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# Mediation of the meaning of work on the relationship between leadership and performance, controlling the response bias

## *Mediação do sentido do trabalho sobre a relação entre liderança e desempenho, controlando o viés de resposta*

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### Abstract

#### Objective

Researchers have investigated the relationship between the meaning of work and variables related to work well-being. This study investigated the relationships between transformational leadership and job performance, and the mediation of the meaning of work in these relationships.

#### Method

A total of 397 professionals of a Brazilian public university participated, answering a forced-choice questionnaire. The relationship model between variables was tested using structural equations. In addition, the parameters of indirect effects of mediation were tested using bootstrap (100 resamples).

#### Results

The results indicated that job performance levels were explained by transformational leadership. The meaning of work explained 86% of the relationship between the variables.

#### Conclusion

The study contributes by presenting data of acquiescence control and in explaining the impact of variables on professionals' job performance.

**Keywords:** Job performance; Leadership; Psychometric.

## Resumo

### Objetivo

*Estudiosos tem se aprofundado nas relações do sentido do trabalho com variáveis ligadas ao bem-estar laboral. O estudo investigou as relações entre a liderança transformacional e o desempenho no trabalho, e a mediação do sentido do trabalho nessas relações.*

### Método

*Participaram 397 servidores brasileiros de uma universidade pública, que responderam os instrumentos na versão de escolhas forçadas. O modelo de relação entre as variáveis foi testado por meio de equações estruturais e os parâmetros de efeitos indiretos da mediação foram testados por meio de bootstrap (100 reamostragens).*

### Resultados

*Os resultados indicaram que os níveis de desempenho no trabalho foram explicados pela liderança transformacional. O sentido do trabalho explicou 86% da relação entre as variáveis.*

### Conclusão

*O estudo contribui pela coleta de dados com controle de aquiescência e na explicação do impacto das variáveis no desempenho dos servidores públicos.*

**Palavras-chave:** Desempenho profissional; Liderança; Psicometria.

Researchers in the field of positive psychology in the work context have sought to deepen their knowledge of the individuals' perception of the meaning of work they perform, as it is a significant experience, which brings a positive meaning to workers (Rosso et al., 2010). The eudaimonic way of experiencing daily work helps the individual perceive a vocational purpose that points to the presence of meaning in the activity he performs (Steger et al., 2012). The meaning found at work comes from individual's or collective's or both experiences and interactions, perceived and interpreted by the worker in a subjective way, and contributes to the worker also perceiving meaning in his own life and knowing how to deal better with the stress resulting from the work routine (Allan et al., 2015).

Studies on the meaning of work being measured by a forced-choice scale instrument are still incipient. This instrument is more fit to reduce acquiescence in the results (Leonardo et al., 2019). Single-stimulus Likert-type scales, when evaluating positive valence constructs, may be susceptible to response biases, such as acquiescence and social desirability. Some respondents often avoid extreme categories and tend to mark their answers around the center. Others, on the contrary, mark their answers only at the ends. Further, there are respondents who tend to agree with positive and negative items, inserting acquiescence bias in their answers. The halo effect is also common, in which the respondent rates high or low on all behaviors. The option for forced-choice serves as a strategy, since it can improve the fit quality of psychological research (Brown & Maydeu-Olivares, 2012).

In this study, the nomological network of the meaning of work construct was expanded, using diversified samples, linked to occupational well-being, which were work performance and transformational leadership. To expand the evidence on the use of forced-choice instruments as strategies to control response bias, forced-choice scales were used to assess the meaning of work, transformational leadership and work performance.

In addition to contributing to the increase of evidence of the nomological network of the meaning of work construct, the relationships of transformational leadership, meaning of work and performance among public servants of a public university were investigated. It should be noticed that the updating process of the public sector in recent decades, the work of these civil servants still

encompasses several particularities (Andrade, 2020; Vieira et al., 2011). The principles of work in the public service involve legality, morality, impersonality, efficiency, and actions must be planned and decentralized, valuing the process of delegating activities according to the competence and control of the civil servants, also considering that several decisions made by public institutions must be made available for public consultation (Vieira et al., 2011). Among the main characteristics that differentiate public servants from other sectors of work, we can observe the challenge of several bureaucratic obstacles in the development of work activities, the stability guaranteed in the current legislation, the presence of a notarial, formal, and juridical-prone culture (Andrade, 2020; Vieira et al., 2011).

