



Leadership from the inside

Pressure, energy, and relationships

A study conducted as part of the 4th edition of the nation-wide social and educational campaign 'Bliżej Siebie' organised by Artemis Group

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We talk a great deal about what a good leader should be and what contemporary leadership should look like. We create new competency models, catalogues of behaviours and definitions of the leadership of the future. Far less often do we pause at something fundamental - the person who performs this role.

Leaders are most often discussed through the lens of responsibility. They set the direction, make decisions, take responsibility for results and support their teams in achieving goals.

Yet leadership does not begin when a decision is made. It begins earlier - in how a person sees reality, interprets it and experiences it. In what they can hold and what they cannot yet hold; what they notice and what remains outside their field of view. In how they respond to tension, uncertainty, conflict and loss of control, and from what inner place they make a decision before it becomes a strategy, a message or an action.

Leadership is a phenomenon that is born within.

Contemporary leadership means much more than managing tasks and people. It is the everyday act of functioning within a field of many, often contradictory forces: expectations, emotions, tensions, interests, responsibilities and needs.

That is why one of the most important words describing today's experience of leaders seems to me to be 'between'.

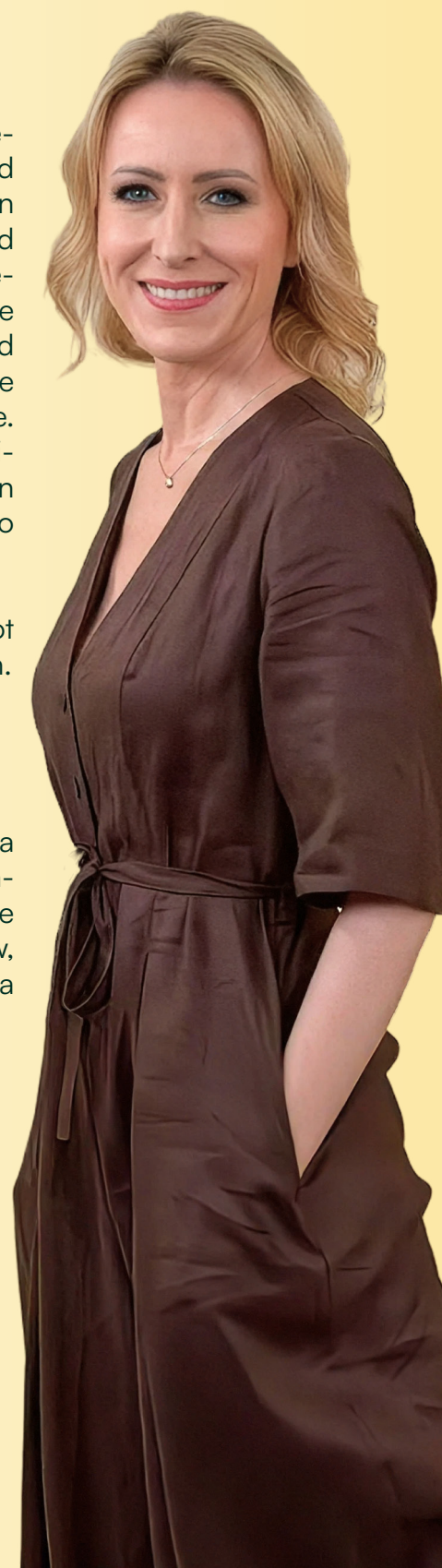
Between the organisation's expect-

tations and the team's needs. Between responsibility for results and responsibility for people. Between the need to support others and the need to protect one's own resources. Between the confidence expected by those around us and our own uncertainty. Between the need to act and the need to pause. Finally, between what we call business and what we call the human being - although in reality the two have never been separable.

This position 'in between' is not merely an organisational position. It is a psychological experience, sometimes a very lonely one. The greater the responsibility, the fewer places there are where one can stop representing it for a moment. The greater the influence, the harder it is to find a space where one does not have to know, answer, solve, decide or maintain a sense of safety for others.

At the same time, leaders operate within a powerful cultural image of a person who copes, has everything under control, knows, solves, supports, makes decisions, leads and delivers.

This is the figure of the leader-superhero: a person immune to overload, uncertainty, loneliness or doubt, as if ordinary



laws of human experience ceased to apply with the position.

We want to set this figure aside for a moment. We want to see the leader without the mask of the role - not to take away their strength, but to see where that strength truly comes from and what price sometimes has to be paid for it.

A position brings a scope of responsibility, influence and authority. It does not remove the nervous system. It does not erase emotions, fear, fatigue, the need to belong or the need to be seen. It does not eliminate personal histories, automatic reactions, limitations or the places within ourselves that we have not yet recognised.

A leader is not a function. A leader is a person who performs that function. That is precisely why their condition is not solely a private matter.

What happens inside a leader does not stop at the boundary of their own experience. It travels further - through how decisions are made, the quality of attention, language, relationships and responses to error, conflict and uncertainty. Through what has room in the organisation and what does not; what may be said and what is better left unnoticed; how much tension the system can hold before it begins to deny, control or pass it on.

Organisations are not separate from the people who lead them. In a sense, they are extensions of how those people see.

What a leader cannot see in themselves may, over time, become an invisible rule of the entire system. Fear may take the form of excessive control. Lack of trust may become another procedure. Overload may become a culture of

permanent availability. The need to prove one's worth may become an organisation that never achieves enough. But it also works in the opposite direction. The capacity for reflection can create space for dialogue. Inner stability can create room for the courage of others. The ability to remain in contact with uncertainty can open the way to experimentation, learning and creating what does not yet exist.

That is why the condition of leaders is not an addition to the conversation about a healthy organisation. It is one of its sources.

In this report, we therefore do not want to ask only what leaders should be like. We are interested in something more fundamental: what does it really mean today to be the person on whom so much depends?

What do people responsible for others face? What gives them energy and what takes it away? Where does tension accumulate? What happens in places the organisation usually does not see? To what extent do leaders themselves have access to support? And where can they exist for a moment without having to be the ones who support everyone else?

This is a report about leadership viewed from within.

If we want to change the quality of leadership, changing only the content of decisions, competency models or expected behaviours is not enough. We also need to examine the space from which they arise. Expanding that space makes it possible to see relationships that were previously invisible and to notice possibilities that previously lay outside the field of view.

Agata Swornowska-Kurto

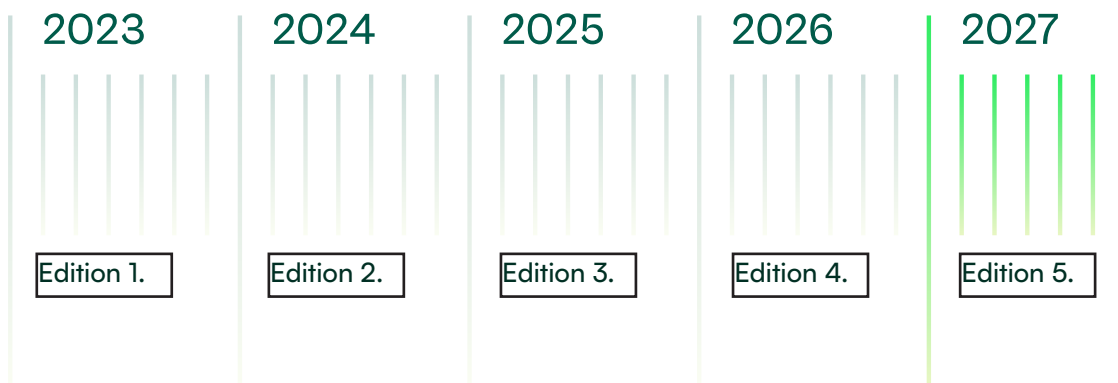
Sociologist, President of Artemis Group, author of the 'Blżej Siebie' campaign





Nationwide social and educational campaign

For four years, we have been changing the narrative on mental health



Education, inspiration and real impact

The foundation of the 'Blżej Siebie' campaign is the mental health of employees and leaders. Its overarching aim is to shape a supportive workplace culture that protects people's wellbeing. The initiative combines prevention, education and practical solutions implemented in organisations.

The campaign integrates mental health with a modern approach to management and workplace culture. We show that wellbeing is not a trend, but the foundation of a modern organisation - a workplace where people are valued, not treated as resources.



Winner of the 'Wellbeing Creator of the Year 2025' award

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We create a unique platform for exchanging knowledge and experience

We bring together the voices of business, experts, NGOs and public institutions.



We educate

Through diverse initiatives, we respond to the specific challenges and needs of today's labour market.



We support leadership

We develop leaders' skills in building workplace cultures based on trust, empathy and care for team wellbeing.



We motivate real change

We promote good practices and create recommendations, practical ideas and guidance for employees, leaders and organisations.



About the study



Who?

The study covered people managing teams in medium-sized and large enterprises.

We surveyed 300 leaders.

What?

We examined what the experience of being a leader really looks like today.

We explored what people responsible for others face: what gives them energy, what drains it, how they experience pressure and responsibility, and how they care for others and themselves. We also asked about loneliness in the leadership role - feeling understood and supported, making decisions alone and being ready to ask for help. We checked whether today's workplace has room to talk not only about tasks and results, but also about the human being.

How?

Online interviews (CAWI).

Study period:

The study was conducted in April 2026.

Research contractor:

PBS Research Agency Sp. z o.o.

In the 'Bliżej Siebie' campaign, we regularly pause to take stock

Explore the campaign's other reports

2023 edition
'Mental health and empathy at work'



2024 edition
'The pressure of change: emotions and mental health in the workplace'



2025 edition
'Success at the Cost of Health: Mental Well-being and the Future of Work'



Sample profile

The study was conducted among 300 leaders working in medium-sized and large enterprises.

Company size

52%

Medium-sized
(50-249 employees)

48%

Large
(over 250 employees)

For this study, a leader was defined as anyone managing a team of employees: supervisors and managers, as well as directors and board members. The last two categories, however, represented a clear minority of the sample.

The largest group of respondents managed teams of 6-10 people (42%). A further 38% were responsible for teams of 11 or more employees, while one in five respondents (20%) managed teams of 2-5 people. Thus, 80% of participants had managerial responsibility for at least six people, indicating a substantial level of responsibility for work organisation, communication and team wellbeing.

More than two-thirds worked on site, 28% worked in a hybrid model, and only 2% performed their leadership role fully remotely.

Position

94%

Manager / supervisor
/ team leader (manages a team of employees)

