Revista Latinoamericana de Psicología

https://revistalatinoamericanadepsicologia.konradlorenz.edu.co/

ORIGINAL

Leadership aspirations: The roles of authentic leadership and work engagement

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Received 30 January 2025; ***accepted*** 28 July 2025

Abstract | **Introduction:** Leadership is vital in the military domain, where decisions impact lives. This study analyses how authentic leadership may influence leadership aspirations, considering work engagement as a mediator. It aims to identify organisational factors that motivate military personnel to advance in their careers**. Method:** A quantitative design was used with 320 officers from the Uruguayan Army and Navy. Authentic leadership, work engagement and leadership aspirations were measured. Structural equation modelling was applied to analyse direct and indirect relationships, controlling for gender and tenure. **Results:** The hypothesised model is confirmed, contributing to the idea that authentic leadership outcomes predict variance in military personnel's leadership aspirations through work engagement. Our results confirm a full mediation model. The model showed good fit and explained 31% of the variance in aspirations. **Conclusions:** The findings highlight the importance of integrating authentic leadership development into military training to improve work engagement and leadership potential. Future research should consider additional factors such as social identification or self-efficacy that may influence these relationships. Limitations include non-random sampling, sample homogeneity, and the cross-sectional design, which hinder generalizability and causal inference.

Keywords: Authentic leadership, work engagement, leadership aspirations, military, military psychology, military leadership

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Aspiraciones al liderazgo: los roles del liderazgo auténtico y el *work engagement*

Resumen | **Introducción:** El liderazgo es vital en el ámbito militar, donde las decisiones impactan vidas. Este artículo analiza cómo el liderazgo auténtico podría influir en las aspiraciones de liderazgo, considerando el *engagement* laboral como mediador. Se busca identificar factores organizacionales que motivan a los militares a avanzar en su carrera. **Método:** Se utilizó un diseño cuantitativo con 320 oficiales de la Armada y Ejército de Uruguay. Se midieron liderazgo auténtico, *engagement* laboral y aspiraciones de liderazgo. Se aplicaron modelos de ecuaciones estructurales para analizar relaciones directas e indirectas, controlando género y antigüedad. **Resultados:** El modelo hipotetizado se confirma, aportando a la idea de que los resultados del liderazgo auténtico predicen la varianza en las aspiraciones de liderazgo de los militares por medio del *engagement* laboral. Los resultados confirman un modelo de mediación completa. El modelo mostró buen ajuste y explicó el 31 % de la varianza en aspiraciones. **Conclusiones:** Los hallazgos subrayan la importancia de integrar el desarrollo del liderazgo auténtico en la formación militar para mejorar el *engagement* laboral y el potencial de liderazgo. Futuras

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https://doi.org/10.14349/rlp.2025.v57.10
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investigaciones deberían considerar factores adicionales, como la identificación social o la autoeficacia, que podrían influir en estas relaciones. Las limitaciones incluyen el muestreo no aleatorio, la homogeneidad de la muestra y el diseño transversal, lo que dificulta generalizar los resultados y establecer causalidades.

Palabras clave: Liderazgo auténtico, *work engagement*, aspiraciones para el liderazgo, militares, psicología militar, liderazgo militar

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Leadership is vital in the military, where emergency decisions affect lives (Richter, 2018). Military careers inherently involve leadership from start to finish, making leadership aspirations —the intent to advance and take on leadership roles (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2017)— a key factor for progression and rank attainment. Research shows leadership aspirations predict future leadership behaviour and performance (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hart, 2016) and enhance leadership training effectiveness, as higher motivation boosts competency development (Stiehl et al., 2015)

To understand the development of leadership aspirations, research has examined individual factors such as personality traits, self-efficacy, and work values (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Lechner et al., 2018). However, little is known about organisational factors that may foster these aspirations. To address this gap, this study explores how authentic leadership relates to leadership aspirations in a military population and seeks to clarify the mechanisms through which authentic leadership may influence these aspirations by considering work engagement as a possible mediator.

