



**UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG**  
**SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW**

# **Job Satisfaction in Dental Practices**

A Qualitative Study on Leadership Activities of  
Dentist Managers

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## **A Qualitative Study on Leadership Activities of Dentist Managers**

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### **Abstract**

The field of management has been emphasized in this qualitative case study, featuring a particular emphasis on the leadership practices of dental managers who do not hold a professional management degree and how these practices affect their staff members' job satisfaction. This study is guided by a research topic that aims to comprehend the relationship that exists between leadership activities and employee job satisfaction in dentistry settings. Through qualitative data collection methods, including interviews with 15 employees and observations of a dental company, this study investigates five key findings: 'flexible working conditions', 'fairness, trust, and respect', 'effective communication', 'recognition and appreciation', and 'manageable workload and realistic expectations'. The analysis is framed within the theoretical lenses of distributed leadership and relational leadership, allowing for a meticulous examination of how these leadership approaches are exhibited within the context of a dental company. The findings reveal that keeping discursiveness and communicating with no boundaries, creating autonomy, building mutual relationships, maintaining work/life balance play crucial roles in contributing positive employee job satisfaction. The discussion emphasizes the unique aspects of the dental settings in the healthcare industry, where managers are deeply involved in day-to-day operations and maintain a high level of interaction with employees. Drawing on the empirical context of the study, the research might help fill previous studies' neglect by exploring the practical implications of leadership theories within a specific healthcare industry context and emphasizing the relevance of understanding and applying tailored leadership approaches to enhance organizational effectiveness, particularly job satisfaction.

### **Keywords**

Dentist Managers, Clinician Managers, Healthcare Managers, Managers without Formal Management Education, Dental Industry, Leadership Activities, Clinician Leaders, Clinician Leadership, Distributed Leadership, Relational Leadership

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## 1. Introduction

Formal management training/education refers to management knowledge and competencies developed through university programs or research institutes, such as MBA and MSc. in Management (Lehene, 2021). Management education seems to be an important driver of better management practices and better organizational outcomes (Valero, 2021). However, in various industries, experts, such as lawyers and engineers, often come into the managerial roles without formal management education. This trend is particularly prevalent in the healthcare sector, and many doctors are assigned to managerial positions as a part of their career development (Jankelová, 2020). In the case of dentist managers, they often maintain their roles as experts even after transitioning to managerial positions. Therefore, their clinical expertise converges with their managerial responsibilities (Craven, 2017).

Dentist managers, most of the time, get leadership roles without having a traditional and formal management education since, in dental schools, dental students are taught to deliver patient care as a core component of their clinical training (Allen, 2019). However, according to research, leadership training in dentistry is equally as important as gaining clinical skills (Bedi & Wordley, 2019). Therefore, over the last decade, leadership has become an important area of discovery in dentistry (Hanks et al., 2020).

Dentist managers, who hold leadership roles without having formal management training, aim to effectively manage a complex landscape where their decisions significantly impact their teams. As a result, dentist managers' actions might have an influence on the job satisfaction of their teams.

As a concept, job satisfaction is highly debated in literature. Understanding job satisfaction is important to discover more about employee well-being and the effectiveness of organizational outcomes. Job satisfaction is defined as the positive emotional state, which is a result of job experience or job appraisal (Locke, 1969). As expected, job satisfaction is affected by several factors ranging from job security, work flexibility, and interpersonal relationships (Aman-Ullah et al., 2021; Davidescu et al., 2020). In the context of healthcare, where the demands of patient care intersect with the complexities of administrative duties, creating a culture of job satisfaction among healthcare professionals becomes important to achieve optimal patient outcomes, patient satisfaction, and organizational success (Richter et al., 2016). Moreover, previous research has demonstrated the profound impact of job satisfaction on various organizational outcomes in different industries. For instance, studies conducted by Judge et al. (2001) revealed that there are robust associations between job satisfaction and organizational commitment, turnover intentions, and job performance. Similarly, for the healthcare sector, studies have consistently linked job satisfaction among healthcare professionals to improved patient satisfaction, enhanced clinical outcomes, and greater organizational commitment (Lu et al., 2019; Tummers et al., 2013).