The particularities of the work relationships of public servants highlight the importance of investigating the effects of transformational leadership and the meaning of work on the performance of public servants. In this way, the mediating role of the meaning of work in the relationships between transformational leadership and work performance was evaluated, with response bias control among public servants of a university. Based on the evidence presented and the scarcity of similar studies, this research is justified.

Much has been investigated on the meaning of work. Mainly because it concerns the individual's perception of his/her true vocation, as it refers to a personal, subjective experience of the worker in the face of the effort demanded for the performance of his/her work activities, where he recognizes that what he/she does has a purpose and a much more valuable meaning for the individual, for the organization and for the world (Steger et al., 2012). Work has a positive meaning, which is established as the basis of the vocation in which workers feel identified with what they do and are sure that they have chosen their professional activity correctly. Therefore, it concerns an individual rather than a collective production (Rosso et al., 2010; Bendassolli & Goldim, 2014). Studies have shown eight categories of mechanisms that blend as predictors of the meaning of work and through which individuals can perceive it: authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belonging and transcendence (Rosso et al., 2010).

The meaning of work is positively associated with important variables correlated with well-being at work, such as: engagement at work, occupational self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation (Leonardo et al., 2019), the desire to continue in the organization (Steger et al., 2012) and work engagement (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Meaning of work is negatively associated with depression and anxiety (Steger et al., 2012). This suggests that people who perceive meaning in their jobs tend to exhibit higher levels of intrinsic motivation at work (Steger et al., 2012), job performance (Harris et al., 2007), and less intentions of quitting or being absent in their work frequently (Steger et al., 2012). Some scholars argue that the meaning of work is a central component of occupational well-being (Rosso et al., 2010). In addition, it was observed that the meaning of work can alleviate the negative effects of stress on the individuals' meaning of life; therefore, it works as a protective factor against the negative impact of stress at work on the individuals' well-being (Rosso et al., 2010).

The original study conceptualized three dimensions for the meaning of work, including: the positive meaning of work, which is the perception that the work performed has a meaning of personal value; the sense of doing through work, which is the degree to which work helps people understand the world and contribute to personal growth; and the greater good, which is the belief that work positively impacts others (Steger et al., 2012). Meaning of work can also be investigated in a one-dimensional way. This was the finding in a study with a Brazilian sample. It was observed that in Brazil, the three dimensions of the inventory were understood as global (Leonardo et al., 2019).

## Transformational Leadership

Among several types of leadership, transformational leadership has drawn the attention of organizational psychology scholars, as it is a phenomenon that arises from the human need to establish positive influence relationships capable of mobilizing its followers. Transformational leadership stands out radically from other leadership models as it engages subordinates in a meaningful way that ensures both the achievement of organizational goals and the individual's personal growth. A relationship is built that makes leader and subordinates transcend to a higher level of motivation and morality. Studies present transformational leadership as one that inspires followers to go beyond expectations, to transcend their own interests for a collective objective based on a higher mission or vision (Buil et al., 2019; Cavazotte et al., 2013).

Transformational leadership is positively associated with several variables of labor well-being, such as: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, perception of organizational justice, organizational citizenship behavior, individual and collective performance, which connects subordinates' objectives to the objectives of the organization and the self-identity of its followers to the identity of the organization (Pradhan & Pradhan, 2016). This type of leadership emphasizes performance at work based on relationships that include ethical practices, healthy cooperation, and goals achievement within a standard of respect and legality (Buil et al., 2019).

The transformational leader urges his followers to exert more effort, and to look beyond their own interests, in order to demonstrate a collective performance that goes beyond expectations. It also presents as personal characteristics proactivity, moral values, innovation, and the ability to motivate and influence their subordinates to commit to perform their tasks as well as to the organization in which they work (Buil et al., 2019). It acts as a catalyst for motivation, commitment, and performance. He demonstrates in his relationship with his followers a certain emotional involvement capable of exerting a change in his beliefs and attitudes (Frieder et al., 2018; Pradhan & Pradhan, 2016).

In the behavior of a transformational leader, the existence of idealizing influence or charisma can be observed; this is the inspiring motivation that leads followers to achieve challenging goals, the intellectual stimulation that awakens in the followers the desire to make innovative and creative decisions and the individualized consideration that gives to the follower's socio-emotional support promoting their development and empowerment. It leads its followers to focus on collective goals with a high degree of collaboration and cooperation within the team. Another relevant attribute in this leadership is the ability to exhibit self-sacrifice behavior towards the organization in which it serves, and this greatly influences its followers who absorb and reproduce such behavior (Cavazotte et al., 2013).