To meet this objective, this study considers two Social Psychology theories to understand the variable associations. First, the perspective of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory which emphasises the importance of vicarious learning, a process by which individuals learn by observing the behaviours of others and the consequences that follow (Bandura, 1977). Second, the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which explains how individuals internalise collective interests that motivate and guide their individual behaviours towards the achievement of organisational goals. People share the organisation's beliefs, norms and values and leaders embody these elements (van Knippenberg, 2023).

Authentic leadership and leadership aspirations

This study draws on Luthans and Avolio's (2003) model, which defines authentic leaders as transparent, values-driven, consistent in behaviour, and committed to developing others. Authentic leadership includes four key traits (Avolio et al., 2004): self-awareness (knowing one's strengths, weaknesses, and impact on others), transparency (being genuine to foster trust), balanced processing (making objective, informed decisions) and internalised moral perspective (acting in accordance with personal values).

Military leadership has traditionally relied on rigid hierarchies to ensure efficient decision-making and obedience in high-pressure situations (Gøtzsche-Astrup et al., 2021). Recently, research in this setting has explored the effects of alternative styles such as authentic leadership, a leadership style that has been shown to promote psychological capital, resilience and engagement (Antonesei & Fasarea, 2023; Gaddy & Gonzalez, 2021; Ruiz Moreno et al., 2021). Military leadership often reflects authentic traits, such as clear communication, ethical conduct, and respectful leader–follower relationships (Jordan et al., 2013); that is why authentic leadership aligns closely with core military values (Olsen et al., 2021).

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), leaders serve as role models who shape behaviour and attitudes in their teams (Pino Ricardo et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2021). Through daily interactions, they become key sources of motivation and learning (Kenar & Yeşiltaş, 2023). Perceived authentic leadership strengthens employees' professional identity, career aspirations, and positive behaviour (Tsemach & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2021). Given its impact on engagement, performance, and organisational identification, this study explores its potential link to leadership aspirations.

Based on above, it is hypothesised that Authentic leadership and leadership aspirations have a positive association (Hypothesis 1).

The mediating role of work engagement

This study proposes that work engagement mediates the relationship between authentic leadership and leadership aspirations. Work engagement is defined as "a positive mental state related to work, characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption" (Salanova et al., 2014, p. 24).

Several studies confirm work engagement as a mediator between leadership and other variables such as organisational commitment (Orgambídez & Alameida, 2020), job performance (Lai et al., 2020), and extra-role performance (Salanova et al., 2011). Research also links work engagement to career aspirations, showing that higher engagement is associated with greater leadership ambition (Hartman & Barber, 2020).

Scientific evidence highlights how authentic leadership psychologically influences its followers, generating higher levels of work engagement (Hassan & Ahmed, 2011; Stander et al., 2015; Wang & Hsieh, 2013; Wiraman et al., 2020) and identification with the organisation to which they belong (Arshad et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2021; Steffens et al., 2021). Authentic leaders provide their followers with a personal experience of happiness, which

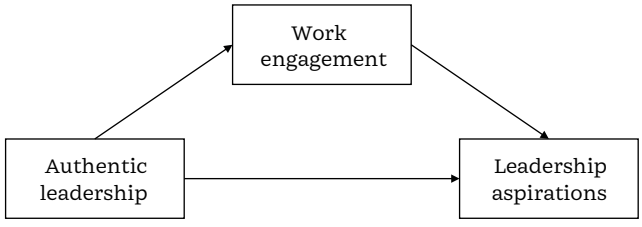
leads to work engagement (Bannay & Hadi, 2021). These leaders develop an emotional bond with their subordinates, resulting in a positive relationship between them. In a workplace with engaged employees, there are high levels of energy, enthusiasm, motivation and inspiration (Baquero, 2023). In addition, considering the social identity theory, authentic leaders allow employees to develop a sense of identity with the organisation that facilitates them becoming more engaged and willing to perform other role behaviours (Leal Paredes et al., 2021). At the same time, their behaviour as leaders is an example for their followers who aspire to be like them.

Work engagement is included as a potential mediating variable, given that previous studies have found links between authentic leadership and work engagement, as well as between work engagement and career aspirations. However, to our knowledge, no efforts have yet been made to develop a model that integrates these variables.

For the aforementioned reasons, it is hypothesised that authentic leadership is related to the leadership aspirations of military personnel, with work engagement acting as a mediator (Hypothesis 2).

