

A Relational Approach to Workplace Leadership

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Abstract

This research project examines relational leadership as an ethical and strategic foundation for fostering effective workplaces. Motivated by the growing importance of human connection in leadership, the study integrates philosophical insights, particularly Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the face of the Other, with empirical evidence on workplace relationship-building. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining a structured survey of 32 professionals with thematic analysis of qualitative responses. Results confirmed that strategies such as encouraging knowledge-sharing and cultivating positive relational climates significantly enhance employee well-being, psychological safety, and organizational performance. Knowledge-sharing emerged as the most effective strategy, while relationship-building was found to be underutilized in hybrid work settings. The study concludes that leadership grounded in relational ethics not only supports individual flourishing but also drives long-term organizational success, underscoring the need for intentional relational practices across both in-person and remote environments.

Chapter One: Introduction

Leadership has traditionally been defined through authority, decision-making, and strategic execution. While these frameworks have shaped modern organizational structures, they often overlook the human element of leadership, the ability to connect with others and foster meaningful relationships. Increasingly, research suggests that leadership is not just about control and direction, but about cultivating strong interpersonal bonds that drive engagement, performance, and workplace culture (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Colbert et al., 2016).

The growing shift toward relational leadership reflects a deeper understanding of how workplace relationships shape employee well-being and organizational success. Leaders today face a complex work environment, defined by hybrid and remote work, increased reliance on technology, and shifting employee expectations. Traditional hierarchical models are proving insufficient in these contexts. Relational leadership, which emphasizes trust, mutual respect, and ethical responsibility, presents a more adaptive framework, one that encourages leaders to understand and respond to the needs of those they lead. This study explores how relational leadership can serve as a foundation for building engaged, productive workplaces.

Research highlights the profound influence of workplace relationships on employee engagement and job satisfaction. Work relationships offering task assistance are most strongly associated with job satisfaction, while friendships at work correlate with higher positive emotions and increased life satisfaction (Colbert et al., 2016). Meaningful workplace connections have been shown to increase overall engagement and job satisfaction. Relationship functions explain 24% of the variance in job satisfaction, even after controlling for coworker satisfaction. Among the relationship functions studied, giving to others is the strongest predictor of job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.28$), followed by career advancement ($\beta = 0.24$) (Colbert et al., 2016). These

findings highlight the measurable impact of workplace relationships on employee outcomes and suggest that cultivating a supportive relational environment is critical for organizational success.

Strong workplace relationships also foster psychological safety, which is essential for learning and innovation. Psychological safety, created through high-quality interpersonal connections, enhances employees' willingness to take risks, share ideas, and learn from failures (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Psychological safety mediates the link between relational leadership and learning behaviors, reinforcing the importance of interpersonal trust and support within teams (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009).

Similarly, research on relational stars, individuals who are both high-performing and highly connected within an organization, underscores the broader impact of strong workplace relationships. Relational stars play a pivotal role in driving firm-level knowledge production and innovation. Their ability to connect with others and facilitate knowledge-sharing creates a competitive advantage for organizations. However, the formation and long-term influence of relational stars remain underexplored, highlighting the need for further investigation into how organizations can strategically foster these individuals (Grigoriou & Rothaermel, 2014).

The rise of remote and hybrid work has added complexity to the challenge of maintaining workplace relationships. Nearly 70% of employees working in virtual teams report difficulty with effective communication due to a lack of personal familiarity (Maynard et al., 2019). Professional familiarity is positively associated with team effectiveness and viability, but only when information elaboration processes are in place (Maynard et al., 2019). This underscores the need for leadership strategies that foster meaningful engagement in digital spaces, reinforcing the urgency of integrating relational leadership into modern organizational structures.

Philosophical frameworks also offer insight into the ethical dimensions of relational leadership. Emmanuel Levinas's theory of ethical responsibility emphasizes that human relationships are central to moral decision-making. Levinas argues that individuals have a fundamental obligation to recognize and respond to the needs of others (Jones, 2014). This perspective challenges traditional leadership models that prioritize authority and control, instead positioning leadership as a relational and moral practice.

Despite growing evidence supporting relational leadership, significant gaps remain in understanding how these principles can be effectively applied across different work environments. Much of the existing research has focused on traditional office settings, leaving open questions about how leaders can foster strong relationships in hybrid and digital workplaces (Pauleen & Yoong, 2001). Additionally, there is a need for more research on the long-term impact of strategic relational human resource management (SRHRM) on employee well-being and organizational performance (Zhang et al., 2025).

This study aims to address some of these gaps by examining how relational leadership can be effectively implemented in contemporary workplaces. It seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the role of workplace relationships in shaping organizational culture and performance while offering practical strategies for leaders to enhance relational engagement within their teams. Through a combination of theoretical analysis and empirical research, this study will explore how relational leadership can drive organizational success.

This research makes several contributions to the field of leadership studies. First, it integrates ethical philosophy with organizational research, presenting a holistic view of relational leadership that combines theoretical insights with practical applications. Second, it addresses the challenges of maintaining workplace relationships in hybrid and remote settings, providing

strategies for fostering engagement across digital and in-person environments. Finally, it offers actionable recommendations for leaders seeking to cultivate stronger workplace relationships and enhance overall organizational effectiveness.

The structure of this paper follows a logical progression, beginning with an in-depth review of the literature on relational leadership, including its ethical and empirical foundations. The methodology section outlines the research design and approach used to explore the topic, followed by a discussion of the study's key findings. The final section provides conclusions and recommendations for implementing relational leadership in organizational settings. Through the integration of diverse perspectives and a balanced consideration of both theory and practice, this study seeks to deepen the understanding of relational leadership and its influence on the modern workplace.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Leadership is inherently relational. While traditional leadership frameworks have emphasized authority, strategy, and performance; a growing body of research highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in shaping ethical and effective leadership. Leaders are not merely decision-makers; they are facilitators of connection, responsible for fostering environments where individuals feel seen, valued, and empowered. This literature review examines leadership as a fundamentally relational practice, underscoring the ethical responsibility leaders have in building and sustaining meaningful workplace relationships.

This review is grounded in the ethical framework of Emmanuel Levinas, whose philosophy challenges conventional notions of Self and Other by arguing that ethical responsibility arises from the face-to-face encounter (Jones, 2014). Levinasian ethics reframes leadership as an obligation to recognize and respond to the intrinsic value of others, positioning relationship-building as central to ethical leadership. Beyond its philosophical underpinnings, empirical research demonstrates that strong workplace relationships contribute to psychological safety, employee well-being, and organizational performance (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Colbert et al., 2016).

Despite the increasing recognition of relational leadership, gaps remain in understanding how these principles apply across different industries and organizational structures. Additionally, the rise of remote and hybrid work presents new challenges for maintaining interpersonal connections, requiring leaders to develop innovative strategies for fostering relational engagement in digital spaces. This review critically examines these trends, highlighting both the ethical imperatives and practical strategies that support relationship-building in leadership.

To structure this analysis, the review first explores the philosophical foundations of relational leadership, with a focus on Levinasian ethics. It then transitions to empirical research on workplace relationships, psychological safety, and social capital, demonstrating the tangible benefits of relational leadership. Finally, the review examines practical strategies for effective relationship-building, discusses potential challenges, and identifies future research directions. Utilizing the integration of both ethical philosophy and empirical evidence, this review deepens the understanding of leadership as a relational practice essential for fostering ethical, engaged, and high-performing workplaces.

Philosophical Foundation: Levinasian Ethics and Relationship-Building in Leadership

Leadership is, at its core, an ethical responsibility, an obligation to recognize and respond to the inherent value of others (Jones, 2014). Drawing from Levinasian ethics, which asserts that ethical engagement originates in the face-to-face encounter with the Other, this literature review explores the philosophical and empirical foundations of relationship-building as an ethical imperative in leadership.

