

The role of compassionate leadership in predicting employee engagement: the influencing role of job clarity and implications for human resource development

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Abstract

Purpose – The study aims to examine the influence of compassionate leadership and role clarity on employee engagement based on data obtained from a large, multi-site banking organization in the Midwest United States. This research is an extension building upon a theoretical model based on Shuck *et al.* (2019), re-examining key constructs used in the initial study as a form of replication. Using the data set from the original study, this research shifted analytical approaches to assess the predictive power of role clarity and compassionate leadership with overall employee engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a multiple regression approach, both compassionate leadership and role clarity significantly contributed to higher employee engagement levels.

Findings – Compassionate leadership was shown to positively impact employee engagement, along with role clarity, which helped employees understand the boundaries of their overall work-related responsibilities.

Practical implications – Specific implications for research, theory and practice are discussed in relation to connection to current trends in HRD.

Originality/value – The novelty of this research highlights the importance of leadership and clear role definitions in Human Resource Development (HRD) strategies to foster employee engagement and reduce turnover.

Keywords Compassionate leadership, Role clarity, Employee engagement, Human resource development

Paper type Research paper

Leadership is a complex phenomenon and its impact on employee engagement continues to be a central focus of Human Resource Development (HRD) research (Lilius *et al.*, 2008; Jin and McDonald, 2017; Saks, 2022; Shuck and Herd, 2012; Tabak *et al.*, 2024). As multiple scholars have demonstrated, the unique and dynamic nature of employee engagement provides compelling evidence that leadership approaches influence outcomes in work-based settings (c.f., Tyagi, 2021). *Employee engagement* has been defined as a positive, active, work-related psychological state operationalized by the maintenance, intensity and direction of cognitive, emotional and behavioral energy (Nimon *et al.*, 2017; Shuck *et al.*, 2014; Shuck and Wollard, 2010). Within the influence of how employees experience



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engagement, research has been clear that a leader's style can influence both higher and lower levels of overall engagement (Shuck and Herd, 2012; Van Tuin et al., 2021). For example, recent research has shown that leaders who display a compassionate style – those who show up with authenticity, lead with integrity and are emotionally attuned to their teams – tend to have employees who report higher levels of engagement, are less likely to turnover and are more innovative in their work (Shuck et al., 2015; Lilius et al., 2011). On the other hand, leaders who are experienced as dysfunctional – those who lead with humiliation, avoid hard conversations or who lack honesty – tend to have employees who are distracted, detached and disengaged (Rose et al., 2015; Tyagi, 2021). As such, leadership and the act of leading remain critically important areas of research to consider within the HRD field.

Historically, employee engagement research originated from Kahn's (1990) early foundational work on *personal engagement* and *disengagement*, emphasizing the psychological functions of meaningfulness, safety and availability as core conditions for energizing work. Early HRD scholarship (Shuck and Wollard, 2010 and Shuck, 2011) similarly positioned leadership as a dominant central mechanism for shaping these psychological conditions through communication, feedback and role structuring. As the concept of engagement matured in the research literature, engagement research largely expanded to include behavioral and attitudinal traditions, but leadership remained a consistent, unifying antecedent. Compassion-oriented approaches, which remain understudied, represent a modern branch of this lineage yet stand on decades of evidence linking relational leader behavior to engagement-related outcomes.

In 2019, Shuck et al. advanced and tested a new model of leadership for HRD research and practice – *compassionate leadership* – using advanced structural equation modeling (SEM) in which compassionate leadership influenced intention to turnover through employee engagement, conceptualized as a mediating variable. In their two-stage, mixed-method exploratory study, the authors suggested that leaders who focused on and displayed compassionate behaviors during both routine and focal events offered a dynamic and innovative way forward – one that helped employees proactively live better lives through their work, not just go to work everyday (cf. Shuck et al., 2019, for complete details). As noted in their discussion, a deeper and more nuanced understanding of compassionate leadership could inform meaningful organizational interventions, particularly if our field better understood the intricacies of the model and how it functioned in both theory and applied practice. By focusing on employee growth and development, for example, supporting disconnected employees in healing from moral injuries and organizational trauma, and fostering processes that promote talent retention – organizations could create environments where both people and performance thrive simultaneously (Weng et al., 2023).

