

LEADERSHIP STYLES IN SMES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN ROMANIA

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Abstract:

The manager's leadership styles define the way a manager acts behaves and takes decisions in certain situations and has a direct influence upon the employees' well-being. In a small and medium enterprise setting, unlike in a large enterprise, the employees are feeling the influence of the leadership style in a much more direct and personal way, due to the small number of hierarchical levels and the constant interaction between the owner/manager and the employees. The present paper focuses on analyzing how the employees of SMEs from Oltenia and Muntenia Regions of Romania perceive their superiors' leadership styles. In order to meet this goal, we have used a 21 question survey, based on which we could determine the leadership style (Autocratic, Democratic or Laissez-faire) of the superior, as it is perceived by each respondent. The survey has been applied on a sample of cca. 300 employees from small and medium enterprises from Oltenia, and approximately 130 responses have been used in the actual research. The results of this study will be used in a further research, in which we aim to compare the way the managers perceive their own leadership style and how it is perceived by their employees.

Keywords: leadership styles, autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, millennials, Xers, SMEs

Introduction

The small and medium enterprises are very important because they promote innovation, both in terms of delivered products and services and in terms of technologies and management process. Investments permit access to new technologies, which will eventually lead to the development of the business and will ensure its competitiveness and, in the end, the development of the national and European economic

system, the SME's being considered the engine of the European economic system.

Leadership, even from its very beginnings, has been an interesting subject for researchers who tried to explain and understand the social influence of this concept. Despite the abundance of studies regarding leadership, few researchers focused on the problem of how the leadership styles should be applied in a small and

medium business setting (O'Regan et al, 2004; Chun-Wen, 2008; Valdiseri and Wilson, 2010; Arham et al, 2013).

The most important difference between the way in which leadership is applied in a large enterprise and in an SME, refers to the influence that the leader has upon his followers (Mihai, 2015). In a large company, the management as well as leadership, is layered in multiple hierarchical levels, each leader influencing and projecting his behavior on a small number of the company's employees, specifically his direct subordinates. On the other hand, in a small or medium enterprise, the owner/manager has a direct and personal influence upon his staff (Bass, 1981) due to the fact that, in most cases, he is actively involved in the day-to-day operations and his presence is felt directly by his employees. Moreover, the leadership styles used by the SME owners are an indicator of their predisposition towards specific leadership behaviors, which should be considered an essential ingredient of the company's success recipe (Pasanen, 2003; Randoi and Goel, 2003; O'Regan and Lehmann, 2008).

The theoretical literature regarding the leadership styles is vast and thus, there are many classifications of leadership styles, proposed by different scholars. Despite the theoretical and conceptual differences, most experts agree that we cannot talk about the advantages and disadvantages of leadership styles if we do not explain the context in which the said style will be used (Mihai, 2015). The styles which will be used in the present paper are Autocratic, Democratic and Laissez-Faire (Jackson and Keaveny, 1980).

As we have mentioned beforehand, the topic of small and medium enterprises, as well as the topic of leadership styles have been a

central point of focus for many researchers in the recent years, but, despite this abundance of literature, few studies have treated the both topics together and even fewer have tackled how the employees view their superiors' leadership styles in a small and medium business setting.

Our article focuses on the analysis of how the leadership styles of SME owners from Oltenia and Muntenia, two regions of Romania, are perceived by their employees. This article aims to continue some of the authors' previous research, which analyzed the way the small and medium enterprise owners perceive their own leadership style.