In the context of dental practices, in order to influence job satisfaction of their teams, dentist managers play a crucial role by shaping the work environment and work culture. However, dentist managers may lack the theoretical foundation, formal education, and structured training

associated with their leadership roles (Clay-Williams et al., 2017). Instead of having management education, their leadership journey is often associated with experiential learning, on-the-job training, and mentorship from senior colleagues (Jankelová et al., 2022). The lack of formal training creates problems, and dentist managers confront a unique set of obstacles, such as challenges regarding personnel management, financial issues, and strategic decision-making (Nene et al., 2020; Clay-Williams et al., 2017). Nevertheless, every action that they take, their communication style, and leadership approach significantly influence the experiences and satisfaction levels of dental professionals under their supervision (Richter et al., 2016).

Concerning the importance of management training for dentist managers, this study aims to understand the practical significance of management training for these professionals. It also investigates the role of leadership activities of dentist managers in relation to employee job satisfaction. Thus, the research question is:

*What is the role of leadership activities of dentist managers in relation to job satisfaction of their employees?*

To understand this, a case study is done on a Turkish dental clinic with fifteen employees and two branches in Ankara, Turkey.

### **Problematization**

While there is extensive research on leadership and job satisfaction in general, studies specifically focusing on the dental industry are limited. This study aims to find out the discrepancies between previous studies and real-world practice regarding the importance of management training. Through exploring dynamics in a dental clinic setting, the study may help to show insights that are specific to the dental industry.

Existing literature often emphasizes the importance of formal managerial training for effective leadership. However, this study challenges that notion by examining how dentist managers, who typically lack formal managerial training, may successfully influence their employees' job satisfaction. Through focusing on dentist managers' leadership activities, this study highlights alternative pathways to effective leadership and tries to find out practical leadership strategies that dentist managers use to improve job satisfaction. By documenting these strategies, this study offers insights that can be applied in similar dental settings and bridges the gap between theory and practice.

By conducting a single case study at a dental clinic, this study analyzes the specific circumstances and challenges faced by the clinic. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how leadership activities are tailored to fit the unique needs of a dental clinic, addressing the inconsistency of applying generalized leadership models to a specialized industry. Moreover, while there is substantial research on dental leadership, the use of distributed and relational leadership lenses as theoretical frameworks is relatively limited. Although these contemporary leadership approaches are known to be effective, they are still

not widely practiced in the dental field. Therefore, this study aims to show the applicability of these modern leadership theories within a dental setting and offer a fresh perspective on how dentist managers can improve employee job satisfaction through these less commonly used leadership styles.

## **Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis is structured as follows: The previous research provides an overview of the importance of management training and its impact on job satisfaction. The theoretical framework discusses leadership theories, with a focus on relational and distributed leadership models. The methodology section outlines the research aims, data collection methods, analysis techniques, and ethical considerations. In the empirical section, data from a selected company is presented to illustrate how dentist managers' leadership activities influence their teams' job satisfaction. The discussion connects theoretical concepts to empirical findings, highlighting how leadership theories could be used to understand the actions of dentist managers. Finally, the conclusion offers managerial implications and suggestions for future research.

## **2. Previous Research**

In the constantly changing and demanding landscape of healthcare, healthcare professionals are often assigned to leadership roles without having formal management training (Clay-Williams et al., 2017). Moreover, the hierarchical structure of healthcare systems are different than that of regular business systems, prioritizing clinical healthcare expertise over management skills (Shanafelt et al., 2015; Clay-Williams et al., 2017). This situation often causes healthcare managers to be less-prepared for their leadership roles (Clay-Williams et al., 2017; Hamric et al., 2014). However, these clinician-managers are still required to have managerial skills in order to achieve better organizational performance (Fanelli et al., 2022). Therefore, management training is important for them (Berggren & Söderlund, 2011).