Such strategies, however, require a degree of clarity around role behavior, in addition to supportive leadership. *Role clarity* has been defined as the extent to which role expectations within a job or organization are clearly communicated and fully understood by the employee (Rizzo et al., 1970). Within the research literature, role clarity has a long and storied theoretical and practical tradition. For example, the emphasis on clear role expectations is consistent with a historical trajectory dating back to Kahn et al. (1964), who argued that ambiguity and conflict in role expectations directly undermined motivational and psychological presence. Subsequent scholarship throughout the 1970s and 1980s reinforced these mechanisms, positioning role clarity as a foundational component of effective job design and employee functioning. Our work aligns with and extends this established lineage by examining role clarity within a modern HRD leadership framework. Within this context, leaders reliably play a key role in communicating role expectations, which in turn influence cascading levels of engagement across the organization. Many scholars have shown that role clarity functions as a strategic leadership leverage point – one that heightens employees' moment-to-moment experience of leadership

while also giving leaders more bandwidth to demonstrate authentic, compassionate action (Akdere and Egan, 2020). For example, Kim (2014) found that managerial coaching, a process in which leadership provides role clarity and effective feedback strategies, enhances organizational commitment and performance reinforcing the value of role clarity as a leadership function. More recently, a study by Majid *et al.* (2023) found that role clarity mediates the connection between effective leadership behaviors and employee engagement outcomes. Furthermore, effective leadership traits reduce barriers to positive employee experiences (e.g., burnout) which is mediated by role clarity (Chen *et al.*, 2022). By removing ambiguity, leaders free up cognitive space for employees, simultaneously making supportive intentions unmistakable. This process allows compassion to be perceived and reciprocated in real time. Unfortunately, Shuck *et al.* did not fully explore or explain how role clarity and compassionate leadership interacted, and if, role clarity mattered at all within the bounds of leadership within their framework. This omission represents a meaningful gap as the 2019 framework centered primarily on relational leader behavior without examining how structural work factors may enable or could constrain those behaviors. As a result, it remains decidedly unclear whether compassionate leadership functions independently, relies on supportive job structures, or interacts with clarity conditions in predicting engagement. It is unlikely that compassion alone influences outcomes within a vacuum, but theoretically possible and worth further exploration. Notwithstanding these contributions, by revisiting the original data set with an expanded analytical lens, our study addresses this underdeveloped intersection and provides deeper insight for scholars and practitioners. Although the relationship between role clarity and leadership has clear practical relevance, and interest in compassionate leadership as a predictor of engagement continues to grow, the HRD field still offers limited empirical guidance in these areas (Shuck *et al.*, 2019; Jin and McDonald, 2017). More, even less is known about how compassion relates to other psychological constructs in practice such as psychological safety, trust or moral elevation, or how these associations might refine and extend existing theories of leadership and compassion (Dutton *et al.*, 2006).

In short, what remains insufficiently theorized in the literature is how compassionate leadership coexists with, or is shaped by, structural job design variables such as role clarity. While engagement scholarship acknowledges leadership and role expectations as important, no studies empirically examine them together or explore their relative influence as influencing mechanisms. This absence limits the fields understanding of whether compassionate leadership operates primarily as a relational force, a structural amplifier or a synergistic mechanism in engagement processes.

As such, it seems plausible that compassionate leadership, when not anchored in clear expectations or well-defined roles, may result in an ambiguous, dysfunctional and ineffective leadership experience – one that lacks focus, direction and meaningful impact (Saks, 2022). As a direct extension to both theory (De Clercq *et al.*, 2014; Dutton and Workman, 2011) and practice (Shuck *et al.*, 2019; Jin and McDonald, 2017), the purpose of our work was to explore the influence of compassionate leadership on employee engagement within an HRD-specific context. Our work aimed to examine levels of employee engagement within the organization as influenced by role clarity and compassionate leadership using a retrospective replication of Shuck *et al.* (2019). A retrospective replication is a type of research design that revisits and reanalyzes existing data or previously conducted studies to replicate the original findings – often with the goal of asking new questions of that data (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019). Through our work, this study contributes to existing HRD literature by disentangling the independent effects of compassionate leadership and role clarity on engagement using a regression-based approach and identifies role clarity as a potent predictor. This shift in analytical framing offers new insight into how HRD interventions might prioritize structural

clarity alongside relational-like leadership behaviors. More, we conducted this retrospective replication in response to calls for increased rigor and reproducibility in HRD research (Reio, 2016). By applying this new analytical lens, we sought to interrogate unexplored variance in the original data set and surface novel predictors that had remained unexplored. As a potential outcome, advancing our understanding of role clarity enables HRD scholars and practitioners to design strategic interventions that foster more compassionate organizational cultures while equipping leaders to support employees in intentional, human-centered and empathetically grounded ways (Rafferty and Griffin, 2006; Lilius *et al.*, 2011). In this paper, we situate employee engagement and leadership within HRD; use existing research to characterize the relationship between compassionate leadership, role clarity and employee engagement; detail the methods and results and, finally; discuss the implications of our findings for HRD for theory, research and practice.