1. Literature review

1.1. General aspects regarding leadership: From the Great Man to Transformational Leadership

Throughout the years, the paradigm in leadership research has shifted from a leader-centered approach in the first years to a situational approach in the latter years. The most important theories that appeared throughout the years are (1) The Great Man theories which are "based on the belief that leaders are exceptional people, born with innate qualities, destined to lead" (Bolden et al, 2003, p.6); (2) The Trait theories which focused on what traits and characteristics are specific to leaders (Bass, 1990); (3) Behaviourist theories which are focused more how do the leaders act instead of their characteristics (Bass, 1981); (4) Situational leadership which focuses in studying the leader's behavior in the context of the specific situations that he has to deal with (Hersey&Blanchard, 1969); (5) Contingency theory which is a development of the situation theory and focuses on the variables which

might help predict which styles is optimal for which situation (Fiedler, 1967); (6) Transactional Theory which treats the relationship between leaders and followers as a transaction between the rewards and recognition offered by the leader in exchange of the followers' work (Bass, 1990) and (7) Transformational Theory which focused on the leader as the most important figure needed to implement sustainable change in the organization (Burns, 2003).

Besides these individualistic perspectives regarding the leader, a new school of thought is becoming popular these days and it sees leadership as a decentralized process, visible in the whole organization, rather than being dependent on the formally (or informally) appointed leader (Bolden et al, 2003).

1.2. Leadership styles: autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire

The leadership literature describes three broad power styles of leadership within groups, namely autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire (Bass, 1990; Lewin et al., 1939; Vroom & Yetton, 1973; Yukl, 1989).

According to Van Vugt et al. (2004) "autocratic style leaders will do whatever they feel necessary to provide the common good. They decide which group members should contribute how much without asking anyone for input" (p. 2). Usually, this style can be used efficiently when the leader is familiar with the actions he needs to take in order to reach a goal, while his team has little or no experience regarding the matter (Boykins, 2012). Lewin et al. (1939) claimed that groups led by an autocratic leader are more productive than democratic led groups, and both of these groups are more productive than laissez-faire led groups.

Kurt Lewin and his colleagues argued that democratic leaders focus

on involving the team in their decision making, actively involving their members, constructive praise and criticism and building strong interpersonal relationships with their followers (Lewin et al., 1939; White & Lippit, 1960). Krech et al. (1962) explain that "the democratic leader seeks to evoke maximum involvement and the participation of every member in the group activities and in the determination of objectives. The leader seeks to spread responsibility rather than to concentrate it" (p.435). This theory is supported by Burns (1978, 2003) who claimed that democratic leadership is focused on involving both leaders and followers who work together in order to create an environment in which both the leader's and the followers' goals and expectations are aligned.

The leadership style can be described as "the absence of leadership, the avoidance of intervention or both. With laissez-faire leadership, there are generally neither transactions nor agreements with followers. Decisions are often delayed, feedback, rewards and involvement is absent and there is no attempt to motivate followers or to recognize and satisfy their needs" (Bass and Avolio, 1990 p.20). Other supporters of this theory, such as Lewin et al. (1939) state that laissez-faire leadership is more likely to appear when a leader is nominated, rather than elected and he chooses to distance himself from the day-to-day operations and delegates his duties to his followers. Despite these claims, empirical studies documenting the correlations between this type of leadership as a cause for stress and the consequences for the workers are scarce (Skogstad et al., 2007)

2. Research methodology

2.1. Purpose. Objectives. Research Questions

The present paper aims to analyse the leadership styles of Romanian entrepreneurs. In order to fulfill this goal, we have set the following objectives: (1) Exploring the way in which the entrepreneur's leadership style is perceived by his own employees; (2) Identifying the most important variables which can explain the differences in leadership styles.

In order to fulfill these objectives, we have used the following research questions:

Q1: Which leadership style is perceived as being the most common among small and medium enterprise owners?

Q2: How do the variables "age", "sex", "seniority", "geographical region" and "industry" affect the distribution of leadership styles?

2.2. Survey and Sample

The instrument used in this research is a 21 questions survey, which was applied on a sample of 200 master's degree students from two of Romania's Development Regions: South West Oltenia (5 counties: Dolj, Olt, Gorj, Valcea and Mehedinti) and South Muntenia (only one county, Arges), all of them being employed in a small or medium enterprise. Out of the 200 sent surveys, 129 responses have been used in the present research.

