

THE PARTICULARITIES OF LEADERSHIP STYLES AMONG DUTCH SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESS OWNERS

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the particularities of the leadership styles practiced by the small and medium business owners from a developed western European country, the Netherlands. The three leadership styles that we have used in our research are Autocratic, Democratic and Laissez-faire, the difference between them being the way the leaders make decisions, their involvement in the day to day activities and the degree of freedom and responsibility that their giving their subordinates. The main research instrument used was a 23 questions survey, based on which we could determine the dominant leadership style for each respondent. This survey has been applied on a sample of 128 Dutch small and medium business owners, from which 100 responses could be used for the actual research. The results have shown us that the dominant leadership styles among Dutch SME owners is the democratic one and we have also identified a series of factors, such as the company's age and the owner's sex that are having a significant influence upon the practiced style. The results of this research will be used in a future study in which we will make a comparison between the particularities of leadership styles among Romanian and Dutch small and medium business owners.

Keywords: leadership styles, small and medium business owners, the Netherlands, autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire,

Clasificare JEL : M12, M14, M16

1.Introduction

Ever since its first appearance as a concept, leadership has been a topic for interest both for academic researchers, who are trying to understand it from theoretical point of view and for professionals from the business world, who are trying to understand how they could successfully apply it in their day to day organizational life [7][14]. Many theories were developed without regard to the problems of leadership within organizations; instead, the tradition of basic research was to explain and to understand the social influence of leadership [33]. Moreover, most of these theories have tackled leadership as a general concept or in the context of project teams or large companies, while the issue of leadership in small business have not been extensively researched.

The small and medium business sector represents 99.8% of the European Union's roughly 20 million firms [32]. Moreover, SMEs account on average for 50% of GDP in high income countries [1] and in the OECD countries about 75% of the formal workforce was employed in the small and medium business sector [5][17]. In the Netherlands, a similar situation could be observed, with 99.6% out of a total of 864.000 of Dutch companies, being SME, according to EU standards (Statistics Netherlands, 2010). In the non financial business sector, 537.000 small and medium companies accounted for a total of 67.2% of total employment, showing us that in the Netherlands, the proportion of large enterprises is larger than the European Union average [32]. Despite this, when it comes to value creation, the Dutch SMEs account for 62.2% of the total added value, with 4.3% more than the European average [32].

The most important difference about how is leadership perceived and applied in a small or medium business, rather than in a large corporation is the direct influence that the SME owner has upon his employees [31]. In a large company, the leadership itself is layered among the multiple levels of hierarchy, each manager exerting his influence and projecting his leadership behavior only upon a small portion of the company's staff, precisely, their immediate subordinates. As an example, we cannot talk about the CEO's leadership behavior affecting directly the bottom line employees; his direct influence is felt only upon his executive team. On contrary, in the case of a small and medium business, the owner (which in most cases is the manager too) exerts a direct and personal influence on his employees [2], due to the fact that in most cases, he is actively involved in the day to day operations and his presence is being acknowledged directly by his subordinates [18][23][27][39]. Moreover, the leadership styles used by the small business owners are an indicative of their predisposition in managerial behaviors and should be considered an essential ingredient in the mix that ensures a company's success [3][38]. Chaganti, Cook and Smelts (2002) have stated that "in order for a firm to succeed, the business strategies and management practices have to fit or match the owner/CEO's

leadership style. In other words, certain types of business strategies and management systems are more appropriate than others for particular leadership styles and success is more likely when there is such an internal consistency.”[12]

As we have stated before, the theoretical literature on leadership as a general concept is extensive and several classifications have been proposed by different researchers. Despite their theoretical and conceptual differences, most scholars agree on the fact that the subject of leadership styles cannot be discussed without first explaining the context in which each style could be used [31]. The most common styles, which are often included (in some form or the other) in most classifications are Autocratic, Democratic and Laissez-faire [21]. These three styles have been used in the present research.

Taking into account these statistics and arguments, we can safely assume that the small and medium business sector is crucial to the Dutch economy (and the European economy in general), thus explaining the need for extensive research regarding leadership styles in this sector. The present paper is aiming to examine the particularities of leadership styles among Dutch small and medium business owners, while trying to understand the different factors that are actively influencing these styles.

