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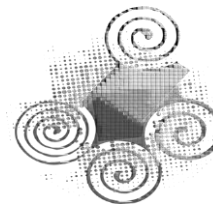
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RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND HORIZONTAL MANAGEMENT

LIDERANÇA RELACIONAL E GESTÃO HORIZONTAL

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Abstract

This study analyzed characteristics relevant to effective leadership in technology organizations and the level of adoption of horizontal management from the perspective of relational leadership. To this end, a qualitative study was conducted involving 16 interviews with technology professionals. The results indicate that not all organizations are able to effectively implement horizontal management. The data also indicate that leaders generally emerge due to recognized technical knowledge in a given area of expertise. Furthermore, communication, trust and support from the leader were considered indispensable conditions for effective leadership, aspects that are highly emphasized in the relational leadership theory.

Keywords: Leadership theories. Decentralization of Power. Relational Leadership. Trust. Technology Market.

Resumo

Este estudo analisou características relevantes para uma liderança efetiva em organizações do setor de tecnologia e o nível de adoção da gestão horizontal sob a ótica da liderança relacional. Para tanto, foi desenvolvida uma pesquisa qualitativa envolvendo 16 entrevistas com profissionais da área de tecnologia. Os resultados indicam que nem todas as organizações conseguem implementar efetivamente a gestão horizontal. Os dados indicam ainda que o líder geralmente emerge devido ao conhecimento técnico reconhecido em determinada área. Ademais, comunicação, confiança e suporte do líder foram considerados condições indispensáveis para uma liderança efetiva, aspectos bastante enfatizados na teoria da liderança relacional.

Palavras-chave: Teorias de Liderança. Descentralização do poder. Liderança Relacional. Confiança. Mercado de tecnologia.

Introdução

The horizontal management model has been the subject of various studies since the 2000s, aiming to understand its characteristics, its impact on organizational performance (Gratton & Erickson, 2016; Lopez-Robles et al., 2019; Oliveira et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022), and how leadership is exercised in contexts characterized by high autonomy and decentralization of power (Meirelles & Fischer, 2019; Silva, 2022).

Horizontal management, also referred to as participatory or democratic management, is an organizational structuring model that seeks to distribute decision-making power and promote individual participation at all levels of the organization. This model presupposes a flatter structure, with few hierarchical levels and composed of teams empowered to make decisions collaboratively (Oliveira et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022). Several startups and technology companies in Brazil and worldwide have adopted this horizontal management model to facilitate creative and innovation processes (Melhor RH, 2022).

Studies have highlighted the positive impacts resulting from the adoption of the horizontal management model. Hackman (2015), for example, analyzed the benefits of horizontal management in promoting individual autonomy and self-fulfillment. Authors such as Block (2003) and Schein (2010) offer valuable insights into how horizontal management can positively impact organizational dynamics, influencing team performance and employee satisfaction. Lopez-Robles et al. (2019) emphasize the effects of horizontal management in promoting innovation, creativity, and adaptability to environmental changes, in addition to contributing to talent retention.

One of the strengths of the horizontal management model is the potential for developing work by cross-functional teams with the participation of senior management (Rossi et al., 2020). In these organizations, responsibility is shared, and the layout and arrangement of desks and rooms do not visually distinguish who the "boss" is (Besemer et al., 1993).

Considering such environments where decisions and responsibilities are shared, some research questions emerge: how is leadership exercised in these contexts? What characteristics are required for effective leadership in organizations that adopt the horizontal management model?

Leadership plays a crucial role in organizations, being one of the main strategic concerns of organizations also in Brazil (Carvalho Neto & Sant'Anna, 2011). Although leadership has been studied for more than a century, it has undergone transformations and evolutions. While early studies concerning Trait Theory viewed leadership as something natural or legitimate, almost like a superpower, contemporary theories have moved far beyond this leader-centric view (Rezende et al., 2014; Sant'Anna, Nelson & Carvalho Neto, 2015; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021).

These studies have sought to understand leadership from the perspective of different actors involved, such as the followers themselves, and from the perspective of social influence and multilateral relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2003; 2006; Sant'Anna, Nelson & Carvalho Neto, 2015; Niemeyer et al., 2016; Lima et al., 2019; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021), which appears to be a more consistent model with organizations adopting a horizontal management approach.

Relational leadership, one of the most recent approaches in the field of leadership, emphasizes precisely the importance of multilateral interpersonal relationships and collaboration to achieve results. These leaders focus on building meaningful and positive connections with individuals, based on trust, respect, and empathy (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021; Sant'Anna, 2021).