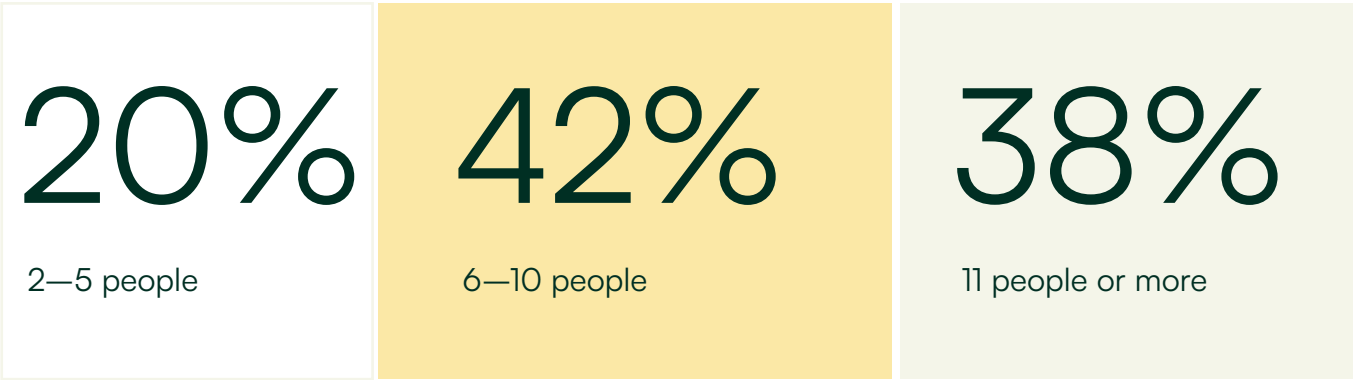
5%

Director

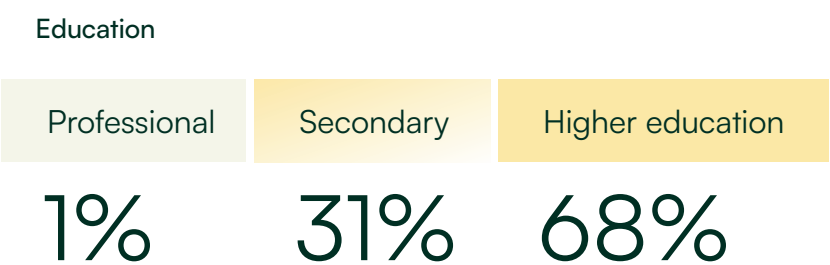
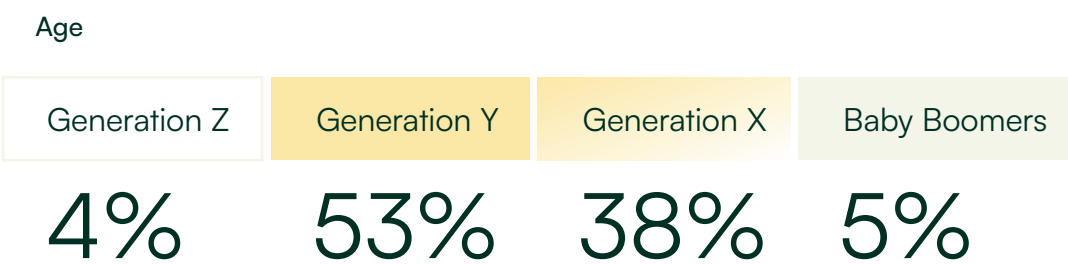
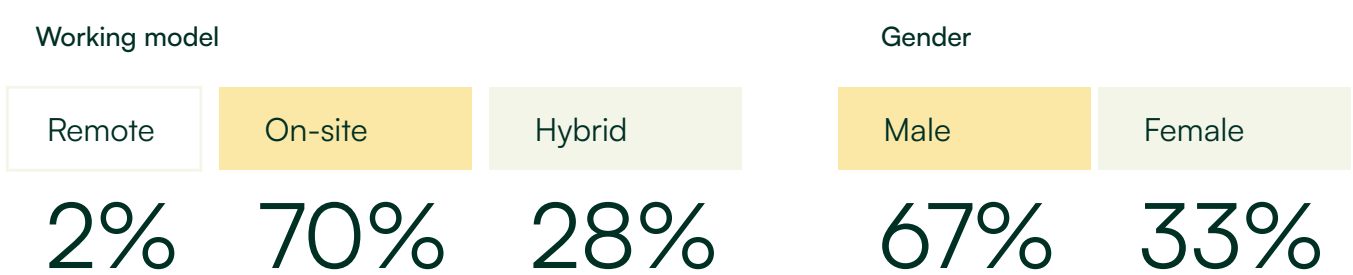
1%

Board member

Team size



Men predominated among the respondents, reflecting their still greater share among people in leadership positions. Members of Generations Y and X were the most strongly represented. Respondents also had a high level of education, with a clear majority holding higher-education qualifications.



Double pressure

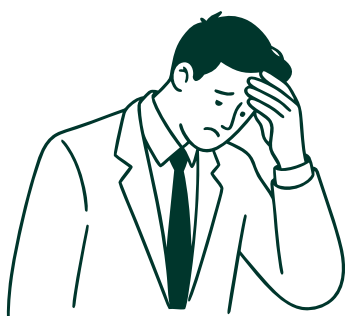
Taking on a leadership role has its bright and dark sides.

It is not only a promotion, with the greater prestige and higher salary that follow. It also means substantially higher demands, additional responsibilities and growing pressure.



Leaders are often described as operating 'in between': between senior management on one side and the team reporting to them on the other. Between business goals, results and the strategy of the entire organisation, and the everyday challenges of managing people and caring for their wellbeing. Having to operate where these two spheres meet and reconcile expectations coming from different directions can generate pressure. This is precisely what we asked the leaders in our study about.

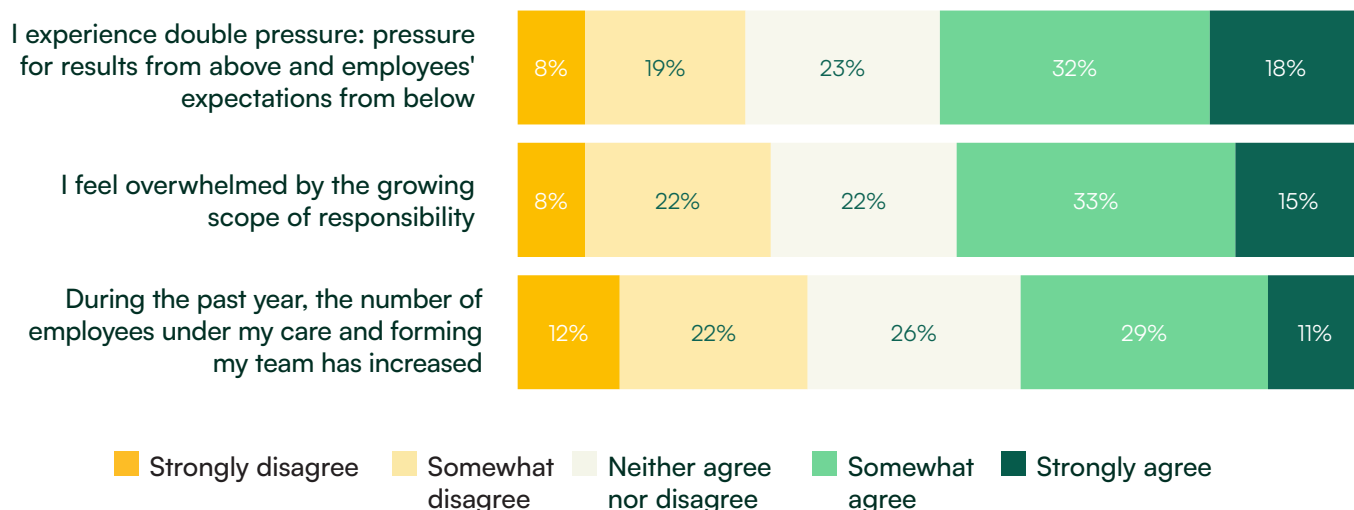
Exactly half of the leaders said that they experience double pressure at work: pressure for results from above and employees' expectations from below (27% do not experience it, while 23% did not give an unambiguous answer, choosing 'neither agree nor disagree'). Women leaders reported it more often, and the frequency increased with the size of the team managed: the more people in the team, the greater the pressure.



48%

of leaders feel overwhelmed by the growing scope of responsibility

40% report that the number of employees on their team increased during the past year. This was most common among leaders managing remote teams.

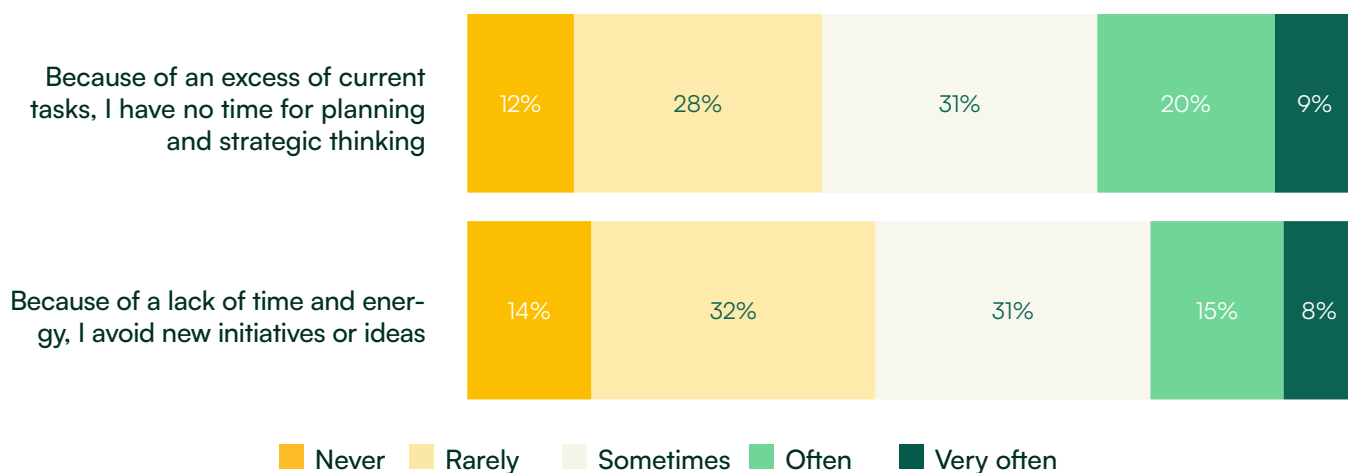


The growing workload does not deprive most leaders of the ability to think strategically or become involved in new initiatives, but for many it remains a significant challenge. **60% of respondents say that an excess of current tasks at least sometimes leaves them without time for planning and strategic thinking.** Moreover, 29% experience this problem often or very often (sometimes: 31%; often: 20%; very often: 9%). Only 12% never experience this lack of time, while 28% notice it rarely.



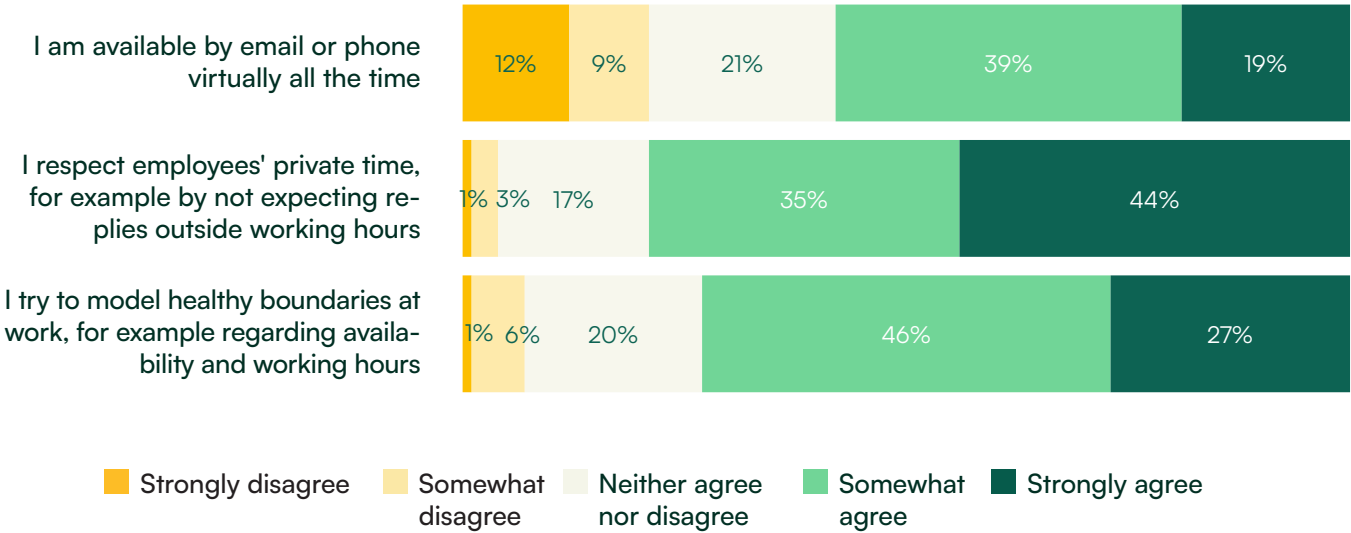
54%

of leaders say that, at least sometimes, a lack of time and energy makes them avoid new initiatives or ideas, with 23% experiencing this often or very often.



The pressure and workload experienced by leaders are also reflected in how they work. Most remain constantly ready to respond to emerging challenges - **58% report that they are continuously available by email and/or phone** (21% say this is not the case, while another 21% do not take a clear position).

In light of these declarations, leaders' assessment of the example they set in the workplace may appear surprising. **73% say that they try to model healthy boundaries at work, including availability and working hours** (only 7% say that they do not). **Meanwhile, 79% believe that they respect employees' private time, for example by not expecting replies outside working hours.**



The results suggest that many leaders apply double standards: one to themselves and another to their teams. For them, healthy boundaries do not mean being completely unavailable, but above all respecting employees' private time.

At the same time, their own high level of availability may reflect a belief that leadership requires being constantly 'always on': remaining reachable by phone and ready to respond outside standard working hours. As a result, healthy boundaries become something leaders support in others but do not always permit

in their own work. We may therefore assume that they often protect their teams' wellbeing at the expense of their own resources.



The findings can be read not only as a story of 'double pressure', but also as a picture of a role that is paradoxical by its very nature.

Today's leader is expected to deliver objectives while caring for the team's wellbeing; make quick decisions without losing a long-term perspective; develop strategy while responding to change; retain control without micro-managing; and build trust without abandoning expectations.

These contradictions cannot be resolved once and for all. Leaders therefore need ways to hold both poles of the tension: to operate through 'both-and' logic instead of reducing the situation to an 'either-or' choice.

This capacity is described by the concept of **paradoxical leadership**. The ability to hold both sides of a tension can strengthen teams' adaptability and autonomy. The problem begins when the cost of maintaining these contradictions is borne by the leader in the form of constant readiness, emotional labour, decision overload and lack of recovery. The study clearly reveals this imbalance: leaders protect employees' boundaries while treating their own availability as part of the role.