The need for management training extends to dentist managers as well. Leadership qualities and managerial skills are important in dentistry (Antoniadou, 2022). However, most dentists graduate without the necessary management skills to lead their teams effectively (Victoroff et al., 2009). Consequently, these dentists often start their own practices and lead their teams without basic management knowledge and skills (Taichman et al., 2012). Dentist managers rarely pursue formal management training and typically develop their managerial skills through personal experience and trial and error (Chilcutt, 2009; Taichman et al., 2012).

Management training is beneficial for all healthcare managers in various ways. It equips healthcare managers with essential leadership and managerial skills, such as decision making, effective communication and conflict management (Jankelová et al., 2022). With the help of management education, healthcare managers can improve team cohesion, employee engagement, organizational performance, and organizational outcomes in healthcare settings (Shanafelt et al., 2015; West et al., 2015; Lall et al., 2021). Moreover, healthcare managers with appropriate knowledge and skills in management tend to create supportive and peaceful work environments, promote professional and career development for their employees, and recognize

employee contributions, leading to greater job satisfaction among healthcare staff (Lall et al., 2021; Goh et al., 2018).

On the other hand, lack of management training may result in role ambiguity, job stress, and confusion among healthcare professionals (Nene et al., 2020). Healthcare professionals lacking management skills may struggle to navigate managerial and financial responsibilities and decisions, leading to frustration, confusion, interpersonal conflicts, and decreased job satisfaction (Rice et al., 2016; Nene et al., 2020).

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework aims to understand the complicated relationship between dentist managers' leadership activities and employee job satisfaction. This part of the thesis will explore various lenses to examine leadership in dental settings. Building on insights from the literature review about leadership in dental settings and the challenges of transitioning to managerial roles, this framework will investigate further leadership theories. By tracing ontological changes in leadership theories, it aims to understand how they relate to job satisfaction, focusing on 'relational leadership' and 'distributed leadership'. This integration will provide a comprehensive understanding of how dentist managers' leadership activities in relation to job satisfaction.

#### **3.1. Leadership Studies**

Understanding the development of leadership studies from the past to present and how they laid the groundwork for modern theories is crucial. These studies shifted from putting emphasis on 'great' leaders' traits to leader-follower interactions, and then to a more horizontal and processual understanding. Contemporary approaches such as Relational Leadership and Distributed Leadership now emphasize daily interactions, shared responsibilities, and leadership as a social process, preparing every individual to take on responsibility when needed.

Leadership is a multifaceted socially constructed phenomenon that involves individuals influencing others in different environments (Jackson & Parry 2018). The perception and interpretation of leadership are heavily influenced by societal norms and values, and its comprehension varies significantly based on the theoretical lenses and analytical methods applied in its examination (Collinson et al., 2018; Jackson & Parry, 2018). Leadership phenomenon is observable across a wide range of contexts, including organizational dynamics, everyday interactions, and cultural depictions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Jackson & Parry, 2018). In regards to organizational dynamics, Jackson and Parry (2018) state that all leadership approaches serve as the driving force that ensures that corporate management operates efficiently in pursuit of the organization's goals and aspirations. Furthermore, all leadership theories provide valuable insights into how individuals influence and guide others to accomplish tasks and objectives within organizations (Collinson et al., 2018).

The phenomenon of leadership, which began to be theorized in the 19th century, initially adopted a leader-centered approach, focusing on individual characteristics in line with the concept of romanticism, a reaction to industrialization (Collinson et al., 2018; Jackson & Parry,

2018). Early theories, such as Carlyle's "Great Man" theory, posited that some individuals were inherently born as leaders, with followers being seen as passive actors (Jackson & Parry, 2018). However, this perspective proved insufficient, leading to a shift towards follower-centric theories in the early 20th century, recognizing followers as active agents of the organizations who shape and influence leaders (Baker, 2007; Collinson et al., 2018).