Background on Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995) redefined philosophy by arguing that ethics, rather than metaphysics or ontology, should be considered “first philosophy.” Instead of developing a traditional ethical theory, he explored how responsibility for others emerges naturally in face-to-face encounters. Levinas believed this ethical response happens at a pre-reflective, sensory level, shaped by our embodied experience. Drawing from phenomenology, he expanded Husserl’s method of examining experience without preconceived concepts and engaged with Heidegger’s ideas on being-in-the-world, but with a focus on ethics rather than ontology. His work, often described as meta-ethics or an “ethics of ethics,” emphasizes that true leadership is

not about authority but about recognizing and responding to the intrinsic value of others (Bergo, 2019). This recognizing and responding to the intrinsic value of others is foundational to understanding organizational leadership, and the integral role that relationships play in the success of the organization.

Levinasian Ethics as the Basis for Leadership Relationality

Levinasian ethics posits that ethical engagement arises from the face-to-face encounter with the Other, this encounter compels leaders to respond with care, accountability, and an unwavering commitment to their humanity, as Levinas is quoted by Jones, “Meaning is the face of the Other... the Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me by his essence qua infinity” (Jones, 2014). Leaders cannot reduce others to mere extensions of themselves or instrumentalize them for business objectives; instead, each employee, client, or stakeholder must be viewed as an entity with infinite values (Jones, 2014), and the only way to do so is through relationship-building within the organization.

Leadership as an Ethical Obligation to Others

If ethics is first philosophy, then leadership itself cannot exist apart from ethical responsibility; it is, at its core, an obligation to the Other (Jones, 2014). Ethical leadership does not stem from personal ambition or the pursuit of authority, but rather from a deep awareness of and responsibility for those whom the leader serves. In this sense, leadership is not about control, but about recognizing and responding to the needs, dignity, and individuality of others. This ethical obligation is what differentiates authentic leadership from transactional management, ensuring that leadership remains rooted in human connection rather than mere strategic advantage.

Multiplicity and Relationality in Leadership

Levinasian ethics challenges leaders to move beyond narrow definitions of individuals based on their professional roles, recognizing instead the complexity and multiplicity of identities that each person embodies (Jones, 2014). Leadership that reduces employees to their organizational functions fails to acknowledge their full humanity, limiting the depth of workplace relationships and the potential for ethical engagement. Levinas insists that “The Other cannot be defined,” emphasizing that leaders must resist the urge to categorize or confine people within rigid structures (Jones, 2014). Instead, leaders must remain open to the evolving and multifaceted nature of those they serve, fostering environments where individuals feel valued not just for their productivity, but for their intrinsic worth.

A leader's role, then, is not to impose knowledge or dictate direction from a place of authority but to recognize that true learning occurs in engagement with others. As Levinas states, “The Other teaches from height,” meaning that ethical leadership involves humility, an openness to being shaped by those whom one leads (Jones, 2014). This relational approach requires leaders to see themselves as both teachers and learners, understanding that wisdom is not bestowed from the top down, but emerges through ongoing dialogue and mutual respect.

The Face of the Other and Workplace Leadership

In the workplace, Levinasian ethics demands that leaders acknowledge the ethical weight of their encounters with employees, clients, and stakeholders. The “face” of the Other commands responsibility, compelling leaders to act with care and accountability (Jones, 2014). This perspective challenges traditional leadership paradigms that prioritize efficiency over ethics, reminding leaders that their decisions impact real people whose humanity must never be overlooked.

Furthermore, identity itself is not an isolated construct but is continuously shaped through interactions with others. A leader's sense of self, as well as the culture of an organization, is co-created through ongoing encounters with employees and stakeholders (Jones, 2014). By embracing this interdependent view of leadership, organizations can cultivate workplaces that prioritize meaningful relationships, mutual respect, and a shared sense of purpose. Leadership, in this sense, is not about exerting influence, but about fostering an ethical culture where individuals are seen, valued, and empowered.

Transition to Empirical Evidence for Relationship-Building in Leadership

Levinasian ethics establishes the moral foundation for relationship-building in leadership, positioning it not as a mere strategic approach, but as an ethical responsibility inherent to the act of leading. If leadership is, at its core, an obligation to the Other, then the cultivation of meaningful relationships within an organization is not optional, it is fundamental to ethical leadership (Jones, 2014). Leaders must actively foster environments where individuals feel seen, valued, and supported, as ethical engagement cannot exist in the absence of genuine human connection.

This ethical foundation underscores the tangible benefits of relationship-building in leadership. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that strong workplace relationships enhance psychological safety, employee well-being, and overall organizational performance. Leaders who prioritize relationality cultivate workplaces where employees feel secure enough to voice concerns, learn from mistakes, and engage in collaborative problem-solving. Furthermore, studies indicate that organizations with a strong culture of relationship-building see higher levels of employee engagement, innovation, and long-term success. The following section examines the

empirical evidence supporting these claims, illustrating how ethical leadership through relationship-building translates into measurable workplace outcomes.

Relationship-Building in Leadership Practice

Psychological Safety and Learning from Failures

A core outcome of relationship-building in leadership is the cultivation of psychological safety within an organization. Psychological safety refers to an environment in which employees feel secure in expressing their thoughts, asking questions, and admitting mistakes without fear of punishment or ridicule (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Leaders who prioritize relationship-building foster workplaces where employees are encouraged to engage in open dialogue, allowing for a culture of trust and continuous learning. When employees feel safe to share their experiences and voice concerns, organizations become more adaptive, resilient, and innovative.

Research has demonstrated that strong workplace relationships contribute to psychological safety by promoting shared goals, mutual respect, and an openness to feedback (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). In their study on relational coordination, Carmeli and Gittell found that organizations with strong interpersonal relationships saw improvements in communication, teamwork, and overall performance (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Furthermore, leaders who create environments of psychological safety enable employees to learn from failures rather than be penalized for them. Helmy et al. found that organizations with high levels of interpersonal trust and emotional support allowed employees to openly discuss mistakes and transform failures into valuable learning experiences. In contrast, organizations that foster blame-oriented cultures stifle creativity and discourage employees from taking initiative (Helmy et al., 2020).

Meta-analytical research further highlights the role of psychological safety in fostering information-sharing behaviors that contribute to learning from failures (Mesmer-Magnus &

DeChurch, 2009). Their synthesis of 72 independent studies found that teams that engage in structured discussions and prioritize both openness (general communication and idea exchange) and uniqueness (the sharing of information uniquely held by an individual) achieve higher-quality decisions, stronger team cohesion, and greater overall satisfaction. Importantly, their research suggests that uniqueness is more strongly associated with decision-making effectiveness than general openness (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). This finding supports the argument that leaders must actively create environments where employees feel safe to share novel insights, challenge assumptions, and contribute unique perspectives, all of which are essential for learning from failures and refining organizational processes.

The role of psychological safety in learning is particularly relevant in high-stakes industries that require constant adaptation and innovation. Studies have shown that in teams with strong relational foundations, employees are more likely to challenge assumptions, refine processes, and propose new ideas (Ray et al., 2023). Additionally, in virtual and hybrid work environments, where spontaneous interpersonal interactions are limited, structured communication strategies become even more critical. Leaders who invest in relationship-building not only strengthen psychological safety but also create environments where employees are empowered to experiment, learn, and improve, ultimately driving organizational success.

Digital Communication and Psychological Safety in Remote Teams

In today's increasingly digital workplace, structured communication plays a critical role in maintaining relational leadership. As organizations adopt remote and hybrid work models, leaders must ensure that communication channels foster collaboration, psychological safety, and

knowledge-sharing. Without structured digital interactions, employees may experience uncertainty, misalignment, and disengagement, ultimately weakening workplace relationships.