Situating employee engagement and leadership within the HRD context: a brief review of the relevant literature

Employee engagement has been widely examined within the HRD field, emerging as a central construct in both contemporary theory and applied research (Fulmore *et al.*, 2023; Hurtienne *et al.*, 2022; Saks, 2022). Understood as an individual's emotional, behavioral and cognitive investment in work roles, engagement reflects a sustained and meaningful connection to one's job (Shuck *et al.*, 2019). Distinct from related constructs such as job satisfaction or organizational commitment, engagement represents a broader and more active psychological state – one in which employees derive energy from their roles and contribute at a higher level in a reciprocal fashion (Christian *et al.*, 2011). Numerous empirical studies have shown that engagement is positively influenced by factors such as feedback and alignment of expectations, and, is associated with improved organizational citizenship behaviors and a more supportive organizational climate (Akgerman *et al.*, 2025; Park and Choi, 2020; Shuck *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). This engaged state fosters both personal growth and enhanced job performance, creating a cycle of motivation and effectiveness that benefits individuals and organizations alike (Hurtienne *et al.*, 2022).

Employee engagement is widely recognized as a salient contributor to organizational effectiveness and is thought to be an underlying reason why employees are more productive, profitable and healthy (Khodakarami and Dirani, 2020). Quantitative studies using cross-sectional and structural equation modeling have consistently found significant positive relationships between employee engagement and organizational performance outcomes. For example, Awan *et al.* (2021) used multiple regression to analyze how factors such as role clarity and job satisfaction influence employee engagement. Companies that espouse and enact higher overall levels of employee engagement efforts over a longer period not only achieve better outcomes but also are believed to realize increased revenues and profits (Pandit, 2023). In times of economic and organizational uncertainty, the need for employee engagement becomes even more pressing. Engaged employees have been shown to be better equipped to navigate unpredictable climates, adapt to, and contribute to organizational resilience (Sorenson, 2013). Employees that feel engaged are also more likely to stay with the organization, thereby improving retention rates (Fulmore *et al.*, 2023). In unpredictable environments, promoting strong engagement can help organizations withstand challenges and maintain a competitive advantage (Montermel *et al.*, 2023).

As increased employee engagement is listed as a notable factor in organizational growth and leads to decreased turnover rates, leadership is perhaps one of the most important determinants of employee engagement (Akdere and Egan, 2020; Busse and Regenberg, 2018; Fulmore *et al.*, 2023). Leaders play a central role in maintaining or detracting from

levels of employee engagement by cultivating connections and supporting employees through the challenges of work. *Leadership* is a term that can be assigned to several different people and be described in just as many ways (Chang *et al.*, 2021; Wilson, 2023). Directed by actions and behaviors, leaders influence organizational norms that are responded to and replicated by employees – often role modeled with a hint of psychological permission (Lilius *et al.*, 2011). Several imitative leadership styles have been identified, such as, for example, *democratic leadership*, in which group members participate in decision-making (Wang *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b). *Compassionate leadership*, described by Shuck *et al.* (2019) as an act of noticing and empathetically feeling another person's suffering and acting in both a proactive, and reactive manner that consoles the suffering of work experiences in everyday work-based situations. Recent literature has suggested that compassion within the workplace can help drive employee attraction, improve interpersonal relationships, and increase employee engagement (Barghouti *et al.*, 2023). As Shuck *et al.* (2019) explained, compassionate leadership is a natural expression of humanity and perhaps an evolution in the way we work, directly connected to experiences of engagement. This style of leadership could serve as a guiding experience in the workplace. In as much, compassionate leaders have been found to affect employee well-being and reduce burnout by quelling negative emotions and behaviors within the workplace (Östergård *et al.*, 2023).

According to Shuck *et al.* (2019), the building blocks of the compassionate framework consisted of six constructs: *integrity* (alignment of words and actions rooted in personal values), *accountability* (responsibility for performance outcomes and consequences), *presence* (attentive awareness), *empathy* (understanding others perspectives and emotions), *authenticity* (genuine expression of personal beliefs) and *dignity* (respecting the intrinsic values and uniqueness of individuals). These dimensions operationalize compassionate leadership by capturing observable behaviors and attitudes that shape leader interactions. Although these dimensions provide a comprehensive conceptual foundation, the scale was modeled as a bifactor structure, where a primary factor of compassionate leadership explained most of the variance across items. Other scholars have attempted to define and conceptualize compassion in various ways. For instance, de Zulueta (2015) described compassionate leadership in the context of healthcare as a system that provides containment of anxiety, support for individuals and regulation of positive adaptive responses to challenges – ultimately fostering an environment of openness and learning. Additionally, Poorkavoos (2016) defined compassionate leadership as an approach that encourages open conversations about problems and offers meaningful support to employees within the context of their organization. Collectively, from these contexts, compassionate leadership taken in whole, reliably promotes a richly positive organizational culture and increased overall affective commitment.