In the academic field, few national studies have sought to understand horizontal management and its relationship with leadership in the context of technology companies. Given this, this study aimed to

analyze the characteristics considered important for effective leadership in technology organizations and the level of adoption of horizontal management from the perspective of leaders and followers.

In addition to being a topic rarely debated in academic literature, studies indicate that there may be a dissonance between the discourse of horizontal management and its practical implementation. Silva et al. (2023), for example, analyzed 30 Brazilian startups and concluded that, although most advocate horizontal management, only 20% implement it effectively. The authors identified three main obstacles: lack of organizational maturity, an entrenched hierarchical culture, and a lack of clarity about roles and responsibilities. Santos et al.'s (2022) study of 10 Portuguese startups found a dissonance between the discourse and practice of horizontal management. The main discrepancies were a concentration of power in the hands of the founders and a lack of effective communication mechanisms. Therefore, while many technology companies adopt the discourse of horizontal management, implementing this model can be challenging in practice.

The next section addresses a theoretical discussion on the horizontal management model and the relational leadership theory.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this article includes a discussion of the principles of the horizontal management model (Costa et al., 2019; Fernandes et al., 2020; Álvares et al., 2021; Oliveira et al., 2021) and the relational leadership theory, one of the most contemporary approaches in the field of leadership (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021; Sant'Anna, 2021).

Horizontal Management Model

Horizontal or decentralized management is an organizational model based on the decentralization of decision-making power and the encouragement of active participation by individuals from all hierarchical levels in decision-making processes (Silva, 2022). In this model, the traditional hierarchical structure is replaced by more autonomous and interdisciplinary teams that hold greater autonomy and responsibility in decision-making. Baggio (2015) highlights that the rise of horizontal management is a response to the demands of increasingly complex and dynamic environments.

Characterized by the decentralization of power, employee autonomy, and teamwork, horizontal management seeks to promote greater agility, flexibility, and individual engagement regardless of their position (Oliveira et al., 2021). Although this model can increase the workload—since employees engage in various processes and routines in the daily operations of the organization—horizontal management has proven effective in fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing employee connection with the organization (Álvares et al., 2021).

The literature on horizontal management discusses various principles of this organizational model, with some of the most emphasized being: i) decentralization of power: decisions are made jointly and participatively, without the figure of a single manager holding absolute power (Oliveira et al., 2021); ii) absence of rigid hierarchy: a flatter, horizontal structure with fewer command levels (Oliveira et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022); iii) employee autonomy, granting employees the freedom to make decisions and perform tasks based on their knowledge and skills (Fernandes et al., 2020); iv) teamwork, encouraging the systematic exchange of ideas and mutual learning (Costa et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2022); v) organization in networks: teams are organized in work networks throughout the organization, based on projects or areas of common interest (Costa et al., 2019; Fernandes et al., 2020); vi) open, fluid, and transparent communication (Silva et al., 2023); vii) the customer as the main strategic element (Spector, 1998; Besemer et al., 1993).

Another important feature of horizontal management is the adoption of technological tools to facilitate communication, collaboration, and information sharing (Fernandes et al., 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021), as

well as SCRUM principles. While SCRUM is a specific project management framework and horizontal management is a broader organizational model, they share many similar principles, such as collaboration; team autonomy and self-management; rapid feedback cycles; and focus on delivering value to the customer (Hamel, 2007; Rubin, 2012; Sutherland, 2014).

Some studies provide significant findings on the adoption of the horizontal management model. Meirelles and Fischer (2019) highlight that horizontal management promotes active employee participation by sharing decision-making power and responsibility. In this context, empowerment is seen as a key element for the model's success, visible through various dimensions such as access to information, participation in decisions, and autonomy in work execution, suggesting that a horizontal model better reconciles these interests.

Tornikoski and Newholm (2016), for example, analyzed power dynamics in horizontal organizations. Their findings reveal that horizontal management supports power distribution and employee participation in decision-making. However, forms of control and discipline can still emerge in horizontal organizations. They concluded that while horizontal management offers more autonomy and participation, there are challenges and contradictions in power distribution. They also observed that some horizontal structures may subtly reproduce forms of power and control.

Laamanen and Wallin (2017) conducted a literature review on management control practices and mechanisms in horizontal organizations. The authors identified and corroborated characteristics of horizontal management, such as autonomous and interdisciplinary teams; communication networks to ensure systematic information exchange; shared leadership; autonomy and empowerment; continuous learning and feedback. However, they pointed out that despite power decentralization, the need for control and coordination persists in horizontal organizations.