Research by Rafaeli and Ravid provides empirical evidence for the importance of structured communication. Their study examined the role of email in virtual teams, demonstrating how digital tools can enhance trust and decision-making. They found that when teams had access to email, they were able to bypass traditional hierarchical communication barriers, leading to more efficient and informed decision-making. For example, retailers with the most market information could communicate directly with manufacturers, rather than relying on intermediaries, improving demand forecasting and reducing bottlenecks (Rafaeli & Ravid, 2003).

Email-enabled teams were able to disintermediate traditional hierarchical communication barriers, enabling faster and more informed decision-making (Rafaeli & Ravid, 2003). Effective digital communication is a key component of maintaining strong workplace relationships, particularly in remote and hybrid environments where informal interactions are limited. Structured communication channels enable employees to share critical information, reducing uncertainty and enhancing decision-making. This form of structured communication allowed teams to mitigate uncertainty, reduce delays, and enhance coordination, all of which are critical elements of psychological safety in virtual work environments.

Furthermore, the study found that structured email communication encouraged proactive knowledge-sharing behaviors, particularly among team members who held critical information. When employees had a clear framework for sharing insights, they were more likely to engage in transparent discussions and contribute unique perspectives, thereby fostering an environment of trust and collaboration. This aligns with Mesmer-Magnus and DeChurch's findings on the importance of uniqueness in information-sharing (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009), as well

as research on relational coordination that emphasizes the role of structured interactions in enhancing team cohesion (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009).

Despite the advantages of email as a tool for enhancing psychological safety, the study also noted challenges related to variability in email usage across different roles. Some team members, such as retailers, actively leveraged email for knowledge-sharing, while others, such as manufacturers, participated less frequently (Rafaeli & Ravid, 2003). This underscores the need for leadership to actively structure digital communication practices to ensure that critical information flows effectively across all levels of the organization. Leaders must provide clear guidelines for digital communication, encourage consistent engagement, and implement training programs to enhance employees' ability to communicate effectively in remote settings.

Ultimately, the integration of digital platforms into leadership strategies presents a significant opportunity to reinforce psychological safety in virtual teams. Structured information-sharing, reduced uncertainty, and open dialogue facilitated through email and other digital communication tools serve as vital mechanisms for enhancing trust and enabling learning from failures. Leaders who embrace these tools strategically can create environments where employees feel empowered to share insights, collaborate effectively, and drive continuous improvement, even in the absence of face-to-face interactions.

Relationship-Building as a Driver of Employee Flourishing

Beyond fostering psychological safety, relationship-building in leadership contributes to overall employee flourishing; enhancing job satisfaction, well-being, and engagement. Strong workplace relationships provide emotional support, mentorship opportunities, and a sense of belonging, all of which have been linked to higher levels of motivation and job performance (Colbert et al., 2016). Employees who feel valued and connected to their colleagues are more

likely to be engaged in their work, demonstrate resilience in the face of challenges, and find deeper meaning in their professional roles.

Colbert et al. argue that “positive workplace relationships contribute to job satisfaction, meaningful work, positive emotions at work, and overall life satisfaction” (Colbert et al., 2016). Their research highlights that employees who develop strong interpersonal bonds within the workplace report greater feelings of fulfillment and purpose. Similarly, workplace friendships have been shown to facilitate knowledge-sharing and creative problem-solving (Helmy et al., 2020). In environments where employees trust their colleagues and feel supported by leadership, they are more willing to collaborate, take risks, and contribute innovative ideas.

Importantly, relationship-building also plays a crucial role in retaining top talent. Organizations that foster strong interpersonal connections tend to experience lower turnover rates, as employees are more likely to remain in workplaces where they feel valued and supported (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). This underscores the importance of ethical leadership, as leaders who prioritize relationships create environments where employees not only perform better but also experience greater satisfaction and long-term commitment to their organizations.

The Role of Emotions in Leadership and Organizational Trust

Leadership effectiveness is deeply intertwined with the ability to recognize and manage emotions within the workplace. Leaders who acknowledge the emotional dimensions of employee interactions foster an environment of trust, engagement, and psychological safety (Dutton et al., 2006). Emotions serve as catalysts for action, guiding responses and shaping workplace interactions over time. However, organizations have historically excluded, controlled, or commodified emotions, limiting employees' ability to express their experiences authentically (Tietz, 2021).

Leaders who engage in Compassionate Leadership recognize that emotions are not distractions from productivity but essential drivers of workplace engagement and well-being. Research suggests that organizations that embrace emotional expression see higher levels of trust, resilience, and cooperation among employees (Dutton et al., 2006). When leaders encourage an emotionally aware work culture, employees develop stronger interpersonal bonds and experience a greater sense of belonging within the organization (Ramachandran et al., 2023). This connection between relational leadership and emotional engagement underscores the importance of creating spaces where employees feel comfortable sharing and supporting one another, reinforcing the broader impact of relationship-building on workplace flourishing

Benevolent Leadership and Employee Flourishing

Beyond fostering psychological safety, relationship-building in leadership contributes to employee flourishing by creating workplaces where individuals feel valued, supported, and connected to a shared purpose. Karakas and Sarigollu introduce the concept of benevolent leadership, a relational approach that integrates spiritual depth, ethical sensitivity, positive engagement, and community responsiveness to cultivate high-functioning, compassionate organizations (Karakas and Sarigollu, 2013). Their research, grounded in a case study of Bereket, a Turkish textile company, demonstrates how leaders who actively nurture employee well-being and social responsibility foster greater organizational commitment and job satisfaction.

Bereket's leadership model is built upon the principle that employees thrive in environments where they are treated with care and respect beyond their immediate job roles. Through initiatives such as providing free meals, education subsidies, and family healthcare, Bereket's leaders cultivate a culture of trust and mutual investment, reinforcing the idea that employees are not merely economic actors but integral members of a larger organizational

community (Karakas and Sarigollu, 2013). This approach aligns with the growing body of research suggesting that leaders who prioritize meaningful interpersonal connections create workplaces where employees experience greater fulfillment, motivation, and resilience (Colbert et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Karakas and Sarigollu's framework underscores that benevolent leadership fosters a sense of belonging, which directly impacts employee engagement and retention (Karakas and Sarigollu, 2013). Their findings parallel research on relational coordination, which posits that organizations with strong social capital experience higher levels of collaboration, innovation, and adaptability (Carmeli & Gittel, 2009). Companies like Bereket illustrate that incorporating relational and ethical considerations into leadership practices transforms relationship-building into both an ethical imperative and a strategic advantage for long-term employee flourishing.

This case study reinforces the central argument that relationship-oriented leadership is foundational to organizational success, as it ensures that employees feel seen, valued, and connected to the organization's mission. Leaders who foster compassionate, ethically-driven workplaces not only enhance employee well-being but also strengthen organizational commitment, reinforcing the broader impact of relationship-building as a key driver of flourishing in the workplace.

Social Capital and Organizational Performance

Relationship-building extends beyond individual well-being and directly impacts broader organizational performance through the development of social capital. Social capital refers to the networks of relationships within an organization that facilitate trust, cooperation, and the exchange of knowledge (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2021). High levels of social capital enable

employees to work more collaboratively, share resources efficiently, and navigate challenges with greater ease.

Research indicates that organizations with strong social capital benefit from increased innovation, enhanced decision-making, and improved overall performance (Tasselli et al., 2015). Lengnick-Hall et al. assert that “the integration of human capital and social capital is the engine of organizational capabilities. Work gets done by talented people working together” (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2021). This underscores the idea that leadership is not merely about individual competence but about fostering the conditions necessary for collective success.