To prevent this from leading to burnout, leaders need to recognise which tensions must be maintained, which should be resolved temporarily and which should be escalated. They need to protect time for strategic thinking, limit permanent availability, delegate and avoid personally filling every gap in the system. Leadership maturity does not mean enduring everything; it

also means recognising the limits of one's own capacity.

This cannot be solely an individual responsibility. A leader operating under high and seemingly contradictory demands needs resources: genuine autonomy, clear priorities, support from HR, supervision and their own manager, the ability to escalate conflicts between objectives, adequate staffing and room for recovery.

Leaders can learn to work with paradox more effectively, but they should not compensate for organisational inconsistency with their own health. A mature organisation does not expect heroism. Whenever a new priority is introduced, it defines what will be deprioritised, what resources will be added and where responsibility lies.

Well-designed working conditions do not eliminate paradoxes from leadership. They can, however, transform them from a chronic source of overload into a space for mature leadership: making better decisions, building accountability within the team and responding to complexity without losing oneself along the way. The ability to apply 'both-and' logic then becomes not another demand placed on the leader, but a genuine resource for the leader, the team and the entire organisation.

Kasia Żurek

Executive & Leadership Coach and partner to leaders during change and transformation, accompanying them in development grounded in real-life challenges; expert for the 'Bliżej Siebie' campaign.



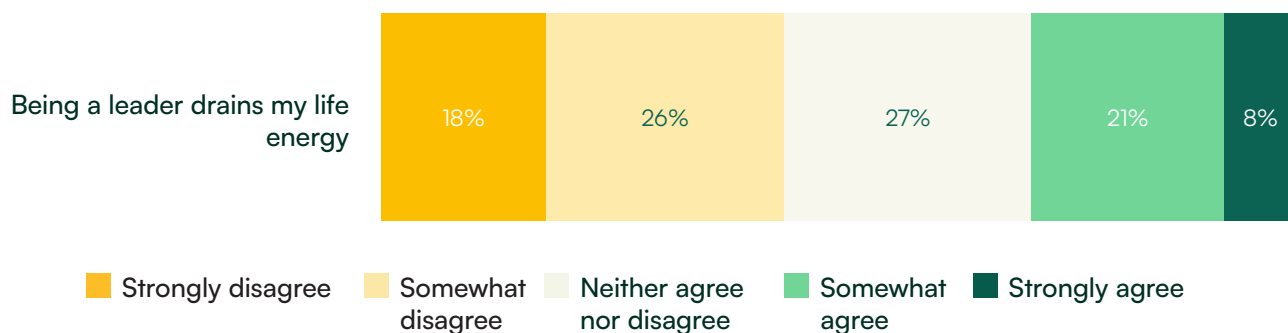
Energy up or down?

Discussions of leadership often focus on competencies, results and responsibility. We ask less often how performing the role of leader affects a person's level of life energy.



Energy is the driving force that enables us to act and achieve objectives. Yet the experience of leadership can vary greatly: for some it is a source of satisfaction, meaning and energy to act; for others it involves considerable effort and strain. Which experience is more common?

29% of respondents said that leadership drains their life energy, while 44% disagreed. Interestingly, one in four respondents did not give a clear answer. Their energy boost may therefore vary depending on the situation.

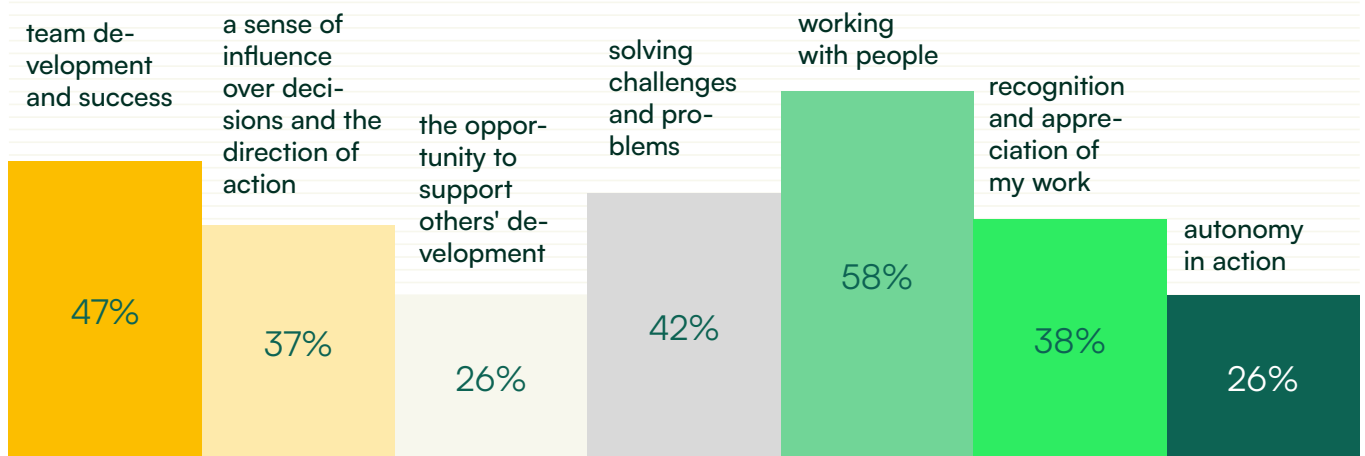


Working with people is the primary source of energy, according to 58% of leaders. Relationships are therefore one of the key resources in the experience of leadership. The team's growth and success (47%) and solving challenges and problems (42%) also matter. This highlights the importance of influence and agency in leaders' daily work and relates to the task-oriented dimension of leadership.

Employees expect recognition, but it also proves important to leaders, giving 38% of them energy to act.

Among the listed factors, autonomy in action (26%) and the opportunity to support others' development (26%) have the least impact on increasing energy levels.

Chart: What in your leadership role gives you the most energy to act? (multiple-choice question)



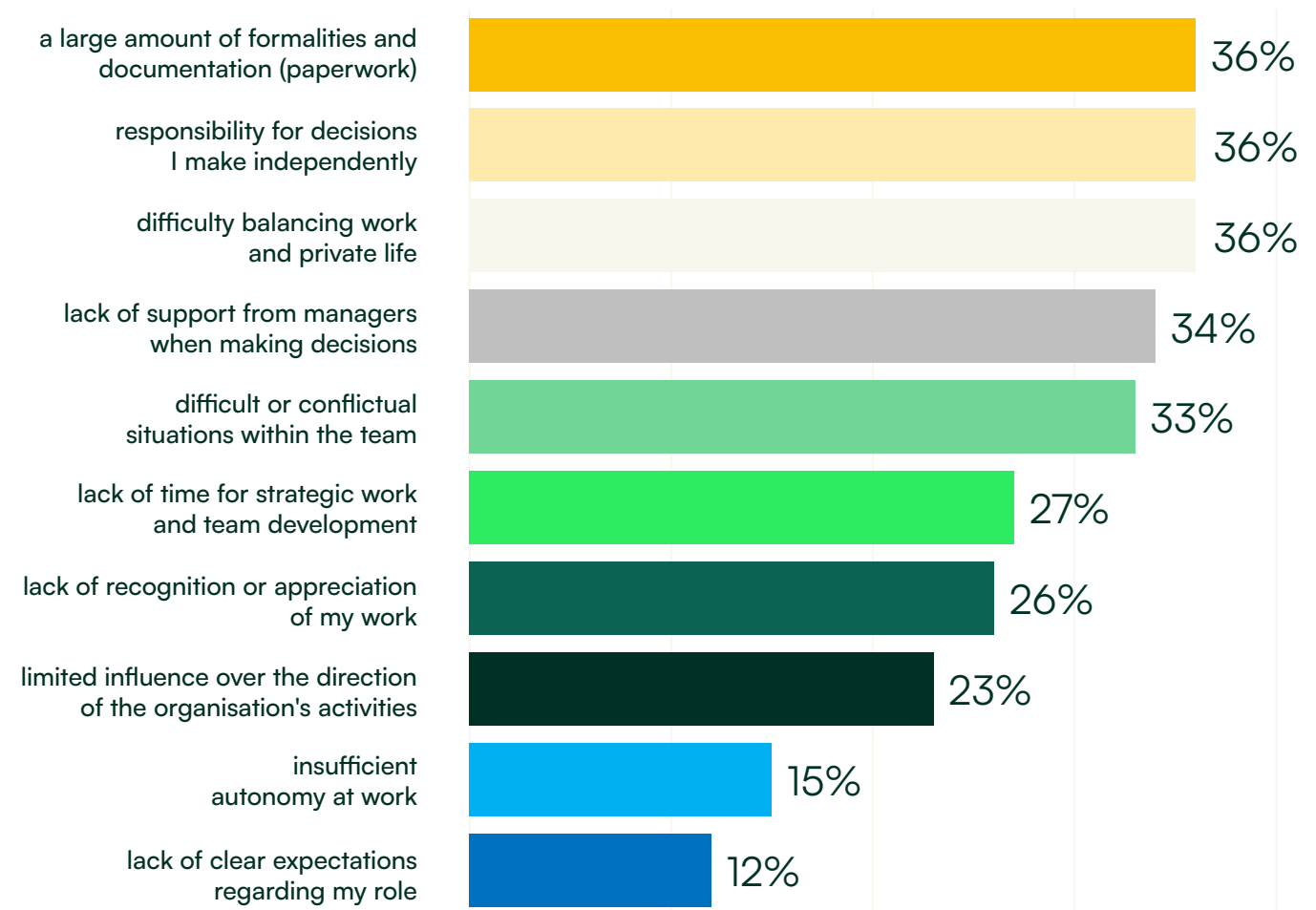
And what drains energy? Several reasons are equally important:



Insufficient autonomy at work and a lack of clear expectations regarding the role were selected by the fewest respondents. This may suggest that most operate in organisations that provide relatively clear frameworks for action.

The key sources of strain for leaders do not arise from structural ambiguity or a lack of agency. Instead, they come from the day-to-day operational nature of the role: intensive daily responsibilities, numerous administrative tasks, responsibility for decisions, the need to balance work and private life, and relationship challenges within teams.

Chart: What in your leadership role drains your energy to act? (multiple-choice question)



The findings reveal an important and often overlooked dimension of leadership: the energy cost of performing the role.

29% of respondents say that leadership drains their energy, and it is particularly interesting to see what exactly takes it away. Three areas come first: extensive formalities and documentation, responsibility for independently made decisions and difficulty balancing work and private life. From a coach's perspective, I see this not so much as a problem with leadership itself, but as a risk of the role becoming overloaded by everyday operational work.

Importantly, relationships and cooperation with people are the main source of energy, selected by 58% of respondents. This reveals a paradox: leaders draw strength primarily from what lies at the heart of leadership, yet lose it through elements that often distance them from working with people.

Is this therefore a problem that needs to be addressed? Definitely, but not by teaching leaders to 'cope better' with overload.

The first step should be to examine what can be changed systemically within the organisation. A task audit can be a good starting point: how much time does the leader spend with people and how much on administration? Which duties genuinely require their involvement, and which can be simplified, automated or delegated?

At the individual level, leaders should develop the ability to recognise their own sources of energy and energy loss. Coaching can help here, because a leader should not merely be someone who 'delivers' despite exhaustion. Their wellbeing is an organisational resource: it affects decision-making, relationships with the team and the quality of leadership.

The study findings should therefore be treated not as an alarm, but as an invitation to ask an important question: does the way we organise leaders' work allow them to draw energy from what matters most in leadership - people, development and a sense of influence - or is more and more of that energy consumed simply by staying afloat?

Kasia Chałas

ICC Coach, MTQ Plus Mental Toughness Trainer, PRISM Brain Mapping Practitioner, and expert for the 'Bliżej Siebie' campaign.



Lonely leadership

It can seem that the higher one rises in the corporate hierarchy, the more people there are around.

But does the number of contacts translate into feeling understood and supported? Loneliness in leadership proves to be far more common than one might expect.

The data also show that leadership loneliness is not a one-dimensional phenomenon. It is better understood as a combination of several experiences that may occur simultaneously: feeling misunderstood, lacking support and becoming fatigued by decision-making responsibility.