Baggio (2015), while highlighting the benefits of horizontal management, such as increased employee engagement, improved communication, and faster decision-making, also notes that implementing horizontal management is not without its challenges. These include resistance to change, the need to redefine responsibilities, and inefficiencies in distributed power. For instance, if an organization grows exponentially, it may become difficult to accommodate diverse opinions while maintaining functional management.

Considering some characteristics of horizontal management, such as power decentralization and shared leadership, it becomes apparent that certain leadership theories align more closely with these principles, such as Relational Leadership, which is discussed in the next section.

A Brief Overview of Relational Leadership

Relational leadership theory emerged from Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, with Uhl-Bien as one of its founders. Uhl-Bien (2003), a pioneer in debates around relational leadership, defines leadership as a process of social influence resulting from interactions between the individual, the organization, and the environment in which they operate (Hoch, 2018). Leadership, therefore, is context- and relationship-dependent (Drath, 2001).

Seeking to move beyond leadership theories centered on individuals and the figure of the leader, relational leadership theory understands leadership through multilateral relationships: leader-follower, follower-follower, leader-organization, and leader-society. Therefore, leading is a process of social interaction in different directions, involving various actors and contexts (both organizational and societal) (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Quick, 2014; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021; Sant'Anna, 2021).

Uhl-Bien (2003, 2006) presents several foundations of relational leadership, including: i) leadership occurs when individuals use their influence to generate change; ii) leadership is effective when the

leader can establish trust with others; iii) leadership pertains to relational dynamics, not formal positions (Hunt, 2004; Sant'Anna, Nelson & Carvalho Neto, 2015; Lima et al., 2019), and can occur at all organizational levels. Thus, leadership is a consensual process endorsed by organizational members, where individuals agree on who will assume the temporary role of leader (DeRue & Ashford, 2010).

The relational leader focuses on building and strengthening positive social connections, trust, and mutual commitment between them and their followers. They recognize that social interactions are crucial for leadership and team success, which includes: i) building positive connections, involving empathy, active listening, and genuine interest in others' perspectives and needs. By fostering these connections, leaders create an environment conducive to engagement and collaboration (Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2005); ii) trust, involving the consistency of the leader's actions and words, fulfillment of promises, and transparency in decision-making. Leaders also encourage trust by allowing individuals to express their opinions and be heard (Liden et al., 2008); iii) fostering mutual commitment, encouraging individuals' commitment to shared goals, which can be achieved through clear communication of expectations, setting shared objectives, and recognizing both individual and collective performance (Eisenbeiss, 2015).

Sant'Anna et al. (2015), in describing attributes associated with relational leaders, identify several characteristics of this leadership style, including: i) the ability to operate in dynamic and uncertain environments; ii) the capacity to build effective social ties with people; iii) recognizing that relationships have an emotional and supportive dimension; iv) building teams with complementary and synergistic skills; v) the ability to inspire and mobilize individuals' competencies in their relationships; vi) fostering an organizational context conducive to the emergence of high-performance teams; vii) managing different environments with various stakeholders.

Given the above, Table 1 summarizes some key principles of relational leadership theory.

Table 1

Fundamentals of Relational Leadership Theory

Authors	Fundamentals
Uhl-Bien, 2003, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2005; Sant'Anna et al., 2015; Quick, 2014; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021; Sant'Anna, 2021	Importance of interpersonal relationships, empathy and collaboration.
	Building positive connections, trust and mutual commitment.
	Focus on multilateral relationships between leaders, subordinates and peers that also consider the organization and society.
	Emphasis on leadership as a result of the interrelationship between different dimensions and actors.
	Inclusion of individual, team, organizational, interorganizational and societal levels

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Procedimentos metodológicos

Considering the objective of this research, which is to analyze what leaders and followers perceive as an effective leader in the context of technology organizations, a qualitative research approach was chosen (Creswell, 2013), emphasizing the views of the people interviewed. This choice allowed for a rich and in-depth analysis of the phenomenon under study, taking into account the experiences, perceptions, and meanings attributed by those involved in technology environments.

The research can also be characterized as a case study, appropriate for investigating a complex and particular phenomenon within its real context (Yin, 2018). In this study, the case is comprised of leaders and followers working in technology companies that claim to adopt a horizontal management model.

Data was collected through 16 semi-structured interviews. The research subjects were intentionally selected based on specific criteria: i) Professional experience — the length of their professional experience; ii) Years of experience in the technology market; iii) Experience with agile frameworks and tools. They were leaders and followers with substantial knowledge of agile methodologies and experience working in technology organizations. These professionals were identified through the authors' professional networks. As such, most interviewees were clients, former colleagues, and professional partners of one of the authors.