Additionally, trust and collaboration within organizational networks contribute to higher levels of adaptability in fast-changing industries. Teams that have built strong interpersonal relationships are better equipped to handle uncertainty, problem-solve effectively, and capitalize on emerging opportunities (Ray et al., 2023). As a result, relationship-building is not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic advantage, positioning organizations for long-term resilience and innovation.

Strategies for Effective Relationship-Building

While the ethical and empirical foundations of relationship-building in leadership establish its necessity, effective implementation requires intentional strategies. Leaders must actively cultivate environments that encourage collaboration, trust, and interpersonal connection to maximize the benefits of relationship-building within organizations. Research highlights several key approaches, including fostering knowledge-sharing, identifying and supporting influential relationship-builders, leveraging workplace friendships, and creating a positive relational climate.

Encouraging Knowledge Sharing and Team Collaboration

One of the most effective ways leaders can strengthen workplace relationships is by facilitating knowledge-sharing and cross-team collaboration. Knowledge-sharing not only enhances individual learning but also fosters collective intelligence within an organization, enabling teams to work more efficiently and innovatively (Kaše et al., 2009). When leaders implement structures that encourage the free flow of information, such as mentorship programs, collaborative projects, and open communication channels, employees are more likely to develop trust and mutual respect.

The study by Stasser and Titus provides a concrete example of what happens when knowledge-sharing is ineffective (Stasser & Titus, 1992). Their research on information sampling within teams demonstrates that groups often fail to exchange unshared information, leading to suboptimal decision-making. This phenomenon, known as the “hidden profile effect,” occurs when critical information is distributed unevenly among team members, preventing the group from reaching the best possible decision. The study found that when team discussions focused only on shared knowledge, decision-making quality suffered, reinforcing the importance of proactive knowledge-sharing structures (Stasser & Titus, 1992).

Leaders who create structured opportunities for employees to contribute new ideas and insights can counteract this tendency, leading to higher-quality decision-making and enhanced problem-solving capabilities (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). Furthermore, ensuring that employees feel psychologically safe to share unique perspectives enhances knowledge elaboration and fosters a culture of continuous learning. Digital communication tools can both facilitate and hinder this process. While structured platforms enhance knowledge exchange, they can also reinforce biased information sampling if not managed strategically (Mesmer-Magnus &

DeChurch, 2009). Leaders must balance encouraging open communication with actively directing discussions to ensure that critical, unshared insights are surfaced and integrated into decision-making processes.

Identifying and Supporting Key Relationship-Builders (Relational Stars)

Within every organization, certain individuals naturally excel at building and maintaining relationships. These "relational stars" play a crucial role in shaping workplace culture, fostering collaboration, and driving innovation (Grigoriou & Rothaermel, 2014). Unlike formal leadership roles, relational stars may not always hold managerial positions, yet their influence can be significant in connecting teams, facilitating knowledge-sharing, and strengthening trust within the organization.

Grigoriou and Rothaermel found that relational stars contribute both to the quantity and quality of innovation within firms. By recognizing and supporting these individuals, leaders can enhance organizational connectivity and maximize the impact of relationship-building efforts (Grigoriou & Rothaermel, 2014). Providing relational stars with leadership development opportunities, encouraging their role in mentorship, and leveraging their networks for cross-team collaboration are all strategies that help harness their natural abilities for the broader benefit of the organization.

The Role of Workplace Friendships

Workplace friendships serve as another vital component of effective relationship-building, fostering emotional support, trust, and engagement among employees. Strong workplace relationships have been linked to increased knowledge-sharing, higher levels of job satisfaction, and improved problem-solving capabilities (Helmy et al., 2020). Helmy et al. found that workplace friendships significantly enhance innovative service behavior, particularly

through the collection and exchange of knowledge. When employees feel personally connected to their colleagues, they are more likely to collaborate, seek feedback, and contribute creative ideas (Helmy et al., 2020).

However, while workplace friendships can positively impact team dynamics, an excessive focus on personal familiarity can, in some cases, reduce efficiency. Maynard et al. caution that close relationships, particularly in face-to-face teams, may sometimes hinder productivity by prioritizing social interactions over task-oriented collaboration (Maynard et al., 2019). Effective leaders must strike a balance, encouraging meaningful connections among employees while ensuring that professional relationships remain aligned with organizational goals.

Creating a Positive Relational Climate

A positive relational climate; one that prioritizes trust, mutual respect, and open communication, is essential for fostering strong workplace relationships. Strategic Relational Human Resource Management (SRHRM) has been identified as an effective approach for developing relational climates that enhance collaboration and engagement (Zhang et al., 2025). Through policies that support team-building activities, open dialogue, and inclusive leadership practices, organizations can create cultures where employees feel valued and connected.

Leaders play a critical role in shaping this climate by modeling ethical engagement, promoting shared values, and ensuring that employees feel heard and respected. Zhang et al. highlight that organizations with strong relational climates experience higher levels of employee commitment and overall performance (Zhang et al., 2025). When relationship-building becomes an integral part of an organization's structure and culture, leaders cultivate environments where both individuals and teams can thrive.

Potential Challenges in Relationship-Building

While relationship-building is a foundational element of ethical leadership, implementing and sustaining meaningful workplace relationships is not without its challenges. Leaders must navigate the complexities of balancing professional and personal connections, addressing organizational resistance to relationship-focused initiatives, and fostering relationships in virtual and hybrid work environments. These challenges require intentional strategies to ensure that relationship-building efforts remain productive and aligned with organizational goals.

Balancing Professional and Personal Connections

One of the key challenges leaders face is maintaining the right balance between personal rapport and professional collaboration. While strong interpersonal connections can enhance trust and teamwork, overly personal relationships in the workplace may blur professional boundaries and impact decision-making (Maynard et al., 2019). Leaders must foster an environment where employees feel valued and supported while ensuring that professional expectations and responsibilities remain clear.

Maynard et al. highlight that workplace relationships can be both an asset and a liability; when balanced effectively, they promote collaboration and innovation, but when left unchecked, they may lead to favoritism, conflict, or inefficiencies (Maynard et al., 2019). Effective leadership requires the ability to encourage authentic relationships while maintaining a culture of professionalism and accountability. This can be achieved through transparent communication, clear role expectations, and fostering a team-oriented culture that prioritizes collective success over personal alliances.

Addressing Organizational Resistance to Relationship-Building Initiatives

Despite the well-documented benefits of workplace relationships, some organizations remain hesitant to invest in relationship-building initiatives. One common concern is whether the time and effort required to cultivate strong relationships yield a tangible return on investment. Organizational leaders, particularly in results-driven environments, may prioritize efficiency and output over interpersonal dynamics, viewing relationship-building efforts as secondary to business performance.

Research suggests that relationship-building initiatives may introduce inefficiencies that organizations are unwilling to accommodate. Sobrero and Roberts argue that deep interorganizational relationships often come at the expense of short-term efficiency, as they require higher coordination costs, extensive problem-solving, and increased time investment (Sobrero and Roberts, 2001). Their study on supplier-manufacturer relationships, although not interorganizational relationships, highlights a clear trade-off between fostering long-term learning and maintaining immediate productivity. When tasks involve high interdependency, frequent communication and iterative collaboration become necessary, slowing down decision-making processes and increasing operational complexity (Sobrero and Roberts, 2001). This supports the notion that relationship-building, while beneficial in certain contexts, may not always align with an organization's need for efficiency and control.