2. Literature Review

Hersey and Blanchard (1984) defined leadership as “the process of influencing the activities of an individual or a group in efforts toward goal achievement in a given situation”[24]. The previous studies on the topic of leadership were “in turn riddled with trial and error applications that are grounded more in the anecdotes of key policymakers, sponsoring stakeholders, and targeted constituencies than in scientific data and models” [40]. Nave (2005) has stated that most of the existing literature on this subject consisted of books and articles which offered advice on how to efficiently use leadership in a business or organizational context, frequently falling into the self-help genre, without having a strong scientific background. The papers usually reflected individual cases studies, irrelevant samples, unreliable evidence and personal reflections of the authors, without strong, scientific arguments to back them up [33]. This mass of literature on organizational managers and leadership practices tended to place greater emphasis on the popular theories than on scientifically tested principles [33][40].

Fairholm (1998) has stated that “Leaders play a major role in helping us shape our life. Leaders define business and practice. They determine the character of society. They define our teams, groups and communities”[19]. Thus, leadership refers to creating and implementing a vision in order for a company to succeed and ensuring the necessary organizational context in which the employees could adhere and follow that certain vision. In the case of a small business, in the beginning, the vision is created and maintained solely by the business owners who projects his attitude, behavior and perceptions upon their company. In the early phases of a small business’s life, the owner is identifying himself with every aspect of the company’s existence and is the only responsible for its success or failure. But in order for the company to grow and expand, the owner needs to be able to project this vision upon his employees [33] Gray et al. (2003) stated that that in order for “the business to prosper beyond the start-up phase, the founder-leader needs to communicate the vision for the business and develop followers with the capacity to implement the vision” [22].

As we have stated in the introductory chapter of this paper, in the past, extensive research has been conducted on the subject of leadership in larger organizations or in small project teams. The main difference between a large company and a SME is the layers of authority. While in a large company, authority and reasonability is divided and delegated among numerous levels with top, medium and bottom line managers and teams, so is the influence of their leadership behavior and/or styles. An individual is mostly concerned with the behavior and attitude of his immediate superior and this influence is diminishing as we go down the hierarchical ladder of the organization (as we have explained before, the bottom line employee is not directly influenced by the behavior and attitude of the CEO). On the contrary, in a small or medium business, there are far less hierarchical levels, in many cases the owner being the only manager, thus, being responsible for all the organizational matters: achieving performance, motivating his employees, establishing partnerships, setting strategic goals, basically controlling all aspects of the company [22] This active involvement from the manager in the daily activities reduces the distance between himself and his employees. His presence is felt and seen directly by his staff (as a opposed to a large company, when the bottom line employees may only meet the CEO on special occasions) and because of this his behavior and style of management and leadership is affecting them in a direct, non-mediated way.

Research on leadership styles started to appear from the 1940s to 1960s, as the scholars started to focus more on the different styles of leadership, than on the traits of the leader itself. According to Bryman (1992), “researchers were particularly concerned to identify the kinds of leader behavior that enhanced the effectiveness of subordinates” [8]. If before 1940s, leadership was seen a quality that one had to possess from birth, after this period, research started to be focused more on the idea of leadership behaviors, which, if properly identified, could be trained, thus increasing the effectiveness of the leader [33]. In this period, many important researchers started to publish their theories. Blake and Mouton (1964) came up with the management grid theory which was used to measure an individual predisposition of engaging in group activities and tasks. Likert’s (1961) management theory and McGregor’s (1966) X and Y theory were concerned with “not being nice to people or making work pleasant, but with understanding how to make work organizations more effective” [35].