According to the Theory of Purposeful Work Behavior, developed by Barrick et al. (2013), the personality traits of a subordinate vis-a-vis a transformational leadership are relevant for him to obtain good results performance at work through the moderating role that transformational leadership individuals will exert on it. The theory postulates that individuals managed by transformational leaders tend to pursue the goals that are proposed to them with autonomy and effort. In this way, subordinates inserted in an environment with high levels of transformational leadership keep their minds open to new experiences, engage in highly complex intellectual activities, act with curiosity, carry out their occupational activities in a creative and proactive way. In addition, these professionals are willing to experiment with new ideas and explore ambiguous tasks (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006).

In a study with information technology professionals in India, Pradhan and Pradhan (2016) investigated the mediating role of the meaning of work in the relationship between transformational leadership, affective and contextual organizational commitment and work performance. In the regression analysis, it was found that transformational leadership was significantly and positively associated with affective organizational commitment ( $\beta = 0.56, p < 0.001$ ). When the meaning of work was introduced as a mediator, the coefficient  $\beta$  of the relationship between transformational leadership and affective and contextual organizational commitment remained significant, but reduced ( $\beta = 0.48, p < 0.001$ ) and the coefficient  $\beta$  of the meaning of work remained significant ( $\beta = 0.14, p < 0.01$ ). The result confirms the effect of partial mediation of the meaning of work on the relationship between transformational leadership and affective organizational commitment.

## Job Performance

Job performance has a practical impact on the individual's professional experience and in the construction of values for the organization. It is also reflected in the behavioral set capable of bringing together psychosocial dimensions, such as: interpersonal behavior, situational behavior and individual behavior composed of skills, competences, disposition and affection (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017).

The literature on job performance has developed a lot in recent years, both in the evaluative and individual aspects. The development in individual aspects is because this subject is of great relevance to the individual and to the organization. For the individual, job performance can be a source of satisfaction and pride, which can lead to a successful career, promotions and better opportunities in the labor market (Sonnentag & Frese, 2002). For the organization, it favors the achievement of organizational objectives such as the delivery on time of products and services and contributes to the organization becoming competitive, generating well-being for its workers, and arousing the interest of organizational managers (Queiroga et al., 2015).

Scholars who investigated work performance claim that this is not only a behavioral construct, but also an outcome. Constructs in the literature dealing with the subject, different definitions for the construct are found, such as: performance, efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity. Job performance can be defined as all the behaviors that involve employees while they work. Individual job performance refers to the best way in which people perform their work. The construct consists of skills and knowledge applied in the work context, in the implementation of a duty or task, or further in the way an individual acts in terms of efficiency and performance, culminating in the achievement of organizational results (Sonnentag & Frese, 2002).

In the result aspect, job performance is evaluated by the behavior of the individual in the face of what he was hired for. In many situations, the behavioral and outcome aspects are empirically associated. In practice, it is difficult to describe the behavioral aspect of job performance without any reference to the outcome (Sonnentag & Frese, 2002).

In the individual aspect, it is defined as the proficiency with which individuals act and behave in a way that is relevant to the organization (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). And, from a multidimensional perspective, it is considered a set of actions guided by a purpose of transforming matter, physical or immaterial, that provides value creation (Bendassolli & Goldim, 2014). Thus, job performance is associated with behavior, with the outcome, with the product and productivity, with the relationship between product and cost. Behavior that is part of job performance is the behavior that, in some way, relates to organizational goals. Not only should individual characteristics such as motivation and job satisfaction be significant in measuring an individual's job performance, but other factors can affect individual performance, such as the individual's degree of knowledge, the knowledge required to perform the task and the working environment. It can also be influenced by social, cultural, or demographic status (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017).

