

Leader Change Engagement as a Boost for Workplace Development

Leader Perceptions from a Finnish Wellbeing Services County

Satu Uusiautti

Krista Rautio

Abstract

In 2023, Finland implemented a major structural reform that created Wellbeing Services Counties (WSCs), which became responsible for organising public healthcare, social welfare, and rescue services. This reform transferred these responsibilities from individual municipalities to newly established regional authorities, with the aim of improving service coordination, accessibility, and equality across the country. This research focused on one mid-sized WSC. The research examined how change engagement and its dimensions were reflected in WSC leaders' and supervisors' descriptions of their leadership work. The data for this study comprised leaders' and supervisors' (N=92) answers to open-ended questions in an online survey. The data were analysed with a theory-driven qualitative content analysis. The research contributes new insights into leaders' change engagement and conceptualises it as a means of supporting both leadership engagement and well-being at work. In times when leaders report decreasing motivation and intentions of resignation it is more important than ever to find new ways of supporting enthusiasm and ensuring that public leadership work remains attractive. Job demands and resources theory (JD-R) provided us with a basis for analysing the leaders' work from the perspective of change engagement. The research showed that leader change engagement could be an important concept for understanding change as a resource in the leaders' work and well-being. Furthermore, it provides a new way of perceiving the connection between leaders' work and their well-being.

Key Words: work engagement, job demands and resources, change engagement, leadership

Introduction

Well-being, adaptation, and the ability to change are recognized as the foundations of sustainable organizational success (Bakker, 2022; Uusiautti & Hyvärinen, 2021) and as key positive features of organizations (Karasvirta & Teerijoki, 2022). However, not all employees and leaders find constant change appealing. While Finnish workers experience more work engagement than before, they are less optimistic about the changes occurring in their work, and both stress levels and intentions to resign have significantly risen among leaders (Suutala et al., 2025). This is not only a problem limited solely to Finland, but it occurs in public organizations internationally too (Ancarani et al., 2021). In large organizations, change management can be seen as an opportunity, but also as a burden in a leader's work (Harrison et al., 2021).

Traditional change management theories were developed when the idea of a career represented stability and straightforwardness, the world of work was more predictable, and leadership research was mainly interested in how to lead efficient work processes (Anderson et al., 2017; Gill, 2003). When we examine large public organizations and the requirements for increasing efficiency and flexibility, these theories alone do not serve organizational change management success sufficiently (Ferlie & Ongaro, 2022; see also Errida & Lotfi, 2021; Harrison et al., 2021). In addition to clear vision, values, and strategy, today's leaders need well-being skills and enthusiasm and motivation to carry out their leadership work in uncertain and stressful work situations (Gill, 2003). One concept to address this need is change engagement, which can be defined as "an enduring and positive work-related psychological state characterized by a genuine enthusiasm and willingness to support, adopt and promote organizational change" (Albrecht et al., 2020, p. 4).

We know that some leaders succeed better than others: leadership style, communication skills, and certain leadership traits can explain the leader's success (McGowan et al., 2020; Uusiautti, 2015; Uusiautti & Wenström, 2026). Leaders have personal resources that predict their performance and work satisfaction well (Bakker, 2022). Leader's work engagement (Bakker, 2022) and the ability to use their strengths at work (Sosik et al., 2019; Rautio & Wenström, 2026) certainly can provide grounds to understand successful leadership and successful change in organizations (Albrecht et al., 2020; 2022; Errida & Lotfi, 2021). Indeed, leaders are usually more enthusiastic and engaged in their work than other employees (e.g., Haapakoski et al., 2023). However, change engagement in leaders is not axiomatic because changes can increase the burden and negative emotions about work. Therefore, even the most enthusiastic leaders may not be enthusiastic about change.

Our research focuses on a Finnish public organization, one of the Wellbeing Services Counties (WSC) of Finland. The WSC reform is one of the most significant political and structural reforms to take place in Finland (Paatela & Tynkkynen, 2025), which makes the research context extremely crucial. Currently, WSCs face considerable changes that leaders have to (are forced to) lead, although at the same time the self-governance system of the

organization itself is changing and evolving (Paatela & Tynkkynen, 2025; Paatela et al., 2025). The latest news about WSCs has reported increased financial difficulties and layoffs since their establishment in 2023. Yet, these organizations must fulfil their legal obligations and provide healthcare, social, and security services to citizens. In addition, many leadership and supervision positions in WSCs are only part-time, meaning that, for example, a physician may work in a clinical role while also holding a leadership position (see, e.g. Perez, 2021).

The leaders' impact on employees' performance, engagement, and well-being at work is ambiguous in the healthcare, social services, and rescue services sectors (see, e.g. Pekkarinen et al., 2025; Selander et al., 2024). The sectors differ in the levels of enthusiasm and work drive the employees report, with healthcare workers reporting higher levels than those in social services, rescue services, and administrative work in Finland (Pekkarinen et al., 2025). In WSC-relevant occupations, such as in healthcare or rescue services, the nature of work and its often extraordinary conditions shape the meaning of successful change in distinct ways. Nevertheless, even when work-related challenges are complex or workloads are high, individuals can still become engaged in their work.