Likert's (1961) theory could be considered the basis for the leadership styles classification that we will be using in the present paper. This theory deals with systematic development of ideas. He recommended that supervisors should advocate that groups seek agreement in problem solving so that those solutions could be generalized to the organization at large [33]. Starting from this concept, Likert (1961) identified four different leadership and management systems: 1) Explorative/authoritative system, in which the managers would command and control their subordinates through fear and intimidation and all the organizational communications were unidirectional (top to bottom); 2) Benevolent/authoritative system, similar to the previous one, the only difference being the fact that the managers were rewarding employee loyalty and performance. In this system, communication was starting to become bidirectional, but the only information that was transmitted by the employees was the one that they thought the managers wanted to hear; 3) Consultative system, in which the employees were consulted when it came to minor decisions, but the communication from bottom to top were filtered before being delivered and the major decisions remained a top level concern. 4) Participative group system, in which managers encouraged bidirectional communication and were actively involving their employees in the decision making process [28][33]. The first two levels could be considered similar to the autocratic leadership style used in this paper, while the last two possess characteristics found in the democratic style and represented the bases from which the laissez-faire (delegative) leadership style appeared.

The next step in leadership studies was a shift in the conceptual paradigm which focused more on contingency approaches to managing people [33]. This new concept was based on the idea that there is no such thing as an ideal style which could be flawlessly used in any situation and on the fact that the effectiveness of a certain leadership style or behavior was dependent on the situation in which it was used. Among the advocates of this theory we should include Hersey and Blanchard (1969), Fiedler (1970), Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) and House (1977). In my opinion, the most relevant theory to the study at hand, remains Tannenbaum and Schmidt's (1973) which stated that the leader's behavior is not divided into different, specific styles, but is rather a continuum, ranging from manager-centered to subordinate-center [37]. This theory implies the fact that in order to change the subordinate's behavior, the leader should adapt his behavior accordingly. The same line of reasoning is found in Hersey and Blanchard's (1969) theory of situational leadership which advocated for the idea that maximum efficiency is obtained when the right leadership style is adopted in a given situation in an organizational context. According to Norris and Vecchio (1992), the "theory proposed that optimal styles of leadership change as the level of followers' maturity levels increases". Davis and Luthans (1979) concluded that rather than causing a desired behavior in their subordinates, leaders should serve as role models for their followers, thus inspiring, rather imposing, the desired behavior.

This being said, we will proceed to defining and discussing the three leadership styles which will be used in the present paper: autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire.

Autocratic leadership style

Autocratic leadership is derived from the first two levels of Likert's (1961) leadership systems: explorative/authoritative and benevolent/authoritative. Moreover, we can observe similarities between the autocratic leader and the transactional leader, which focuses on the bottom line and the events that surround completion of tasks. According to Covey (1991), transactional leaders are "preoccupied with power and position, politics and perks that will allow the person to complete the job and make a living".

This style is characterized by excessive control from the leaders, centralized decision-making process and little to no regard to the employees' well being [31]. According to Shankar, Ansari and Saxena (1994), leaders "in an authoritarian climate are status and power oriented, demanding blind obedience and personal loyalty from their subordinates".

This is the ideal style to be used with a young, inexperienced team, which needs directions from its leader. Moreover, when a crisis appears in the company, the employees usually will look up to their leader for guidance and thus, a competent autocratic leader can help bring the organization back on track [31].

Democratic Leadership style

As we have stated before, democratic leadership has its roots in the last two levels of Likert's (1961) leadership systems: consultative system and participatory group system. It also can be linked with transformational leadership style, which is characterized by inspiring loyalty from their subordinates, while producing visionary change in the organization [33]. Transformational theory began with the work of Burns (1978), and involved both leaders and followers working together to raise motivation toward idealistic goals, such as one in which the aims and aspirations of both the leader and the followers were combined into one [10].

The Democratic leaders emphasize the importance of input from team members [7]. They actively involves his employees in the decision making process, taking into account their opinions, desires and needs [9] and "encourage group decision making, team spirit, supportive relationships, and high goals" [36]. Another advantage of this style is the increase in employees' motivation, because it gives people the perception "that their voice has been heard and they own the plan" [30]. Mihai (2015) is stating that "this style is best used within a developing company, in which the employees are mature enough to take part in the decision making process, but still need a certain degree of guidance and direction in their actions".

Laissez-faire (delegative) leadership style

This style is derived from de democratic (participatory) leadership style, with the difference being that the leader's involvement in his subordinates' activities is kept to a minimum. This is one of the most controversial leadership styles, some researchers even saying that this involves the lack of any leadership styles [31]. The employees are given full freedom of action and full responsibility over their activity are expected to make decisions and solve their problems on their own, with little to no involvement from their superiors.