The 16 interviewees are Brazilians working in organizations located in the cities of Belo Horizonte and São Paulo (two among three of the richest metropolises located in the southwest of the country); 14 employed in the private sector and 2 in the public sector. The participants have an average age of 42 years, 13 men and 3 women; 8 hold top management positions while 8 are followers. 12 work in a hybrid format.

The profile data of the interviewees were summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

Interviewees' Profile

ID	Position	Gender	Age	Education
AP	Director	Masculine	38	Postgraduate
CK	Technology Director	Feminine	48	Postgraduate
CP	Project Analyst//follower	Feminine	36	Postgraduate
EA	Follower	Masculine	26	Incomplete higher education
FM	Founder, Chief Technology Officer	Masculine	47	Complete higher education
GD	Founder, CEO	Masculine	52	Complete higher education
HG	Founder/follower	Feminine	33	Complete higher education
LS	Developer/follower	Masculine	27	Postgraduate
FH	Head of Low Code	Masculine	47	Complete higher education
MS	Founder, Director	Masculine	55	Complete higher education
NM	CEO	Masculine	21	Incomplete higher education
PM	Software Architect/follower	Masculine	46	Incomplete higher education
PF	Developer/follower	Masculine	18	Technical high school
RC	Analyst Developer/follower	Masculine	37	Complete higher education
RF	CEO	Masculine	45	Complete higher education
TB	Systems Analyst/follower	Masculine	38	Postgraduate

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Interviews were conducted individually through online meetings on the Google Meets platform. Each interview lasted an average of 40 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent, ensuring their anonymity to allow them to freely express their perceptions and experiences.

The open-ended questions were designed to explore topics related to horizontal management and leadership, using analysis categories created from the theoretical framework and refined in light of the empirical data. The aim was to understand aspects such as the level of team participation in decision-making (are decisions shared?), the existence and degree of involvement of lower levels in the decision-making process, whether leaders and followers perceive horizontal management being practiced in their day-to-day work, identifying the ideal leadership model from the perspective of the interviewees, and understanding what gives power to leaders in horizontal organizations.

The data analysis technique employed in the research followed the principles of content analysis, which is a method for processing, organizing, and analyzing meanings found in textual data. According to

Bardin (2011), content analysis involves identifying themes and patterns in a data set, allowing researchers to conduct analyses and draw inferences, for example, from the most frequently mentioned and emphasized topics in a particular set of textual data. This method enables researchers to identify emerging patterns and themes that may be relevant for understanding a given phenomenon (Minayo, 2014).

In this research, the first step in content analysis was the full transcription of the interviews, followed by a thorough reading of the transcripts. Next, the interviewees' statements were organized according to the research questions on horizontal management and leadership, aiming to identify patterns, repetitions, and also divergent perceptions. A subsequent rereading of the text was conducted to identify themes that were not initially foreseen in the interview guide.

The analysis also sought to identify explicit, implicit, and silenced aspects present in the social actors' narratives. After a detailed examination of the relevant quotes from each interview, differences and similarities between the responses of leaders and followers were explored to identify convergences and contradictions in the participants' discourses.

Analysis and Discussion of Results

This section brings together the main findings of the study, focusing on two central aspects: i) the level of implementation of horizontal management as perceived by the interviewees, which involves an analysis of the adoption of horizontal management tools by organizations and the degree of employee participation in decision-making; ii) aspects that grant power to the leader and contribute to effective leadership, from the participants' perspective.

Level of Implementation of Horizontal Management

The main goal of this topic was to analyze whether the organizations addressed effectively apply horizontal management from the perspective of the interviewed professionals. This analysis considered two key aspects: the implementation of horizontal management tools and practices, and the level of employee participation in the decision-making process.

A general analysis of the data indicated that none of these organizations are entirely horizontal according to the interviewees' perceptions, with some degree of verticalization and hierarchy always present in the organizational structure. Even in organizations that claim to adopt participative approaches, the data show there may be limitations to the actual participation of individuals. For instance, important decisions may be made by a select group of leaders, or employee participation might be merely symbolic, sometimes without real influence.

This point is in line with Meirelles and Fischer (2019), who warn of the risk of horizontal management being based on empty speeches when in practice there is no effective empowerment of individuals. The absence of real participation mechanisms can undermine the principles of decentralization. This finding also corroborates the analysis of Tornikoski and Newholm (2016), who highlight the contradictions of horizontal management by showing that, even in decentralized structures, subtle forms of power and control persist. The discourse of horizontality, therefore, can coexist with hierarchical practices.