The survey has the same items regarding the leadership styles as a previous one, used by the authors in a previous research in which they analyzed the way the small and medium enterprise owners perceive their own leadership styles. The items have been left the same in order to allow further research, regarding a comparison between the way the small

and medium enterprise owners perceive their own leadership style and how they are perceived by their own employees.

Fifteen of the twenty-one questions are meant to measure the leadership style and they are divided in 3 sets of 5 questions (using a 5-point Likert Scale), one for each leadership style (e.g. the questions no. 7, 10, 13, 16 and 19 were related to the autocratic leadership style, the questions no. 8, 11, 14, 17 and 20 were related to the democratic style, while questions no. 9, 12, 15, 18 and 21 were related to the laissez-faire style.) (Mihai, 2015). In order to establish the dominant leadership style for each respondent, we have added the scores for each set of 5 questions and the leadership style with the highest score was considered dominant. Regarding the situations in which a respondent would have equal scores for two or more styles, we have used the following approach:

- if the score is equal between the autocratic and democratic styles, we consider that the respondent's leader is in a transition phase between these styles and we will use the autocrat style.

- If the score is equal between the democratic and the laissez-faire style, we consider that the respondent's leader is in a transition phase between the two styles and we will use the democratic style.

- In case of equality between the autocratic and laissez-faire style or in case of equality between all the three styles, we considered the result as inconclusive and we did not include it in the analysis.

In order to test reliability of the survey's items, we have used the Cronbach's Alpha indicator, which had the values of .803 for the items

regarding the autocratic style, .813 for the items regarding the democratic style, .801 for the laissez-faire style and .825 for the total of 15 items regarding all three leadership styles which confirms the fact that the items have a

strong internal reliability, as in all 4 cases, Cronbach's Alpha is greater than .8.

Out of the 129 respondents, 68 were male and 61 were female, as we can see in Figure 1.

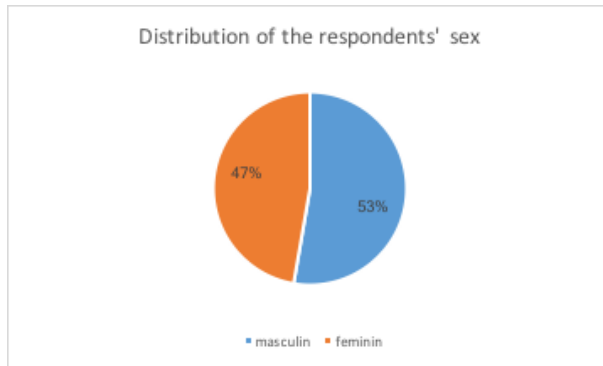


Figure 1. Distribution of the respondents' sex

Out of the 129 respondents, 41 were aged between 18 and 24, 43 were aged between 25 and 34, 28 were aged

between 35 and 44 and 17 were aged past 45, as we can see in Figure 2.

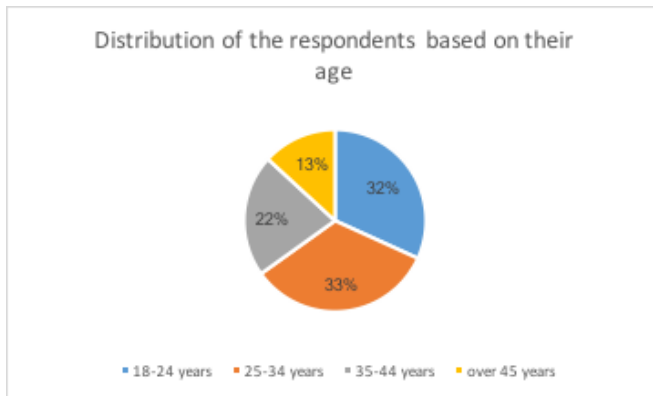


Figure 2. Distribution of the respondents' based on their age

Out of the 129 respondents, 69 are from Oltenia Region and 60 are

from Muntenia region, as we can see in Figure 3.