Even though it might seem as a style used by lazy, irresponsible leaders who delegate their tasks and decisions to their subordinates, for the sake of delegation, if used correctly, it could be efficient in a completely mature organization. If the employees are experienced, mature and competent and the day to day operations of the company become mundane and no longer represent a challenge, the leader could take a step back and focus on more complex, strategic decisions, allowing the employees to organize themselves in order to keep the company running [31].

3. Research Methodology

As we have specified before, the purpose of this article is to analyze the particularities of the leadership styles practiced by the Dutch small and medium business owners. In order to achieve this purpose, we have set the following objectives:

1. The identification of the dominant leadership style among Dutch small or medium business owners.
2. The identification of the different factors that contribute to a variance of leadership styles among small and medium business owners.

In order to fulfill these research objectives, our study is based on the following research questions:

Q1: What is the dominant leadership style among the Dutch small or medium business owners?

Q2: How does the company's age and maturity influence the leadership style practiced by its owner?

Q3: How does the sex of the business owner influence the leadership style?

Survey

In order to collect the data needed for answering the aforementioned research questions, we have used a survey containing 23 questions. This survey has been applied on a sample of 128 small or medium business owners from the Netherlands (60 male respondents and 68 female respondents) during a period of one month (21st of September 2015 – 20th of October 2015). In order to reach this sample size, we have given around 400 surveys to small or medium business owners from the Netherlands. The companies have been chosen in an arbitrary way, especially with the aid of different professional associations which represent the interests of small and medium enterprises in the Netherlands. we must mention that this article is based on an empirical research, given the fact that the author had limited resources and time, which were not sufficient for conducting a more complex scientific research, with all its characteristic aspects and requirements.

The survey is divided into two parts. The first part, comprising of 8 questions is aiming to identify the general characteristic of the small or business and its owner. Those questions were related to the sex, age and education level of the small or business owner and to the age, SME statute, industry, profit rate and return on investment of the company itself. The second part, the main body of the survey, is comprised of 15 questions which measure (using a 5 point Likert Scale) the leadership style of the respondent. These questions relate to the way the respondent makes decisions, assigns tasks, evaluates his subordinates and the degree of autonomy and responsibility that he is giving his subordinates. These questions are divided into 3 sets of 5, each set characteristic to one leadership style, being adapted from two online questionnaires, one from Sagepub and one from NWlink. In order to determine the dominant style for each respondent, we have added the score from each set and the style which had the highest score will be considered the dominant one and will be used in the discussion of the results. In case of equal scores between two styles, we have used the following guide scoring rules:

- If there is an equal score between the autocratic and democratic style, we have considered the respondent to be in a transition phase between the two styles and we have chosen the autocratic style. The reason for this is the natural transition between these three styles (based on the company's and the owner's maturity and experience: autocratic – democratic – laissez-faire) and we have considered that a transition respondent have practiced the autocratic style for a longer time and is just starting to enter the democratic phase.
- If there is an equal score between the democratic and the laissez-faire style, based on the same reasoning as above, we have chosen the democratic style as the dominant one.
- In the case of an equality between the autocratic and the laissez-faire style or an equality for all the three styles, we have regarded the respondent as inconclusive and we did not use that result for further analysis.

Analysis method

In order to analyze and discuss the results, the data has been adapted and processed using Microsoft Excel for Mac 2016 (the version of Microsoft Excel used for the Mac OS operating system) and IBM SPSS Statistics 17. With these analysis instruments, we have been able to interpret the data in a way which allowed me to answer the research questions of this survey.

4. Research results and discussion

General characteristics of the sample

As we have stated in the above chapter, this research has been conducted on a sample of 128 small or medium business owners from the Netherlands. After eliminating the inconclusive results (10 respondents did not answer all the relevant questions, 8 respondents declared that their company is not a small or medium enterprise and 10 respondents were dismissed because they either had an equal score for all three styles or had an equal score for autocratic and laissez-faire style), we have reached a final sample of 100 respondents which we could use in the present analysis. In the following figures and charts, we will present the distribution of the sample based on the sex (fig. 1), age (Fig.2) and education (Fig.3) of the respondents.