Therefore, the question becomes how to analyze the level of horizontalization—that is, how horizontal organizations can realistically be. In this sense, the data suggest the existence of three levels of horizontalization: either weak, moderate or strong. This gradation of the level of horizontality has already been presented in the literature. For Laamanen and Wallin (2017), for example, despite the decentralization of power, the need for control is also present in horizontal organizations.

The findings reveal that the use of SCRUM, a way of organizing work using horizontal management principles, is not routinely adopted in some of the investigated organizations, depending on the context

or project. Responses like "it depends on the project" illustrate this: *"No, it depends on the project. Everywhere I've been, we use it as a model, but not, let's say, as a religion."* (AP, Director and Partner); *"In some projects, we do reviews; in others, not necessarily. So, it varies a lot depending on the team; the more senior the team, the fewer the ceremonies."* (AP, Director and Partner).

Due to its popularity and principles aligned with a certain level of horizontal management, SCRUM has become well-adopted among technology teams and a tool for leaders managing their teams with horizontal principles (Hamel, 2007; Rubin, 2012; Sutherland, 2014). As a result, parts of the ceremonies (such as daily meetings), rituals, or SCRUM tools were observed to be present in the routines of some interviewees. However, using this tool does not necessarily mean there is a high level of horizontalization, as the issue is more complex, involving the analysis of other factors:

Often, you don't know what's happening in your team; you don't know about any decisions. So, it's horizontal in the idea, but in practice, it ends up being a bit hierarchical, just like a normal organization. No matter how much you try, I see that the hierarchical structure is still very present underneath." (RC, Developer Analyst).

The reports indicate that horizontality can be observed mainly at the higher levels of the hierarchy, where decisions are indeed participative and distributed among the managers, as illustrated by the statement of a Developer Analyst:

I don't think there is horizontality in my day-to-day within the development team. As you go down, it narrows; the project cannot be horizontal. (...) The horizontality exists among the executives. The executives have autonomy, then the manager has a bit more autonomy, but when it gets to me as a developer, the autonomy becomes somewhat masked. (RC, Developer Analyst, follower).

Therefore, in some companies, a horizontal structure is applied only among 'equals' within councils and meetings of the upper management, without taking into account the opinions of the followers: *"But the decision is always very... I would say that a large part of the decisions I always make together with my partners"* (FM, Co-founder, CTO). It is observed, therefore, a certain centralization of power: *"Everything that involves technology, of course, I need to be responsible for making the decision"* (FM, Co-founder, CTO). This indicates a low level of employee participation in decisions, thus being one of the indicators of low implementation of horizontal management (Oliveira et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022).

These findings are in line with the observations of Tornikoski and Newholm (2016), who highlight that, even in horizontal structures, subtle forms of control and centralization persist. Decentralization, as described by Oliveira et al. (2021), is more of a normative ideal than a reality widely implemented in the organizations studied.

Although there is an advocacy for the use of horizontal management, a paradoxical use of agile frameworks is observed, along with a lack of employee participation in decisions or, furthermore, an application of horizontal management only at the strategic top level: *"Today in the organization it is very verticalized. And we still use SCRUM. There are some decisions that are personal, like the director or president who defines. And there is not much contestation. We have to follow; it comes from above."* (TB, Systems Analyst, follower).

Companies that receive investments from funds or third parties also experience a scenario where verticalization takes proportions that even exclude some top executive levels: *"Now, above the development team, you have directors, you have a board. In this case, the relationship is much stricter."* (MS, Founder, Director). In these cases, there is also a high level of concern among managers for investors and Directors/CEOs who end up receiving more attention than the team itself, as reported by two interviewees.

On the other hand, some interviewees mentioned the existence of a model referred to as *"hybrid"*, especially those at the Director/CEO/Board level. In their view, this would involve the existence of

vertical hierarchical structures along with the adoption of horizontal management practices and processes. The fact is that even in the discourse of partners and founders, contradictions were observed:

There is a hierarchy of positions, mainly to comply with legislation, but it adopts many principles of agile frameworks. So, it's not a very vertical hierarchy; it ends up being more horizontal while applying agile frameworks. (GD, Founder, CEO).

Therefore, the data seem to indicate that what is observed in the practice of organizations that claim to be horizontal is the coexistence of vertical and horizontal structures. That is, within vertical structures, there are some teams, sectors, or business units with more autonomy and freedom in decision-making, a situation mainly observed in companies that adopt branch and business unit models, for example. This coexistence between vertical and horizontal elements may confirm what Baggio (2015) describes as a pragmatic response to the limitations of implementing a “pure” horizontal management model.