Beyond concerns of wasted time, cultural resistance to relationship-building presents another significant barrier. Raelin notes that organizations often favor dispassionate, control-oriented leadership models, which can create resistance to more relational approaches (Raelin, 2003). He argues that many leaders seek to maintain an "orderly universe" in which emotions and interpersonal complexities are minimized (Raelin, 2003). In such environments,

leaders who emphasize relationship-building may be perceived as indecisive or lacking control, deterring them from investing in relational leadership strategies. The legacy of corporate scandals, such as Enron, further reinforces this mindset, with executives fearing that delegating authority and fostering collaboration may lead to a loss of control and increased risk (Raelin, 2003).

Given these challenges, leaders who advocate for relationship-building must present a compelling case for its long-term benefits. Sobrero and Roberts suggest that organizations seeking efficiency should strategically limit interdependent collaborations, while still recognizing the potential for long-term learning gains (Sobrero and Roberts, 2001). Similarly, Raelin highlights the need to integrate relational leadership in a way that does not compromise authority but instead strengthens organizational effectiveness (Raelin, 2003). Leaders can address skepticism by tracking key performance indicators related to team collaboration, incorporating relational leadership into professional development programs, and demonstrating how successful organizations have leveraged relationship-building to drive innovation and performance. Leaders who weigh the benefits of workplace relationships against organizational constraints are better equipped to navigate resistance to relationship-building initiatives.

The Impact of Biased Information Sampling on Relational Leadership

Another significant challenge in relationship-building is the impact of biased information sampling on decision-making and collaboration. Research has shown that teams often prioritize discussing commonly held information rather than unique insights, leading to suboptimal decisions (Stasser & Titus, 1985). In relational leadership, this bias can limit diverse perspectives, reinforcing dominant viewpoints and inhibiting innovation.

Leaders who fail to actively manage biased information sampling risk creating environments where employees hesitate to share unconventional ideas or challenge existing assumptions (Stasser & Titus, 1985). This can weaken psychological safety and reduce the effectiveness of knowledge-sharing initiatives. To counteract this challenge, leaders should implement structured discussion techniques that encourage employees to voice unique contributions, ensuring that all perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. Additionally, fostering a culture of inquiry, where employees feel empowered to question and refine ideas, can help mitigate the effects of biased information sampling and enhance relational leadership outcomes.

Navigating Virtual and Hybrid Work Environments

The rise of remote and hybrid work models presents a significant challenge to relationship-building in leadership. In traditional office environments, informal social interactions, such as casual conversations in hallways or shared meals, naturally facilitate connections among employees. However, in virtual and hybrid settings, these organic moments of relationship-building are significantly reduced, making it more difficult for leaders to foster trust and collaboration (Maynard et al., 2019).

Maynard et al. note that remote work diminishes spontaneous communication and impedes the development of strong interpersonal bonds. Without intentional efforts to maintain connections, employees in virtual environments may feel isolated, disengaged, or disconnected from their teams (Maynard et al., 2019). Additionally, Rafaeli and Ravid found that uneven participation in digital communication channels can limit the effectiveness of knowledge-sharing, with certain team members, particularly those in key information-holding

roles, engaging more actively than others (Rafaeli & Ravid, 2003). This imbalance can create knowledge silos and reduce the benefits of open communication.

Pauleen and Yoong further highlight the need for leaders to develop skills in digital relationship-building, emphasizing that virtual team leadership requires not just technical proficiency but also the ability to foster trust through intentional and structured communication (Pauleen & Yoong, 2001). Their research suggests that leaders who proactively manage virtual interactions by establishing norms for communication, leveraging multiple information and communication technologies (ICT) tools, and facilitating regular check-ins can bridge the gap between remote and in-person employees (Pauleen & Yoong, 2001). Prioritizing relationship-building even in dispersed work environments allows leaders to ensure that employees remain engaged, supported, and connected to the organization's mission.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Summary of Key Findings

The ethical and empirical foundations of leadership demonstrate that relationship-building is not just a leadership strategy but an essential ethical responsibility. Levinasian ethics positions leadership as an obligation to recognize and respond to the intrinsic value of others, emphasizing relational engagement as a cornerstone of ethical leadership (Jones, 2014). Empirical research further supports this perspective, showing that strong workplace relationships enhance psychological safety, promote employee well-being, and contribute to overall organizational performance (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009).

By fostering relational coordination, social capital, and strategic relational human resource management (SRHRM), leaders can create environments where employees feel valued, supported, and empowered to contribute meaningfully to their organizations (Zhang et al., 2025).

These relationships drive key workplace benefits, including trust, collaboration, and innovation, all of which are essential for long-term success. Furthermore, as work environments evolve, with the increasing prevalence of remote and hybrid models, leaders must adopt new strategies to maintain strong interpersonal connections and ensure that relationship-building remains a central component of organizational culture. Despite the clear advantages of relational leadership, challenges persist in balancing personal and professional relationships, overcoming organizational resistance, and addressing biases in communication.

Need for Further Research

While research increasingly supports relationship-building in leadership, critical gaps remain that warrant further exploration. One area of future study is how relationship-building varies across industries and organizational structures. Different sectors, such as education, technology, healthcare, and manufacturing, may require distinct approaches to fostering workplace relationships due to variations in team dynamics, job functions, and communication structures (Han, Han, & Brass, 2014). Understanding these nuances can provide industry-specific insights into best practices for relationship-driven leadership.

Additionally, the increasing prevalence of remote and hybrid work environments necessitates further investigation into how leaders can effectively build and sustain relationships in digital spaces. While existing studies highlight the challenges of virtual work in reducing informal interactions and impeding relationship-building (Maynard et al., 2019), more research is needed to identify scalable strategies that foster psychological safety and trust in dispersed teams.

Another area requiring deeper analysis is the long-term impact of relational HRM on organizational performance. While preliminary research suggests that strategic relational HRM

fosters positive workplace climates and enhances employee engagement, its sustained effects on productivity, retention, and innovation remain underexplored (Zhang et al., 2025). Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how relational HRM practices evolve over time and contribute to enduring organizational success.

Conclusion

Relational leadership is essential for cultivating ethical, engaged, and high-performing workplaces. Grounded in Levinasian ethics, this approach emphasizes leadership as an ethical obligation to prioritize human connection and foster environments where employees thrive. Empirical research reinforces the value of relationship-building, demonstrating its role in enhancing psychological safety, organizational trust, and workplace innovation. Leaders who intentionally nurture workplace relationships create cultures that empower employees, strengthen team collaboration, and sustain long-term organizational success.

As organizations continue to adapt to hybrid and remote work structures, the ability to maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships will remain a critical challenge. Leaders must develop and implement structured digital communication strategies, ensure inclusivity in knowledge-sharing, and actively reinforce relational coordination to sustain engagement in virtual and in-person settings. Future research should further explore industry-specific applications of relational leadership, the effectiveness of relational HRM over time, and the development of scalable strategies for relationship-building in digital workspaces.

Effective leadership is rooted in strong relationships, guided by ethical principles, and responsive to the needs of employees. When leaders prioritize meaningful connections, they create more inclusive, resilient, and innovative organizations that value not only productivity but also the long-term well-being and success of their people. Gaining a deeper understanding of

these dynamics requires examining how specific relationship-building strategies are perceived and applied in professional settings. The next chapter details the research methodology used to explore these strategies, offering a comprehensive overview of the data collection and analysis process.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the most effective relationship-building strategies among workplace professionals. Grounded in the literature demonstrating the critical role of workplace relationships in fostering psychological safety, employee engagement, and overall organizational success, this research sought to bridge theory and practice by identifying and evaluating specific strategies that professionals found most impactful in real-world settings. A structured survey served as the primary tool for collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, helping to assess the perceived effectiveness of various relationship-building approaches in workplaces.