However, as research on compassionate leadership remains in its infancy, the extant literature lacks both theoretical depth and practical application, particularly in understanding its relationship to employee engagement. As Shuck *et al.* (2019) had noted, this area of research is not yet fully developed and remains largely absent from recent academic discourse. In this study, we aim to contribute a small ripple by contextualizing compassionate leadership in terms of how it interacts with other variables related to employee engagement as a targeted outcome. Operationalizing this framework will enable deeper analysis and interpretation of compassion's influence in both theoretical and applied organizational settings. Taken together, the historical development of engagement and leadership research has highlighted evolving but parallel lines of inquiry. That is, engagement scholarship has strongly emphasized psychological conditions and leader influence, while leadership research has broadly examined interpersonal and behavioral expressions of support,

development and communication. Yet, despite these overlapping trajectories and potential impact, research integrating compassionate leadership with structural role variables remains decidedly minimal.

The critical role of role clarity: connecting both leadership and employee engagement

It should be noted that impactful leadership is not the only antecedent to employee engagement; role *clarity* has been shown to also increase employee engagement within an organization and reduce turnover intentions (Devaguptapu, 2018). For example, a study demonstrated that organizations with well-defined roles and responsibilities experience lower turnover rates as employees are more engaged and understand their contributions to the company (Bakar *et al.*, 2021; Bain and Company, 2023; Zettna *et al.*, 2025). Additionally, Bakar *et al.* (2021) conducted a recent quantitative study using regression modeling techniques to examine the relationship between work engagement and voluntary turnover intentions. Their finding showed a significant negative relationship indicating that as employee engagement increases, turnover intentions decrease when roles are clear.

Role clarity can inspire employee work behavior and engagement by allowing employees to operate effectively and stimulate high-quality work (Kad *et al.*, 2023). According to Gallup (2022), whose original research underscores the importance of role clarity enhancing employee engagement (see for example Harter *et al.*, 2002), employees who have a clear understanding of their role expectations are more likely to be engaged and productive. Working in conjunction with leadership, role clarity has the potential to increase engagement levels within an organization and directly affect levels of employee engagement (White *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, as employees view their organizations as an important factor in satisfying their overall needs, role clarity provides more meaning to their work, which contributes to higher levels of overall engagement (Kim and Beehr, 2023). Here, role clarity becomes a key component to employees exhibiting engagement and showcasing increased proactive behaviors in the workplace. Leadership-driven role clarity plays an integral role in effective organizational management impacting a host of critical outcomes (Akdere and Egan, 2020).

Conversely, the lack of role clarity in organizations, which could be linked to more passive types of leadership, could increase burnout for workers by increasing job stress and expectation uncertainties; a disastrous combination (Vullings *et al.*, 2020). As organizations are consistently finding themselves in periods of change, vagueness in role only increases job stresses, likely leading to lower level of engagement. This type of ambiguity hinders an employee's ability to adapt to new roles during periods of change, further intensifying feelings of frustration and disengagement (Lee and Lee, 2018). Overtime, these environments contribute to a decline in engagement, emphasizing the need for leadership that instills clarity and compassion to mitigate these risks (Buonomo *et al.*, 2022). As Brene Brown has been often quoted as saying, *clear is kind* (Brown, 2018).

Given the extant literature, we proposed to explore how compassionate leadership and role clarity influence employee engagement. Following the theoretical justifications outlined above, our work was grounded in the below hypotheses:

- H1.* Compassionate leadership and role clarity positively influence employee engagement.

In the following sections, we detail our methodological approach and explore operationalization and our variables of interest.

Methods

Participants

The population was represented by all levels of employees across 35 semi-independent units within a financial conglomerate in the Midwestern USA, totaling 1067 respondents (Shuck *et al.*, 2019). This study used the same data set and number of respondents as Shuck *et al.*, (c.f., Shuck *et al.*, 2019 for complete details of sampling methodology and participant details); however, in this replication study, we used regression analysis as the approach in lieu of SEM due to the nature of our question. Although structural equation modeling is often used for examining latent constructs and mediated relationships (Kline, 2016), the present study used multiple regression because the main objective was to assess the direct predictive relationships of compassionate leadership and role clarity with employee engagement. The measures used in this study have established psychometric support in prior research, and observed composite scale scores were calculated for each construct. These composite scores were subsequently standardized to z-scores to facilitate interpretation of coefficients. Accordingly, multiple regression was an appropriate and efficient analytical approach for the study objectives (Hair *et al.*, 2019; Osborne, 2016).