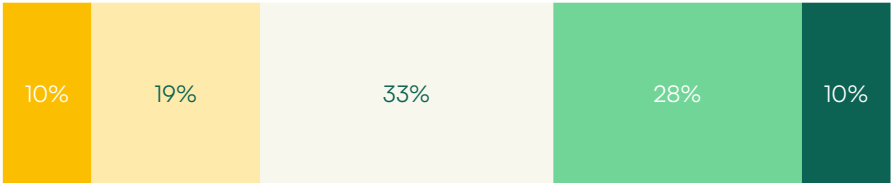


38%

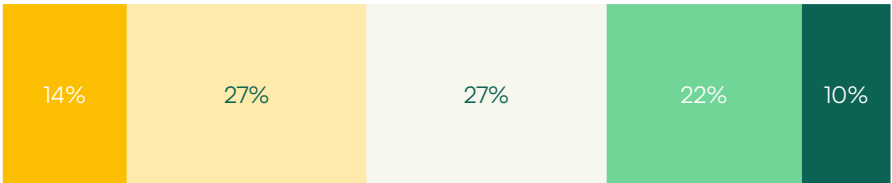
of leaders admit that they feel few people in the organisation understand the challenges of their role. 29% disagree, while one in three respondents did not take a clear position ('neither agree nor disagree'). This hesitation itself may suggest a certain lack of understanding.

Women leaders report this lack of understanding more frequently. The results also show that it is considerably more common in remote work and among younger age groups: the younger the leaders, the more often they feel that those around them do not understand their challenges.

I feel that few people in the organisation understand the challenges of my role



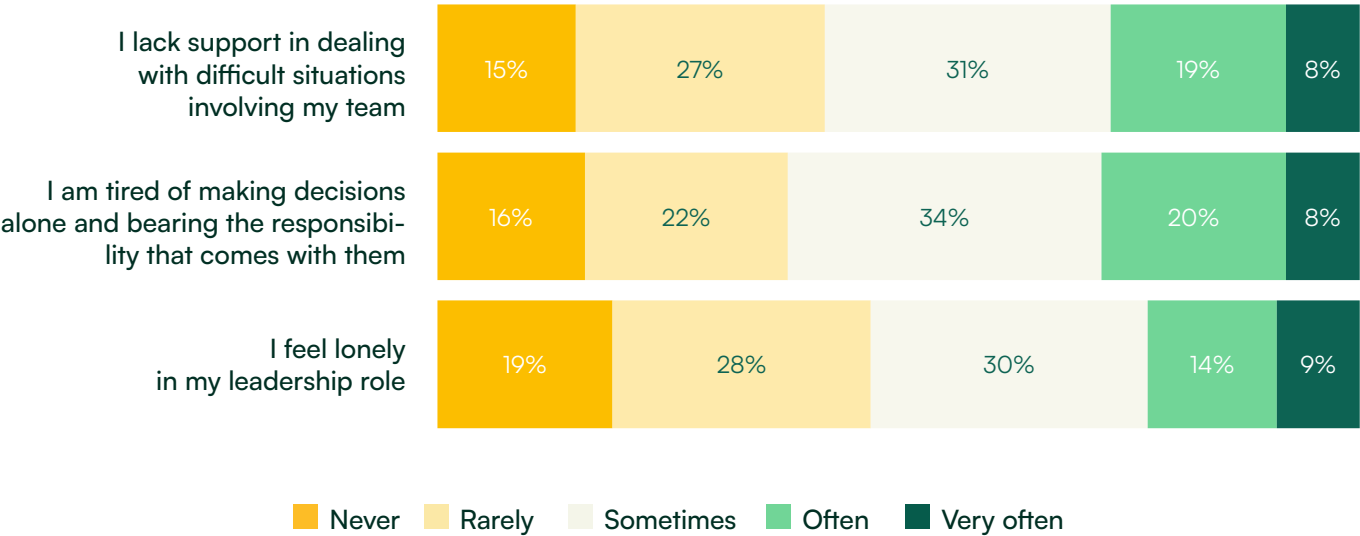
Since taking on a leadership role, I feel greater distance in my relationships with the team



Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

More than half of managers (58%) at least sometimes feel they lack support in dealing with difficult situations involving their team (sometimes: 31%; often: 19%; very often: 8%). Gender makes no difference in this respect, but trends are visible in relation to age and working mode: the younger the person, the more often they report lacking support. This is also reported more often by people working remotely or in a hybrid model than by those working on site.

A lack of understanding, a lack of support—but also decision-making loneliness? **62% of people in management positions say they are tired of making decisions alone and bearing the responsibility that comes with it** (sometimes: 34%; often: 20%; very often: 8%). As with feeling misunderstood, this affects women, younger people, and those working remotely or in a hybrid model somewhat more often.



These statements from women and men in leadership provide a fitting summary: more than half (53%) feel lonely in their role (sometimes: 30%; often: 14%; very often: 9%). Here, people working remotely and in a hybrid model clearly predominate.

In addition, 32% of leaders say they feel greater distance in their relationship with the team after taking on a leadership role (41% do not see this, while 27% have no clear view).

The findings reveal a clear link between remote and hybrid work and more frequent feelings of lon-

eliness, lack of support, and being misunderstood among managers. We are therefore seeing an erosion of everyday relationships and natural sources of support, which are easier to build in an on-site environment.

The results suggest that one of the greatest paradoxes of contemporary leadership may be that people responsible for supporting their teams often operate with a sense that they themselves receive limited support. Yet it is precisely under such conditions that it is hardest to build resilience, make difficult decisions, and care for other people’s well-being over the long term.

Where does loneliness among people in leadership positions come from? There is no single answer.

As responsibility grows, so does the weight of decisions and the isolation that remains invisible from the outside. The higher we move in the hierarchy, the fewer relationships allow us to be fully ourselves: subordinates remain dependent on us, we want to demonstrate competence and reliability to our superiors, while peer leaders are either competitors or participants in the same performance of apparent confidence.

Then there is shame. We mistakenly believe that feeling lonely means we are poor at building relationships. So we wear the mask of a strong, self-confident leader—a source of permanent fatigue that we call ‘overwork’ and then try to cure with a holiday. To no avail.

Nor does the number of contacts protect us from loneliness. Our calendars may be packed with meetings and our contact lists enormous, yet we can still have no relationships that leave room for authenticity.

What can be done about it?

First of all, remember that loneliness is a deficit of connection. The remedy is therefore not a greater number of superficial relationships, but the development of deep, supportive bonds. These are worth nurturing on three levels:

1. Connections in the professional circle: a gro-

up of leaders at a similar level and with similar experiences (e.g. peer groups or masterminds). A community in which we can feel among our own and ease the loneliness of decision-making.

2. Connections in the personal circle: with those closest to us, with friends and family. The key to strengthening them is a radical change of priorities—recognizing that loved ones are far more important than work. This reflection may help: if I had one day left to live, would I want to spend it at work, wrapping up a project before the ultimate deadline, or with the people I love?

3. Connection with oneself: the most important and the most difficult. It enables us to approach people from a place of care and curiosity rather than a hunger for approval. Paradoxically, we often need other people in order to connect with ourselves. We need to see ourselves from their perspective to loosen the hold of limiting beliefs, shame, and the inner critic. That is why it is easier to begin by building or repairing bonds in our professional and personal circles and, drawing strength from them, develop the courage to accept ourselves.

A leader’s loneliness does not disappear when more people gather around them. It disappears when they gain places where they do not have to be only a role—only a leader.

Kari Goldyn

Sociobiologist, psychoeducator, and speaker specializing in neurodiversity; expert for the “Blížej Siebie” campaign.



Care as part of leadership

Contemporary leadership goes far beyond managing tasks and achieving business goals.

An increasing part of the leadership role consists of tasks that are not written into any contract, are not covered by deadlines or KPIs, and are nowhere to be found in the calendar—although in reality they are happening all the time, every day and at every turn. This is the daily, often invisible emotional labour continuously performed through conversations, decisions, and relationships: the emotional effort involved in regulating ten-

sions within the team, responding to employees' emotions, building an atmosphere of safety and trust, and easing conflicts.



Competencies that until recently were considered 'soft' are becoming increasingly important and now form the foundation of effective leadership. But do leaders always possess them? Are they always able to provide support and act as a caregiver?

36%

of leaders believe they are not always able to provide emotional support to their team (women leaders more often)

30% disagree (men more often), while 34% choose the neutral response, 'neither agree nor disagree.' Such a large proportion of ambiguous answers may suggest that, for many managers, providing emotional support is an area in which they do not feel sufficiently confident. Age helps build this confidence: the older the leaders, the more often they were convinced they had the skills to provide emotional support; the younger the respondents, the more often they said they were unable to offer such support.

It may be assumed that, in leaders' own assessment, grow-

ing professional and specifically managerial experience also translates into stronger competencies in the emotional dimension of people management.

However, if we view support through the lens of specific actions, such as conversations about mental health, we can also see significant gaps. **34% of leaders believe that their preparation for conversations about mental health does not match their team's actual needs.** 27% consider their preparation sufficient.

The largest group (39%) consists of people who cannot clearly assess how well prepared they are for such conversations. This applies more often to women and Generation X representatives; interestingly, the percentage expressing this ambivalent view rises as the number of people in the managed team decreases. It is impossible to state unequivocally what causes such declarations. Perhaps these people cannot assess their skills, which may in turn be related to a lack of standards and expectations concerning leadership competencies in this area, or perhaps they simply have no experience of conducting such conversations.

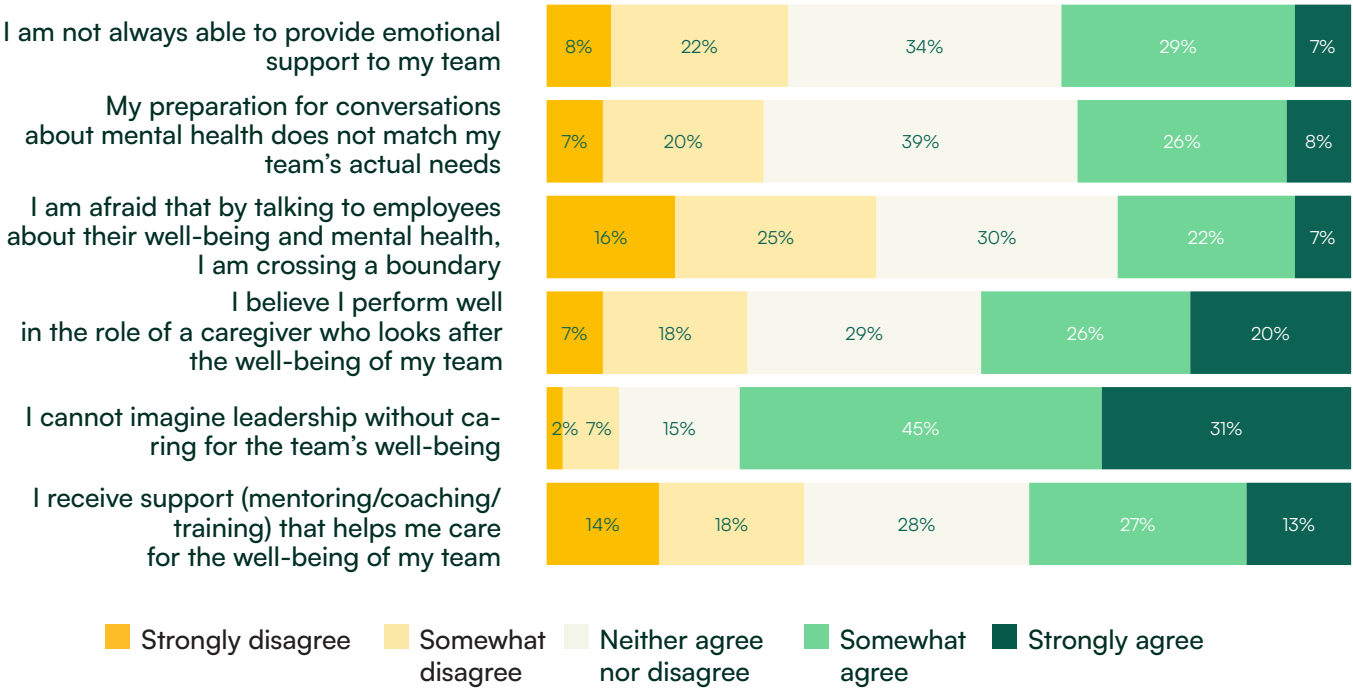
It is also worth noting that **29% of leaders are afraid that by talking to employees about their well-being and mental health, they are crossing a boundary.** 30% cannot assess this clearly and choose the ambivalent response ‘neither agree nor disagree,’ while 41% have no such concerns.

The survey findings show that, for at least some leaders, caring for well-being is not synonymous with providing emotional support. While 36% say they are not always able to provide emotional support to their team, and another 34% are unsure in this respect, **46% believe they perform well in the**

role of a caregiver who looks after their team’s well-being (the frequency of such declarations also increases with age, as with providing emotional support), whereas 25% say they do not and 29% answer ‘neither agree nor disagree.’ This may indicate that leaders find it easier to act as organizers of conditions conducive to well-being than as people who accompany employees through emotionally difficult situations. It may suggest that well-being is still viewed primarily in terms of ‘benefits’ and working conditions provided by the organization, rather than as a process requiring relational involvement, conversation, and the leader’s daily presence. In this view, well-being is not always equated with active care for the team’s emotional condition, but rather with a package of systemic solutions.