Finland's 21 WSCs employ about 230,000 workers. The WSCs differ greatly by the number of inhabitants in the area, varying from 100,000 to 550,000 inhabitants (Statistics Finland, 2023). In this article, we focus on data obtained in one Finnish WSC representing a mid-sized WSC with over 8,000 employees and about 176,000 inhabitants in the area. Typical for the WSC in question are long distances, uneven demographic development in the regions, and some intensive periods of tourism, setting high demands for rescue and healthcare services. Some parts of the WSC are suffering from demographic changes, such as an aging population, which challenges the WSC to achieve a balance between providing necessary services for citizens and developing new ways of serving them, for example, through digitalization (Kerätär et al., 2025).

While the heterogenous workforce in the WSC perceive their work to meaningful and are motivated, interaction, trust-building, and communication about ongoing changes by leaders appears insufficient (Rautio et al., 2025). A variety of educational interventions and leadership programmes have been introduced in similar situations worldwide (McGowan et al., 2020). However, more research is needed about the reality of leadership in changing public organizations especially concerning organizational transformations (Fernandez & Rainey, 2017).

Change Engagement as a Job Resource

This research leans on the theoretical framework of the job demands-resources model (JD-R), which combines demands and resources as psychosocial dimensions impacting well-being (Bakker et al., 2022; Demerouti et al., 2001). The basic idea of the framework is that certain demands reduce mental and physical resources (e.g., workload, unclear work roles, unpredictable changes), while there are also various resources (e.g., positive emotions, social

support, interesting work tasks) that increase well-being at work (Demerouti et al., 2001). As resources help employees cope with demands and achieve work-related goals (Bakker, 2022), they are important for work engagement as well.

In this research, we are especially interested in the change engagement of leaders themselves. The concept of change engagement is related to work engagement (Bakker, 2022; Schaufeli et al., 2006), which has been widely studied and used since Kahn (1990) introduced it and especially after Schaufeli and Bakker (2010) developed its quantitative measurement tool the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES). Work engagement is a positive state characterized by energy, enthusiasm about and dedication to work, and even complete absorption in work activities (Bakker, 2022). When comparing the concepts, change engagement is about positive attitudes, openness and readiness for change, or willingness and commitment to change at work, while work engagement describes a positive work drive and enjoyment of work. The concept of change engagement helps to analyse employees' positive energy and active involvement in organizational change (Albrecht et al., 2022). Notably, leaders' work engagement is a predictor of employee work engagement and performance, but whether that is the case in change engagement, is still unknown.

It is also worthwhile to distinguish change engagement from change-oriented behaviours in leaders (e.g., DeRue et al., 2011). Leadership behaviour as a concept means therefore behaviours that support employees and organizational goal-oriented performance. Thus, change-oriented behaviours comprise leadership behaviours that promote change, for example by encouraging and spurring employees on and working actively in change management tasks (e.g., Kaluza et al., 2021). Change engagement can be seen merely as an inner state which is positive and which promotes change-oriented behaviours. In other words, change engagement, as understood in this article, can lead to constructive, change-oriented behaviours in leaders (Kaluza et al., 2021). However, at this point in time there is not much research available on this topic, and therefore, our research will fill the research gap from the perspective of public sector leadership.

One reason for the lack of research is that leader's change engagement (LCE) has not previously been conceptualised as a positive, proactive state in leaders in times of organizational change. For instance, the leader's role in the change engagement model proposed by Albrecht et al. (2020) perceives the leader merely as an active supporter of change—emphasising clear communication about the importance and constancy of change, providing support and resourcing for ongoing change, and clarifying outcomes and behavioural expectations for change. In other words, change engagement appears in employees when it is supported by the leaders, also known as engaging leadership (Schaufeli, 2021; see also Tanskanen et al., 2019). When it comes to leaders, the expectation is that leading the change and making it happen is the leader's job (Errida & Lotfi, 2021), but the model does not consider the level of change engagement in the leaders themselves.

Our fundamental assumption is that LCE might fill the gap of how leaders perform successfully and may spread and facilitate the crossover of work and change engagement within teams, as pointed out by Bakker (2022). Our core interest in this article is, therefore, in how the leaders describe *their own engagement* and the preconditions for their change engagement. CLE can provide new ways of understanding the leaders' own experience of the leadership reality within change (see also Salmi, 2024).

Method

The purpose of this research was to analyse how the WSC leaders and supervisors described their engagement with the change they were leading. In this article, we use the word "leader" to refer broadly to leaders and supervisors whose work consists of a variety of leadership tasks. We apply the definition by Malik and Azmat (2019, p. 24): "A leader is supposed to have the ability not just to manage or control the people, but also to inspire them; not only meeting goals and targets, but also able to create new goals and modify the existing ones according to the changing time, needs and challenges." This definition is useful because it covers both human resources management and the leadership of goals, development, and organizational culture. The research question set for this study was as follows:

How are change engagement and its dimensions reflected in WSC leaders' and supervisors' descriptions of their leadership work?