Participants came from diverse demographic backgrounds, as there were no restrictions or specific criteria based on age, sex, ethnicity, level in the company or other demographic characteristics. Participant's data was collected via online surveys using external self-reporting measures consisting of three inventories, including compassionate leadership (Shuck *et al.*, 2019), employee engagement scale (Shuck *et al.*, 2017) and role clarity (Rizzo *et al.*, 1970). On average, respondents completed the full Qualtrics administrated survey in approximately seven minutes.

Gatekeepers were identified to facilitate the data collection and solicit responses from leadership positions. Additionally, those in leadership positions were identified using a nonprofit public interest association composed of business and community leaders promoting compassion-based initiatives. Leaders from the organizations, ranging from nonprofits to large private-sector firms, were identified using purposive sampling strategies. Members of the nonprofit public interest association assisted this process by nominating individuals within their networks who were perceived to exhibit compassionate leader behaviors. These nominations were informed by employee input from within each organization. The selected leaders then served as the primary informants for the study.

Instrumentation

The cross-sectional survey aimed to identify factors that influenced the dependent variable of employee engagement. Independent variable predictors included in the model were *Role Clarity* and *Compassionate Leadership*. Responses were self-reported on Likert-type scales (5 = strongly agree, and 1 strongly disagree), and respondents were given a unique URL that tracked responses and prevented duplications. Construct and content validity were formed with leading scholars and practitioners in the fields of management, organizational behavior and communications. Each expert and practitioner conducted initial and follow-up reviews of individual item scales. Of the scales used in this research, the Employee Engagement and Compassionate Leadership scales were the only scales with a reported Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$ and $\alpha = 0.98$, respectively, indicating very strong internal reliability (Shuck *et al.*, 2019).

Compassionate leadership was measured using Shuck *et al.*'s (2019) 24-item *Compassionate Leadership Behavioral Index*, designed to assess how well leaders demonstrate compassion behaviors in the workplace. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 5 = *Strongly Agree*. Sample items include "My leader listens without distractions.". This included six subscales comprised of four items, including cognitive engagement and emotional engagement. The internal consistency for the CLBI scale reported a Cronbach's alpha

coefficient of 0.98 and confirmatory factor analysis supported the model ($\chi^2 n = 237 = 1,880.71$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.99, RMSEA = 0.08) indicating good fit.

Employee engagement was measured using the [Shuck et al. \(2017\)](#) *Employee Engagement Scale*. This scale consisted of 12 items measuring employees' engagement within their work experience. Each scale consisted of three subscales, each comprising four items: cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and physical engagement. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale with 1 = *Strongly Disagree* and 5 = *Strongly Agree*. Sample Items include "I often go above what is expected of me to help my team be successful." The employee engagement reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.92.

Role clarity was measured using the Role Ambiguity Scale developed by [Rizzo et al. \(1970\)](#), a six-item, unidimensional scale designed to assess the degree to which individuals perceive ambiguity or a lack of clarity in their job roles. Responses were rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). A sample item includes, "I know what my responsibilities are." The Role Clarity Scale reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. Although role clarity was not originally reported in the [Shuck et al. \(2019\)](#) model, it was included in the broader organizational survey battery based on client-driven priorities and feedback. As such, it was not analyzed in the original conceptual model but emerged as a salient dimension warranting further investigation. Recent scholarship underscores the centrality of role clarity in shaping work-related outcomes such as engagement, performance and well-being ([Bakker and Albrecht, 2018](#); [Oldham and Fried, 2016](#)). Including this variable in the present study aligns with a growing emphasis on job design factors as critical antecedents to employee engagement and offers an opportunity to extend the original framework by incorporating an empirically supported construct of practical significance.

Data analysis

Before conducting our regression analysis, we screened the data by visualizing distributions and checking for outliers. Outliers were identified using standardized residuals greater than ± 3 SD, in alignment with [Osborne \(2016\)](#). Visual inspections of histograms and P-P plots confirmed normality, and variance inflation factors ($VIF < 3$) ruled out multicollinearity. Cook's Distance values were within acceptable limits, confirming no undue influence on the model. Descriptive statistics were reviewed to assess means, standard deviation and variability. Correlations were examined to identify potential multicollinearity concerns and to explore bivariate relationships between predictors and the outcome variable. Composite scales scores were computed for each study variable and standardized to z-scores prior to analysis to facilitate coefficient interpretation and comparability across predictors. A single block entry method was used in the regression.