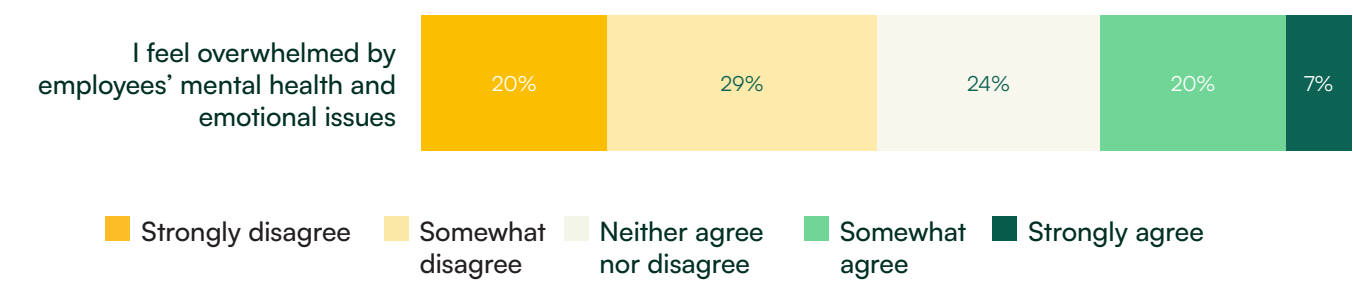
At this point it is worth adding that **40% of leaders say they receive support (mentoring/coaching/training) intended to help them care for the team’s well-being.** 32% do not see such support, while 28% do not define this clearly (‘neither agree nor disagree’).

At the same time, however, the findings indicate that well-being is firmly embedded in the normative image of leadership.



This is confirmed by the fact that **76% of leaders say they cannot imagine leadership without caring for the team’s well-being.** Only 9% disagree, while 15% take no clear position (‘neither agree nor disagree’). A generational difference is visible in attitudes toward well-being as an element of leadership. Older generations more often regard well-being as an integral part of the leadership role (Baby Boomers: 81%; Gen

X: 80%; Gen Y: 75%), while Generation Z identifies leadership with caring for well-being less often (60%).

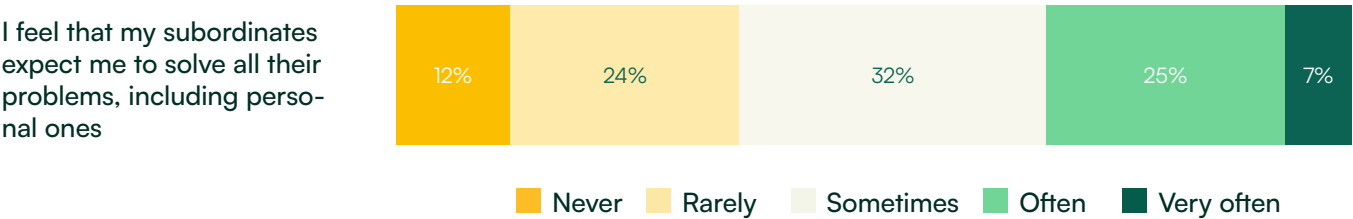


A leader’s emotional effort means constantly accompanying people through their everyday challenges, emotions, and difficulties. It means easing tensions, supporting employees, building trust, and safeguarding the team’s psychological safety. This dimension requires time, attention, and emotional engagement. **Does it burden leaders?**

Our survey showed that it does not do so to a great extent. **27% of leaders feel overwhelmed by employees’ mental health and emotional issues** (with most answering ‘somewhat agree’), whereas **almost half (49%) do not perceive such overload in themselves**. 24% respond ambiguously—‘neither agree nor disagree’—which may presumably be interpreted as the absence of strongly felt overload.

This result may be surprising, especially when compared with the fact that **64% of leaders at least sometimes feel that their subordinates expect them to solve all their problems, including personal ones**.

One possible explanation is that expectations of this kind have largely become normalized and built into the definition of the leadership role—as its permanent and ‘obvious’ component. As a result, leaders may experience relational pressure without interpreting it as excessive burden.



We asked leaders who feel overwhelmed about the reasons behind this feeling. Among the arguments, a lack of time to properly address employees' health and emotional issues stands out slightly. Respondents cited the other reasons almost equally often.

39%

of leaders say they lack the time to properly address employees' health and emotional issues

33%

of leaders indicate that a lack of competence and adequate preparation for conversations about the team's emotions and problems is burdensome

32%

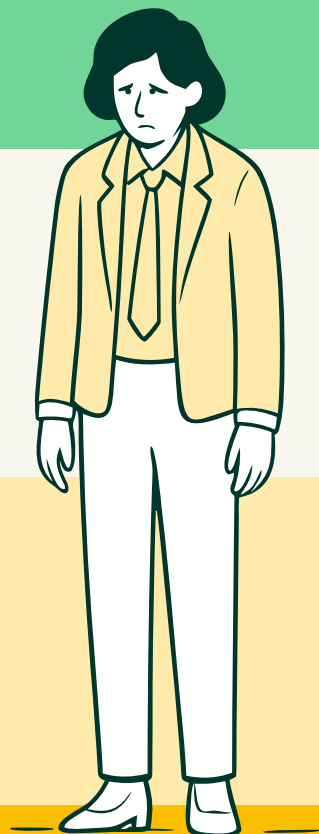
point to a lack of support within the organization itself (e.g. psychologist, EAP, HR)

31%

of leaders say that mental health topics are emotionally difficult for them

31%

see the overload in expectations, saying that it is burdensome when the team expects them to be the main source of support



The findings show an important shift: caring for employees' well-being is becoming part of the definition of good leadership—76% of respondents cannot imagine the leadership role without caring for the team's well-being.

This is an important and necessary change. For years I have emphasized that organizations do not manage 'resources.' They manage relationships, responsibility, trust, and the conditions in which people can do their jobs well. A leader who fails to see the person behind the result will sooner or later stop delivering results too.

At the same time, only 27% believe they are adequately prepared for conversations about mental health, while 34% assess their preparation as insufficient. This does not necessarily mean a lack of empathy. More likely, it reflects a gap between rising expectations of leaders and the support they receive from their organizations. Many managers know they should respond, but do not know how to conduct such a conversation, where their responsibility ends, or when to refer an employee to a specialist.

That is why I approach the term 'leader as caregiver' with caution. A leader should notice signals, ask questions, listen without judgment, and point to available forms of help. They should not diagnose, provide therapy, or take responsibility for an employee's personal problems—especially since 64% of respondents at least sometimes feel that the team expects their manager to solve private difficulties as well.

We cannot build employees' well-being at the expense of leaders' well-being.

Caring for people cannot be solely the individual responsibility of a manager. It should be the responsibility of the entire organization. If an organization expects leaders to conduct difficult conversations, it must give them more than the message 'be empathetic.' What is needed are specific procedures, conversation training, access to HR, psychologists or employee assistance programmes, and clear rules for escalating crisis situations. The well-being of leaders themselves must also be protected.

Mature leadership is not about taking responsibility for employees' lives. It is about creating an environment in which a person is not left alone with their problem and the leader knows how to respond wisely and responsibly.

Because business is people. And a leader is a person too.

Romeo Grzębowski

Expert in leadership and the development of leaders and teams; author of the book 'People, Not Resources: How to Respond to Change and Build a Culture of Engagement'; expert for the 'Bliżej Siebie' campaign.



Leaders care for others— but who cares for leaders?

Every day, leaders support their teams, help them cope with challenges, make difficult decisions, and take responsibility for the atmosphere and effectiveness of work.



Yet we rarely ask who supports the people expected to care for others, and whether that support is provided to a sufficient degree.

41%

of leaders say they do not feel that the company cares about their well-being

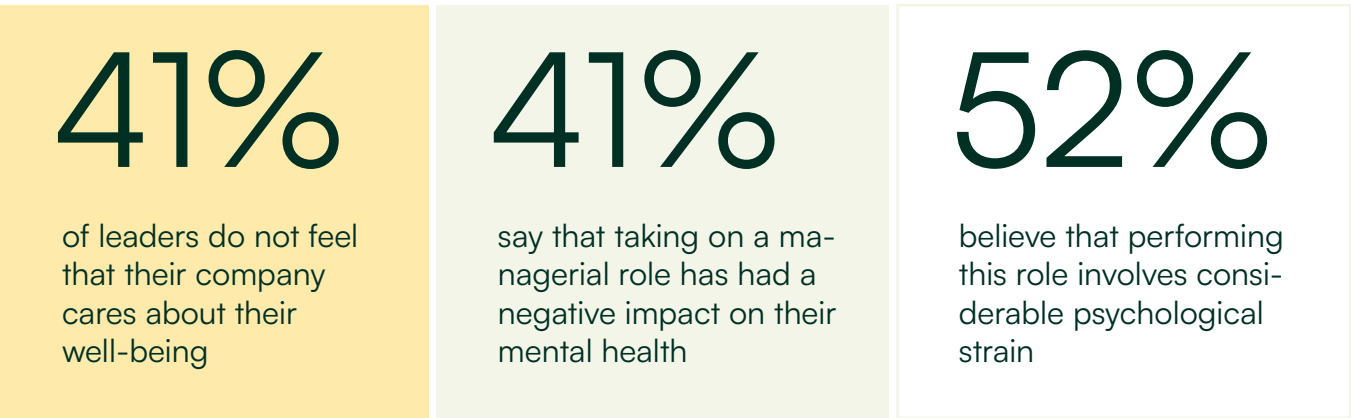
33% perceive such care, while 26% cannot assess the issue clearly. Such a high proportion of undecided responses may indicate either a lack of visible initiatives aimed at leaders or difficulty in assessing what organizational care for well-being actually means in practice.

It turns out that, in women's assessment, needs and expectations concerning well-being support are more often not reflected in organizational practice. Women predominate among those who feel the company does not care. This assessment may be influenced by various professional and life experiences, including combining professional and family roles, periods related to parenthood, or a heavier burden of caregiving duties, all of which increase well-being needs. It is also possible that women show greater sensitivity and awareness of the factors affecting well-being and therefore assess employers' initiatives more critically.

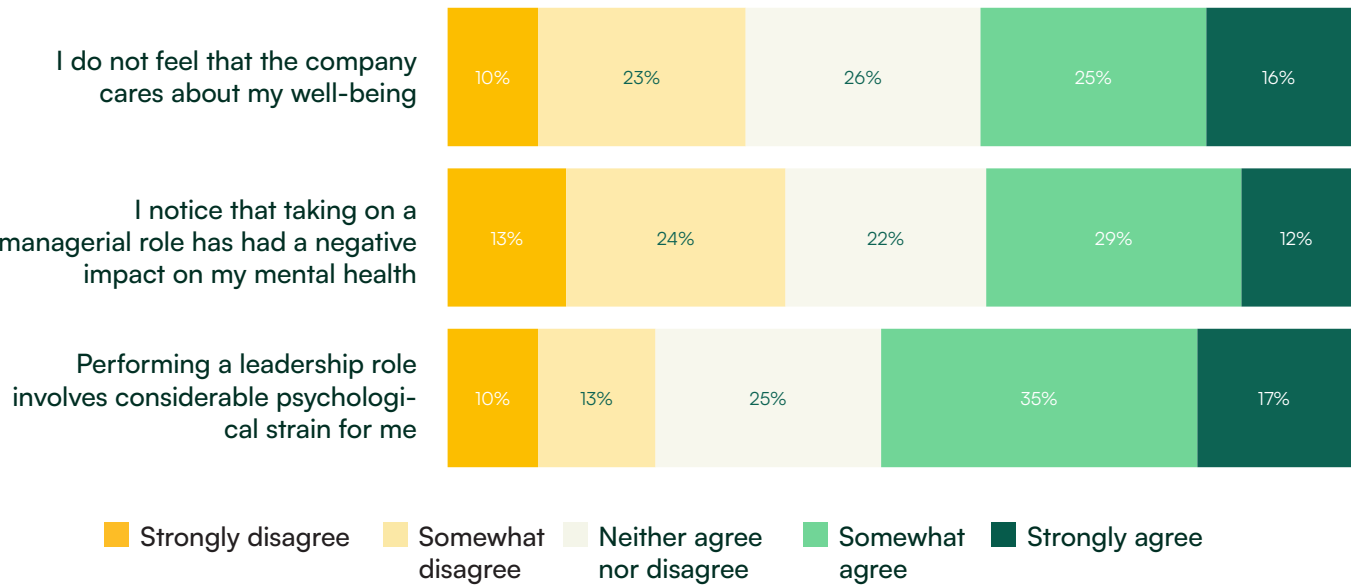
The highest share of people who do not feel that their company cares about their well-being is found among the youngest leaders (aged 18–29): 52%. In subsequent age groups, the figure is clearly lower, at around 39–43%. For younger leaders, issues related to mental health, well-being, and work—life balance may already be a natural element in assessing the workplace, because they entered such environments at the beginning of their careers. As a result, they may assess companies' initiatives in this area more critically than older colleagues, who only learned to address these issues in the workplace

over the course of their careers and who, due to longer tenure, may have become accustomed to operating with limited well-being support or developed their own care strategies independent of the company’s offering. Meanwhile, the youngest leaders, at the beginning of both their professional and leadership journeys, simultaneously face high expectations, the need to build authority, and the need to gain experience. Their need for organizational support may therefore be particularly strong, and its absence more keenly felt.