Considering the two hypotheses that have been proposed, this paper aims to test a theoretical model where authentic leadership relates to an individual's aspirations to lead, with work engagement as a mediator (see Figure 1) in order to contribute to better understand the factors that influence leadership aspirations, a fundamental variable for organisational performance.

Figure 1. Proposed theoretical model



Method

Sample and procedure

The study obtained ethical approval from the Jaume I University Ethics Commission (Universitat Jaume I, approval number CD/55/2022). Researchers contacted commanders of the Uruguayan Navy, Army and Air Force, who provided a list of potential participants. Human Resources departments sent the survey link via email and WhatsApp including study objectives, a survey link, and a contact form for contacting the research team.

Participants received informed consent at the start of the survey and had to accept it to proceed. Data were collected via Qualtrics. Confidentiality was ensured by not collecting personal data (e.g., name). The survey remained open and available for three weeks and reminders were sent every five days. At the end of the data collection process, each branch of the Armed Forces received a summary report.

Due to strict data protection protocols detailed, sociodemographic data could not be collected for subgroup comparisons.

Participant selection followed a non-probabilistic, purposive design. Invitations were sent to 500 military personnel; 23% did not respond or left questions unanswered and no responses were received from the Air Force. A total of 386 people fully answered the questionnaire. Those with less than six months in their current role were eliminated (n = 66), as leadership effects may require more time to influence engagement and aspirations. The final sample included 320 officers from the Uruguayan Navy and Army with tenure ranging from 6 to 420 months (M = 43.08; SD = 56.69) and ages from 23 to 57 years (M = 39.08; SD = 8.22). Sociodemographic characteristics of the participants appear in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociodemographic data of the sample (N = 320)

Characteristic	*N*	%
Gender		
Female	39	12.2
Male	281	87.8
Age range		
< 29	46	14.37
30-39	124	38.75
40-49	103	32.18
50-59	43	13.43
Military force		
Navy	282	88.1
Army	38	11.8
Military Rank		
Senior officer	153	47.81
Junior officer	167	52.19

Instruments

Authentic leadership (AL). Was measured using the Authentic leadership Questionnaire (Walumbwa et al., 2008), adapted to Spanish by Moriano et al. (2011). It includes 16 items rated from 0 – ("Not at all") to 4 ("Always") based on the participant's perception of their immediate supervisor/leader. It measures the four dimensions: self-awareness (e.g., "Seeks feedback from others to improve relationships with them"), transparency in relationships (e.g., "Says exactly what they mean"), balanced processing (e.g., "Solicits contrary views to the views they hold") and internalised morale (e.g., "Displays beliefs that are consistent with their actions"). The overall AL scores showed high reliability (α = .97) for the overall scale and acceptable subscale indices (.88 - .93). Fit indices supported its theoretical structure: $\chi^2_{(98)}$ = 376.66, p = .368, RMSEA = .084 (.074 to .095 at 90%), SRMR = .031, CFI = .986, GFI = .998, NNFI = .983.

Leadership aspirations. Were assessed with Fritz & van Knippenberg's (2018) scale, a 17-item instrument that includes 9 items to assess the employee's intentions to reach a more senior position (e.g., "I hope to move up within the organisation or business where I work"), and 8 items to assess the behaviours they engage in to achieve this (e.g., "I have engaged in a career plan") with a Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 5 ("Strongly agree"). The overall reliability was acceptable for the total scale (α = .89) and its subscales (Intentions = .83 and Behaviours = .84). The two-factor model showed good fit: $\chi^2_{(118)}$ = 222.442, p < .001, RMSEA = .053 (.053 to .063 at 90%), SRMR = .080, CFI = .971, GFI = .974, NNFI = .966.

Work engagement (WE). Was measured using the 9-item short version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2006) assessing vigour (e.g., "At my work, I feel bursting with energy"), dedication (e.g., "I am enthusiastic about my job"), and absorption (e.g., "I feel happy when I am working intensively") with three items each. Responses ranged from 0 ("Strongly disagree") to 6 ("Strongly agree"). This scale showed high reliability overall (α = .94) and subscales indices (.81 - .90). The three-factor internal structure showed excellent fit: $\chi^2_{(24)}$ = 11.23, p = .987, RMSEA = .000, SRMR = .039, CFI = 1.000, GFI = 1.000, NNFI = 1.007, a pattern common in small models estimated with WLSMV and ordinal data (Xia & Yang, 2019).