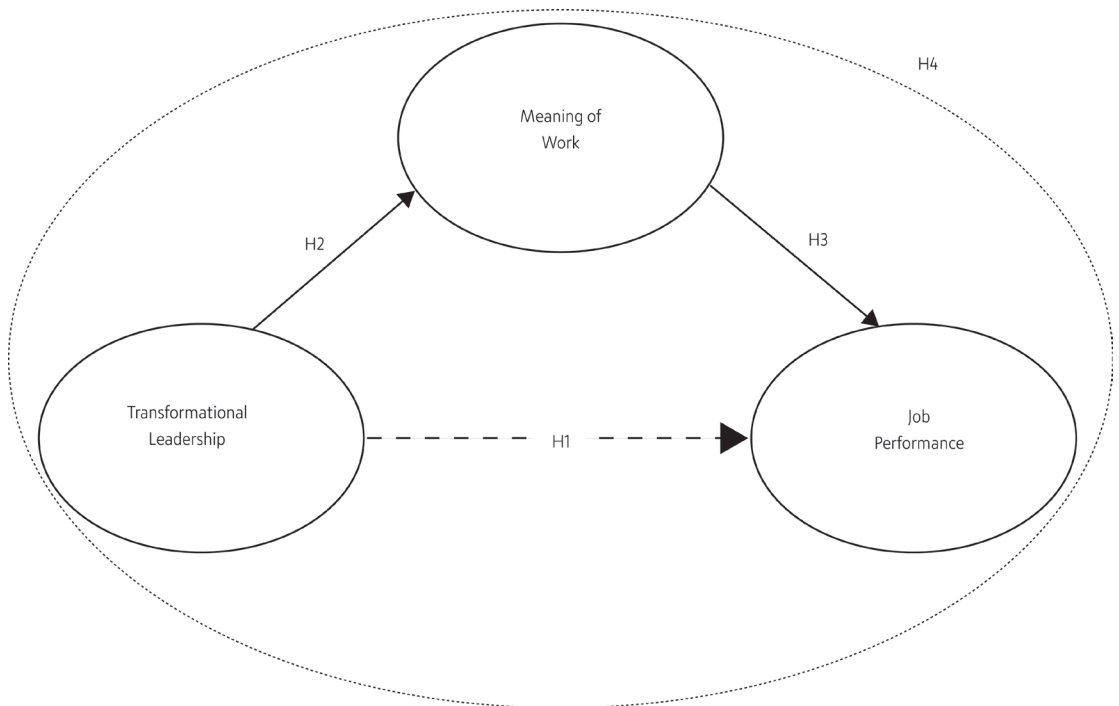
The first taxonomy on individual job performance identified eight dimensions, such as: proficiency in a specific task, proficiency in a non-specific task, proficiency in oral and written communication, demonstration of effort, maintenance of personal discipline, facilitation of peer and teams performance, supervision and administrative management. But recently, the following dimensions have been added: task-oriented and contextual (Sonnentag & Frese, 2002). The first is consistent with the way in which the activities performed by the individual can contribute to the organization's technical issues. This contribution can be classified as direct, aimed at production-purpose workers and indirect, aimed at administrative workers or managers. The second dimension encompasses activities that are part of the organization's support, that is, the social and psychological environment that includes helping co-workers, suggestions for improvement, etc.

In a study carried out with nurses in Harbin, China, it was shown that there was a significant relationship between the meaning of work ( $r = 0.44$ ) and task performance ( $r = 0.49$ ), indicating that the perception of the meaning of work led nurses to perform better in their tasks. Nurses who perceived greater meaning in their work were more willing to help and showed greater dedication, both individually and as part of the entire team (Tong, 2018).

Based on the above, the present study sought to investigate whether the relationship between transformational leadership and the performance of professionals would be mediated by the meaning of work. To evaluate these relationships, the following hypotheses were formulated: H1 - Higher levels of transformational leadership will predict greater performance. H2 - Transformational leadership will be positively associated with the meaning of work. H3 - The meaning of work will be positively associated with performance at work. H4 - The meaning of work will mediate the relationship between transformational leadership and performance.

Based on such considerations indicated in the different hypotheses formulated, the main objective of the present study was to examine the mediating role of the variable meaning of work in the relationship between transformational leadership and performance at work. The tested model is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
Tested hypothetical model



## Method

### Participants

A total of 397 staff from a public university, in the southeast of the country, participated in the study; 365 of them held subordinate positions and 32 leadership positions, distributed across different departments. The age ranged from 20 to 71 years, with a mean of 43.0 years ( $SD = 12.8$ ). Most of them (56.6%) were female, 56.1% were married or living together and 54.0% respondents had children. A large part of the sample reported having a degree (73.8%), and 44.1% had some type of specialization. Regarding their positions, 51.1% of participants worked as librarians, executive secretaries, accountants, technicians in educational matters, among other professional activities, 35.5% were administrative assistants and 13.4% were administrative clerks. The average time that civil servants had worked in the current organization was 12.5 years ( $SD = 11.5$ ) and the average length of service was 19.6 ( $SD = 12.3$ ). Regarding the salary bracket, the majority (51.4%) reported that they were paid between 4 and 6 minimum wages.