Following [Osborne \(2016\)](#), a multiple regression procedure was employed to analyze employee engagement levels. A single block entry method where both role clarity and compassionate leadership were included simultaneously as independent variables was used to address the analysis. This approach was chosen to examine the overall contribution of these predictors to the model, allowing for an assessment of their combined effect on employee engagement levels. In this study, demographic variables were collected but were not central to the theoretical models presented. Although demographic characteristics such as gender, tenure and organizational level can influence employee attitudes, the decision not to include them as control variables in the primary analysis is theoretically and methodologically supported. [Spector and Brannick \(2010\)](#) caution that the automatic use of control variables without clear theoretical justification can increase the risk of Type I and Type II errors.

This empirical research focused specifically on the direct effects of role clarity and compassionate leadership on engagement. Because demographic variables were not explicitly hypothesized to explain these relationships, they were excluded from the primary regression model to avoid testing models in which demographic factors act as proxies for variables that are the true focus of the analysis (Spector and Brannick, 2010). Without a strong theoretical rationale for why these demographic factors should influence the focal relationships, their inclusion would also risk violating the principle that controls should be used only when they meaningfully improve construct validity (Becker *et al.*, 2015).

Based on previous research on employee engagement and its predictors (Bakar *et al.*, 2021; Shuck *et al.*, 2019), we anticipated capturing a medium effect size with *R*-squared values in the range of 0.09–0.25 (Cohen, 1988). Regression coefficients were analyzed to determine the direction and strength of the relationship between predictors and the outcomes.

Conducting a residual analysis of the data indicated that seven cases from the sample reported residual statistics of ± 3 standard deviations. These seven cases were removed from the sample by conducting a residual analysis test within SPSS. Following the results, cases were individually removed from the entire data set to give the data a clearer interpretation of the study. The following values were manually adjusted due to their data skewing results in the initial deletion: 4, 52, 68, 108, 542, 673, 992. Removing the data resulted in a histogram representing more normality and a P-P Plot of the residuals falling more along the linear regression line. However, case-wise diagnostics indicated four more case numbers were skewing the data, in which 4 observations were removed.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The employee engagement score (range 34–60) was 52.97 (SD = 5.51) and moderately left skewed indicating that most employees reported high levels of engagement. The role clarity (range 1–5) with an average of 3.87 (SD = 0.84) and moderately left skewed indicating that most employees feel they have clear roles, though some uncertainty may exist. The compassionate leadership score (range 24–120) averages 96.38 (SD = 19.07) and is moderately skewed meaning that while most leaders are perceived as compassionate, there are some who are not.

Correlations between the variables fell within the moderate, positive range. Specifically, there is a moderate and expected positive correlation ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.05$) between engagement and role clarity, suggesting that as role clarity increases, employee engagement increases as well. There is a moderate expected positive correlation ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.05$) between engagement and compassionate leadership, indicating that as compassionate leadership increases, engagement increases as well. Finally, there is an expected high positive correlation ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.05$) between role clarity and compassionate leadership. The findings are skewing in the expected directions confirming the hypothesis that clear role definitions and compassionate leadership are associated with high levels of employee engagement. See Table 1 for complete details.

Multiple regression findings

Role Clarity and Compassionate Leadership were entered into block 1. The model explained 18.9% of the variance in engagement, $F(2,972) = 113.54$, $p < 0.05$. The model was assessed for multicollinearity, with VIF statistics reporting 2.88 indicating no signs of multicollinearity, with thresholds set at less than 10 for VIF (Pallant, 2020). The employee engagement scale recorded an intercept value of 53.02, ($p < 0.05$) reflecting the expected mean score on the dependent variable when all predictors are held at zero. In contrast, role

clarity recorded a standardized beta value ($\beta = 1.75, p < 0.05$) indicating that for every one standard deviation increase in role clarity, there is an associated increase in the outcome variable by approximately 1.75 standardized units. Compassionate leadership reported a standardized beta value ($\beta = 0.82, p < 0.05$) suggesting that for every 1 standard deviation increase in perceived compassionate leadership, there is an associated increase in the outcome variable by approximately 0.82 standardized units. The evidence supports that both role clarity and compassionate leadership significantly predict engagement. Therefore, the initial hypothesis that these predictors influence engagement is supported.

The regression output recorded standard errors and confidence intervals with the following results: intercept $b = 53.02, SE = 0.16, 95\% CI [52.71, 53.34]$, role clarity $b = 1.75, SE = 0.23, 95\% CI [1.31, 2.19]$, and compassionate leadership $b = 0.82, SE = 0.23, 95\% CI [0.38, 1.27]$.

Table 2 presents the unstandardized regression coefficients from the model predicting employee engagement. The model explained 19% of the variance in outcome ($R^2 = 0.19$), indicating a moderate but meaningful effect. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(2, 972) = 113.54, p < 0.05$. Standard regression diagnostics indicated no issues with multicollinearity ($VIF = 2.88$, and residuals were normally distributed with no evidence of heteroscedasticity or influential outliers.