Reliability and dimensional validity were assessed through internal consistency coefficients and confirmatory factor analysis using Weighted Least Squares Method Adjusted for Mean and Variance (WLSMV).

Data analysis

The statistical analysis was carried out through structural equation modelling, which allowed the evaluation of multiple relationships simultaneously. All analyses were performed using R software (R Core Team, 2020) and the packages psych (Revelle, 2022), laavan (Rosseel, 2012), semTools (Jorgensen et al., 2022), and semPlot (Epskamp, 2022).

Assumption testing and descriptive analyses were conducted for each variable, including means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis. Reliability was considered acceptable with Cronbach's Alpha (α) and McDonald's Omega above .70. For interpreting bivariate correlations, Cohen's (1988) cut-off points were used: negligible (r < |.10|), weak (|.10|–|.30|), moderate (|.30|–|.50|), and strong (|.50|–|.90|).

The measurement model included latent variables (AL, WE, leadership aspirations) and regressions following the hypothesised conceptual model (Figure 1). Parameters were estimated using the Weighted Least Squares Method Adjusted for Mean and Variance (WLSMV), a robust estimator for ordinal variables. Model fit was assessed using Bentler's (1990) recommendations: SRMR < .080, RMSEA < .080, CFI > .95 and TLI > .95 meant a good fit. Mediation analysis followed the recommendations by Hayes (2022) and the insights provided by Pardo and Román (2013).

Following Hair et al. (2019), composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and factor loadings were evaluated. Reliability values above .70 are acceptable, AVE > .50 supports convergent validity, and loadings above .708 are adequate.

An alternative model (Model 2), identical to Model 1, included two control variables: gender and tenure. Gender was controlled due to evidence of differences in leadership aspirations and advancement strategies between men and women (Hartman & Barber, 2020). Tenure was included given prior findings that leadership aspirations vary between newer and more tenured members (Singer, 1991).

To assess common method bias, procedures by Kock et al. (2021) and Hair et al. (2019) were followed. Two models were tested. First, Harman's single-factor model (Model 3), where all indicators loaded onto one latent factor. Adequate fit could indicate common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Given critiques of this method (Podsakoff et al., 2003), a fourth model (Model 4) was tested, including the three latent factors from Model 1 plus a fourth representing common method variance, with all indicators loading on it. A significantly better fit than Model 1 would suggest the presence of method bias (Kock et al., 2021).

No multicollinearity was observed between the variables of AL and WE (VIF = 1.196; TOL = 0.836). Regarding the homoscedasticity assumption, Levene's test was used, finding homogeneity of variances in all comparisons between the variables of AL, leadership aspirations, and WE (p > .05). Regarding the residuals, the criteria of no autocorrelation among them (Durbin-Watson = 2.015; p = .888) and that they follow a normal distribution (K-S test = 0.0365; p = .6811) were met.

Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for each of the dimensions assessed in this study, as well as their reliability coefficients. All global scales (AL, WE, and leadership aspiration) and their subscales demonstrated acceptable reliability (> .70).

Bivariate correlations (Table 3) revealed moderate associations between authentic leadership (AL), its subdimensions, and WE and its dimensions (.321 < r < .466). In contrast, correlations between AL and leadership aspirations were weak (.114 < r < .168), and the associations between leadership aspiration behaviours and balanced processing (r(318) = .103, p = .067), as well as between aspiration intentions and self-awareness (r(318) = .086, p = .125), were not statistically significant. Meanwhile, correlations between leadership aspirations and WE ranged from weak to moderate (.313 < r < .497). Finally, subscale correlations within the same constructs were generally strong, with the exception of a moderate correlation between leadership aspiration behaviours and intentions (r(318) = .590, p < .001).

Four structural equation models were tested. Model 1 represents the core model, with AL as predictor, WE as mediator, and leadership aspirations as outcome. Model 2 adds gender and tenure as control variables. Models 3 and 4 assess common method bias: Model 3 adds a method factor to the three-factor structure, and Model 4 tests Harman's single-factor model. Table 4 shows model fit indices.