### **3.2. Evolution of Leadership Theories**

Early leadership theories were leader-centric, focusing on the inherent traits of leaders, exemplified by Carlyle's "Great Man" theory (Collinson et al., 2018). These theories assumed leaders were born, not made, ignoring followers' roles and identity (Jackson & Parry, 2018). As the limitations of leader-centric approaches became evident, theories began to incorporate the role of followers (Collinson, 2006). This shift emphasized followers' identities and their dynamic interactions with leaders, leading to a collaborative understanding of leadership (Collinson, 2006; Jackson & Parry, 2018). After the leader-follower identity and bilateral communication, the development of situational theories occurred. Contingent leadership asserts that leaders must adapt their approach to align with followers' needs and the organizational context (Vroom & Jago, 2007). These models consider both leader qualities and situational dynamics, with leaders adjusting their style based on followers' maturity and ability and try to balance their activities task or person-orientation (Vroom & Jago, 2007).

In the modern era, the introduction of transformational and transactional leadership theories marked another significant shift. James Macgregor Burns' Transactional Leadership involves the exchange and recognition of followers' needs, while Bernard Bass' transformational leadership focuses on cooperation, collective effort, appeals to a higher purpose, where leaders use charisma and inspiration to motivate employees, enhancing engagement, performance, commitment, and trust (Avolio et al., 2004). Using the charismatic trait of leader has still impact on transformational approach that it used for motivation of the followers demonstrates that traditional to post-heroic modern leadership theories has still connection partially (Avolio et al., 2004). Transactional leadership prioritizes rewarding employees for their performance and penalizing them for errors, emphasizing daily task-oriented operations and organizational productivity (McCleskey, 2014). On the contrary, transformational leadership emphasizes motivation, team cohesion, and broader goals like company growth and vision while upholding moral responsibilities (Bass, 1990). Transformational leadership perspectives inspire and motivate their followers to achieve higher levels of performance, boosting trust and loyalty, and enriching creativity and dedication among employees (Jackson & Parry, 2018). They focus on building strong relationships and shared visions, aiming to collaboratively achieve organizational objectives, unlike transactional leadership, which relies on exchange such as incentives and penalties to drive results (McCleskey, 2014).

As seen from the examples, leadership theories have evolved over time and are not entirely separate from one another. Instead, each development and change in perspective has contributed to the emergence of modern approaches like distributed and relational leadership. This shifting in the leadership phenomenon over time, with the 21st century, helped interdependency and plurality in relations emerge as paramount factors and contemporary post-heroic theories such

as distributed leadership and relational leadership have emerged (Jackson & Parry, 2018). Plurality in theoretical, methodological, and empirical research in relation to the Leadership phenomenon leads to decentralized organizational structure perspectives and increased emphasis on more collectivistic approaches (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011).

### **3.3. Relational Leadership and Distributed Leadership Models**

Relational leadership theory, introduced by Cunliffe & Eriksen (2011), roots leadership in daily interactions and responsiveness within relationships. It highlights leaders' moral obligations to others and acknowledges the diversity in leadership dynamics. This theory challenges conventional norms by prioritizing collaboration, empathy, trust, and empowerment, strengthening a non-hierarchical/horizontal and distributed leadership model throughout organizations (Uhl-Bien, 2006). It calls for empirical investigation into daily leadership practices at both micro and macro levels in the organizational aspects (Crevani et al., 2010).