The survey consisted of two key components: a quantitative ranking system in which participants evaluated the effectiveness of specific relationship-building strategies, and open-ended qualitative questions that allowed respondents to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. The quantitative component provided measurable data regarding the relative effectiveness of various strategies, while the qualitative responses offered deeper insight into why certain approaches were more impactful in fostering meaningful workplace relationships. This methodological approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of both the prevalence and the perceived success of different strategies within the workplace.

The quantitative data were examined through statistical analysis, including mean rankings, frequency distributions, and comparative assessments where applicable. This analysis provided an objective measure of which relationship-building strategies were most frequently utilized and valued by workplace professionals across industries. The qualitative data, consisting of open-ended responses, were subjected to thematic analysis to identify common patterns and insights regarding the experiences and reasoning behind the participants' rankings. This

combination of analytical approaches helped triangulate findings and ensured a well-rounded interpretation of the data.

The methodological choices made in this study were justified by the need to balance empirical rigor with practical insight. The use of a structured survey allowed for broad participation while maintaining consistency in data collection. The inclusion of open-ended qualitative responses ensured that the study captured the nuanced and context-dependent nature of relationship-building strategies, which may not have been fully encapsulated through numerical rankings alone. Furthermore, leveraging access to a vast network of connections through social media allowed the study to provide insight into a representative sample, stretching across industries. The mixed-methods approach strengthened the study by integrating statistical validation with qualitative depth, ultimately providing a richer understanding of effective workplace relationship-building strategies.

With the data collection and analysis process established, the next chapter presents the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study. The results offer insight into the most effective relationship-building strategies, highlighting key patterns and participant perspectives that reflect broader trends across industry.

Chapter Four: Data and Results

Part One: The Importance of Relationship-Building in the Workplace

The first research question guiding this study; Is relationship-building in the workplace important?, is addressed through a qualitative analysis of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Drawing on philosophical, empirical, and practical perspectives, the available data presents a compelling and multi-dimensional case affirming the critical importance of relationship-building in organizational contexts.

The foundation of this argument lies in the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, whose work repositions leadership as an ethical obligation to the Other. Within this framework, leadership is not reducible to strategic execution or positional authority; rather, it is constituted through the quality and depth of interpersonal relationships. Leadership, according to Levinasian ethics, is rooted in the responsibility to acknowledge and respond to the humanity of others (Jones, 2014). This ethical obligation reframes workplace leadership as a fundamentally relational act in which the cultivation of meaningful connections is not merely strategic, but essential.

Empirical research reinforces this theoretical claim by demonstrating the measurable impacts of strong workplace relationships on individual and organizational outcomes. High-quality interpersonal connections significantly enhance psychological safety, a core driver of employee learning, innovation, and collaboration (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). In psychologically safe environments, employees are more likely to engage in risk-taking, share creative ideas, and admit mistakes, thereby contributing to adaptive and resilient organizational cultures. Similarly, studies highlight that organizations that prioritize relational leadership

practices are better positioned to support employee well-being and foster environments of trust and mutual accountability (Helmy et al., 2020).

The findings of Colbert et al. support the importance of workplace relationships with significant quantitative data. Their study revealed that relationship functions explained 24% of the variance in job satisfaction, even after controlling for coworker satisfaction (Colbert et al., 2016). Among these functions, giving to others was the strongest predictor of job satisfaction ($\beta = .28$), followed by career advancement ($\beta = .24$), indicating that both altruism and developmentally supportive relationships contribute significantly to employee outcomes (Colbert et al., 2016). They also found that workplace friendships correlate with higher levels of positive emotion and life satisfaction, further illustrating the broad impact of relational engagement (Colbert et al., 2016).

Further statistical support is offered through the meta-analysis conducted by Mesmer-Magnus and DeChurch, who analyzed 72 independent studies involving 4,795 teams and 17,279 individuals. Their findings revealed a corrected mean correlation of $\rho = .42$ between information sharing and team performance, indicating a moderate to strong positive relationship (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). Importantly, the study found that sharing unique (unshared) information had a stronger positive impact on team performance than sharing information already known to the group. Structured discussions and cooperative team climates were identified as enhancing factors, while informational interdependence and uneven distribution of knowledge hindered performance (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). These findings provide compelling statistical evidence that team environments characterized by openness, trust, and interpersonal connection are better equipped to foster meaningful knowledge exchange and achieve higher performance outcomes.

Beyond individual flourishing, relationship-building supports broader organizational performance through the development of social capital. Defined as the network of trusting, cooperative relationships within an organization, social capital facilitates knowledge-sharing, innovation, and decision-making (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2021). Teams with strong relational coordination, based on shared goals, mutual respect, and frequent communication, demonstrate improved efficiency and adaptability, particularly in complex and uncertain environments (Gittell, 2002).

The concept of benevolent leadership provides a concrete example of relational practices driving organizational success. Karakas and Sarigollu studied Bereket, a Turkish textile firm whose leadership prioritized employee well-being through initiatives such as education subsidies, free meals, and healthcare. These relational investments resulted in increased employee engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational loyalty (Karakas & Sarigollu, 2013). Their work underscores that employees are more likely to thrive when they are treated as whole persons rather than merely economic actors (Karakas & Sarigollu, 2013).

Leadership effectiveness is also enhanced when leaders attend to the emotional dimensions of work. Dutton et al. emphasized that emotions are vital to building trust, shaping interpersonal bonds, and supporting ethical engagement in the workplace (Dutton et al., 2006). Leaders who cultivate environments of emotional safety and expression enable employees to engage more fully, strengthening team dynamics and resilience. Similarly, compassionate leadership, as outlined by Ramachandran et al., has been linked to higher cooperation, psychological safety, and organizational trust (Ramachandran et al., 2023).

Maintaining strong workplace relationships, however, presents new challenges in the context of remote and hybrid work. In such environments, spontaneous interactions that typically

foster familiarity and trust are diminished. Maynard et al. found that professional familiarity significantly impacts team effectiveness in global virtual teams, but only when paired with intentional, structured communication strategies (Maynard et al., 2019). Without such strategies, employees may experience reduced engagement and diminished connection.

Rafaeli and Ravid demonstrated that structured digital communication, such as email, can mitigate some of these challenges by facilitating transparent, decentralized knowledge-sharing (Rafaeli & Ravid, 2003). When employees had access to direct digital channels, they were able to bypass hierarchical bottlenecks and share critical information, thereby improving coordination and decision-making (Rafaeli & Ravid, 2003). Pauleen and Yoong also emphasized that relational leadership in virtual settings requires more than technical tools; it demands a proactive effort to build trust and mutual understanding through purposeful virtual engagement (Pauleen & Yoong, 2001).

The philosophical and empirical evidence presented in the literature clearly supports the conclusion that relationship-building in the workplace is critically important. Leadership, when grounded in ethical responsibility and supported by strategic relational practices, creates the conditions for employee flourishing, psychological safety, and organizational resilience. The inclusion of statistically significant findings, such as those by Colbert et al. and Mesmer-Magnus and DeChurch, strengthens the conclusion that relationship-building is not only an ethical imperative but a measurable driver of job satisfaction, collaboration, innovation, and long-term performance (Colbert et al., 2016; Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). As the workplace continues to evolve, the capacity to build and sustain meaningful relationships remains a cornerstone of effective leadership.

Part Two: Analysis of Survey Results on Relationship-Building Strategies

To address the second research question; What is the most effective relationship-building strategy based on the strategies presented in the literature review?, a mixed-methods survey was administered to a diverse sample of professionals across industries. The survey was designed to measure both the perceived effectiveness and actual utilization of six key relationship-building strategies derived from the literature. It also invited participants to share their experiences, reflections, and advice through a series of open-ended qualitative prompts.

Participants represented a broad range of professional backgrounds and experience levels. Notably, 64.7% of respondents reported having over 20 years of work experience, while the remaining were evenly distributed across the 1–15-year range. This wide range of experience provided a balanced and representative perspective on the relevance and effectiveness of relational strategies in contemporary workplaces.