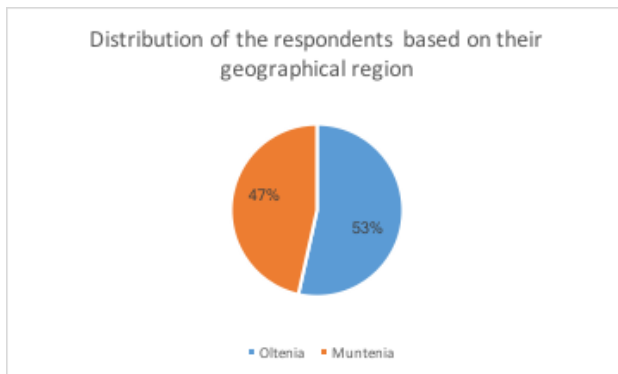


Figure 3. Distribution of respondents based on their geographical region

3. Results

Q1: Which leadership style is perceived as being the most common among small and medium enterprise owners?

Our results have shown us, that out of the 129 respondents, 47 consider that their superiors are focused on control and give them little to no freedom action, thus employing an autocratic leadership style, 73 consider that their superior is involving them in

the decision making process, giving them a certain degree of autonomy and is aware of their needs and expectations, thus having a democratic approach to leadership, while 9 respondents consider that their superiors are giving them full authority over the day to day operations, while providing them with little to no guidance and direction, thus having a laissez-faire approach on leadership. These results can be seen in Figure 4.

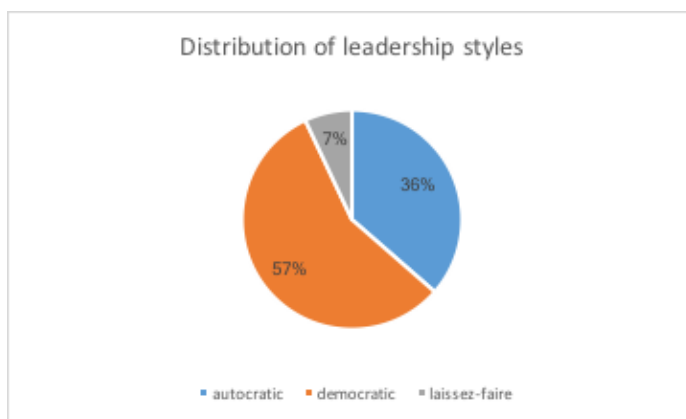


Figure 4. Distribution of Leadership Styles

Q2: How do the variables "age", "sex", "seniority" and "geographical region" affect the distribution of leadership styles?

Regarding the variable "age", Table 1 shows us how the respondents perceive their superiors' leadership styles in relation with their age.

Table 1

The Correlation between age group and leadership style

		Leadership Style			Total
		Autocratic	Democratic	Laissez-faire	
Age	Count	14	26	1	41
	18-24 years Expected Count	14,9	23,2	2,9	41,0
	Residual	-,9	2,8	-1,9	
	Count	17	23	3	43
	25-34 years Expected Count	15,7	24,3	3	43,0
	Residual	1,3	-1,3	.0	
	Count	11	13	4	28
	35-44 years Expected Count	10,2	15,8	2,0	28,0
	Residual	.8	-2,8	2,0	
Count	5	11	1	17	
Over 45 years Expected Count	6,2	9,6	1,2	17,0	
Residual	-1,2	1,4	-,2		
Total	Count	47	73	9	129
Expected Count	47,0	73,0	9,0	129,0	

From Table 1 we can see that the largest differences between the real count and the expected count can be found in the democratic style for the 18-24 age group (26 respondents consider their superior as being democrat against an expected count of 23.2) and the 35-44 age group (13 respondents consider their superior as being democratic against an expected count of 15.8).