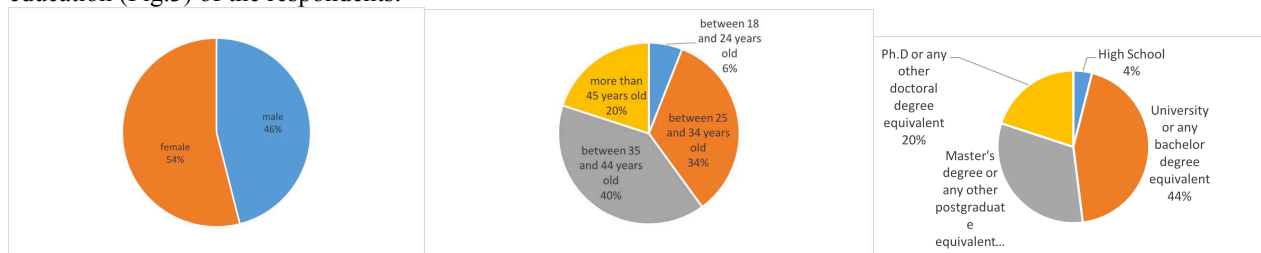


Fig. 1 – Distribution of the respondents according to sex, age and education.

Research questions discussion

Q1: What is the dominant leadership style among the Dutch small or medium business owners?

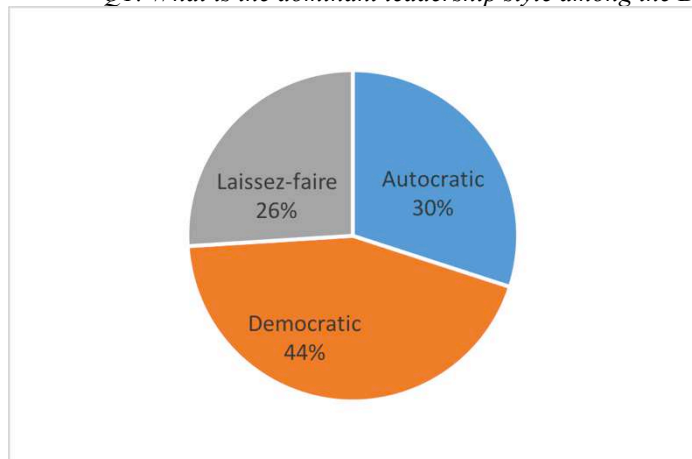


Fig. 2 – Distribution of leadership styles among Dutch small or medium business owners.

As we can see from Fig. 2, 44% of the Dutch small or medium business owners are practicing the democratic style, while 30% use the autocratic style and 26% use the laissez-faire style. Taking into account these results, we can state that the dominant leadership style among the Dutch small or medium business owners is the democratic style.

The prevalence of the democratic style could be explained through Hofstede's cultural dimensions. According to these dimensions, the Netherlands has a fairly low score (38/100) in the power distance dimension [41] which means that hierarchy in an organization is mainly used only in formal situations and the Dutch managers (including, but not being limited to small or medium business owners) are counting on their subordinates, involve them in the decision making process and give them a fairly large degree of autonomy and responsibility, all of these aspects being also characteristic for the democratic leadership style.

Q2: How does the company's age and maturity influence the leadership style practiced by its owner?