This was qualitative research and was considered appropriate for approaching this new perspective of leadership work and for gathering the leaders' own perceptions and experiences about their change engagement. The strength of this approach is that it allowed us to bring out the leaders' voices and interpret their experiences using the JD-R framework and the concept of change engagement. The data was collected using an online survey in the target WSC simultaneously among employees from all sectors (healthcare, social services, rescue services and administrative work) and personnel groups (leaders and supervisors n=185; other employees n=897). The survey consisted of structured questions about work-related experiences (such as motivation, optimism), relationships and interaction in the work unit, and perceptions of leadership work. In addition, the survey included two open-ended questions: the first allowed the respondents to explain their answers to the structured questions, and the second asked how "human-sized work" (the target WSC's workplace slogan) was reflected in their daily work. The open-ended questions to which the leaders responded were included in the analysis of this research. Answering these open-ended questions was voluntary.

All together 92 leaders responded to these questions so that 56 leaders answered the first question and 74 answered the other question. Of these 92 respondents six were men, 85 were women, and one other/did not wish to say. Two were under 29 years old, 46 were between 30 and 49 years old, and 44 were 50 years old or older. They had work experience in the field as follows: 0–4 years (n= 5), 5–9 years (n=13), 10–15 years (n= 20), and over 15

years of experience (n=54). The respondents represented all four sectors of the target WSC, which was considered important for the quality of data. The respondents represented the target population of leaders well. However, more importantly, their answers were considered rich and varied, which was essential for capturing diverse perspectives and experiences among leaders (Hansen et al., 2025).

The chosen analysis method was a theory-driven qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). We analysed the free-form responses from the leaders and supervisors using the dimensions of change engagement defined by Albrecht et al. (2020): enthusiasm for change, involvement and participation in change, focused energy toward change, willingness to actively support change, and striving for successful change outcomes. Therefore, the theory guided the analysis although otherwise the analysis was data based, which meant that we listed all the mentioned elements of change in the answers and compared how they represented the definition of change engagement. The descriptions that could be placed in the categories of *willingness to actively support change* and *striving for change success* appeared to overlap in the leaders' responses, and therefore, these were combined into a single result category. Eventually, the following categories were formed from the data: 1) enthusiasm for change; 2) participating in change; 3) focusing energy for change; and 4) willingness to actively support and strive for change success, each including their distinctive data-based sub-categories as our main findings.

Results

Enthusiasm for Change

Enthusiasm for change can serve as an important resource in a leader's work (Bakker et al., 2023), particularly when it is manifested through affective states—such as perceiving the change as important, viewing one's role in the change as crucial, and finding one's actions in the change process inspiring. If there is a tension between the leader's enthusiastic state and opportunities to enjoy their work, the demanding sides of work, such as unclear roles or processes, can weaken this resource (Albrecht et al., 2020). In the leaders' answers, enthusiasm appeared mainly through three kinds of experiences, reflecting the tension between resources and demands in their work.

The first and the most common notion involved *feelings of frustration*. The leaders were frustrated about decision-making processes and desperation in the work community. They reported that their enthusiasm had been replaced by negative feelings, such as mistrust and desperation, and a sense of indifference sometimes arose. The extracts below illustrate these sorts of feelings:

“The decisions for the future that concern me are dampening and discouraging me, and I don’t have the enthusiasm to develop things anymore.”

(Leader no. 43, over 15 years of work experience)

“The situation is somewhat desperate and sometimes I have a feeling that I don’t care. - - I don’t care anymore or even talk about it, sorry.”

(Leader no. 19, 10-15 years of work experience)

Their *enthusiasm had been deteriorating*. The most often mentioned reason for this was the continued state of uncertainty about the future. While the leaders had to worry about how their own work would change or what would happen to their units, they felt that they could not work properly and perform their core tasks at work, as one of the participants explained:

“The constant change and the uncertainty involved with it takes my focus away from the work itself.”

(Leader no. 53, 10-15 years of work experience)

However, some leaders also had *positive feelings about change* and perceived their own work positively, which was an important resource for them. They considered that they had a chance to develop their work and contribute to the change, which increased their enthusiasm. Some also mentioned that they had received positive feedback either from their subordinates and colleagues or customers (e.g., patients), which boosted their enthusiasm for change. The following extracts illustrate this view:

“However, I am quite a development-oriented person, and I like it when I have a chance to develop operations and be part of the change.”

(Leader no. 16, 5-9 years of work experience)

“Positive feedback has strengthened my perception of being on the right track.”

(Leader no. 59, over 15 years of work experience)

Overall, enthusiasm for was reflected in both positive emotional experiences at work but also in their lack or decline, illustrating the tension between resources and demands in the change situation from the leadership perspective. Negative perceptions were related to uncertainty and the inability to participate in the change, which will be reported in further detail next.

Participating in Change

Among the leaders in our data, participation in change described how well they perceived that they could influence or contribute to the change, and which factors they identified as supporting or hindering their participation.

The first category was: *limited participation due to unclear roles and communication*. As the WSC was still evolving and in the process of organizing its management system, the leaders reported that many of them did not really understand their responsibilities and decision-making power. This led to unwillingness or inability to take control over development processes. They reported challenges in their induction for their tasks, but it was also a question of communication: many leaders mentioned changing and unclear guidelines, contradictory operations, and differences between units and sectors. The following extracts from the data illustrate these views:

“There are too many supervisor hierarchies, due to which supervisors’ work and leadership are really confusing. We just delegate things downwards to the next supervisor and don’t bear responsibility from the point of view of our own leadership role.”