The reason that there more respondents aged between 18 and 24 who consider their superior democratic than expected is the fact that usually employees from this age group are young, inexperienced professionals who view their supeiors as a mature, experienced person from which they have many things to learn and thus, are willing to accept their authority and view their intrusions in their activity as help and support, rather than micromanagement tendencies. According to Gursoy et al (2008) and

Martin (2005), people from born from 1980 onwards (also called Millenials or Generation Y) expect open and frequent communications with their superiors, with whom they develop strong interpersonal relationships, an aspect which furthermore supports the theory that the respondents from this age group are willing to accept their manager's intrusion as an opportunity for development. Moreover, according to Graybill (2014), one of the Millenials' accepted definition of leadership is a "Collaborative act of guidance, direction and action" (p.12), a definition which underlines the Millenials' acceptance of direction and control as a necessary part of leadership. Another study has shown that younger employees tend to view older managers from a different perspective than they view managers from their own age (Slotterback, 1996). At the same time, considering the lack of experience that these people are having, their managers might consider

their tasks mundane and less important and thus might employ less control and supervision

The reason that there are less respondents aged between 35 and 44 who consider their superior democratic than expected is the fact that in most cases, their superiors are from a similar age group and thus might consider their superior (who might have been a former colleague who got promoted) as being equally competent and any intrusion from their part might be considered a micromanagement

practice. This theory is supported by a study published in *ziare.com* which shows that 57.25 % of Romanian entrepreneurs are aged between 30 and 49, which is more or less the similar to the age group analyzed here. Moreover, Shore et al. (2003) stated that employees tend to receive lower performance evaluations from managers from the same generation.

Regarding the variable "sex", Table 2 shows us how the respondents perceive their superiors' leadership styles in relation with their sex.

Table 2
Correlation between the respondent's sex and the perceived leadership style

		Leadership Style			Total	
		Autocratic	Democratic	Laissez-faire		
sex	male	Count	25	37	6	68
		Expected Count	24.8	38.5	4.7	68.0
		Residual	.2	-1.5	1.3	
	female	Count	22	36	3	61
		Expected Count	22.2	34.5	4.3	61.0
		Residual	-.2	1.5	-1.3	
Total		Count	47	73	9	129
		Expected Count	47.0	73.0	9.0	129.0

In table 2, we can see that there are small differences between the real count and the expected count. Furthermore, we have used Fisher's Exact Test in order to analyse if there are significant differences between the male and female respondents, which turned a result of $p=.726$, which is greater than .05 which means we have

to accept the null hypothesis, according to which there are no significant differences between the male and female respondents.

Regarding the variable "seniority", Table 3 is showing us how the distribution of leadership styles is being influenced by how long the respondents have worked in their company.

Table 3

Correlation between seniority and leadership style

		Leadership style			Total	
		Autocratic	Democratic	Laissez-faire		
seniority	Less than 1 year	Count	12	27	1	40
		Expected Count	14.6	22.6	2.8	40
		Residual	-2.6	4.4	-1.8	
	Between 1 and 3 years	Count	9	10	1	20
		Expected Count	7.3	11.3	1.4	20,0
		Residual	1.7	-1.3	-4	
	Between 3 and 5 years	Count	3	8	3	14
		Expected Count	5.1	7.9	1	14,0
		Residual	-2.1	.1	2	
	Between 5 and 7 years	Count	6	8	1	15
		Expected Count	5.5	8.5	1	15,0
		Residual	.5	-5	0	
	More than 7 years	Count	17	20	3	40
		Expected Count	14.6	22.6	2.8	40,0
		Residual	2.4	-2,6	2	
Total	Count	47	73	9	129	
	Expected Count	47.0	73.0	9.0	129	

We can see that in the case of the respondents who have been working in their company for less than year, there are more respondents who consider their superior as being democratic than expected (a real count of 27 against an expected count of 22.6) and less respondents who consider their superior autocratic than expected (real count of 12 against an expected count of 14.6). The situation appears in a similar way regarding the respondents who have been working with their company for more than 7 years, where there are less respondents who consider their superior democratic than expected (20 against a real count of 22.6) and more respondents who consider their superior as being autocratic than expected (17 against a real count of 14.6).