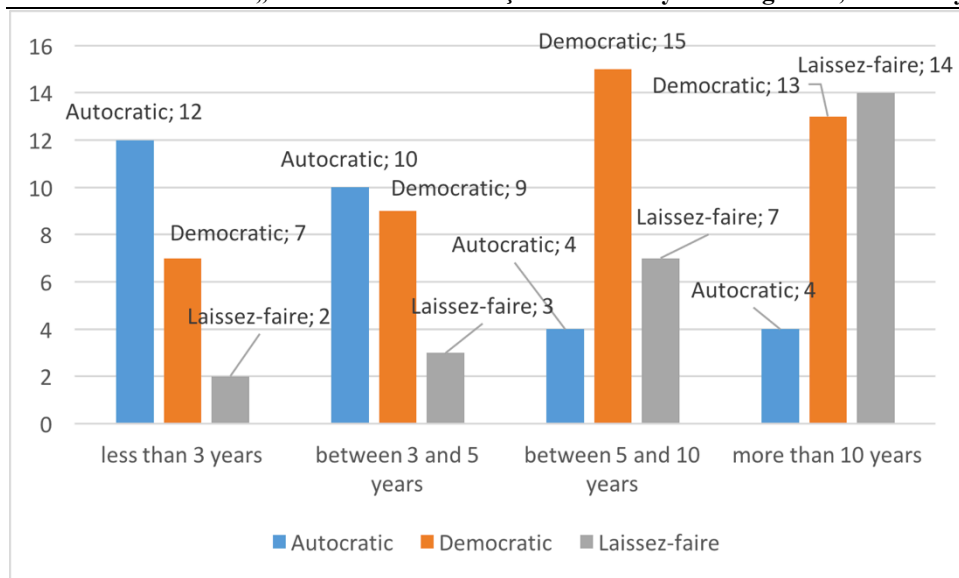


Fig. 3 – The relationship between the leadership styles of Dutch SME’s and the company’s age.

In fig. 3 we can see the distribution the leadership styles based on the respondent’s company age. We can see that in the case of a company with less than 3 years of activity, the dominant leadership style is autocratic. The reason for this, in opinion, is the fact that in the first 3 years of activity the company’s environment is turbulent, it does not have a stable position on the market, the competition is fierce and obstacles, problems and challenges may appear everyday. Moreover, the owner may not fully trust his employees’ capabilities and loyalty, this being the reason for which the owner might not involve them into the decision making process and might not give them a large degree of responsibility and freedom of action. Last but not least, in this early period of it’s life, the company might not be profitable yet and the owner probably did not receive a return on his investment. All these reasons are compelling the owner to act in an autocratic way, to be actively involved in the company’s day to day activities, to closely supervise his employees’ activity in order to ensure that the company is going on the right track.

From fig. 3, we can see that as the company ages, the proportion of the respondents using an autocratic style is diminishing, while observing a clear ascending trend for the laissez-fair style (from 2 respondents with company’s less than 3 years old to 14 respondents with companies more than 10 years old). At the same time, the proportion of respondents practicing a democratic style is increasing too in the first 10 years of a company’s life, becoming the dominant style for companies between 5 and 10 years old, but falling behind the laissez-faire style for companies with more than 10 years of activity. The explanation for the variance in the leadership styles would be the fact that as a company ages, it becomes more mature, it comes to have a more stable position on the market, the employees become more experienced, competent and loyal, the day to day activities become mundane tasks and the challenges appear less often. Thus, the owner can safely delegate more and more of his responsibilities, can offer a higher degree of freedom and autonomy to his employees and he can involve them more often in the decision making process, because they are more experienced and their opinions could be relevant for the situation at hand.

An aspect important to mention would be the fact that the distribution of the respondents according to their company’s age is quite balanced (as it can be seen in fig. 4), thus eliminating the possibility of it having a direct influence upon the general distribution of leadership styles.

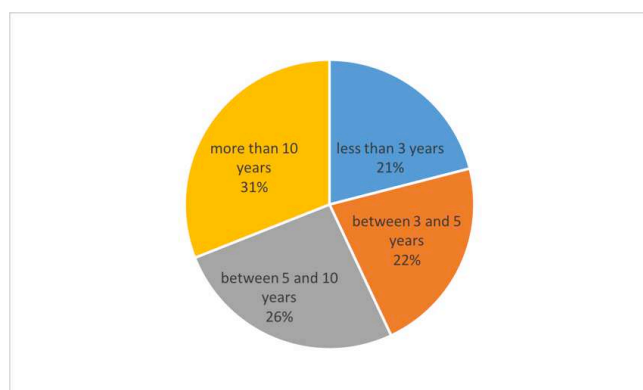


Fig. 4 – Respondent’s distribution according to their company’s age

Q3: How does the sex of the business owner influence the leadership style?