For a significant proportion of leaders, taking on a managerial role clearly entails additional psychological costs:



It may therefore be assumed that some of leaders’ psychological support needs remain unmet.



It is worth noting that the level of psychological strain experienced in a managerial role correlates with leaders’ gender and age. Women report experiencing high psychological strain more often than men, while men more often say they do not experience this type of burden. The younger the respondent, the more often they report strain related to the leadership role. The opposite trend appears among those who report no such strain: the proportion of these answers rises with respondents’ age.

These findings are a signal that cannot be ignored.

41% of leaders do not feel that their company cares about their well-being, 41% say that taking on a managerial role has negatively affected their mental health, and as many as 52% report high psychological strain related to their role. This means that more than half of the leadership population is saying: 'this is hard for us.'

Today we work in a reality changing in leaps—AI, reorganizations, new work models—and leaders operate in a state of permanent adaptation. They are expected to be an 'anchor' for their teams and calm other people's anxiety before they have had time to process their own. Sustaining such a state over time is not free: leaders pay a high price—the price of their health.

I am particularly concerned that the problem affects the youngest leaders most strongly (52% of those aged 18–29 do not feel that their company cares about their well-being). These are people only beginning to build their leadership path and shaping management culture for the years ahead. If they learn from the outset that being a leader means having no support, we risk reinforcing a model of 'survival' instead of healthy leadership.

The good news, however, is that leaders do not have to wait for systemic change to make a difference. It is worth starting with an audit of one's own boundaries—identifying where energy is being given with no return. I also encourage playing the 'essentialist,' inspired by Greg McKeown's book, and asking: 'if I am to do this, what should I not do?' Building peer support also helps: informal meetings with other leaders that lift the burden of 'I have to cope on my own.'

We should communicate tension and stress openly to managers or HR—not as a complaint, but as a signal of real business risk: turnover, burnout, and poorer decision quality.

I believe the data in this report provide a good starting point for making management boards aware of the scale of the problem and offering specific support for leaders. In our organization, this takes the form of programmes that combine AI transformation with strengthening transformation competencies, with leaders' personal resilience as one of the key areas.

Aleksandra Brzozowska

Head of Learning & Development at Ringier Axel Springer Polska (Main Partner of the 'Bliżej Siebie' campaign), strategist and organizational transformation expert, and expert for the 'Bliżej Siebie' campaign.



The superhero leader...?

They take care of everything, deliver results, solve problems, know the answer, and always suggest the right solution. They are effective in every aspect of their role.



Leaders are sometimes perceived as ‘superheroes’ safeguarding the interests of both the company and the team. Socially and organizationally, the leadership role is associated with the need to ‘be strong’—and the data confirm this.

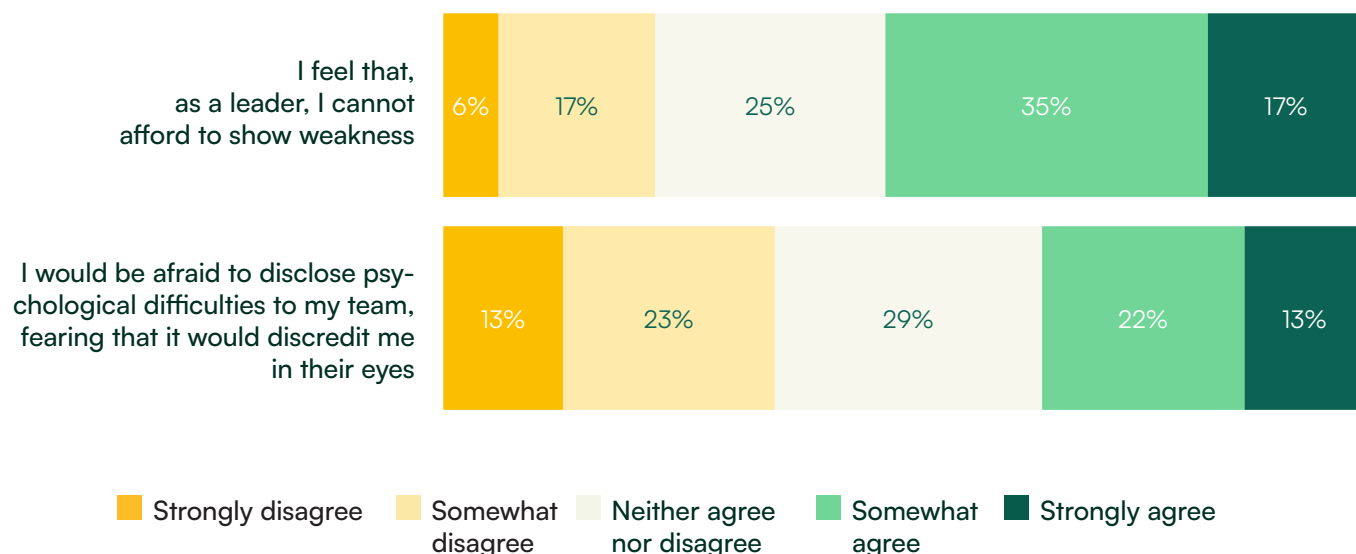
52%

leaders

feel that in their role they cannot afford to show weakness—this is the dominant leadership model. One in five leaders gives themselves permission to show weakness (23%, with most choosing ‘somewhat disagree’ rather than ‘strongly disagree’—17% vs. 6%). One in four respondents (25%) has no clear opinion on this issue.

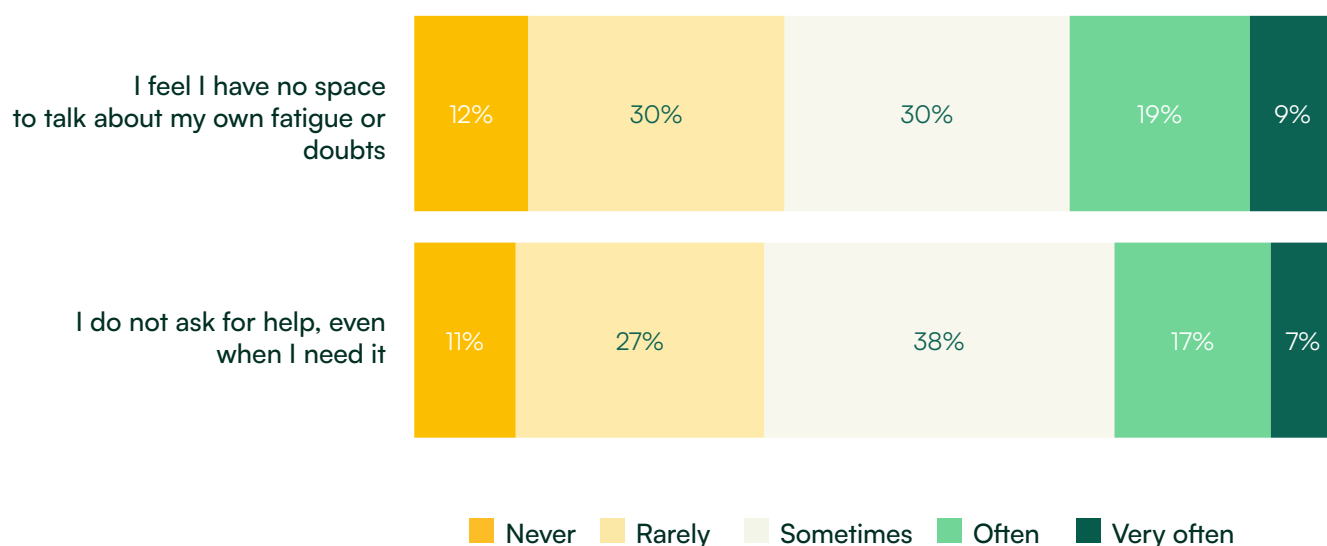
A relationship between this belief and team size is also visible. The larger the number of subordinates, the more common the belief that there is no room for weakness. This may result from the responsibility that grows with team size and from the belief that a leader should provide stability for the team, while revealing difficulties could be perceived as a risk to its functioning. People who report greater freedom to show weakness manage teams of 2—5 twice as often as teams of 6—10 or more (40% vs. 19%). Thus, as leadership responsibility grows, so does the pressure to maintain the image of a stable and ‘unshakable’ person, which may limit the space for disclosing one’s own difficulties.

35% of leaders admit they would be afraid to disclose psychological difficulties to their team for fear that it might discredit them in the team’s eyes. 36% have no such concerns, while 29% remain with the ambivalent response ‘neither agree nor disagree.’



The limits on emotional openness are even more apparent. **58% of leaders say that at least sometimes they have no space to talk about their own fatigue or doubts** (sometimes: 30%; often: 19%; very often: 9%), while **62% of leaders admit that at least sometimes they do not ask for help, even when they need it** (sometimes: 38%; often: 17%; very often: 7%).

Taken together, these findings suggest that the leadership role often comes with an expectation of emotional self-sufficiency, in which expressing difficulty, fatigue, or the need for support remains limited or unspoken.



Looking at these results, it is easy to say that leaders should finally take off their superhero armour.

The problem is that most of them know perfectly well that they should. I hear it constantly in workshops and consultations: 'I know I should ask for help more often. I know I do not have to know the answer to every question. I know that if I stop rescuing everyone, my team will become more accountable.' And yet the next day they put the superhero cape back on.

Why? Because the problem does not lie solely with the leader. The problem is the system.

An employee expects the leader to solve all their problems and relieve them of responsibility. The leader hears from their manager: 'I don't want to hear about your problems. I want to hear about solutions.' And, of course: 'I understand it's difficult, but... the targets still have to be delivered!' The manager is held accountable by the director. The director by the management board. And the board often wriggles under pressure from owners whose egos are blinded by simple, even primitive greed—they see nothing beyond EBITDA.

At every level, someone is afraid of losing something: a bonus, authority, a promotion, a position, a market, or face. That is when the ego takes the helm.

In my book 'The Leader and Their Ego,' I write that the ego fears not failure most, but loss and shame. It does not ask, 'What will be best for people?' It asks, 'What do I have to do to lose nothing and save face?'

That is why, instead of saying openly, 'We can't keep up,' leaders show a slide saying, 'We are facing temporary challenges, but we'll manage.' The problem does not disappear; it simply moves one level down. And after a while... people disappear. Not because they are weak, but because they have been strong for months, sometimes years.

I see the same scenario increasingly often. For months, a leader signals that the team cannot keep up. They ask for more people, cle-

arer priorities, or some tasks to be removed. They hear: 'Don't bring me problems. Bring me solutions,' or 'I understand, but the targets won't deliver themselves.' Eventually they erupt and tell the truth. They are reprimanded. The next day, they go on sick leave. I am not saying the leave is unjustified—quite the opposite. Most often the body is simply saying, 'Enough!' But sometimes there is another message in it: 'If you didn't hear my feedback, perhaps you will hear my absence.' This is a genuine deadlock—and an extremely costly one for both business and people.

As long as a leader says, 'I can't cope,' the organization has a chance to respond. When they disappear for several months, there is no longer a conversation, no feedback, and no possibility of repairing the system. There is a vacancy, a replacement, and another person putting on the superhero cape.

The better a superhero the leader becomes, the longer the organization can pretend that the system works.

A leader's role is not to act as a shock absorber for a faulty system. A leader's role is to say: 'Stop. We cannot go on like this.'

Where should we begin?

1. Build relationships, not hierarchy. Only where there is trust is there room for emotions, mistakes, and asking for help. There, you can say, 'I don't know.' There, you can hear a better idea. There, accountability is born. Without relationships, politics will always win.

2. Be the first to say: 'I don't know.' 'I was wrong.' 'I can't cope.' 'I need help.' Do not wait for someone higher up to do it. Do not wait for the system to change. Half-jokingly, I sometimes tell leaders: 'Get f*cking angry and cry.' Not because I believe tears are a business strategy, but because I know they can stop the system in its tracks. A patriarchal business system fears tears more than a crisis in the financial markets.

Ewa Błaszczak

Leader, mentor, entrepreneur, business educator, and author of books including her latest, 'The Leader and Their Ego'; expert for the 'Blżej Siebie' campaign.