Discussion of findings

The results of this study contribute to a growing body of literature emphasizing the multidimensional nature of employee engagement, with a particular focus on the predictive value of role clarity and compassionate leadership. Our findings underscore that both constructs significantly influence engagement levels, aligning with recent empirical evidence suggesting that clarity in job expectations and leader behaviors grounded in empathy and support are key levers for fostering workplace engagement (Shuck, Kim, and Chai, 2021). The findings in this study provide direct responses to the research questions by illustrating the pathways through which role clarity and compassionate leadership promote employee engagement. Role clarity supported engagement by reducing ambiguity by enabling

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

Variable	N	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Employee engagement	975	53.00	5.49	—		
2. Compassionate leadership	975	96.30	19.04	0.37*	—	
3. Role clarity	975	3.86	0.84	0.42*	0.79*	—

Note(s): $p < 0.05$

Table 2. Unstandardized regression coefficients from the model predicting employee engagement

Variable	R^2 0.19	Estimates	SE
Intercept		53.02*	0.15
Compassionate leadership		0.82*	0.23
Role clarity		1.75*	0.23

Note(s): Unstandardized parameter coefficients. * $p < 0.05$

employees to understand expectations and prioritize tasks. Compassionate leadership enhanced engagement through mechanisms of support and facilitation of a psychologically safe climate. These findings should be interpreted as estimates of direct influence rather than evidence of causal or process-based mechanisms.

Importantly, in our work, role clarity emerged as the stronger predictor in the model, suggesting that employees are more likely to report higher levels of engagement when they understand their responsibilities and expectations. Findings suggest that role clarity may be a foundational condition enabling compassionate leadership to flourish. Without clear expectations, even the most empathetic leader may struggle to inspire engagement. These results are consistent with research by [Humborstad and Kuvaas \(2013\)](#), who found that ambiguity in role expectations undermines motivation and engagement, while clear, structured roles enhance psychological safety and commitment. Similarly, [Maden-Eyiusta \(2019\)](#) argued that in contemporary, dynamic work environments, role clarity mitigates stress and fosters focus, which ultimately supports greater engagement. In this way, compassionate leadership, in our model demonstrated a significant positive relationship with engagement. This connects with, and furthers the work of [Lubis \(2024\)](#), who suggested that leaders who model compassion cultivate environments of trust, inclusion and support; all conditions that are increasingly recognized as foundational to engagement. [Chang et al. \(2025\)](#) also argued that compassionate leadership promotes not only emotional well-being but also drives employee investment in organizational goals, and our findings support this idea in theory. Our work adds to this growing body of research.

More, the strong correlation between role clarity and compassionate leadership observed in this study raises important considerations for practice. These constructs may not operate in isolation but instead function synergistically. Compassionate leaders may be more likely to provide the communication, direction and psychological safety necessary to enhance role clarity. This dynamic suggests a valuable area for future research: examining how leader behaviors moderate or mediate the relationship between job design factors and engagement outcomes. Although the regression model explained 19% of the variance in employee engagement – indicating a moderate effect size – this also suggests that other important predictors remain unaccounted for, and an area for fruitful future research. For example, future research might more fully explore other related constructs such as psychological safety, perceived organizational support and/or even other leadership frameworks such as leader-member exchange as next steps. Previous research has also identified factors such as organizational culture, perceived autonomy, feedback mechanisms and opportunities for growth as meaningful contributors to engagement ([Albrecht et al., 2015](#)). Future work could expand the current model to include these variables, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of what drives engagement in complex work settings.

In sum, our findings reinforce the argument that employee engagement is both a psychological and structural phenomenon, influenced by leadership behavior and clarity in work design. Organizations seeking to improve engagement should invest in both leadership development and job design strategies that reduce ambiguity and promote relational leadership practices grounded in compassion.

Implications for HRD theory, research and practice

The implications of this research study align with the theoretical frameworks guiding this research which position role clarity and compassionate leadership as primary antecedents of employee engagement. By grounding our model in role theory ([Kahn et al., 1964](#)) the present study provides empirical support for the theorized pathways (i.e. clear expectations enhance engagement and compassion leadership behaviors increase employee engagement) The

following implications highlight how the findings reinforce, extend and refine these frameworks within HRD.

The findings of this study contribute significantly to advancing HRD theory, research and practice by providing empirical evidence on the importance of compassionate leadership and role clarity in influencing higher levels of overall engagement. These insights have several implications for the ongoing development of HRD as a discipline.