Quantitative data were collected through a 5-point Likert scale evaluating the perceived effectiveness of each strategy, along with a forced-ranking task that asked respondents to order the strategies based on their perceived impact. The strategies, drawn directly from the empirical and theoretical foundations reviewed in Chapter Two, included: encouraging knowledge-sharing and team collaboration, creating a positive relational climate, promoting emotional awareness and trust, supporting key relationship-builders (relational stars), structuring communication in virtual and hybrid workspaces, and facilitating workplace friendships.

Among the six strategies, encouraging knowledge-sharing and team collaboration emerged as the most effective across all measures. It received the highest average effectiveness rating (4.69 out of 5), and 93.8% of respondents rated it a 4 or 5 in terms of impact. It was also the most frequently observed behavior in practice, with 68.8% reporting that their leaders used

this strategy “frequently” or “always.” Respondents emphasized that this strategy fostered mutual trust, improved morale, and enabled individuals to leverage one another’s expertise.

Creating a positive relational climate and promoting emotional awareness and trust followed closely, with average effectiveness ratings of 4.41 and 4.34, respectively. These strategies were also associated with strong impact rankings. 43.8% of participants rated a positive relational climate as a 5 (most impactful), while 34.4% did the same for emotional awareness and trust. Participants described environments built on positivity and emotional presence as critical to engagement, collaboration, and team resilience.

Conversely, facilitating workplace friendships was perceived as the least effective strategy, with an average rating of 3.47 and over half of participants rating its impact as neutral (3). It was also the most underutilized, with 34.4% reporting that it was “rarely” practiced and only 6.3% selecting “always.” Structuring communication in virtual and hybrid settings received a moderate effectiveness rating (3.78) and was likewise reported as inconsistently applied, suggesting that although its value is acknowledged, it remains a challenge to implement in practice.

Relationship-Building Strategy	Average Rating (1-5)
Encouraging knowledge-sharing and team collaboration	4.69
Supporting key relationship-builders (relational stars)	4.25
Creating a positive relational climate	4.41
Facilitating workplace friendships	3.47
Promoting emotional awareness and trust	4.34
Structuring communication in virtual and hybrid workspaces	3.78

Qualitative data added depth and dimension to these findings. A recurring theme in the open-ended responses was the centrality of collaboration and trust. Participants repeatedly

pointed to structured team interactions, weekly meetings, shared projects, and informal check-ins, as the most meaningful drivers of workplace connection. Respondents highlighted how these opportunities strengthened team cohesion, improved performance, and helped individuals feel seen and supported.

Additionally, participants offered numerous examples of how intentional relationship-building directly improved satisfaction and outcomes. These included professional development retreats, team-building competitions, and consistent one-on-one time with colleagues and supervisors. Strategies that created space for authenticity and vulnerability, such as honest conversations, mentorship, or shared lunches, were praised for fostering trust and deepening interpersonal connection.

Challenges to relationship-building were also explored in detail. Respondents cited time constraints, unsupportive leadership, and remote work as primary barriers. Several participants described how hybrid environments had diminished the casual interactions that often facilitate connection, and emphasized that relationship-building now requires greater intentionality. While digital tools such as Zoom or Teams helped maintain communication, many expressed that these platforms could not fully replicate in-person rapport. Suggestions included more structured time for collaboration, increased support for emotional engagement, and clearer expectations from leadership around relational culture.

When asked what strategies were underutilized, participants identified cross-departmental collaboration, emotional awareness, and structured relationship-building time as areas for growth. Many respondents expressed a desire for leadership to model and prioritize relational behaviors. Notably, some expressed concern that relationship-building was often seen as

secondary to productivity, despite its clear connection to long-term engagement and performance.

Finally, respondents offered thoughtful advice for new professionals entering the workplace. Themes of authenticity, initiative, and curiosity ran throughout the responses. Many encouraged new employees to take the first step in getting to know others, volunteer for cross-functional projects, and find shared goals that can serve as a foundation for connection. Several emphasized that trust is built gradually through honesty, collaboration, and the willingness to listen and learn.

Taken together, the survey findings strongly reinforce the central claim of this study: that relationship-building is both ethically essential and strategically effective. Encouraging knowledge-sharing and collaboration stood out as the most impactful strategy, aligning with existing literature on its role in psychological safety and performance (Mesmer-Magnus & DeChurch, 2009). Meanwhile, the underutilization of emotional awareness and digital communication strategies underscores opportunities for growth, especially in the context of remote and hybrid work. Qualitative insights affirmed that relationship-building is not merely about implementing specific strategies, but about cultivating a broader relational culture, one defined by trust, empathy, and shared purpose.

These findings not only validate the theoretical foundations of relational leadership, but also offer practical insights into how leaders can build more inclusive, connected, and high-performing workplaces.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this study confirm that relationship-building in the workplace is not simply a desirable trait in effective leadership, but rather an ethical and strategic imperative. Drawing on both philosophical foundations and empirical evidence, this research has explored the multifaceted importance of relational leadership and the role it plays in shaping organizational culture, employee well-being, and overall performance. This final chapter provides a synthesis of the study's conclusions and offers practical recommendations for implementing relational leadership across diverse workplace environments. It also identifies areas for future study and reflects on the significance of the survey findings.

Summary of Existing Literature Findings

This study began by situating leadership within the ethical framework of Emmanuel Levinas, whose concept of the “face of the Other” grounds relationality in moral obligation. Levinasian ethics reframes leadership as a deeply interpersonal and moral practice, obliging leaders to recognize and respond to the intrinsic value of those they lead (Jones, 2014). This ethical foundation compels leaders to move beyond transactional models of control and efficiency, and toward practices rooted in empathy, responsiveness, and accountability.

Empirical evidence reinforced this philosophical perspective. Studies consistently demonstrated that leaders who foster meaningful relationships create environments marked by psychological safety, trust, and emotional engagement, factors essential for innovation, collaboration, and resilience (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Colbert et al., 2016; Dutton et al., 2006). Research also revealed that strategic relational practices, such as encouraging knowledge-sharing, supporting relational stars, facilitating friendships, and cultivating a positive

relational climate, directly correlate with increased employee flourishing and organizational performance (Grigoriou & Rothaermel, 2014; Helmy et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2025).

However, the study also identified considerable challenges to implementing relationship-building in practice. These include tensions between personal and professional boundaries (Maynard et al., 2019), organizational resistance to perceived inefficiencies (Sobrero & Roberts, 2001), and the persistent effects of biased information sampling in team settings (Stasser & Titus, 1985). The complexity of maintaining strong relational engagement is further exacerbated in remote and hybrid work environments, where informal social interactions are often diminished (Rafaeli & Ravid, 2003; Pauleen & Yoong, 2001). Leaders must therefore take deliberate action to foster connection, inclusivity, and trust in both digital and in-person contexts.

Significance of the Survey

The survey developed as part of this research represents a meaningful step in understanding how the theoretical and empirical strategies identified in the literature translate to real-world perceptions and practices. The data collected provided insights into which relationship-building strategies professionals view as most effective, and the qualitative narratives accompanying these responses helped contextualize those views within lived workplace experience.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the survey. With a sample size of only 32 respondents, the survey represents a small but diverse pool of professional perspectives. While the data offer valuable directional insights and reveal consistent themes that align with existing literature, the sample size is not sufficient for drawing definitive conclusions. As such, the survey results should be interpreted as exploratory, supporting the broader claims of the study but not establishing them with statistical certainty.