Is there room at work to talk about the person?

When a leader and their team talk, it is naturally about tasks, KPIs, plans, and status updates. But is that all?

Is there also room at work for conversations about matters beyond professional duties—well-being, health, private life, and interests? Do leaders have such conversations with their teams, even briefly?

It turns out that they do. **91% of leaders say they have conversations about the employee as a person, not solely about their professional role** (including even brief exchanges), and almost one in four (23%) does so every day.



Exactly one-third (33%) raise non-work topics several times a week, and 35% several times a month.

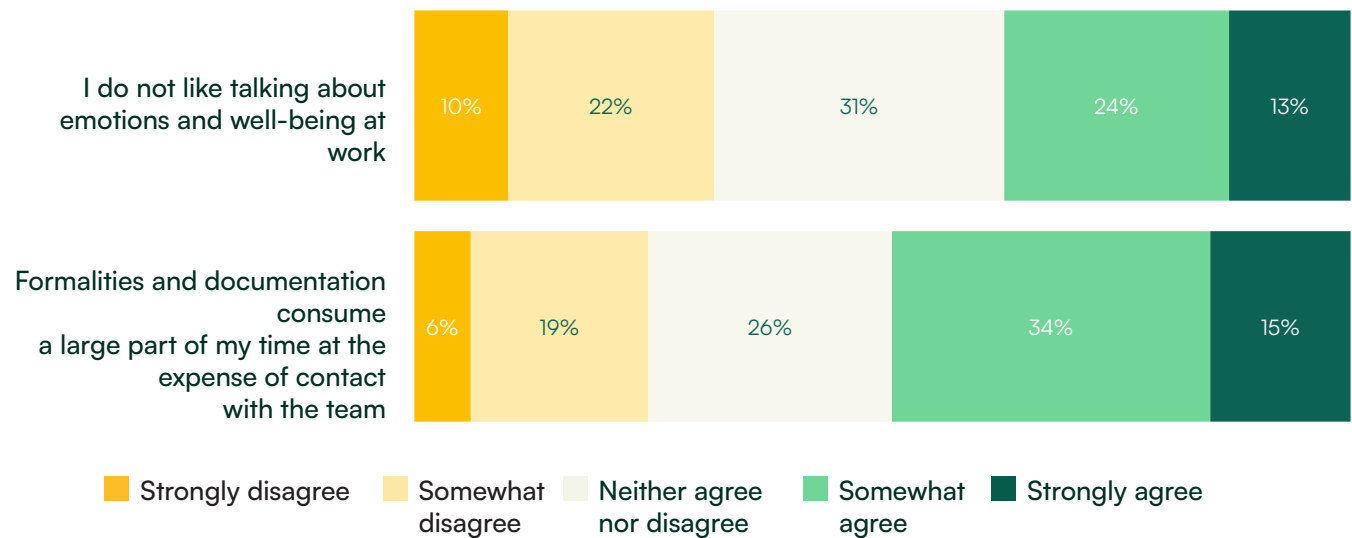
We can therefore conclude that **conversations about an employee as a person, rather than solely as someone who performs tasks, are a common element of the leader—team relationship.**

Considering that **37% of people in leadership positions say they do not like talking about emotions and well-being at work**, while another 31% have mixed feelings ('I neither like nor dislike it'), we can see a certain discrepancy between these declarations and practice. This may suggest that even people who feel less comfortable discussing emotions recognize the value of building relationships with employees through contact that also includes non-work topics.

The reported frequency of conversations on non-work topics should also be compared with the declaration of almost **half of leaders (49%) that formalities and documentation consume a large part of their time at the expense of contact with the team.** It is therefore positive that, despite these duties, they still find room for at least a brief exchange with their subordinates about something other than work.

Despite time constraints and the moderate comfort some leaders feel in conversations about emotions and well-being, relationships with employees are not limited solely to task delivery. Conversations extending beyond professional matters are com-

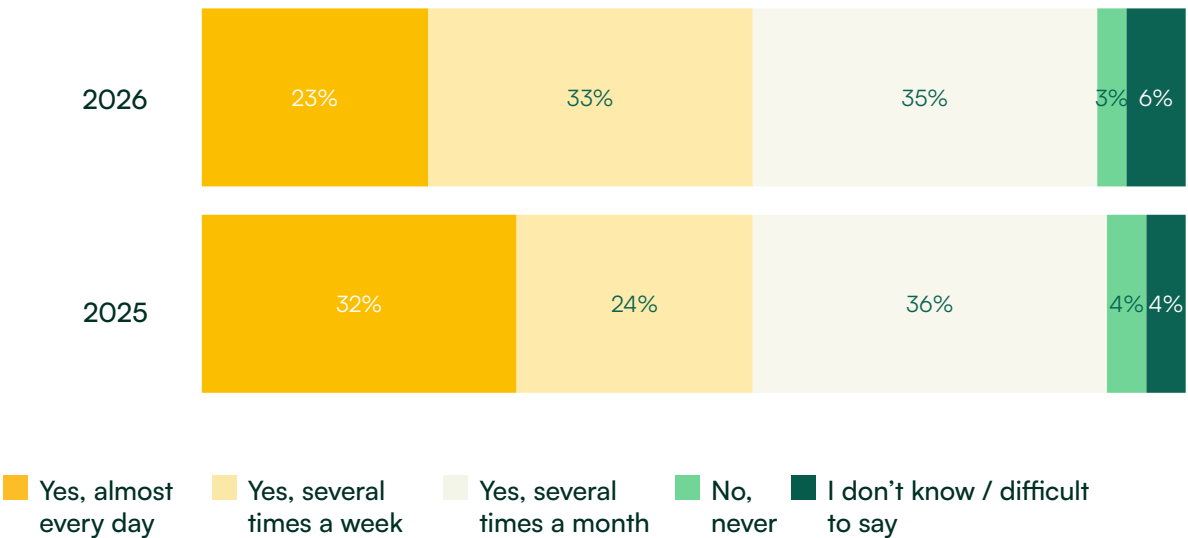
mon in team management and form an important part of everyday interactions between leaders and employees.



Interestingly, the frequency of these conversations is declining. A year ago, in the report ‘Success at the Cost of Health: Mental Well-being and the Future of Work,’ we also asked leaders this question. At that time, 32% held such informal conversations al-

most every day (24% several times a week and 36% several times a month). This may indicate growing operational pressure and a stronger focus on task delivery at the expense of the everyday relational interactions that shape the work climate.

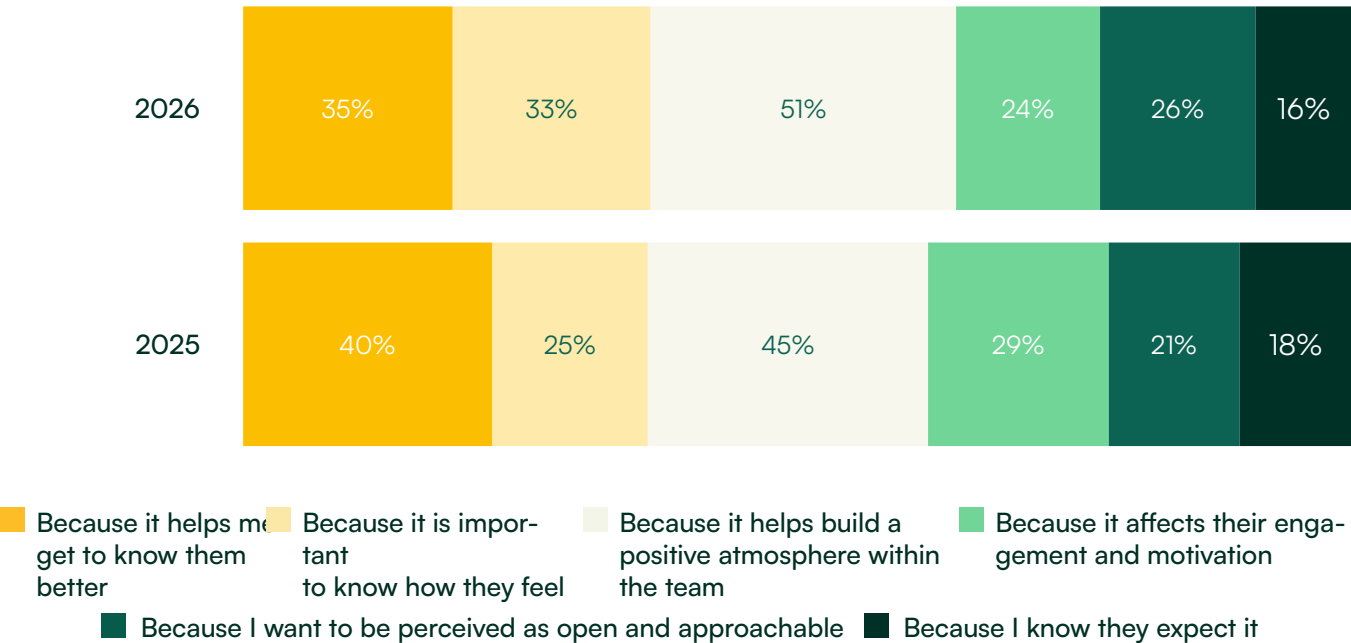
Chart: Do you talk to employees about matters other than professional duties, e.g. their well-being, health, interests, and private life (including even brief exchanges)?



And what motivates leaders to have such conversations? The most important argument, cited by half of respondents, is that these conversations help build a positive atmosphere within the team.

Leaders' responses also indicate an attentive and empathetic attitude: 35% say they have such conversations because they help them get to know their team better, while 33% consider it important to know how team members feel (interestingly, this is the least important argument for leaders working remotely).

Chart: Why do you talk to employees about matters other than professional duties, e.g. their well-being, health, interests, and private life? (multiple-choice question)



Almost one in four respondents (24%) represents a more pragmatic approach, in which conversations about an employee's well-being or circumstances are seen as an element of effective team management. They believe such conversations influence engagement and motivation.

26% of leaders want to build relationships based on accessibility, openness, and closeness. Interestingly, only one in six leaders (16%) feels obliged to have such conversations because employees expect them. It may be assumed that, for this group, these conversations are more an obligation than an internal need on the leader's part.

Among the small proportion of leaders who do not discuss non-work topics, the prevailing argument is the belief that there is no place for such conversations at work (42%), followed by a lack of time (38%). This shows that the barriers are more organizational and cultural than a matter of individual relational skills (cited by 17% of respondents).

The data show that leaders recognize the importance of attentive communication with the team that goes beyond duties and tasks to include private matters, health, and well-being. They understand that such conversations are one of the tools for building a team founded on trust, mutual understanding, and a sense of belonging, which translates into better cooperation and a friendlier working atmosphere.



Talking about the person is becoming a standard of contemporary leadership. For me, this is one of the study's most important conclusions.

91% of leaders say they talk to employees not only about tasks, but also about them as people. What is more, leaders know why they do it: half point to building a positive atmosphere, 35% to getting to know the team better, and 33% want to know how team members feel.

So we see more than the mere presence of such conversations: we see their normalization in the workplace. Talking about the person is ceasing to be something separate from 'real management.' It is becoming a natural part of it. This is also evident in the fact that even some leaders who do not feel comfortable discussing emotions and well-being recognize the value of such conversations and have them.

This is good news—and also the moment to take the next step. If conversation is becoming the norm, the question should no longer be only: do we talk? Increasingly important is: what comes out of these conversations?

Conversation has value, but it can also be the beginning of something more. Its significance for the organization grows when what the leader hears affects how they act and the decisions they make. Does the conversation help them understand the team better? Identify risks earlier? Make better use of people's potential? Build an environment in which people can talk not only about successes, but also about problems, mistakes, and new ideas?

This is where conversation ceases to be solely a relational competency and becomes an element of effective management.

Every conversation leaves a mark. The only question is what kind: a mark of greater trust, accountability, and agency, or merely of a well-executed process.

Perhaps, then, the next stage of leadership maturity will no longer be measured by the number of conversations held, but by the quality of the decisions born from them.



Strategic Partner of the campaign

Ilona Perużyńska-Zych

HR and Sales Director at Rossmann,
expert for the 'Bliżej Siebie' campaign



A firm hand or partnership— which management style do leaders choose?

Although we do not always name it explicitly—and may not even be fully aware of it—every leader acts in a recurring way that affects how they communicate, build relationships with the team, and make decisions. This is their management style.



Which style do they choose most often? To answer this question, we asked respondents to assess statements describing specific managerial behaviours corresponding to six styles: autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, transformational, transactional, and coaching. We assigned two statements to each style and asked respondents to indicate how well they matched their professional situation and workplace.

Does one style dominate? No. Each has its supporters, although the survey results show that the leaders studied most often report behaviours characteristic of the democratic and coaching styles (in both cases, respondents show high agreement with the statements describing these styles—above 70%).