### Instruments

To measure the meaning of work, the Work and Meaning Inventory (WAMI) was used, in the forced-choice responses version developed and validated in Brazil by Leonardo et al. (2019) and is composed of 18 items organized into six blocks with three items each block. An example of block is: A – I found a fulfilling job; B – My work helps me understand myself better; C – My work is irrelevant to the world.

To measure performance, the Self-Assessment Scale of Job Performance (Queiroga et al., 2015) was used, in its short version (Andrade et al., 2020), one-factor, with nine items, to be answered in the format forced-choice. In the original version, Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.88 to 0.82 for the task and context factors. Block example: A – I adequately perform difficult tasks; B – I perform my assignments anticipating their results; C – I am not interested in improving my results at work. To facilitate the identification of the one-dimensional model of forced-choice, we inserted a neutral item (bug item): "I prefer to work in tall buildings rather than low ones".

To assess transformational leadership, the Pearcee and Sims scale (2002), translated into Portuguese (Cavazotte et al., 2013), was adopted. The original scale is composed of 4 dimensions and consists of 14 items, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 in the original version. It was used in the forced choice format, with eight blocks and 24 items. A – Because of my boss, I have a clear vision of our team's goal; B – My boss works for the basics; C – My boss avoids new challenges. Data collection also included a Sociodemographic Questionnaire, with questions associated with the following aspects: age, gender, education, profession, working time and marital status.

### Procedures

The survey was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the institution of the first author under CAAE nº 00389018.9.0000.5289, review acceptance nº 1.945.477. The sample inclusion criterion was the fact that the individual had been working at the institution for at least one year at the time the instruments were applied. In all situations, respondents were informed about the anonymity of their responses and received the Free and Informed Consent Form. Based on the authorizations of the institution and the departments, the participants were contacted and received the questionnaire in pencil and paper format to be answered in person and collected at once or on a date scheduled at a later time.



For forced-choice items, the Thurstonian Item Response Theory model (Brown & Olivares, 2018) was used. In the Thurstonian Item Response Theory, the rankings of the triplets (e.g., the set of the three statements presented in each forced-choice item) are recorded in binary comparisons between the items (e.g. in the ranking of items A, B and C, item A is more preferable than B). From the binary comparisons, the utility of the items is estimated, which represent how representative the item's content is for the subject. Utilities are modeled as intermediaries (proxies) between binary comparisons and latent variables that have a descriptive content.

The model of relationship between variables was tested using structural equations. It was investigated whether the meaning of work operates as a mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership and performance, so that two models were tested. In the first model, it was evaluated whether transformational leadership contributed to the explanation of job performance levels. In the second model, it was investigated whether the meaning of work acted as a mediator in the relationships between transformational leadership and job performance levels (Valentini et al., 2018). The parameters of indirect effects of the mediation were tested by means of bootstrap (100 bootstraps). The analyses were carried out using the Mplus software (v. 8.0).

## Results

### Measurement Model

The scales were modeled separately to test the structure. The scale goodness of fit are shown in Table 1.

The models fit the data well, except for the WAMI scale. Forced-choice models are difficult to identify due to the number of estimated parameters. Thus, adjustments in the scales were

**Table 1**  
Scale goodness of fit

Scales	$\chi^2$ (df)	TLI	CFI	RMSEA (90% CI)
Work and Meaning Inventory	230.18	0.84	0.87	0.07 (0.06, 0.08)
Job Performance	32.1 (25)	0.90	0.93	0.03 (0.01, 0.05)
Leadership	205.14 (129)	0.97	0.97	0.04 (0.03, 0.05)
General (with the three scales)	998.10 (803)	0.89	0.88	0.03 (0.02, 0.03)

Note: CFI: Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA: Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation; TLI: Tucker-Lewis Index.

required for the estimation of identifiable models. We excluded three items (16, 17 and 18) from the WAMI (a triplet) and six items from the transformational leadership scale (7, 8, 9, 13, 14 and 15), because the correlation matrix presented a cell with a response frequency equal to 0. In addition, it was necessary to impose constraints to 10 variances and 11 factor loadings.

For the final measurement model, estimated with the three scales, the factor loadings and correlations are presented in Table 2. We emphasize that the loads presented are those between the latent content variable (e.g. meaning of work) and the item utility.

The model with the three scales presented adequate factor loadings. Furthermore, the correlations were lower than the averages of the factor loadings, which indicated evidence of discriminant validity between the latent variables; therefore, it is possible to test a model of mediation between these scales.