The collected data also indicate that the size of the organization does not determine how horizontal it is. This is because, regardless of the need for verticalization, companies can apply horizontal models in departments or teams where this may be relevant or necessary.

Lastly, the data show a third group of organizations where individuals are part of environments that have a higher level of implementation of horizontal management practices (Oliveira et al., 2021). In these cases, individuals described the organizational culture, hierarchy, and participation in decision-making as:

It's the most horizontal I've ever seen; I think saying it's horizontal is even an understatement... it's almost underground. I think it's very, very shared. Both in all decision-making and in responsibilities as well. No one does anything alone. And we have a program here called DNA. We have a constant feedback system with everyone at any time, so it happens that each leader and subordinate is evaluated every three months at most. (FH, Head of Low Code).

In these cases, the data indicate that horizontality is observed at all levels, even with the existence of some formal hierarchy. In these organizations, individuals, regardless of their position, are encouraged to make decisions and actively participate in processes (Oliveira et al., 2021), with leaders support in case of need. The role of the leader, then, is more about stimulating individual participation and offering opportunities for development and training than about controlling and defining the organization's direction:

Guidance? No. I have continuous freedom, you know? I have their support, but each leader has their autonomy within the team. There is no directive on how things should be done. There are training and some things that support us, but we don't have directives. (FH, Head of Low Code).

However, this scenario of “*freedom*” and the absence of rules and “*standardization*” also brings challenges:

What I'm going to say is contradictory. But the lack of standardization within these companies is a deficiency. While this freedom is good, there were companies where each team operated in a different way, and there was no visibility into what was working for one team and what wasn't working for another team here. These experiences aren't even about wanting to standardize, but about finding a way to see how teams are performing with this freedom to try to adjust what's going wrong and reproduce, spread what's going right. (PM, Software Architect, follower).

Here we can perceive a paradox: a vertical structure demands a horizontal structure, which in turn, when too horizontal, requires some verticalization.

What Confers Power to Leaders in Horizontal Organizations?

Horizontal management seeks to promote equality and the participation of all members of the organization in the decision-making process (Oliveira et al., 2021). The research aimed to analyze what confers power to leaders in the studied organizations. The data reveal that leadership roles ascend in the investigated organizations largely due to the individual's technical ability, which in these environments is naturally recognized and legitimized by the team of followers: *"A good leader needs to have technical domain of what they are managing. Thus, if you have a project manager who does not have at least minimal domain of each area and each phase of the project, it is a risk"* (AP, Director and Partner).

Having proven expertise, technical domain of a particular area of knowledge, the individual stands out in the structure, achieving management positions within the formal structure of the organization: *"Since there is a Chief Technology Officer (CTO), they end up being more responsible. Since we are not a huge organization, the CTO is a technician—a computer scientist who knows a lot of things."* (MS, Founder, Director). Therefore, it is quite common to promote individuals from technical areas to positions at the strategic top level of organizations.

In addition to technical knowledge, some relational aspects emerged as important for individuals to attain managerial positions and exercise effective leadership, such as: i) their communication skills (Eisenbeiss, 2015); ii) being a support for the team; iii) and their ability to establish trusting relationships (Uhl-Bien, 2003, 2006; Liden et al., 2008).

Communication was the expression that emerged most frequently in the vast majority of the interviews conducted, considered the most required skill for exercising effective leadership. Communication was referred to not only as the leader's ability to articulate ideas clearly but also as establishing frequent and close dialogue with individuals (Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2005). Therefore, despite many leaders emerging due to their technical knowledge, those who possess good communication skills also stand out in terms of reaching managerial positions: *"Of the leader's skills, I think the main one is communication. It's important to communicate in a friendly way, so to speak."* (LS, Developer, follower).

The role of communication emerged strongly in the interviewees' statements, confirming the assumptions of Eisenbeiss (2015) and Uhl-Bien & Maslyn (2005), who understand communication as a structuring means for the creation of collaborative environments. Trust, as pointed out by Liden et al. (2008), emerges as a catalyst for autonomy.

The data also indicate that trust is a fundamental element in the exercise of leadership in the studied organizations, a finding that aligns with relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2003, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2005; Sant'Anna et al., 2015; Mendes, Sant'Anna & Diniz, 2021). Trust in the team of followers allows the leader to grant autonomy to individuals to develop their activities freely, which is viewed positively by followers, as illustrated by the reports: *"Really free, but not in a negative sense, in a positive sense of a lot of trust and that people are working on what is expected."* (PM, Software Architect, follower); *"You have to have a great capacity to build a culture of trust. You have to trust your team. If the guy says, 'It takes me 18 hours to complete this functionality,' you have to believe it's true."* (MS, Founder, Director).