(Leader no. 39, over 15 years of work experience)

“The supervisors’ work is challenged constantly by the unclear and inconsistent guidelines. What was given today as our task will be cancelled or changed tomorrow. - - Different services and sectors are operating inconsistently; some are following the given guidelines, others are not.”

(Leader no. 74, over 15 years of work experience)

The second category was: *inequal opportunities for participation and ostensible participation*. The leaders described situations in which some of them or their units had not been allowed to participate in planning the change. Some leaders also had noted that in the wide area that the WSC covered some parts of the organization were not given an equal opportunity to participate due to long distances or smaller numbers of citizens they were serving, etc., as one of the participants explained:

“[xx] personnel have not been invited to participate in planning at all and informing us about the future changes has been really dissatisfactory.”

(Leader no. 29, 0-4 years of work experience)

Ostensible participation was also reported. The leaders had found that decisions may have been made already before the meeting took place. In some cases, the leaders had participated in meetings but did not have any chance to contribute to the changes or developments, as one of the participants explained:

“In the meetings, we have ostensible discussions about things but the decisions have been made already before the meeting and you can’t influence the decisions. - - If I could do my current work somewhere else, I would resign from [the WSC] immediately.”

(Leader no. 55, over 15 years of work experience)

Thirdly, the leaders reported about their own *willingness to participate in the change*. They also realized that they had a significant role, and their own abilities were important for making the change happen. These leaders appeared to be optimistic about the change and their participation opportunities, as the quotation below illustrates:

“In this unstable economic and change situation, I see myself in a crucial [supervisor’s] role for making the “human-sized work” concept come true.”

(Leader no. 37, 10-15 of work experience)

The three categories revealed that while the sense of being able to participate was a clear resource for change engagement, this was not true for all leaders. Some of them felt left outside or given just an ostensible role in the change, indicating that change participation and involvement did not function as a change-related job resource (see Albrecht et al., 2020) equally for the leaders in this data.

Focusing Energy for Change

Emotions and participation do not fully describe change engagement: a leader must be able to direct their energy for change in their everyday work. The leaders in this data described how they could focus on the successful leadership of change and prioritizing change work.

On one hand, the leaders reported that the demands were high and they were overloaded with work which made them feel *insufficient and not being able to focus energy for change*—neither their own nor their followers’ energy. They wanted to do their basic tasks first and hoped for better chances to be more energetic about the change too. Often, the leaders mentioned that they did not receive enough support for their leadership and supervision tasks, which was a crucial notion because social support is one of the key resources at work boosting engagement (Bakker, 2022). The following extracts from the data illustrate this aspect:

“The immediate supervisors have simply too much work. - - The option is to do well (=you are doing overtime) or do the mandatory tasks just barely without developing anything (=during work hours).”

(Leader no. 60, over 15 years of work experience)

“I have to be flexible at work all the time and my office hours are not enough for doing all tasks. I experience feelings of insufficiency at work.”

(Leader no. 85, 5-9 years of work experience)

“The idea of “human-sized work” seems like a joke in my work. - - I don’t get any support for handling the challenging workload.”

(Leader no. 2, over 15 years of work experience)

On the other hand, some leaders found their work very *autonomous*, allowing them to focus energy on change. Change autonomy can be a highly important change-related job resource (Albrecht et al., 2020). The crucial notion was that when the leaders had the perception that they could control their work tasks and contents, plan their schedules, and genuinely contribute and lead the change, they felt that they could also prioritize the change, as the following quotations from the participants illustrate:

“I think that I have a job in which I can influence and develop things. - - I can design my work so that I have a balance.”

(Leader no. 91, over 15 years of work experience)

“I pretty much lead my own work. I am an independent employee, and I like to have plenty of responsibilities and autonomy at the same time. I can prioritize my work as I think is the best.”

(Leader no. 47, 0-4 years of work experience)

The contradictory categories mentioned above regarding focusing energy on change revealed how demands and resources were evident in the leaders’ perceptions. In particular leaders with relatively clear job descriptions and responsibilities also reported more positive evaluations. The clarity of the leadership role is also closely connected with the sense of autonomy and the ability to plan one’s own work and where the energy is focused, supporting the leaders’ change engagement.

Willingness to Actively Support and Strive for Change Success

Finally, the fourth category describes how persistently and willingly the leaders are ready to put effort into making the change come true as planned. This category illustrates how change engagement is shown in practice as actual persistence and devotion to change. In this category, too, the leaders’ perceptions vary, showing the imbalance between resources and demands in their work.

First, some leaders reported that they could *not strive for change success*. The demands from their work were overwhelming, and they had too many administrative tasks and daily problems they hindered them from supporting and striving for change. The extracts below illustrate this view:

“Clarifying the goals and how to reach them requires time from the supervisor, which I don’t have in this situation because human resource management and problem-solving take so much time and there is no time even to do my basic job.”

(Leader no. 90, 10-15 years of work experience)

“At the moment, work is a lot bigger than the human being doing it. The demands from our leadership have been overwhelming since last spring, e.g., schedules for tasks have been impossible.”

(Leader no. 3, over 15 years of work experience)

Some factors were *slowing down the leaders’ efforts*. Unclear organisational processes consumed time and energy, and ambiguous work roles resulted in chains of delegating questions from one person to the next. In addition, unclearly communicated goals and strategic objectives made the leaders struggle to find out what was expected from their units and how they could meet the goals. The following excerpts from the data express this view:

“We have to exchange emails on the same issue for several days. This slows down working and getting issues solved.”