**Table 2***Factor Loadings of Items on Meaning of Work (WAMI), Transformational Leadership and Job Performance scales*

Scales	Factor Loadings of Items	
	Utility	Load (SE)
WAMI (1)	T1	0.71 (fixed)
	T2	0.52 (0.07)
	T3	-0.79 (0.14)
	T4	0.71 (fixed)
	T5	-0.94 (0.06)
	T6	0.62 (0.10)
	T7	-0.62 (0.11)
	T8	0.40 (0.07)
	T9	0.60 (0.07)
	T10	0.71 (fixed)
	T11	-0.99 (0.00)
	T12	-0.88 (0.09)
	T13	-0.71 (fixed)
	T14	0.59 (0.14)
	T15	-0.66 (0.18)
Transformational Leadership (2)	T1	0.71 (fixed)
	T2	0.12 (0.05)
	T3	-0.75 (0.08)
	T4	0.71 (fixed)
	T5	0.37 (0.15)
	T6	-0.66 (0.14)
	T10	-0.71 (fixed)
	T11	0.87 (0.06)
	T12	0.79 (0.07)
	T16	0.71 (fixed)
	T17	-0.90 (0.10)
	T18	-0.43 (0.28)
	T19	0.71 (fixed)
	T20	-0.93 (0.04)
T21	-0.96 (0.03)	
T22	-0.71 (fixed)	
T23	0.98 (0.02)	
T24	-0.97 (0.06)	
Correlations		1
1		-
2		0.55
3		0.35
Job Performance (3)	T1	0.29 (0.14)
	T2	0.71 (fixed)
	T3	-0.67 (0.00)
	T4	0.71 (fixed)
	T5	-0.39 (0.00)
	T6	-0.49 (0.12)
	T7	0.71 (fixed)
	T8*	0.00 (fixed)
	T9	-0.27 (0.00)
Correlations	2	3
1	-	-
2	-	-
3	0.21	-

Note: All items had statistical significance  $p < 0.05$ , except item 18 of the Transformational Leadership Scale; T8\*: Neutral Content Item (Item Bug)

It is noteworthy that item 8 (T8) of the work performance scale has neutral content (i.e. it is a bug item), whose wording is 'I prefer to work in tall buildings instead of low ones'. Hence, its factor loading was equal to 0. This item was included in the scale to help identify the model. Small scales tend to present this type of problem in forced-choices questionnaires and the use of neutral items can maximize the difference in factor loadings, thus facilitating the convergence and identification of the model.

## Mediation Model

To test H1, the first model investigated whether transformational leadership worked as an antecedent of job performance. The outcome evidenced the direct and positive effect between leadership and performance ( $\beta = 0.20$ ; S.E. = 0.08;  $p < 0.001$ ; non-standardized regression coefficient), corroborating the proposition of H1.

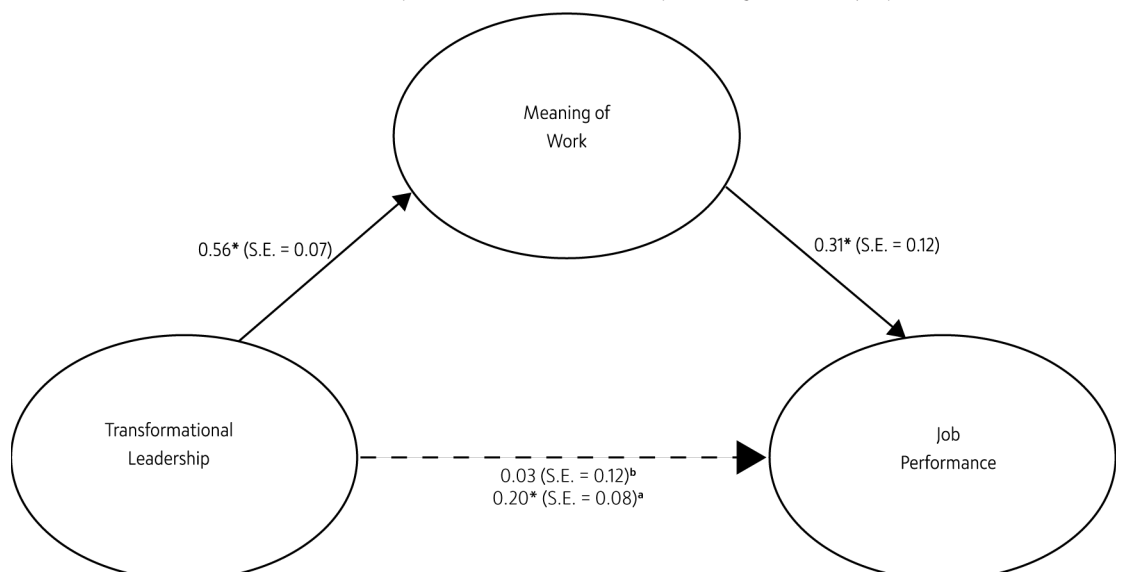
To investigate the hypotheses related to mediation (2, 3 and 4), the second model tested the direct and indirect effects of leadership on performance, including meaning of work. The direct effect between leadership and meaning of work was positive and statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.68$ ; S.E. = 0.12;  $p < 0.001$ , non-standardized coefficient); as well as the direct effect between meaning of work and performance ( $\beta = 0.27$ ; S.E. = 0.01;  $p = 0.01$ ) confirming hypotheses 2 and 3 respectively.