Relational leadership emphasizes the ethical and dialogical dimensions of leadership, drawing from Ricouer's concept of ethical selfhood and Bakhtin's ideas on dialogism (Uhl-Bien, 2006). It sensitizes leaders to their interactions and encourages reflection and ethical conduct. Despite this, many contemporary approaches overlook the significance of everyday leadership experiences (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Relational leadership separates leadership from managerial and hierarchical roles, emphasizing communication as a relational process rather than a structured system (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Leaders prioritize open dialogue, respect for differences, and accountability in their interactions. Additionally, the constructionist perspective views leadership as emerging from communicative actions and collective meaning-making in interdependent contexts (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). It focuses on relational processes and joint practices among social actors to shape and transform social order (Crevani et al., 2010). Relational leadership theory from this perspective stresses the importance of relational dynamics and joint practices in shaping and transforming social order (Crevani et al., 2010; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Lastly, Cleary et al. (2018) emphasize the significance of relational leadership in encouraging effective team engagements and building trust among actors within organizations. They note that bureaucratic management and accountability processes often constrain relational leadership, punctuating the need for higher-level managers to address these constraints to enhance health system governance. In conclusion, as Maritsa et al. (2022) state, leadership transcends hierarchy, embodying the relational dynamics that unfold within organizational contexts and shaping evolutionary organizational processes. Secondly, Distributed leadership extends beyond traditional leader-centric or follower-centric approaches by reshaping the hierarchical boundaries between leaders and followers (Bolden, 2011; Jackson & Parry, 2018). It conceptualizes leadership as a collective social process, where responsibilities and decision-making are distributed across the team or organization, rather than concentrated solely in formal managerial roles (Jackson & Parry, 2018). This model emphasizes shared vision, providing leadership opportunities for all, relational trust, and supportive structures (Denee & Thornton, 2017). While Distributed Leadership enhances employee satisfaction and involvement, its implementation in healthcare can be challenging due to hierarchical structures and external pressures (Günzel-Jensen et al., 2018).



A significant aspect of Distributed Leadership is the empowerment of staff who may lack formal authority yet gain power through their contributions to leadership tasks (Lumby, 2013). Distributed Leadership in many industry settings has shown promise, with positional leaders fostering collaboration and professional growth through mentorship and vision-setting (Denee & Thornton, 2017). However, Bolden (2011) suggests that despite its advancements, Distributed Leadership's popularity remains limited to specific geographic and sector areas. Bolden (2011) also put emphasis on distributed leadership may have negative impacts on team performance by dispersing responsibility and reducing stability and this model of leadership effectiveness depends on connecting with leadership practitioners' experiences and addressing power imbalances within organizations.

In dental industry, transformational which is mostly used in leadership approach, inspires vision and enriches commitment, facilitates Distributed Leadership, while transactional leadership, focused on rewards and corrective actions, has a weaker association with Distributed Leadership (Günzel-Jensen et al., 2018). Transformational leadership aligns with distributed leadership by promoting shared purpose and collaboration (Günzel-Jensen et al., 2018). Similarly, the relational dynamics emphasized in transformational leadership complement the interpersonal focus of Relational Leadership, advancing trust and mutual respect within teams. On the other hand, transactional leadership, with its emphasis on structured rewards and penalties, tends to align less with the fluid and shared nature of Distributed and Relational Leadership, as it reinforces hierarchical structures rather than dismantling them (Jackson & Parry, 2018). Empowering leaders plays a crucial role in promoting Distributed Leadership, particularly during organizational change. However, efficacy beliefs may not always translate into willingness to engage in Distributed Leadership, highlighting the complexities of its implementation in healthcare settings (Günzel-Jensen et al., 2018).

In conclusion, we anticipate that the selected leadership models of 'relational leadership' and 'distributed leadership' will establish a strong foundation for comprehending our thesis study and yield valuable insights into the role of leadership activities of dentist managers in relation to job satisfaction of their employees. Unlike the traditional examination of the ongoing manager-employee relationship as a historical process, we posit that these contemporary leadership models will aid in understanding how dental professionals provide job satisfaction to their employees, even in the absence of formal management training. We expect that these new leadership perspectives, which transcend the limited roles and responsibilities of previous paradigms and emphasize collective consciousness and vision, ability to effectively manage and motivate their teams through relational dynamics and management skills will construct a more suitable theoretical framework for our single case study. This framework is aimed at providing a comprehensive understanding and clarifying job satisfaction of employees in dental settings. Moreover, we affirm that these lenses present an opportunity to contribute to overlooked areas in the healthcare industry, particularly in dental settings, and lay a solid groundwork for our research. Through our qualitative research, the selection of Dental T company and the execution of a single case study will align with this framework, enabling a deeper exploration of the experiences and perspectives of dental professionals and offering insights into the practical application of these theories in real-world scenarios.