(Leader no. 12, over 15 years of work experience)

“I wish we had more concrete strategic goals - - and mutual discussions about them. - - What is expected from me and my unit, and how we can achieve it. And I would hope that this would be explicitly described for example at the unit level so that everyone would have the same means and aspirations to reach the goal.”

(Leader no. 86, over 15 years of work experience)

The third category revealed the leaders’ *positively perceived actions and efforts*. They mentioned how they could boost the “we” spirit in their units and explain the reasons for change and their goals to their subordinates. They perceived that they had a key role in supporting their subordinates and were striving for the change to be a success in their teams. These leaders also considered their own way of embracing the change and working for it as setting an example for others in their work units, as the following quotations from the participants show:

“We work as a team and go towards the goal together. No one will reach anything alone.”

(Leader 77, 0-4 years of work experience)

“Listening and understanding; we help and look for means to cope with challenges in life or at work together.”

(Leader no. 81, 5-9 years of work experience)

While striving for change success was challenged in various ways that related mostly to the formation phase of the organization, some leaders also had positive experiences of being change agents. They could also inspire their teams and units to support change through their actions. In this sense, striving for change success appeared not only as the leaders' own resource but also a resource for others through their inspiring action and dedication (Albrecht et al., 2020).

Discussion

Our analysis showed that leaders' change engagement appeared as a multidimensional phenomenon in which their aspirations to perform well in their leadership role and the realities of their current workload strongly influenced how they perceived their ability to lead the change actively or just merely go with the flow or act as bystanders.

When considering the elements of change engagement (Albrecht et al., 2020) and how they were reflected in the speech of leaders in our data, it appeared that when leaders were well embedded in their work and clearly understood their responsibilities and mandates—i.e., were able to work autonomously, and experience a sense of leading the change—change engagement could emerge as a multidimensional resource at work rather than solely as a burden or demand (cf. Bakker, 2022; Bakker et al., 2023). This finding is in line with Paatela et al.'s (2025) research whose findings also showed the need for clarity in responsibilities and mandates as roles are established or redistributed in the WSC.

In this research, enthusiasm and willingness to strive for change success appeared somewhat conditional on the actual sense of being able to participate and direct energy towards change. This means that when the workload and autonomy over prioritizing work are in good balance, leaders can become inspiring change agents. Otherwise, their enthusiasm starts to decrease, and they are no longer willing to put in the effort. This finding is similar to Farhan's (2021) research pointing out that leaders just having certain competencies is not enough if they do not have the belief and persistence to reach the goals in their work.

However, this connection between the elements of change engagement in leaders' experiences needs to be analysed more thoroughly so that the causal relationship can be verified. Still, the value of hearing the leaders' experiences and emotions related to the change revealed crucial aspects concerning the change in a large organization such as the WSC in question.

Based on our findings, it is not possible to assume that leaders automatically feel emotionally connected to the change and are ready to strive for change success. Unclear responsibilities in daily tasks, communication misunderstandings, and perceived inequalities can undermine leaders' genuine efforts and diminish their positively oriented engagement with both their work and ongoing workplace changes. Namely, there are sectors that have been working for a long time, such as the healthcare sector, and the leadership structure is well established. The support services, at the other extreme, represent a somewhat new sector in WSCs, because previously the support services such as human resources management, research services and administration, have been under the responsibility of the municipalities (Paatela & Tynkkynen, 2025). Therefore, the leaders' change engagement can appear differently in different sectors: they may have a long history in a certain kind of organization and were now entering a new, larger structure with increased hierarchy. While older leaders may rely on their previous experience (e.g., Quinn, 2015), this experience can sometimes become a burden, too. Younger leaders may find structural immaturity a change-related demand in their work through unclear roles or responsibilities, but they may also find it an opportunity to create their own way of leading the change. It would be important to focus on each leader's personal situation, attitude, and history with the leadership task in order to find the best way to support their change engagement. Qualitatively oriented research studies—such as the one at hand—can thus provide important information about the actual experiences among leaders themselves and give space to their voices without the fear of becoming judged as a bad leader only because they perceive the resources and demands in their work differently.

Concerning the reliability of this research, we follow the four main criteria for qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). The situation the WSCs in Finland are facing currently was described in the introductory part of this article: the change is prominent and challenging in many ways. To ensure *credibility*, we have pointed out both positive and negative experiences, aiming to provide a profound picture of the phenomenon investigated in this research. The description of the context is important also for *transferability*, so that the reader can decide whether the prevailing environment is similar to another situation—in this case, we assume that reforms in large public organizations represent the target context and how the leaders themselves experience their work within the changes. Although the criterion of *dependability* is somewhat difficult to meet in this kind of qualitative research, we have tried to provide as detailed a description of the implementation of this research as possible. For *confirmability*, we have leaned on researcher triangulation meaning that both of the researchers have analysed the data and compared our interpretations to avoid sticking to our own assumptions or predispositions. Our role as independent researchers without a role in the target organization has also helped us to analyse the data objectively. In addition, we have used a theory-driven content analysis to guide us with the search of perceptions about change engagement. Finally, the leaders' responses to survey and the quotes from the data illustrate how they perceive their work.