Still in the second model, the indirect effect between leadership and performance, mediated by the meaning of work, was positive and significant ( $\beta = 0.18$ ; S.E. = 0.08;  $p = 0.02$ ). Furthermore, the direct effect was no longer significant ( $\beta = 0.03$ ; S.E. = 0.13;  $p = 0.81$ ), in the presence of the mediating variable meaning of work. The analysis of the specific indirect effect rate showed that the meaning of work explained 86% of the relationship between transformational leadership and job performance. Therefore, it is a full mediation model, confirming hypothesis 4.

To facilitate the interpretation of effect sizes, regression coefficients were standardized and presented in Figure 2. Effects were low to moderate. The indirect effect of transformational leadership on work performance is highlighted, as it is mediated by the meaning of work ( $\beta = 0.17$ ; i.e.  $0.50 * 0.39$ ). Although this effect is low, it represents the best path between leadership and meaning. In other words, leadership does not directly impact performance, but it is able to influence the meaning of work, which, in turn, influences performance.

**Figure 2**

Results of Model 2 that evaluated the relationships of transformational leadership, meaning of work and job performance



Note:  $p < 0.001$ . <sup>a</sup>: values of the relationships between the variables without the mediation of the Meaning of Work; <sup>b</sup>: values of the relationships between the variables with the mediation of the Meaning of Work.

Based on the two models tested, it was observed that higher levels of transformational leadership are associated with the presence of higher levels of meaning of work. In addition, the presence of high levels of meaning of work can contribute to promoting higher levels of job performance.

## Discussion

This study aimed to examine the mediating role of the meaning of work variable in the relationship between leadership and work performance. Four hypotheses were proposed to investigate these relationships.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that transformational leadership would predict higher performance. This hypothesis was confirmed, although the impact of transformational leadership had a minor effect on performance. Confirmation of this Hypothesis is in line with the findings that indicate that the ethical, healthy, respectful, and legal relationship of the transformational leader with his/her subordinates emphasizes job performance. In addition, it corroborates the evidence that the transformational leader drives his/her followers to increase efforts in their tasks through organizational engagement and commitment (Buil et al., 2019).

The characteristics of the sample may have contributed to these results, since public servants act as leaders or heads of sectors for a small period, which on average lasts two years. It is understood that the low magnitude of transformational leadership on performance levels is due to the rotation of existing roles, since the civil servant is a subordinate now, then a boss. Because the public servant performs his role as a leader for a short period of time, his/her impact as a leader who can contribute to increasing the involvement and motivation of subordinates becomes restricted (Frieder et al., 2018; Pradhan & Pradhan, 2016). These findings are in line with studies carried out by Andrade (2020) and Vieira et al. (2011), which show that the relationships of public servants with their work should be reviewed, valuing the particularities associated with the values and the organizational structure of the Brazilian public service.

It was found that transformational leadership was positively associated with the meaning of work, confirming Hypothesis 2. Transformational leaders usually verbalize positive words to their followers about the importance and purpose of their work, providing support to their subordinates and opportunities for them to develop. Due to the support and encouragement for the professional development of those led by the transformational leader, it is observed that transformational leadership is associated with finding a “greater purpose” in work activities. This concept is associated with satisfaction, cohesion, and effort at work, as well as the “greater good” is presented in the dimensions of the meaning of work (Steger et al., 2012).

Considering that the public service encompasses the principles of legality, morality, and efficiency (Vieira et al., 2011), participants perceive the importance and meaning that their work demands for society in general. Especially in a university setting where there is a great expectation from the public and society in general to be able to fill a vacancy to study in public institutions and become a professional.