The data indicate that trust is associated with the technical capabilities of individuals. That is, when leaders perceive that the team has the competence to handle the project or function, they tend to offer higher levels of freedom: *"The main challenge is to have good developers, good programmers; that may seem obvious to say. But when you don't have a capable team (...), things don't roll on."* (FM, Co-founder, CTO).

Excessive autonomy, on the other hand, may, in some cases, appear as a lack of support from the leader, as suggested by a systems analyst who participated in the research. Some interviewees pointed out that they enjoy environments of independence and autonomy but also value interaction with leadership. In the absence of this, individuals end up seeking support from peers—co-workers in similar positions within the hierarchy:

In the first team I was in, the role of the manager was practically to pass the demands to you, and we had to understand the demand from start to finish. 'And if you do it wrong, I'll hold you accountable,' and like, I have a question. Oh, 'contact the client and clarify your doubt with them; I won't help you right now.' He would help, but it was more like he was just passing on demands. However, in addition to the system we were working on, he was involved in three or four other systems, so he couldn't manage everything, you know? (TB, Systems Analyst, follower).

This paradox between autonomy and the need for support reinforces the argument of Laamanen and Wallin (2017), according to which horizontal structures can provide coordination mechanisms. Relational leadership, according to Uhl-Bien (2003), acts precisely in this space of mediation between freedom and guidance.

Therefore, the support of the leader to face the challenges individuals experience was considered a relevant aspect of exercising leadership. The role of the leader consists more of providing support and cooperating than indicating the path or direction, which makes sense in horizontal management environments (Oliveira et al., 2021):

They are open to welcoming. Look, I discovered something here that will help me do this. Take it, test it. See if it's really that; present it to us here so we can see if it's good, let's study it here too, and let's research. Let's see how the community accepts it, then. I think this type of interaction is more productive, although more challenging, but it forces you to stay updated. (TB, Systems Analyst, follower).

On the other hand, the data indicate, as previously noted, that a few leaders struggle to delegate, concentrating important decisions instead of deliberating them more collectively: *"I think it's very difficult to have a lot of shared responsibility in a more traditional model... I think there's no way, man; when you start to get bigger, you start to have greater risks for the organization."* (FM, Co-founder, CTO).

The excerpt above, combined with other statements mentioned throughout the data analysis, reveals the contradictions between the discourses surrounding the adoption of horizontal management practices and the centralized decision-making processes present in organizations with a higher level of verticality. Horizontal management, therefore, is a challenge that goes beyond mere organizational structure, involving aspects of trust, technical knowledge, and relational leadership.

Conclusion

The results indicate, first and foremost, that not all organizations are able to effectively implement horizontal management in practice, even considering the technological context (which, in principle, would be more conducive to this) in which the investigated professionals are situated. The data show that some organizations can promote higher levels of decentralization and autonomy, while others maintain more traditional practices, with decision-making centralized at higher hierarchical levels. Therefore, the empirical analysis conducted reveals that there are no entirely horizontal organizations; there is always some level of verticality and hierarchy within the organizational structure.

Regarding the level of implementation of horizontal management, the data show variations in levels of horizontality (weak, moderate, and strong), based on the analysis of employee participation in the decision-making process and the implementation of horizontal management tools. Organizations with a low level of horizontalization were found, where there is a low adoption of horizontal management tools in the daily operations as well as a centralization of decisions at the top. In these organizations, horizontality can primarily be observed at the higher levels of the hierarchy, where decisions are distributed among leaders, indicating low participation from followers at other levels in the decision-making process.

In this sense, the findings reveal that horizontal management, in practice, manifests itself in a hybrid form, coexisting with elements of traditional verticalization. In many cases, horizontality is restricted to

higher levels, being limited at the level of operational bases. This finding reveals an organizational paradox, in which autonomy and participation are sought, but practices of control and centralization remain ingrained. Thus, we cannot speak of totally horizontal companies, but rather of different levels of horizontalization.

These findings may reveal some contradiction with the foundations of relational leadership, which is based on the idea of leadership detached from formal positions that can occur at all hierarchical levels of the organization. On the other hand, many interviewees, particularly those at managerial top levels, mentioned the existence of a model referred to as "hybrid." In their view, this entails the presence of vertical hierarchical structures alongside the adoption of horizontal management practices and processes.