## **4. Methodology**

This component of the study includes comprehensive descriptions of the organization that is the subject of the investigation, as well as the methodology that was applied. The methodology includes the particulars of data collection techniques and analysis procedures. In addition, the study's limitations are thoroughly examined and ethical issues controlling the research procedure are explicitly clarified.

### **4.1. Introduction to Case Company Dental T**

Dental T is a dental health organization that has grown significantly since its establishment as a single branch in 2019. Founded by individuals actively engaged in practical dental operations, Dental T has integrated modern dental technologies into its infrastructure. Currently, Dental T has two operational branches, with a third under construction, and is led by four full-time owners and a team of fifteen employees. Three founding managers oversee operations at the Çankaya branch, while the fourth manages the Sincan branch. The organization adheres to European and international hygiene standards (ISO/TC 106) and has established itself within the international dentistry community/World Dental Federation (FDI). Dental T emphasizes patient and employee safety and satisfaction, maintaining ethical standards and incorporating scientific advancements in its oral and dental health services. The clinic offers a wide range of services provided by professionals, including Pediatric Dentistry, Aesthetic Dentistry, Orthodontics, Implantology, Bleaching, Dental Prostheses, Periodontology, Oral Diagnosis & Radiology, and Filling and Conservative Dental Treatment.

### **4.2. Research Design**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the role of leadership activities performed by dentist managers in relation to the job satisfaction of their employees. Through understanding the perspectives of both employees and management, the study aims to identify effective leadership strategies that enhance job satisfaction of the employees. The dental field was chosen due to its distinctive characteristics compared to other industries, as detailed in the introduction and previous studies sections.

To address this research question, an instrumental qualitative case study was conducted at Dental T. A significant advantage of using a qualitative methodology is the ability to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2017; Flyvbjerg, 2006; Silverman, 2022). Additionally, qualitative methods are particularly suited for capturing insights into individuals' perspectives (Silverman, 2022). Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019) and Gibbert and Ruigrok (2010) further assert that conducting case studies as a qualitative method provide researchers with comprehensive and detailed views of the specific phenomenon under study. Moreover, Stake (2000) advises against the overemphasis on generalization in qualitative research. The author warns that an excessive focus on generalizable findings can detract from crucial aspects necessary for understanding the case. The author argues that generalizations made from comparing multiple cases may be less reliable than those derived from an in-depth examination of a single case. Single-case analyses offer detailed insights into specific circumstances, thereby enhancing reliability (Stake, 2000). Therefore, because of primary goal

is not to compare industries or make generalizations, on the contrary, to create in-depth knowledge and to enhance reliability (Bell et al., 2019); the decision to conduct a single case study at Dental T is appropriate for the optimal extraction of information.

### **4.3. Data Collection**

Before initiating the data collection process, clear objectives were defined to specify the information intended to be acquired through interviews and field observations (Silverman, 2022).

In January-February 2024, before the interviews and observations, we initially carried out a pre-study for three weeks in which we conducted 4 meetings with the company owners/managers. Knowing the owners of the company allowed us to reach these meetings, which led to data being accessible. Since we, as researchers, are far from the dental industry due to our education, these meetings helped us understand the dental industry a little more deeply. After the meetings, we started to learn about the company's business approach in dental settings, ways of doing business, and the mindsets of dental healthcare providers. For our specific study, we collected primary data through conducting interviews and observations (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### **4.4. Interviews**