Naturally, there are limitations to this research. We acknowledge the fact that not all leaders and supervisors from the target WSC responded to the survey, and from those who did, only

about half (49.2%) responded to the open-ended questions. However, the number of responses and the richness of the experiences described in the answers showed that with this analysis method it was possible to draw a picture of the leaders' change engagement and bring out unique experiences of the leaders. In the data, the majority of the respondents were women, which does not fully correspond with the overall gender distribution in the leadership positions in the WSCs (Laine, 2024). We can only make assumptions of why female leaders were more willing to answer to the open questions than men and how the data would have been different if the questions had been mandatory. In general, we did not find any implications related to the gender of the leader in the data, and thus, consider that the issues brought up regarding change engagement were not gender specific per se. On the other hand, it was important that leaders with various levels of experience and from different sectors were well presented in the data.

Conclusion

This research presented some theoretical and practical insights. First, the concept of leaders' change engagement was expanded beyond their role in inspiring their followers to encompass the leaders' own perceptions of their work, offering a more specific lens than work engagement alone. When viewed through the lens of the JD-R framework (Bakker et al., 2022), tensions between resources and demands were evident in all elements of change engagement: it can be a resource for leaders, although it may be undermined by avoidable demands, such as unclear roles and responsibilities (see also Cameron, 2008; Quinn, 2015).

According to prior studies, the nature of the public sector leaders' tasks and being able to reach beyond themselves have been identified as motivational factors that strengthen their engagement (Peretz, 2020). Similarly, Ancarani et al. (2021) suggested that the interconnections between leadership, change implementation, and work engagement may help explain the capacity to promote public sector change. Therefore, in our research, change engagement was considered as a more specific form of engagement in the leaders' work—that is, engagement occurring during a drastic change in the organization. The target WSC provided a good context for this analysis because the WSCs in Finland are undergoing a phase of transformation, as they attempt to focus on the future and find a way to deal with their past as municipal service providers. This was expected to add valuable new perspectives to the strategic management of public sector organizations, as requested by Ferlie and Ongaro (2022).

Practice wise, the study showed how important it is to acknowledge leaders' change engagement, and to determine how to best support them in meeting the demands of change management and change leadership. This need was also noted in earlier research (Gill, 2003). A key practical question is how to enhance leaders' participation and foster a sense of ownership of the changes, even when roles and responsibilities remain unclear. Our findings indicate that vertical communication is crucial to ensure that the leaders understand the meaning and purpose of change and can communicate it to their own teams. This was

evident from our data. Strengthening a shared understanding of the change process and its necessity would also strengthen the collective alignment among leaders and supervisors and support their joint change engagement.

Another suggestion for enhancing the leaders' change engagement is to systematically create opportunities for peer support. In our data, leaders reported that they did not have clear channels for discussing questions, concerns, and solutions with colleagues at the same hierarchical level. However, in times of uncertainty, peer support can serve as a valuable resource by fostering shared enthusiasm, a sense of participation, and enabling the practical exchange of strategies to direct energy and strive for change. Peer support channels could also improve communication within the organization and create a shared understanding of the situation. While the role of social support has been previously acknowledged as an important resource at work (Bakker et al., 2022), its significance for leaders' effectiveness and success at work remains less explored. This conclusion is in line with Tafvelin et al.'s (2019) research, in which they found that leaders who had better peer support also engaged better in transformational leadership.

Peer support in the context of this research does not necessarily mean formal support groups *per se* but merely systematically arranged channels and forums that would allow the leaders to openly discuss their solutions and concerns and share information and ideas for development. Peer support among leaders and supervisors could also enhance the development of a more empathic work culture (Arghode et al., 2022), thereby fostering more positive engagement with the changing organization. This would be worth testing in various formats, such as face-to-face encounters, but also in online groups, because in the target organization of this research leaders might be working hundreds of kilometres in distance from each other.

Job demands and resources theory provided us with a basis for analysing the leaders' work from the perspective of change engagement in this research. While the ultimate goal in JD-R has been to improve employees' well-being and organizational performance (Tummers & Bakker, 2021), we argue that leader change engagement could be an important concept for understanding change as a resource in the leaders' work and well-being. Furthermore, it provides a new way of perceiving the connection between leaders' work and their well-being. For example, Kaluza et al. (2021) have noted a lack of research in this area, claiming that the question of how leadership relates to leaders' own well-being is not yet fully answered. More research on the connections between work engagement and change engagement in leaders is also needed to find new ways to support leaders' well-being during reforms in large public sector organizations.