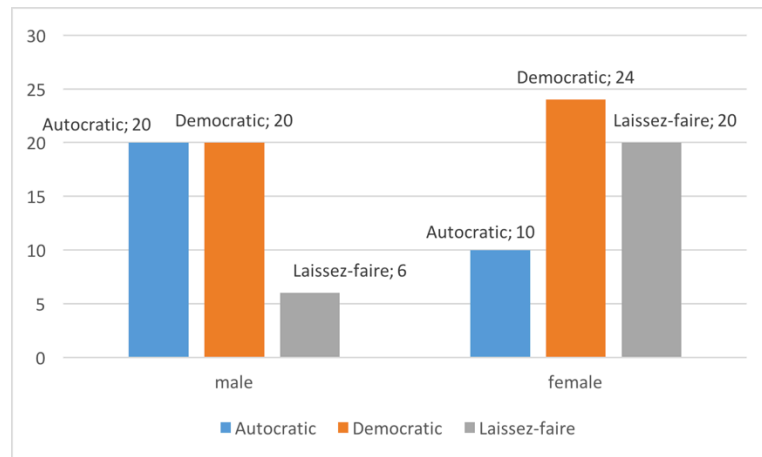


Fig. 5 – The relationship between the respondent's sex and the practiced leadership style

The main reason for which we have chosen to analyze the difference between the male and female leadership styles is the fact that the questionnaire used in this study calls for responses regarding different situations in the organizational life, responses which are, obviously, based on the respondent's past experiences and perceptions. In this case, an individual's sex is one factor that not only affects perception of certain phenomena but, based on social sex roles stereotypes, also defines what behaviors are appropriate in given situations [13]. Individuals are more likely to adopt certain behaviors and to approach situations in a way which is consonant to what the society is expecting from them. In most cultures, the Netherlands included, males are expected to act in a more dominant, competitive and aggressive way (attributes, which, in this case, could be assigned to the autocratic style), while females are seen as being passive and more likely to put more value on social relationship and interactions [13].

From fig. 5, we can see that there is no clear dominant role for the male small and medium business owners (20 male respondents are using the autocratic style and 20 male respondents are using the democratic style), while the women are predominantly more democratic, somewhat confirming the Chapman's (1975) and Baughman's (1972) theories, which state that the women are more likely to indulge in cooperative behaviors with their work colleagues (employees in our case). This is also confirmed by the fact that there are more females (24) than males (20) who are likely to adopt this leadership style. At the same time, we see a significant difference between the distribution of the autocratic style: 20 male and 10 female respondents are practicing this style. This result too can be included in the above-mentioned theories, which state that male leaders are more prone to adopt autocratic behaviors, due to the social expectations assigned to their gender role.

5. Conclusions and further directions

This study aimed to analyze the particularities of the leadership styles used by the Dutch small and medium business owners in order to determine which of the three styles (autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire) was dominant among the respondents and how different factors are affecting the distribution of these styles.

The results have shown that the dominant style used by the Dutch small and medium business owners was the democratic style. Moreover, we have seen that as a company ages, there is a tendency for the leaders to switch from the autocratic style (in the early phase of a company's life) to democratic (middle phase), in order to finally reach the laissez-faire in the late years of a business. If in the case of companies with less than 3 years of activity, the autocratic leadership style was employed by the majority of the respondents (approx. 57%), in the case of companies older than 10 years, nearly 42% of the respondents were using the democratic style, around 45% were using the laissez-faire style, while the autocratic leaders represented less than 13% of total respondents. We must mention, that the distribution of the respondents based on their companies age was fairly balanced, thus eliminating the possibility of this factor affecting the overall distribution of leadership styles among the respondents.

Regarding the difference in the leadership styles practiced by male and female small or medium business owners, our study did not show a clear difference in the dominant style: 43% of the male respondents and 44% of the women are practicing the leadership style. The only observed difference was in the preference for the autocratic style, the male respondents being more prone to adopt this style (43%) than the female respondents (less than 19%).

We should take into consideration the fact that the results of this study may have been affected by the respondents' subjectivity. The democratic leadership style is thought to be more socially acceptable, and this might

have compelled the respondents to answer the questions in a way that they considered to be socially accepted, which might or might not reflect their true opinions on the matter.

Last but not least, we have to mention that the same survey has been applied to a sample of 50 small and medium business owners from the Netherlands and the results, together with the results of the present study will be used in a further research which aims to compare the particularities of leadership styles of small business owners from Romania and the Netherlands.

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