According to Silverman (2022), interviews are considered the most suitable methodology for gathering relevant information. Utilizing semi-structured interviews allows us to inquire about participants' perceptions and potentially exhibit insightful information that may not have been anticipated beforehand (Bell et al., 2019). Open-ended questions facilitate a free, natural, and descriptive dialogue with interviewees which was considered crucial to provide the opportunity to communicate in their most comfortable manner, while also providing a structured framework to ensure discussions remain focused on the relevant topic (Silverman, 2022). We conducted interviews over a two-month period in February and March 2024. During this time, we interviewed all 15 individuals at Dental T, including both managerial and subordinate positions via Zoom and Google Meeting. All interviews are recorded. Our semi-structured interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Turkish, the native language of both the interviewees and the interviewers. However, due to the interviews being translated from Turkish to English, there may be a perceived more formality. This was an unavoidable aspect of the process. Despite our best efforts, some nuances may have been lost in translation. Moreover, even though the interviews were semi-structured, the interview questions were shared with the clinic staff beforehand. As a result, the staff were prepared for the interview, leading to the use of more formal language. Finally, given the small size of the clinic, employees may have been conscious of who provided which responses, potentially leading to more formal and cautious answers in order to remain anonymous. Because of that, we are cognizant of potential biases in the responses.

### **4.5. Observations**

In addition to the information obtained from the interviews, we, as researchers, also had the opportunity to make observations in the field. One of our researchers had the opportunity to go

to Turkey in February 2024 and observe the Dental T company for 3 weeks, with the company's permission. She had a chance to have a total of 144 hours of observation experience, 8 hours a day, 6 days a week. Observations allowed us to see the relationship between company managers/owners and employees, their ways of doing business, and their communication. Observations enabled us to gain the deepest insights into the research phenomenon (Silverman, 2022) within dental settings. Additional information from observations improved our data collection process and strengthened our understanding of the findings (Silverman, 2022).

#### **4.6. Data Analysis, Limitations of the Study, and Ethical Considerations**

Examining articles and conducting document research served as an initial phase of the study, providing us with preliminary insights into dentistry. Secondary data was gathered through Google Scholar and the Gothenburg Library to access scientifically validated studies relevant to the topic, ensuring the study's accuracy and content (Silverman, 2022). This preliminary study not only informed our literature review but also guided the interviews conducted during the research process.

The qualitative data analysis process aimed to identify patterns, themes, and insights from the collected data, contributing to a deeper understanding of the research topic (Burnard et al., 2008; Silverman, 2022). Transcriptions were promptly completed after each interview or observation, ensuring that no important detail was missed. These transcriptions were done in Turkish to maintain accuracy, preserve the essence of the information, and minimize translation risks. Qualitative data analysis, as recommended by Bryman & Bell (2011) and Burnard et al. (2008), involved coding and thematic analysis. This approach facilitated the identification of patterns and themes in the collected data. Following transcription, the data underwent content or thematic analysis, guided by Silverman's (2022) suggestions. Thematic analysis enabled us to perceive recurring descriptive patterns in interview narratives, essential for understanding the data comprehensively (Bell et al., 2019; Silverman, 2022).

Thematic analysis was particularly suitable given the common opinions and concepts expressed by dental healthcare providers in their narratives. If there were failure to utilize thematic analysis, it could have resulted in the loss of critical insights. Through coding, common thoughts and insights from the transcriptions were condensed into 35 initial codes, progressively reduced to 20, and eventually to 5 codes, representing shared patterns. These codes were then transformed into themes based on insights from interviews, facilitating the discovery of findings (Silverman, 2022).

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Flexible Schedule	<b>Flexible Working Conditions</b>
Work-life Balance	
Alternative Arrangements	
Adaptability to Circumstances	
Open and Direct Dialogue	<b>Effective Communication</b>
Clear Instructions	
Team Collaboration	
Active Listening	
Verbal Praise	<b>Recognition and Appreciation</b>
Acknowledgment of Achievements	
Celebration Success	
Appreciation of Efforts and Dedication	
Mutual Respect	<b>Fairness, Trust, and Respect</b>
Trust Among Employees	
Transparent Decision-making	
Equality	
Resource Allocation	<b>Manageable Workload and Realistic Expectations</b>
Realistic Goal Setting	
Clarity on Job Expectations	
Workload Management	