A high level of agreement with statements about involving employees in decision-making, consulting the team on important issues, providing feedback, and treating mistakes as learning opportunities suggests a preference for an approach based on cooperation, employee development, and building their independence. Leaders see themselves as partners, not merely as managers issuing instructions.

At the same time, leaders say they give teams considerable autonomy over how tasks are performed (76%), which corresponds to the laissez-faire style. Yet only 38% of respondents say they do not continuously monitor how tasks are carried out.

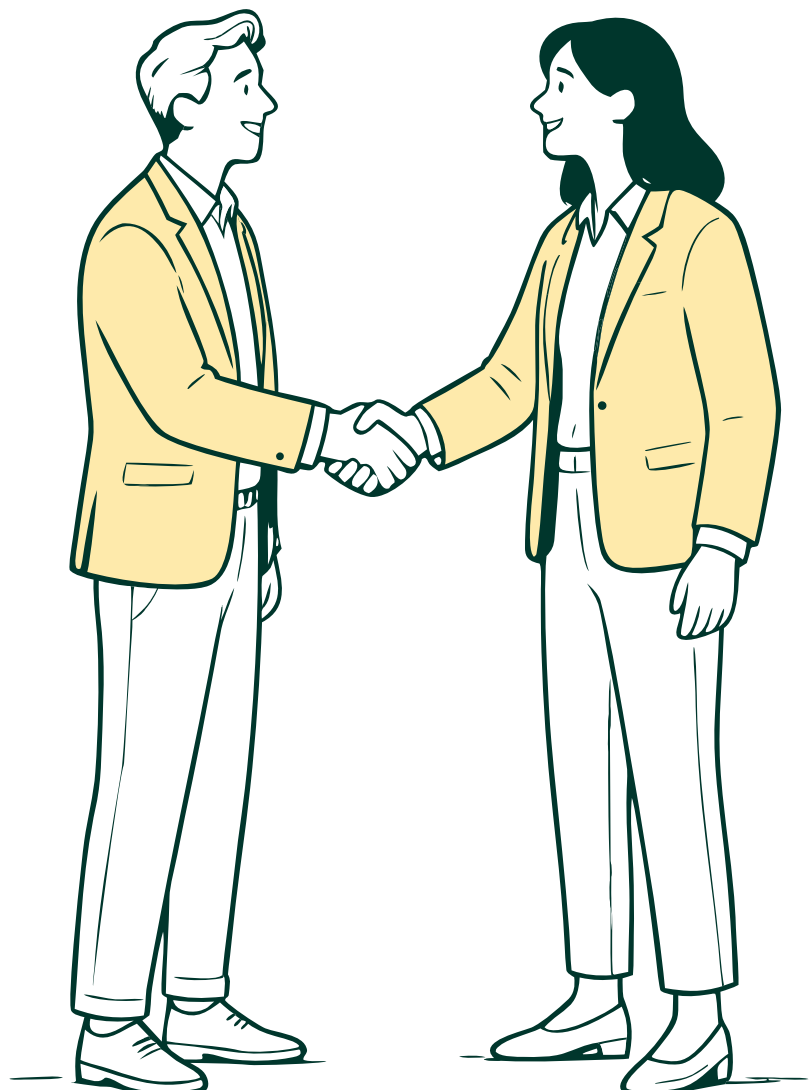
Statements relating to the transformational style also received relatively high results (67–68%), indicating the importance of inspiring employees, supporting their development, and focusing on the long-term development of team potential.

It is worth noting that within the transactional style, holding people accountable for results is emphasized more strongly than motivating them through a system of rewards and penalties.

Statements corresponding to the autocratic style also merit attention. More than two-thirds of leaders believe that a clear hierarchy and control are crucial to

team effectiveness. This reveals their attachment to a clear organizational structure and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Their attachment to control is confirmed by the fact that half of respondents (53%) like to direct everything themselves—assigning tasks and ensuring they are completed.

When assessing leaders' declarations, it is also worth checking how unequivocally they identify with any one style. It turns out that in none of them did more than one-third of respondents agree (answer 'yes': 'strongly agree' or 'somewhat agree') with both statements simultaneously.



More than 70% of leaders report behaviours characteristic of democratic and coaching management styles. At the same time, hierarchy and control are crucial for more than two-thirds, and more than half like to pull all the strings themselves. This result can be interpreted in two ways.

Perhaps this is an image of conscious adaptability: a leader who knows when to enforce firmly because the stakes are high, and when to hand over the reins because the team is ready. They switch intentionally, drawing on the full range of styles to achieve goals. This is a leadership meta-competency—adaptive intelligence—that enables action in the performance zone.

Or perhaps it is an image of dissonance. We say ‘coaching’ because that is what is expected, but we control because it feels safer for the board and more convenient for us. We change masks to meet the conflicting expectations of the business, the team, and the environment. We do not choose consciously; we act reflexively, settling ever deeper into the survival zone.

Or perhaps this comparison is decisive: 76% of leaders say they give their teams autonomy, but only 38% actually refrain from monitoring work continuously?

The study is a mirror in which each of us will see something slightly different—ourselves and our own situation. Do you have the courage to look into it?

Recall the last time you took control. Did you do it because the team was not ready, or because you were not ready to trust them? That single answer is what separates adaptation from fear.

It is worth taking a closer look at the findings. To become *Blżej Siebie*—Closer to Yourself.

Paweł Dudziak

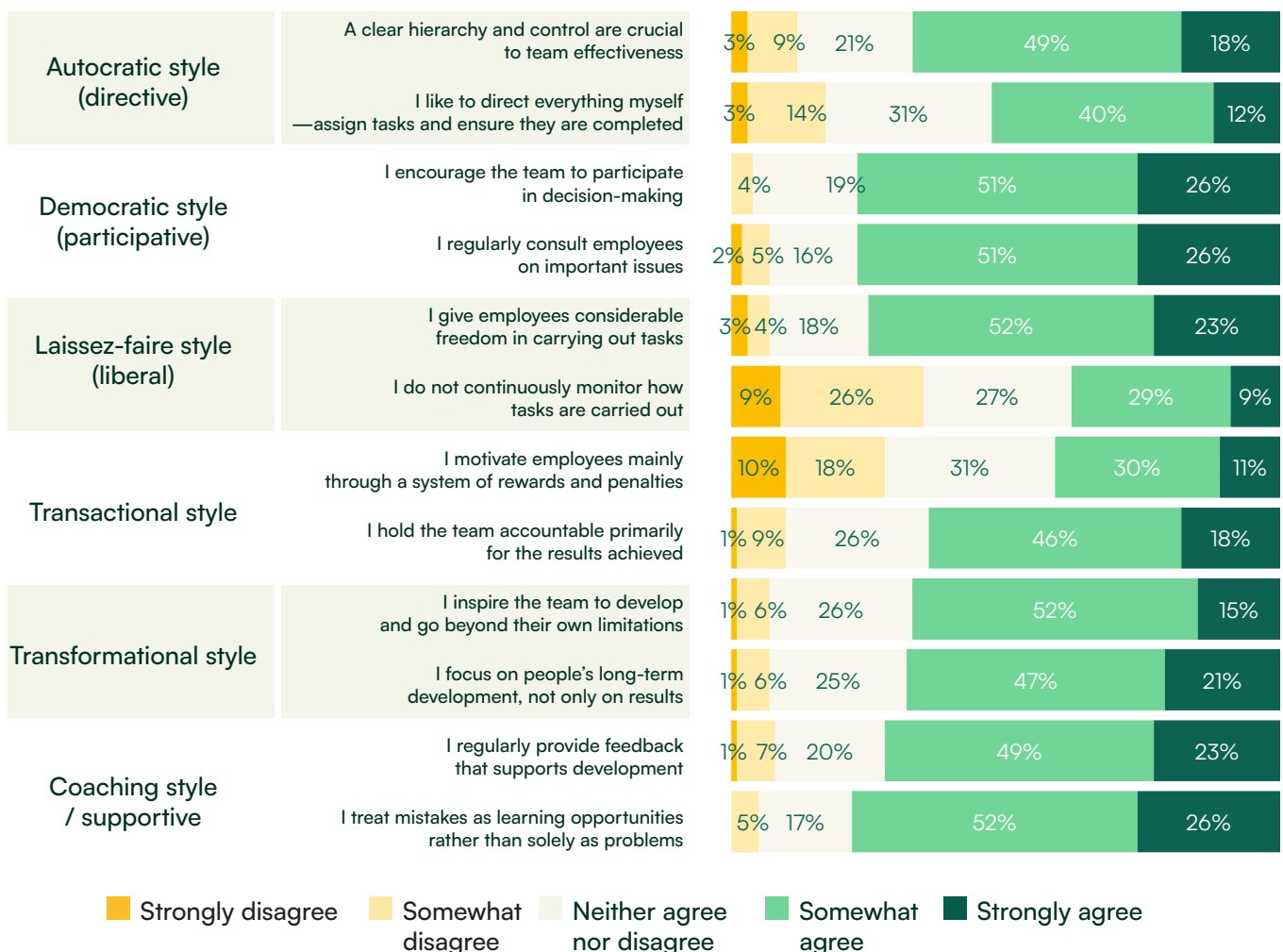
HR Director at Gourmet Foods Polska; expert for the ‘Blżej Siebie’ campaign.



It is therefore clear that leaders identify with a variety of leadership behaviours, suggesting that a situational approach predominates in management. Leaders' actions are influenced by various factors: their personality, professional experience, level of managerial maturity, the organization's characteristics and culture, and the nature of the team they manage.

Effective managers and leaders flexibly adapt their actions, tools, and leadership style to current conditions and the present needs of the team and organization, while rapid adaptation is becoming one of the key leadership competencies.

As campaign expert Paweł Dudziak says: 'Adaptive intelligence (AQ) is today the most appropriate measure of the quality of contemporary leadership. It enables fluid, frequent shifts between different—and sometimes mutually contradictory—management styles. Thanks to it, we can apply different managerial strategies simultaneously in our relationships with different people without losing our internal consistency or the clarity of our stance for the team. Finally, thanks to a high adaptability quotient, we leaders are the first to enter the new territory of every change, securing it for the team.'



AQ is a meta-competency of the future, enabling leaders to fulfil an increasingly desirable role in organizations—that of 'chief energy officers' (Tony Schwartz). Their most important task is therefore to ignite, sustain, and replenish the energy of others amid volatile and uncertain market conditions, in a multigenerational workplace, and in the face of technology that increasingly inspires fear rather than hope. Paweł Dudziak: 'This is precisely why an adaptive

management style is so important. It allows us to adjust methods to circumstances; to step into different roles while remaining in the one most important role that organizations still need so greatly: the role of the leader who is responsible, on the one hand, for people and, on the other, for results; who reports upward on the one hand and guarantees the team's psychological safety on the other.'

Experts from the 'Bliżej Siebie' campaign whose commentaries appear in this report



Ewa Błaszczak

Leader, mentor to leaders and teams, entrepreneur, business educator, and author of books, including her latest, 'The Leader and Their Ego.' For more than 25 years, she has worked with organizations and leaders around the world, helping them implement transformational change.



Aleksandra Brzozowska

Head of Learning & Development at Ringier Axel Springer Polska, strategist, and organizational transformation expert. She supports leaders and teams in building agency, decision quality, and readiness to act in complex and dynamic environments.



Katarzyna Chałas

ICC Coach, MTQ Plus Mental Toughness Trainer, and PRISM Brain Mapping Practitioner. She works in mental toughness research and development, life coaching, crisis consulting, and health coaching.



Paweł Dudziak

HR Director at Gourmet Foods Polska, author, speaker, consultant, and trainer. His domain is HR understood as HARMONIZED RESOURCES—harmonizing organizations in times of change.



Kari Goldyn

Sociobiologist, psychoeducator, speaker, and business consultant specializing in neurodiversity, leadership, and well-being. Co-host of the 'Business and Emotions' podcast. She helps organizations shape cultures that support the well-being of employees and leaders.



Romeo Grzębowski

Expert in leadership and the development of leaders and teams; author of the book 'People, Not Resources: How to Respond to Change and Build a Culture of Engagement.' Managing Partner at Extended Tools Polska.



Ilona Perużyńska-Zych

Lawyer and Executive Leader with 25 years of business experience. HR and Sales Director. She works at the intersection of strategy, leadership, organizational transformation, and corporate governance. Her professional goal is to continuously develop the strategic dimension and significance of business partnering and to educate others on building positive organizations in which engaged teams deliver business goals.



Kasia Żurek

Executive & Leadership Coach and partner to leaders during change and transformation, accompanying them in development grounded in real-life challenges. Her work is based on the belief that organizations develop only as far as the people who create them.



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Write to: kampania@blizejsiebie.info



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