The reason the respondents who have been working in their company for a short period of time, consider their superior as being democratic might be the fact that the respondents consider themselves inexperienced and acknowledge and agree with the way their superior is leading them. At the same time, respondents who have been with the company for more than 7 years might consider themselves experienced enough to be able to work on their own and might not agree with their superior's interference in their activities.

To analyse if there are other significant differences between how respondents from different seniority groups have assessed their superiors' leadership style, we have used Fisher's Exact Test which turned a value of $p=.379$, thus confirming the null hypothesis.

Regarding the variable shown in Table 4. "geographical region", the results are

Table 4
Correlation between the leadership style and the geographical region

		Leadership Style			Total	
		Autocratic	Democratic	Laissez-faire		
Geographical Region	Oltenia	Count	22	40	7	69
		Expected Count	25.1	39.0	4.8	69.0
		Residual	-3.1	1	2.2	
	Muntenia	Count	25	33	2	60
		Expected Count	21.9	34.0	4.2	60.0
		Residual	3.1	-1.0	-2.2	
Total	Count	47	73	9	129	
	Expected Count	47.0	73.0	9.0	129.0	
	Count					

Further more, we have used Fisher's exact test in order to test if there are significant differences between how respondents from the two geographical region percieve their superiors and it turned a result of $p=.239$ which is greater than $.05$ which means we have to accept the null hypothesis and thus, there are no significant differences between the respondents from the two regions.

4. Discussions and Conclusions

Petan and Bocarnea (2016) have stated that "Romania still bears the marks of its past, which included a series of invasions, foreign occupations and, more recently, decades of Communist regime. All of the above have determined the formation and perpetuation of values such as corruption, nepotism, opportunism, social corruption and tendency to blame others" (p. 144). Moreover, Lewis

(2010) states that "the communist legacy has left them (the Romanians) with a poor sense of accountability, responsibility and best routes to the bottom line" (p. 328). The same author is stating that, regarding leadership, Romanian leaders are adopting a model of leadership similar with the Italian style, "autocratic but paternalistic and using emotion as a manipulative tool" (Lewis, 2010, p. 325). This theory is supported by Hutu (2010), who claims that in the Romanian organizational culture, decision and control are heavily centralized, followers prefer to work in teams, while management are using a more individualistic approach (Hutu, 2010). Hutu (2010) is also stating, that due to Romania's high power distance (90/100 according to <https://geert-hofstede.com/romania.html>), employees tent do avoid taking responsibility and may be afraid to voice their opinions, while expecting the management to make the important

decisions. Moreover, Ogarcă (2015) in his study regarding the decision making style of Romanian entrepreneurs has discovered that the “decision-making profile of Romanian entrepreneur, as is framed in our study is the following: autocrat, oriented rather towards task than towards people, a little empathic and creative, making decisions on his own” (p. 451). All of the aforementioned aspects are more prominent in a small business setting, where the owner-manager is much more involved in the company’s activities and his leadership behavior is projected directly upon his employees. These being said, we can conclude, that, at least in theory, the Romanian leader is, in most cases, an autocratic leader.

Our results contradict this theory. Our study has shown that out of the 129 respondents, 47 (36 %) consider their superior to be an autocratic leader, 73 (57 %) consider their superior as being a democratic leader and 9 (7 %) consider their superior as being a laissez-faire leader. Thus, in practice, we can see that the more than half of the respondents included in this study consider their leader to be democratic. Moreover, 26 years have passed since the change in the political climate in Romania and 10 years since the country join the European Union. During this time, the first changes at management level appear in Romania, new generations have entered the labor market and thus, it is very possible to find changes and new approaches in the leadership style of Romanian managers. One reason for this transition from the traditional autocratic, paternalistic leadership style to a democratic approach, might be the fact, that nowadays, due to the global dimension of business, Romanian entrepreneurs often come in contact with western companies and tend to

imitate and adapt the behaviors that they see in their business partners, which tend to be more democratic in their approach to organizational leadership.