Table 2. Descriptive analyses

Scale	Mean	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis	Min-Max	Alpha [IC 95%]	Omega [IC 95%]
1. Authentic leadership	2.60	0.97	-0.68	-0.70	0-4	.97 [.96 - .97]	.96 [.96 - .97]
1.1 Relational transparency	2.59	1.01	-0.54	-0.40	0-4	.93 [.92 –.95]	.93 [.92 - .94]
1.2 Internalised moral persp.	2.73	0.98	-0.76	0.16	0-4	.89 [.87 - .91]	.89 [.88 - .91]
1.3 Balanced Processing	2.60	1.06	-0.69	-0.08	0-4	.88 [.85 - .91]	.88 [.86 - .90]
1.4 Self-awareness	2.46	1.09	-0.58	-0.37	0-4	.89 [.86 - .92]	.89 [.87 - .91]
2. W. Engagement	3.80	1.14	-0.265	0.57	0-6	.94 [.93 -.95]	.94 [.93 - .95]
2.1 Vigour	3.66	1.26	-0.26	0.34	0-6	.89 [.86 - .91]	.89 [.88 - .91]
2.2 Dedication	3.94	1.26	-0.37	0.37	0-6	.90 [.88 - .92]	.89 [.86 - .92]
2.3 Absorption	3.79	1.15	-0.19	0.74	0-6	.81 [.76 - .86]	.82 [.78 - .85]
3. Leadership aspirations	3.74	0.61	-0.17	0.28	1-5	.89 [.87 - .91]	.88 [.87 - .90]
3.1 Intentions	3.56	0.47	-0.27	-0.32	1-5	.83 [.80 - .86]	.84 [.81 - .86]
3.2 Behaviour	3.90	0.64	-0.22	0.54	1-5	.84 [.81 - .88]	.84 [.82 - .87]

The first model, shown in Figure 2, had an adequate fit (CFI = .982, TLI = .973, RMSEA = .076, SRMR = .026), based on Bentler's (1990) criteria. It explained 23.5% of the variance in engagement (R^2 = .235) and 31.1% in leadership aspirations (R^2 = .311).

For convergent validity and composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) values were adequate (AL = .837, WE = .809, Aspirations = .599), and CR was high across factors (AL = .95, Engagement = .93,

Table 3. Bivariate correlations

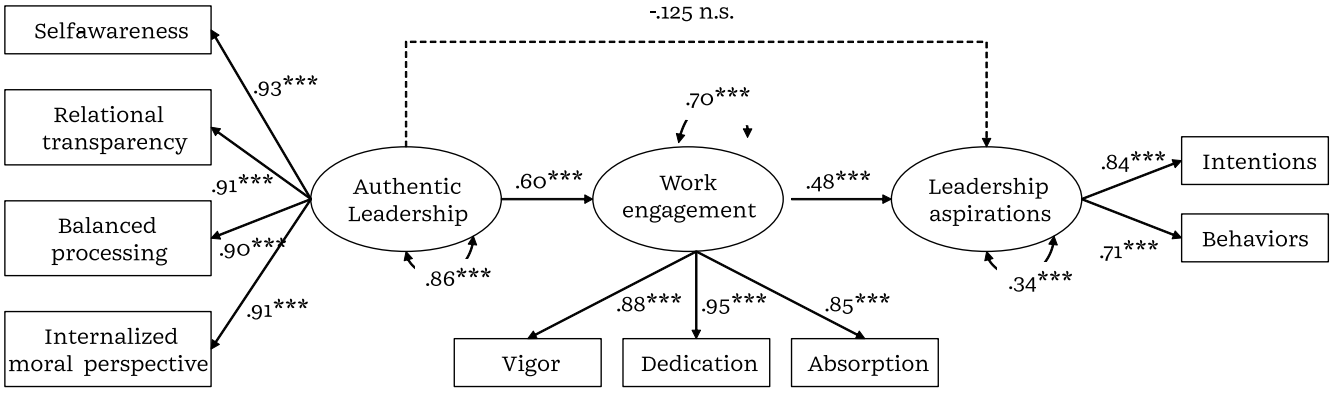
Scale	1	1.1	1.2	1.3	1.4	2	2.1	2.2	2.3	3	3.1	3.2
1. Auth. leadership	1											
1.1 Relational transparency	.935***	1										
1.2 Internalised moral persp.	.932***	.855***	1									
1.3 Balanced Processing	.932***	.810***	.812***	1								
1.4 Self-awareness	.947***	.843***	.836***	.862***	1							
2. W. Engagement	.449***	.420***	.432***	.441***	.392***	1						
2.1 Vigour	.415***	.385***	.394***	.410***	.367***	.934***	1					
2.2 Dedication	.466***	.436***	.457***	.451***	.405***	.953***	.850***	1				
2.3 Absorption	.373***	.351***	.355***	.372***	.321***	.912***	.757***	.811***	1			
3. Lead. Aspirations	.151**	.154**	.168**	.121*	.125*	.469***	.386***	.437***	.497***	1		
3.1 Intentions	.127*	.146**	.135*	.114*	.086	.443***	.380***	.433***	.429***	.877***	1	
3.2 Behaviour	.140*	.129*	.164**	.103	.133*	.397***	.313***	.351***	.455***	.906***	.590***	1