References

- Albrecht, S. L., Connaughton, S., Foster, K., Furlong, S., & Yeow, J. (2020). Change engagement, change resources and change demands: a model for positive employee orientations to organizational change. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, art. 531944. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.531944>
- Albrecht, S. L., Connaughton, S., & Leiter, M. P. (2022). The influence of change-related organizational and job re-sources on employee change engagement. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.910206>
- Ancarani, A., Arcidiacono, F., Di Mauro, C., & Giammanco, M. D. (2021). Promoting work engagement in public administrations: the role of middle managers' leadership. *Public Management Review, 23*(8), 1234-1263. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1763072>
- Anderson, H. J., Baur, J. E., Griffith, J. A., & Buckley, M. R. (2017). What works for you may not work for (Gen)Me: Limitations of present leadership theories for the new generation. *The Leadership Quarterly, 28*(1), 245-260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.08.001>
- Arghode, V., Lathan, A., Alagaraja, M., Rajaram, K., & McLean, G. N. (2022). Empathic organizational culture and leadership: conceptualizing the framework. *European Journal of Training and Development, 46*(1-2), 239-256. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-09-2020-0139>
- Bakker, A. B. (2022). The social psychology of work engagement: state of the field. *Career Development International, 27*(1), 36-53. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-08-2021-0213>
- Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., & Sanz-Vergel, A. (2022). Job Demands-Resources theory: ten years later. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 10*, 13.1-13.29. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-120920-053933>
- Bakker, A. B., Hetland, J., Kjellevold Olsen, O., & Espevik, R. (2023). Daily transformational leadership: A source of inspiration for follower performance? *European Management Journal, 41*, 700-708. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2022.04.004>
- Cameron, K. S. (2008). Paradox in positive organizational change. *The Journal of Applied Behavioural Change, 44*(1), 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021886308314703>
- Demerouti, E., Bakker, A. B., Nachreiner, F., & Schaufeli, W. B. (2001). The job demands-resources model of burnout. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*(3), 499-512. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11419809/>
- DeRue, D. S., Nahrgang, J. D., Wellman, N., & Humphrey, S. E. (2011). Trait and behavioural theories of leadership: An integration and meta-analytic test of their relative validity. *Personnel Psychology, 64*, 7-52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2010.01201.x>

- Errida, A., & Lotfi, B. (2021). The determinants of organizational change management success: Literature review and case study. *International Journal of Engineering Business Management*, 13, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18479790211016273>
- Farhan, B. Y. (2021). Customizing leadership practices for the millennial workforce: A conceptual framework. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1930865>
- Ferlie, E., & Ongaro, E. (2022). *Strategic management in public services organizations. Concepts, schools and contemporary issues* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Fernandez, S., & Rainey, H. G. (2017). Managing successful organizational change in the public sector. In D. H. Rosenbloom (Ed.), *Debating public administration. Management challenges, choices, and opportunities* (pp. 7-26). ASPA.
- Gill, R. (2003). Change management--or change leadership? *Journal of Change Management*, 3(4), 307–318. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714023845>
- Haapakoski, P., Wenström, S., & Uusiautti, S. (2023). The correlation between work engagement and the positive organizational PRIDE Index provides new perspectives on workplace development: An analysis of Northern Finnish public sector workers. *European Journal of Workplace Innovation*, 8(2), 4–30. <https://doi.org/10.46364/ejwi.v8i2.1259>
- Hansen, H., Elias, S. R. S. T. A., Stevenson, A., Smith, A. D., Alexander, B. N. B., & Barros, M. (2023). Resisting the objectification of qualitative research: the unsilencing of context, researchers, and noninterview data. *Organizational Research Methods*, 28(1), 3-31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10944281231215119>
- Harrison, R., Fischer, S., Walpola, R. L., Chauhan, A., Babalola, T., Mears, S., & Huong, L.-D. (2021). Where do models for change management, improvement and implementation meet? A systematic review of the applications of change management models in healthcare. *Journal of Healthcare Leadership*, 13, 85-108. <https://doi.org/10.2147/JHL.S289176>
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692-724. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.2307/256287>
- Kaluza, A. J., Boer, D., Buengeler, C., & van Dick, R. (2020). Leadership behaviour and leader self-reported well-being: A review, integration and meta-analytic examination. *Work & Stress*, 34(1), 34-56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2019.1617369>
- Karasvirta, S., & Teerikangas, S. (2022). Change organizations in planned change – a closer look. *Journal of Change Management*, 22, 163–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2021.2018722>

- Kerätär, E., Rautio, T., Pekkala, S., Kojo, M., Rasi-Heikkinen, P., Suhonen, M., & Rivinen, S. (2025). Towards knowledge-based utilization of social robotics in renewing welfare services: Case Northern Finland. In O. Palinko, L. Bodenhausen, J.-J. Cabibihan, K. Fischer, S. Šabanović, K. Winkle, L. Behera, S. S. Ge, D. Chrysostomou, W. Jiang, & H. He (Eds.), *Lecture notes in social robotics*, ICSR + AI 2024, vol 15562. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-96-3519-1_7
- Laine, P. (2024). *Changes in working life, the position of the genders in the labour market and equal pay*. Reports and Memorandums of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2024:26. <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-00-8458-5>
- Malik, M. A., & Azmat, S. (2019). Leader and leadership: historical development of the terms and critical review of literature. *Annals of the University of Craiova for Journalism, Communication and Management*, 5, 16-32. <https://aucjc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/aucjcm-vol-5-2019-16-32.pdf>
- McGowan, E., Hale, J., Bezner, J., Harwood, K., Green-Wilson, J., & Stokes, E. (2020). Leadership development of health and social care professionals: a systematic review. *BMJ Leader*, 4(4), 231-238. <https://doi.org/10.1136/leader-2020-000211>
- Paatela, S., & Tynkkynen, L.-K. (2025). Changes in the governance structures after the health system reform in Finland. *European Journal of Public Health*, 35(Supplement 4), Article ckaf161.133. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckaf161.133>
- Paatela, S., Huhtakangas, M., & Tynkkynen, L. K. (2025). Governance of a health and social service system after two years of a large-scale reform: a qualitative study in Finland. *Journal of Health Organization and Management*, 3, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JHOM-01-2025-0055>
- Pekkarinen, L., Korhonen, M., & Erkkilä, T. (2025). *Julkisen alan työhyvinvointi vuonna 2024* [Well-being at work in the public sector 2024]. Keva. <https://www.keva.fi/globalassets/2-tiedostot/ta-tiedostot/esitteet-ja-julkaisut/kevan-tutkimus-julkisen-alan-tyohyvinvointi-vuonna-2024.pdf>
- Peretz, H. V. (2020). A view into managers' subjective experiences of public service motivation and work engagement: a qualitative study. *Public Management Review*, 22(7), 1090-1118. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1740304>
- Perez, J. (2021). Leadership in healthcare: transitioning from clinical professional to healthcare leader. *Journal of Healthcare Management*, 66(4), 280-302. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JHM-D-20-00057>
- Quinn, R. E. (2015). *The positive organization: breaking free from conventional cultures, constraints, and beliefs*. Berrett-Koehler.
- Rautio, K., Uusiautti, S., & Leinonen, J. (2025). *The measurement of successful leadership supporting the new organizational culture in a Wellbeing Services County*. Hallinnon ja kuntatutkimuksen