Regarding how the variables “age”, “sex”, “seniority” and “geographical region”, our results have shown significant differences only in the case of age and seniority. Applying the Fisher exact test for “sex” and “geographical region” has turned a result of $p=.726$ and respectively, $p=.239$, which, in both cases is greater than .05, which means we have to accept the null hypothesis, and thus we can say there are no significant differences between how male and female respondents and respectively, respondents from the two geographical region are perceiving their superior’s leadership style, which is supported by Campbell et al. (1993) whose study also found that gender has no significant influence upon the leadership style.

Regarding the variable “age”, our study has shown the younger respondents tend to perceive their superiors as more democratic and less autocratic than expected, while older respondents (Generation X – 35-44 years old) tend to perceive their superiors as more autocratic than expected. The reason for this discrepancies might be the fact that younger respondents (aged 18-24) are more inexperienced, more flexible and display a willingness to accept their manager’s control and supervision because it might help them in their professional development, rather to reject it and consider it micromanagement practices. Through the same line of reasoning, the older respondents (Generation X – 35-44 years old) are less flexible and consider themselves equals in terms of

competency and experience with their manager (which, in most cases is from a similar age group and who might have been a former colleague who got promoted) and thus, might reject their managers' intrusions as an autocratic approach.

Regarding the variable "seniority", our study has shown us that respondents who have been working with their company for a short period of time are perceiving their superiors as being more democratic and less autocratic than expected, while respondents who have been with their company for a longer period of time perceive their superiors as being more autocratic and less democratic than expected. The explanation might be the fact, that inexperienced employees are willing to accept their managers' interference without viewing it as autocratic because they are not familiar enough with the company's way of working and understand the need of control and supervision from their managers. At the same time, the more experienced employees consider that they have are familiar enough with their activities and the company's way of working and thus are less willing to accept their manager's interference in their activities. This result is supported by Whyte's (1998) findings who discovered that the employees' tenure in the present organization has a significant correlation with the leadership style.

A similar study was conducted by Yousef (1998) and its' results indicated "that 63 % of subordinates and 84% of leaders perceive a consultative type of leadership style" (p.280). Yousef (1998) studied the leadership styles in relations to the variables similar to the ones used in our study and he found that "there are significant relationships between leadership style and subordinates gender ($p < 0.003$),

national culture ($p < 0.001$), age ($p < 0.05$) and tenure in present organisations ($p < 0.09$)" (p. 280) and that "results further show that 63 percent of subordinates who perceive consultative leadership style were over 30 years old" (p. 280). We should mention however, the culture differences between Yousef's (1998) sample (83 % of respondents were Arabs) and our sample (100 % of respondents were Romanian). It's worth mentioning the fact, that, in the last 5-6 years at least, there are no accurate studies regarding the leadership styles of Romanian entrepreneurs.

We should take into account the fact that this present study has been conducted with an empirical, exploratory approach and has certain limitations. The first limitation that needs to be addressed would be the fact that the sample was comprised from respondents from two regions (Oltenia and Muntenia) and does not accurately represent the whole population of Romania. Another limitation would be the fact that the study is analyzing only the way in which the employees perceive their superiors' leadership style, without taking into account other factors like employee satisfaction, employee retention, organizational efficiency or profitability. Thus, we confirm the need for a more accurate study, focused on the entrepreneurs because, nowadays, the "autocrat business owner" might be only a myth and at the same time, there might be significant differences between the leadership styles of the managers from large companies, small and medium business or public institutions.

This study is a continuation of the authors' previous works in which they have analysed how small and medium business owners from Oltenia and

Muntenia perceive themselves in terms of their leadership approach. Thus, the results of this previous study along with the results from the present study can be developed in a further analysis which can compare the way the small and medium business owners from Oltenia and Muntenia evaluate their own leadership style and the way this style is perceived by their employees.

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