Note. * $p < .050$, ** $p < .010$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Fit indices of the structural equation models

	X^2 (*gl*)	X^2/gl	CFI	TLI	RMSEA [CI 90%]	SRMR
Model 1	68.60 (24)	2.85	.982	.973	.076 [.055 - .098]	.026
Model 2	88.51 (38)	2.32	.979	.971	.064 [.047 -.082]	.046
Model 3	38.71 (14)	2.76	.990	.974	.074 [.047-.103]	.023
Model 4	903.61 (27)	33.46	.639	.519	.319 [.301-.337]	.191

Figure 2. Results of the explanatory structural model of leadership aspirations (Model 1)



Note. * = .05; ** = .01; *** = .001

Aspirations = .75). All factor loadings exceeded the recommended .708 threshold (Hair et al., 2019).

Regarding mediation, AL was significantly associated with WE (β = .485, p < .001), and WE with leadership aspirations (β = .608, p < .001). The direct effect of AL on aspirations was not significant (β = −.125, p = .062), but the indirect effect via WE was significant (β = .295, p < .001). The total effect was also significant (β = .170, p = .008). In this regard, given that the total effect was significant while the direct effect became non-significant when the mediator was included, the results are consistent with a full mediation model, where the influence of AL on leadership aspirations occurs entirely through WE.

A second model, identical to the first but adding gender and tenure as controls, also showed good fit (CFI = .979, TLI = .971, RMSEA = .064, SRMR = .046). Relationships between these controls and aspirations (β gender = .197, p = .254; β tenure = −.002, p = .089), and with WE (β gender = −.038, p = .809; β tenure = .001, p = .144), were not significant, suggesting the model's robustness to these covariates.

To assess common method bias (CMB), two additional models were tested. Model 3 added a method factor to all items, slightly improving fit (ΔCFI = .008; ΔTLI = .001; ΔSRMR = .003; ΔRMSEA = .001), but not enough to indicate a better fit than Model 1. Model 4, which loaded all indicators onto a single factor, showed poor fit (CFI = .639, RMSEA = .319), indicating the data are not explained by a single latent factor, and strong CMB is unlikely.

Conclusions

The literature identifies individual factors —such as self-efficacy, work values, and personality traits— as precursors to leadership aspirations (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Lechner et al., 2018). However, organisational factors are also key to understanding how to foster these aspirations. This study aimed to explore these influences through a theoretical model, hypothesising that authentic leadership is related to the leadership aspirations of military personnel, with work engagement acting as a mediator.

The hypothesised model is confirmed, contributing to the idea that authentic leadership results predict variance in a military man or woman's aspirations to lead (H1), through work engagement (H2). Our results confirm a full mediation model which suggests that, to achieve greater leadership aspirations, motivational mechanisms should focus on employees' internal processes, such as work engagement. The results of this study are consistent with previous findings that emphasise the positive influence of authentic leadership on work engagement (Hassan & Ahmed, 2011; Stander et al., 2015; Wang & Hsieh, 2013; Wiraman et al., 2020). This leadership style fosters emotional investment and commitment to both work and the organisation (Lewis, 2011), while also promoting optimism and confidence in the organisational environment (Stander et al., 2015). These effects are linked to increased empowerment and organisational identification, which enhance employee engagement. The authentic leadership model suggests that leaders who embody these qualities have a direct positive impact on work engagement (Leal Paredes et al., 2021). In particular, prior research has shown that this relationship is mediated by employees' identification with the organisation, which is stronger when they perceive alignment with its values (Pastor-Álvarez et al., 2019).