The findings showed that the presence of supervisors with high levels of transformational leadership can contribute to the promotion of participants’ meaning of work. In this way, it is understood that the civil servants are motivated by a transformational leadership, as they have the opportunity to value the role they play and, consequently, perceive greater meaning in their work (Steger et al., 2012).

It was also found that the meaning of work presented a positive relationship with job performance, as predicted in Hypothesis 3. This result corroborates the findings of Tong (2018) and Harris et al. (2007), who indicate that the perception of the meaning of work helps the individual to better perform his/her tasks. The meaning of work contributes to help professionals to get intensely and positively involved in their work, to be able to dedicate greater levels of energy to the performance of their task (Steger et al., 2012). The professional's dedication to his/her work can help that professional to present higher levels of performance, explaining the positive relationship between the meaning of work and work performance.

The fact that the individuals in the sample of this study had a high level of education may show the responsibility of the participants regarding professional qualification/training, which will result in a better performance of their functions. This level of education provides better individual and collective performance, contributing to the organization. In addition, the high schooling of participants can be understood as indication that they perceive meaning in their work and continue to put efforts in improving their labor skills (Leonardo et al., 2019).

Hypothesis 4 envisaged the mediation of the meaning of work between transformational leadership and job performance. This hypothesis was confirmed, and it was observed a full mediation model, in which the meaning of work mediated 86% of the effects of transformational leadership on work performance. These findings agree with those of Seibert, Wang, and Courtright, (2011), who propose that individuals who feel a meaning in their work activities are able to execute and exceed their goals, in order to obtain a work performance that goes beyond what was proposed to them.

The role of the meaning of work as a total mediator in the transformational leadership relationship with job performance also demonstrates the importance of evaluating work on the meaning of work activities. Job performance is influenced by healthy relationships, with transformational leadership composed of ethical practices, cooperation and achieving goals within a standard of respect and legality (Buil et al., 2019). In this way, professionals who perceive that their supervisors work sharing transformational leadership values, can signify their work in a positive way and, consequently, present high levels of performance at work.

A large number of the sample's individuals had a high level of education, ranging from undergraduate to master's and doctoral levels, besides an average length of service close to 20 years of professional experience. High levels of education and length of service may indicate that these professionals are satisfied with their work activities, demonstrating a high perception of the meaning of work, as described by Steger et al. (2012).

Returning to the results found, it should be noted that the forced-choices scales were a great differential for this study. This is because the instruments used were built to avoid, as much as possible, potential biases associated with the method. Forced-choice scales helped in the precision and adjustments of the instruments, controlling the acquiescence bias, and reducing social desirability. Without this control, the items would be very positive, would be evaluated without precision and without the necessary sensitivity.

## Conclusion

As with all research, this study has its limitations and its methods can be improved. First, the performance variable measured through self-report instruments demonstrates an individual's perceived performance. However, it is noteworthy that the specific literature distinguishes performance (individual perception) from work results. Furthermore, the use of forced-choice

instruments items may have minimized the distortions that would be caused by acquiescence and social desirability.

The second limitation of the study refers to the cross-sectional data collection. This collection method makes it difficult to establish the causal relationship between the variables. A suggestion for future research is to design a longitudinal study, gathering data repeatedly over a period and verifying the existence of causality. Finally, data collection was concentrated exclusively in a public institution in a large center in the Southeast region. It is suggested that future research is dedicated to investigating private organizations that have other distinct characteristics. Also, as a suggestion, future research should assess whether the instruments are susceptible to acquiescence and social desirability, in order to be reliable in the evaluation of the proposed constructs.

This study offers practical implications for managers and organizational leaders as it exposes the pivotal role of transformational leadership in promoting work meaning, as well as the impact of work meaning on job performance. These findings can be used by managers and organizational leaders as guidelines for them to promote employees' search for the perception of the meaning of work, advising and guiding them. Another suggestion for managers is to develop career plans that will stimulate work and satisfy the extrinsic needs of the worker, such as promotions, incentives, and stimulate the perception of the meaning of work and job satisfaction.

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## Contributors

M.G.L. LEONARDO participated in the design of the project, literature review, data collection and analysis, discussion of results and conclusions. M.M. PEREIRA participated in data analysis, discussion of results and review of the article. C.P. P FREITAS was the first author's doctoral advisor and contributed to the review, the design of the project, data analysis, discussion of results and final review of the article. F. VALENTINI was the first author's doctoral academic co-advisor; he participated in the review of the project design, data analysis, discussion of results and final review of the article.