First, theoretically speaking, our work study reinforces and extends existing HRD theories by demonstrating the critical interplay between leadership behaviors and role clarity in promoting employee engagement. We extend this work and suggest that the positive relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement strengthens leadership theories within HRD, particularly those that emphasize the role of emotional and social competencies in effective leadership (Oluwatoyin and Mardikaningsih, 2024; Riggio and Reichard, 2008). The strong effect of role clarity on engagement challenges HRD scholars to consider how role clarity might theoretically interact with other organizational factors, such as role ambiguity and role conflict, to influence various employee outcomes. While role clarity ensures employees understand their responsibilities, role ambiguity presents information uncertainty and role conflict introduces conflicting expectations (Mwakyusa and Mcharo, 2024). Future research could explore what influences role clarity has on role ambiguity and role conflict. Role theory, developed by Kahn *et al.*, 1964, provides a foundation for examining these frameworks in greater depth particularly with role clarity, role ambiguity and role conflict (Karkkola *et al.*, 2019).

In short, results from this work contribute to the development of more nuanced theoretical frameworks that integrate both leadership and structural elements in the study of employee engagement. These developments should be taken into consideration in future work as extensions of theoretical models. For example, from a research standpoint, this study opens several promising avenues. First, the strong predictive power of role clarity over compassionate leadership suggests that a deeper examination of *how* clarity drives engagement could be a fruitful area of examination (Majid *et al.*, 2023). One possibility is that employees conflate leaders' behaviors with their intentions in ways that scholars have yet to unpack. Follow-up studies could test whether workers view role clarity primarily as an outcome of leadership practices – such as transparent communication and consistent guidance – or as a product of broader organizational systems and processes. Additional work might also trace how leaders' intentions become concrete actions that sharpen role clarity and, in turn, elevate engagement.

Second, personal circumstances likely shape how employees experience both role clarity and engagement. Leaders should recognize how their interventions intersect with individual hardship or stressors, which can moderate the impact of HR initiatives (Onyemah, 2019). Because emotionally intelligent leaders operate with heightened self-awareness, future research could explore how such leaders tailor clarity-building actions to employees lived realities, thereby ensuring intended benefits are realized (Towsen *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, our findings underscore the importance of exploring additional predictors of engagement beyond those in the present model – such as organizational culture, job design and employee empowerment (Han, Sung, and Suh, 2021; Saks, 2022). Incorporating and testing these variables will support building more comprehensive, evidence-based models of what drives employee engagement and how practitioners can ultimately influence it.

For HRD practitioners, the study provides practical strategies that can be effectively implemented to elevate employee engagement within organizations. Because the data from this study was drawn from a single financial services organization, it is important to understand how the contextual features of this organization may influence the meaning of the

findings. Financial service environments tend to emphasize compliance, accuracy and responsiveness (Adekunle *et al.*, 2023). Under these conditions, role clarity may create a more centralized role in shaping engagement than in more flexible or creative industries. Similarly, the strong effect of compassionate leadership suggests that these leadership behaviors remain relevant in highly structured environments in financial services. These contextual considerations are essential for understanding how the findings can be more generalizable beyond the organization studied.

The evidence supporting the impact of compassionate leadership suggests that leadership development programs should include training on empathy, emotional intelligence and supportive communication via role clarity (Farnia and Nafukho, 2016). These programs can help leaders cultivate the skills necessary to influence a compassionate work environment, which is increasingly recognized as essential for high employee engagement (Lubis, 2024). By bridging leadership behaviors with role quality, this study emphasizes the importance of aligning leadership strategies with organizational structures to optimize engagement. Recognizing the connection between leadership and clarity can better inform HRD interventions ensuring that employees feel supported by their leaders and have well defined roles.

Moreover, the significant role of role clarity in predicting engagement underscores the importance of designing and implementing HR practices that ensure employees have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. This could involve revising job descriptions, improving onboarding processes and providing ongoing support and feedback to employees (Maden-Eyiusta, 2019). Similarly, compassionate leadership can be developed through targeted leadership training focused on empathy, active listening, coaching conversations and supportive feedback behaviors. Regular manager development initiatives and reinforcement through performance systems may help translate these behaviors into daily practice. Integrating role clarity assessments into engagement and leadership surveys could aid in these HR practices by continuously monitoring if managerial actions are in alignment with organizational practices. By focusing on both leadership behaviors and role clarity, HRD practitioners can develop more effective strategies for creating a work environment that supports high levels of engagement, thus driving organizational performance.

In sum, this study not only contributes to the theoretical and empirical knowledge base of HRD but also offers practical guidance for improving leadership and elevating the influence of role clarity within organizations. HRD professionals can operationalize these findings by embedding role clarity assessments into engagement diagnostics and by offering targeted leadership coaching focused on clarity-driven communication behaviors. These insights are crucial for advancing HRD as a field that not only understands but also actively shapes the conditions that lead to enhanced employee engagement and overall organizational success.

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