Social Identity Theory offers a valuable framework to understand these dynamics. Leaders who represent group values and aspirations contribute to the development of a shared identity, reinforcing followers' commitment to goals, responsibilities, and team belonging (Steffens et al., 2021). Through trust and positive relationships, authentic leadership promotes this identification, which in turn strengthens emotional bonds, encourages social connection, and enhances proactive behaviours (Kumar et al., 2021). This aligns with the theoretical perspective proposed by Avolio et al. (2004), which posits that authentic leadership improves employee attitudes and behaviours, thereby boosting engagement. The present study contributes to this growing body of evidence by further supporting the role of authentic leadership in fostering work engagement.

Also, this study expands the authentic leadership theory by highlighting its link to employee career aspirations. Building on Baykal (2019), Munyaka et al. (2017), and Olaniyan and Hystad (2016), who found that authentic leadership enhances wellbeing, engagement,

psychological resources and job satisfaction, our findings suggest it also encourages upward career ambitions. Authentic leaders help employees find purpose and foster a desire to grow within the organisation. The results of this study indicate that the perception of authentic leadership can influence employees' leadership aspirations, suggesting that such leadership not only fosters engagement, but also serves as a role model that shapes how followers see themselves as potential leaders. By acting with integrity and clarity, authentic leaders foster engagement and inspire followers to take on leadership roles, thus addressing operational gaps and reinforcing the command structure (Jennings & Hannah, 2011). Social learning theory explains how individuals adopt behaviours, attitudes, and knowledge through observation and imitation in social contexts (Kenar & Yeşiltaş, 2023). As role models, leaders shape followers' perceptions of leadership, prompting them to emulate authentic behaviours and develop leadership aspirations.

Given that soldiers assume leadership responsibilities throughout their careers, understanding the impact of leadership styles in the military context is essential. As Jennings and Hannah (2011) suggest, authentic leadership fosters positive behaviours and strengthens commitment. The findings of this study contribute to this line of research by showing that the perception of authentic leadership can also shape soldiers' aspirations to advance in rank, highlighting its role not only in fostering work engagement, but also in promoting leadership development within military careers.

Practical implications

Leadership programmes can use these results to encourage more personnel to aspire to leadership roles, helping avoid problems and building and ensuring a robust leadership pipeline. Military forces should focus on developing authentic leaders by enhancing transparency, integrity, and self-awareness. Training should also boost work engagement by involving soldiers in decisions, granting task autonomy, and fostering a positive culture. Higher engagement can improve leadership aspirations, performance, morale, and unit cohesion. Recognising achievements and supporting professional growth further strengthen engagement, which mediates the link between authentic leadership and career ambitions.

Limitations and future research

Authentic leadership and work engagement have been well-studied in positive psychology, but leadership aspirations remain a novel concept. While the lack of direct antecedents may pose a limitation for interpreting and generalising results, this study provides valuable insights by showing that authentic leadership predicts leadership aspirations through work engagement.

Although the structural equation model had adequate fit, the high-unexplained variance suggests adding variables to improve the model and explained variance. Future research could explore additional constructs such as social identification or self-efficacy and deepen the understanding of leadership aspirations. Replicating these findings in other organisations would clarify whether effects depend on characteristics typical of the military setting.

Another limitation is the methodology. The sample consisted exclusively of officers, resulting in limited variability across ranks. In addition, despite having surveyed a large sample, non-random sampling prevents generalisation. Given the sample's lack of diversity and male dominance, future research should include groups that are more heterogeneous.

While structural equation analysis allows the study of direct and indirect relationships according to the assumed conceptual model, it does not imply that the significant effects found are of a causal nature. In this context, this hypothesis should be tested using longitudinal designs that allow the testing of causal inferences.

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