The data also indicate the existence of some organizations with a higher degree of implementation of the horizontal management model, where interviewees stated they actively participate in the decision-making process, with supportive leaders when needed. Nevertheless, the professionals revealed facing challenges related to a lack of standardization and excessive freedom, which may be perceived as a lack of support from leadership or a lack of direction. The guidance given to employees in these organizations is perceived as weak, which can lead to a feeling of followers having to be on their own to meet goals without the backing of leaders.

Curiously, despite valuing high levels of autonomy and decentralization of power, the data reveal how the interviewed professionals appreciate interaction with leaders. Therefore, they seek autonomy and freedom of decision but accompanied by systematic interaction and proximity/direction from the leader.

Regarding leadership, the data indicate that technical knowledge is the main factor that gives power to leaders in the organizations analyzed. Technical expertise is widely valued and often associated with leadership legitimacy. However, the interviewees also highlighted relational skills as fundamental to exercising effective leadership, especially clear and frequent communication, building relationships of trust, and providing support to those led. These findings are in line with the assumptions of relational leadership, which emphasizes the importance of social interactions, empathy, and mutual commitment in exercising leadership.

Therefore, besides technical expertise, communication, trust, and support from the leader were considered indispensable conditions for effective leadership, aspects significantly emphasized in the relational leadership theory. The research, therefore, highlighted the relevance of attributes required for leadership that are widely discussed in relational theory, confirming these characteristics in technology environments. Communication, in particular, was highlighted as a crucial skill for leaders in horizontal management models. By emphasizing the importance of both technical and relational competencies, the data reveal the necessity for leaders to develop in both hard and soft skills.

Given the above, the conclusions point to the complexity of effectively implementing horizontal management even in technological environments, as well as revealing the importance of leadership, particularly relational leadership, in addressing the inherent challenges of this management model. Furthermore, this study advances the understanding of leadership in technology companies, offering a lens for analyzing how tensions between hierarchical and horizontal structures affect the daily experience of leaders and followers.

Another important contribution lies in the conceptual refinement of what it means, in practice, to be a "horizontal" organization. The findings indicate that horizontality is a graduated condition, marked by contradictions, adaptations, and contextual limitations. This finding can help organizations formulate more realistic diagnoses about their management practices and plan structural transitions more

consciously.

Finally, the research sheds light on the need to reconfigure the traditional criteria for promotion to leadership in technology companies. The exclusive valorization of technical knowledge may not be enough to guarantee effective leadership in environments of collaboration and autonomy. Thus, the study proposes expanding the dimensions evaluated in leadership training, including relational and communicational aspects that are often overlooked.

From an academic standpoint, no national study has analyzed the competencies required for leaders in technological environments from the perspective of relational leadership theory, one of the most contemporary approaches in the field. In that regard, this study reinforces the relevance of contemporary approaches to leadership, such as relational theory, for understanding organizational structures that emerge in contexts of high uncertainty and complexity, such as the technology sector. Relational leadership is suitable for leadership in environments that propose to adopt horizontal management models. In addition, the results contribute to the literature by demonstrating how hybrid organizational structures challenge the dichotomy between vertical and horizontal models, requiring more complex and contextual analytical approaches.

From a practical perspective, the research can provide support for managers and human resources professionals in designing leadership development programs focused on technology environments. The valorization of technical knowledge must be accompanied by the development of relational skills that favor the construction of bonds of trust and the promotion of responsible autonomy. Furthermore, the results highlight the importance of aligning the organizational discourse on participation and autonomy with effective management practices, avoiding dissonance between intention and action.

The research can advance future studies in three main directions. It is recommended that the paradox identified between the autonomy offered by horizontal models and the need for coordination and control mechanisms be explored in greater depth. Studies that address how organizations balance these tensions can offer relevant theoretical and practical contributions. Second, future research could compare the level of adoption of horizontal management and the predominant leadership styles considering the sector in which the organization operates (health, finance, education, etc.). This approach would allow us to verify to what extent sectoral contexts influence the applicability and effects of relational leadership and horizontal structure. Another promising line of research concerns research on relational skills development programs for leaders in horizontal environments.

Regarding limitations, the research was conducted with participants from the relational network of one of the researchers. This may have inhibited the professionals' reports on certain points investigated in the field research. Another limitation concerns the diversity of the organizations analyzed. The participating companies vary in size, maturity and business model, which can influence the levels of horizontality and perceptions about leadership. Although this heterogeneity enriches the analysis, it also makes direct comparison between cases more complex.

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