- tiedepäivät 19.-21.11.2025, Vaasa, Finland. <https://sites.uwasa.fi/hktp2025/wp-content/blogs.dir/4/files/sites/227/2025/11/HKTP2025-Abstraktikirja-141125.pdf>
- Rautio, K., & Wenström, S. (2026). Strengths-spotting as bringing individual attributes forward at work: strengths in construction managers' leadership narratives. In S. Uusiautti & S. Wenström (Eds.), *Positive leadership – research-based insights of the future of leadership* (pp.195-216). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02369-8_10
- Salmi, I. (2024). *Seeing positive leadership with new eyes – enhancing understanding through study of experience*. (Academic dissertation, University of Lapland, Finland.) <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-337-411-9>
- Schaufeli, W. (2021). Engaging leadership: how to promote work engagement? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, art. 754556. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.754556>
- Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A.B. (2010). Defining and measuring work engagement: bringing clarity to the concept. In A. B. Bakker & M. P. Leiter (Eds.), *Work engagement: a handbook of essential theory and research* (pp. 10-24). Psychology Press.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Bakker, A. B., & Salanova, M. (2006). The measurement of work engagement with a short questionnaire: A cross-national study. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 66, 701–716. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164405282471>
- Selander, K., Nevanperä, N., Nikunlaakso, R., Korkiakangas, R., & Laitinen, J. (2024). Engaging leadership and work recovery among key personnel of a major health-care and social services reform. *Leadership in Health Services*, 38(5), 35-47. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LHS-09-2024-0109>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Sosik, J. J., Chun, J. U., Ete, Z., Arenas, F. J., & Scherer, J. A. (2019). Self-control puts character into action: examining how leader character strengths and ethical leadership relate to leader outcomes. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 160, 765–781. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-018-3908-0>
- Suutala, S., Hakanen, J., & Kaltiainen, J. (2025). *Development of well-being at work from late 2019 to summer 2025*. Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. <https://www.ttl.fi/sites/default/files/2025-09/how-is-finland-doing-research-results-october-2025.pdf>
- Tanskanen, J., Mäkelä, L., & Viitala, R. (2019) Linking managerial coaching and leader-member exchange on work engagement and performance. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 20, 1217–1240. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-018-9996-9>

Tafvelin, S., Nielsen, K., von Thiele Schwarz, U., & Stenling, A. (2019). Leading well is a matter of resources: Leader vigour and peer support augments the relationship between transformational leadership and burnout. *Work & Stress*, 33(2), 156-172.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02678373.2018.1513961>

Tummers, L. G., & Bakker, B. A. (2021). Leadership and Job Demands-Resources Theory: a systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, art. 722080. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.722080>

Uusiautti, S. (2015). Success at work requires successful leaders? The elements of successful leadership according to leaders and employees of a Finnish mid-size enterprise. *International Journal of Research Studies in Psychology*, 4(3), 49-65. <https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrsp.2015.1164>

Uusiautti, S., & Hyvärinen, S. (2021). Defining the new concept of sustainable success – A state-of-the-art analysis on the phenomenon. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 60, article no. 100819.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2020.100819>

Uusiautti, S., & Wenström, S. (Eds.) (2026). *Positive leadership – research-based insights of the future of leadership*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-02369-8>

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [SU], upon reasonable request.

About the Authors

Satu Uusiautti, PhD, is a professor of educational psychology at the University of Lapland, Finland. Her research has focused on well-being, careers, success at work, and positive leadership. Her latest publications include *Positive Leadership—Research-based Insights of the Future of Leadership* (Satu Uusiautti & Sanna Wenström, Eds, 2026, Palgrave Macmillan). More information is available at: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2409-6460>

Krista Rautio, PhD (in educational sciences), MSS, is a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Lapland, Finland. Her expertise lies in continuous learning, career guidance, and supporting work communities through change and development processes. She has co-designed and facilitated numerous leadership development programmes for public and private organizations. More information available at: <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5904-3250>