Despite these limitations, the survey reinforced key findings from the literature review, particularly the prominence of knowledge-sharing and team collaboration as a cornerstone of effective relational leadership. It also illuminated underutilized strategies, such as promoting emotional awareness and structuring communication in hybrid work settings, offering practical entry points for future leadership development. By grounding philosophical and empirical insights in the voices of real professionals, the survey helped bridge theory and practice in a meaningful way.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, several actionable recommendations can be made for leaders seeking to implement relational leadership in their organizations:

1. Prioritize knowledge-sharing and team collaboration. The most effective and consistently practiced strategy identified in both the literature and survey was fostering collaboration and open exchange of knowledge. Leaders should create structured opportunities for dialogue, co-creation, and cross-functional teamwork.
2. Cultivate a positive relational climate. Establishing an environment of mutual respect, shared purpose, and inclusivity helps create the psychological safety needed for innovation and trust. Leaders can promote this climate by modeling ethical behavior, acknowledging contributions, and recognizing emotional needs within their teams.
3. Support emotional awareness and empathy. Survey participants emphasized the value of emotionally intelligent leadership, yet also reported it as underutilized in practice. Leaders should engage in training that enhances their emotional competency and create channels for authentic emotional expression in the workplace.

4. Address gaps in virtual and hybrid communication. As remote work continues to reshape the professional landscape, leaders must be intentional in creating structured, relationally oriented communication strategies. Regular check-ins, inclusive digital forums, and transparent messaging can mitigate the relational distance that often accompanies hybrid environments.
5. Model relational behavior from the top down. Leaders must embody the behaviors they wish to see throughout the organization. By engaging relationally, asking questions, actively listening, mentoring others, and seeking feedback, leaders foster a culture that values connection, not just productivity.
6. Acknowledge and develop relational stars. Leaders should identify individuals who excel at building relationships and empower them to play central roles in mentorship, cross-functional collaboration, and team development.
7. Create time and space for relationship-building. Participants voiced that relationship-building is often viewed as secondary to productivity. Leaders should formalize relational practices into organizational structures, whether through collaborative retreats, peer mentorship programs, or designated time for informal connection.

These recommendations are meant to guide leaders in creating ethically grounded, psychologically safe, and relationally rich workplaces. While relational leadership is not a one-size-fits-all solution, it is a powerful framework that aligns ethical responsibility with strategic effectiveness, ultimately fostering more inclusive and resilient organizations.

Directions for Future Research

While this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on relational leadership, several areas warrant further exploration.

1. Future research should examine how the effectiveness of relationship-building strategies varies across different sectors and organizational contexts. Industries such as healthcare, technology, education, and manufacturing each possess distinct team dynamics, communication structures, and leadership expectations, which may influence the applicability and success of relational leadership practices (Han, Han, & Brass, 2014). Sector-specific studies would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how relational strategies should be adapted to meet the unique needs of diverse work environments.
2. There is a need for longitudinal studies that assess the sustained impact of strategic relational human resource management (SRHRM) on organizational outcomes. While initial evidence suggests that SRHRM supports employee engagement and fosters positive relational climates (Zhang et al., 2025), little is known about how these practices evolve over time or how they influence long-term metrics such as innovation, talent retention, and organizational resilience. Tracking the progression of relational HR initiatives across multiple years could provide valuable insight into their enduring effectiveness and offer practical guidance for implementation.
3. The increasing prevalence of remote and hybrid work underscores the importance of exploring how relational leadership can be maintained in digital contexts. While studies have highlighted the challenges of diminished informal interactions in virtual settings (Maynard et al., 2019), further research is needed to identify scalable, evidence-based strategies that promote psychological safety, trust, and emotional connection in

technologically mediated workspaces (Rafaeli & Ravid, 2003; Pauleen & Yoong, 2001).

This includes evaluating the effectiveness of specific digital tools, communication frameworks, and leadership behaviors in supporting relational engagement across distance.

4. Future research should investigate how relational leadership functions during periods of organizational disruption, transition, or crisis. Understanding how relationship-centered approaches operate under pressure can shed light on their capacity to foster resilience, cohesion, and ethical decision-making in times of uncertainty. As organizations continue to navigate complex challenges, the ability of leaders to sustain meaningful relationships will remain a critical area of inquiry with significant implications for both theory and practice.

Final Reflection

This study affirms that leadership, at its essence, is a relational and ethical practice grounded in human connection. The integration of Levinasian ethics with contemporary organizational research reinforces the view that effective leadership cannot be separated from the responsibility to see, value, and respond to others. Rather than functioning solely as strategic operators, leaders are called to engage with those around them through empathy, humility, and an unwavering commitment to shared humanity.

The survey responses and qualitative narratives emphasized this point. Professionals across industries identified trust, collaboration, and intentional communication as core drivers of workplace connection and performance. These insights aligned with empirical literature, demonstrating that relational leadership strategies, particularly those focused on knowledge-sharing, emotional awareness, and psychological safety, are both impactful and

underutilized. The data reflected not only the importance of these practices but also the barriers that often inhibit their implementation.

Taken holistically, the study highlights that relationship-building is not a secondary element of leadership, but a central force that shapes workplace culture, employee well-being, and organizational resilience. In environments increasingly shaped by remote and hybrid work, the need for intentional relational engagement is more urgent than ever. Leaders who cultivate relational climates, through structured communication, inclusive practices, and emotionally intelligent behaviors, position their organizations for long-term success.

Ultimately, relational leadership represents a shift in mindset. It reframes leadership as an ethical obligation rather than a function of authority, and it challenges organizations to measure success not only through outcomes, but through the strength of the relationships that support them.

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Appendix

Appendix One: Tables of Survey Results

Work_Experience_Breakdown

Years of Experience	Percentage
1-5 years	11.8%
6-10 years	11.8%
11-15 years	11.8%
16-20 years	0%
20+ years	64.7%

Utilization_of_Strategies

Strategy	Never	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Always
Encouraging knowledge-sharing and team collaboration	0%	3.1%	28.1%	56.3%	12.5%
Supporting key relationship-builders (relational stars)	0%	12.5%	46.9%	37.5%	3.1%
Creating a positive relational climate	0%	6.3%	37.5%	37.5%	18.8%
Facilitating workplace friendships	6.3%	34.4%	31.3%	21.9%	6.3%
Promoting emotional awareness and trust	3.2%	22.6%	35.5%	32.3%	6.5%
Structuring communication in virtual and hybrid workspaces	9.4%	15.6%	34.4%	28.1%	12.5%

Perceived_Impact_Rankings

Strategy	1	2	3	4	5
Encouraging knowledge-sharing and team collaboration	0%	0%	6.3%	37.5%	56.3%
Supporting key relationship-builders (relational stars)	0%	9.4%	34.4%	40.6%	15.6%
Creating a positive relational climate	0%	0%	21.9%	34.4%	43.8%
Facilitating workplace friendships	0%	21.9%	53.1%	12.5%	12.5%
Promoting emotional awareness and trust	0%	3.1%	15.6%	46.9%	34.4%
Structuring communication in virtual and hybrid workspaces	3.1%	18.8%	28.1%	25%	25%

Effectiveness_Ratings

Strategy	Average Rating (1-5)
Encouraging knowledge-sharing and team collaboration	4.69
Supporting key relationship-builders (relational stars)	4.25
Creating a positive relational climate	4.41
Facilitating workplace friendships	3.47
Promoting emotional awareness and trust	4.34
Structuring communication in virtual and hybrid workspaces	3.78

Appendix Two: Short Answer Question Responses

Please click the link below to access short answer survey responses.

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1htdtK3Kc72eaAR0uB0TTBIT-QeXpVqfTfoDgCzkdTQ/e
dit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1htdtK3Kc72eaAR0uB0TTBIT-QeXpVqfTfoDgCzkdTQ/e
dit?usp=sharing)