*Figure 1: Data Coding Scheme*

Our study acknowledges several limitations and ethical considerations that may have influenced the research outcomes. Using a pseudonym such as "Dental T" for a company in a thesis is a standard procedure intended to maintain confidentiality, meet with ethical standards, and enhance the ability to apply study findings (Silverman, 2022). One of our researchers' pre-existing knowledge regarding the company and personal acquaintance with one of the owners may have influenced preconceptions about our research on employee satisfaction within the dental clinic and may have introduced biases into the study. Moreover, both authors share similar perspectives on the impact of dental managers' actions and decisions on their teams' job satisfaction, which might have contributed to preconceived notions. Secondly, in qualitative research, determining the appropriate sample size can be challenging. As noted by Bryman (2012), there are no fixed guidelines for estimating the number of interviews required before data collection. Additionally, Morse (1995) highlights the absence of clear references for determining sample size in qualitative research. Moreover, while conducting this study, we were aware that some of the interviewees may not feel equally comfortable when it comes to share perceptions and experiences, so we were aware of this situation and firstly offer to anonymity to subordinates of the company in order to avoid power asymmetry between the interviewer and interviewees (Kvale, 2006). Ensuring anonymity for participants was a priority, thus we did not use the real name of the interviewees, but offering % 100 anonymity might not be guaranteed (Silverman, 2022) in order to consider the size of the company. Because of that,

the overwhelmingly positive responses observed in interviews may reflect genuine employee satisfaction or a desire to portray a positive clinic image, given its small size and potential lack of anonymity. However, complete anonymity for employees cannot be guaranteed in such settings, potentially influencing responses. It is important to note that these responses represent perspectives shared during interviews rather than an objective assessment of the clinic's environment. To ensure the credibility of our findings, several measures were implemented. Following Burnard et al.'s (2008) recommendation, interviewees were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts. Moreover, summaries of the findings were provided to each interviewee for confirmation. Throughout the research process, information gathered from interviews and observations was meticulously compared and contrasted to validate our findings, aligning with Silverman's (2022) guidance on qualitative research methodology. Feedback from participants was sought to further enhance the accuracy and credibility of our study.

In conclusion, it is crucial to consider the possibility of biased responses, particularly given their positive appearances. Future research may benefit from conducting observations over a longer period to provide more realistic outcomes regarding job satisfaction and leadership activities. However, due to study time constraints, this extended observation period was not feasible.

## **5. Empirical Section**

This section presents findings gathered from Dental T, categorized into 5 themes. The first theme discusses the importance of flexible working conditions for dental employees. The second theme elaborates on the significance of fairness, trust, and respect exhibited by dentist managers. Subsequently, the third theme explains the need for direct, clear, and effective communication. The fourth theme highlights the importance of manageable workloads and realistic expectations for dental employees. Lastly, the fifth theme focuses on the recognition and appreciation provided by dentist managers.

### **5.1. Flexible Working Conditions**

Flexible working conditions refer to arrangements allowing employees to have more control over the amount, timing, or location of their work hours. These arrangements help employees balance the demands of their work and nonwork hours more effectively, have work-life balance, and improve overall job satisfaction (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). However, in a dental clinic, achieving a 100% flexible schedule may not be feasible. In order to enhance job satisfaction at the clinic and meet the diverse needs of the employees, the dentist managers have implemented some strategies to improve flexibility regarding working hours.

One strategy employed by the dentist managers is to permit employees to leave work early when there are no patients at the clinic after a certain time, usually around 4:00 PM or 5:00 PM, even though the clinic remains open until 7:00 PM. The managers believe that this strategy serves as a significant motivator for the employees and greatly enhances the employees' job satisfaction and happiness. We see that employees of the clinic are happy with this flexibility

as the managers anticipate. All employees of the clinic expressed that they felt genuinely happy about leaving work early from time to time.

Yesterday, I was able to go home at 4.30 pm, because my manager told me that I could finish work at 4.00 pm. It was great and really made me happy. Since I left early, I was able to spend more time with my daughter. I do not have a lot of time to spend with my daughter during the weekdays. Thus, going home early was the greatest gift for me. When I came to the clinic this morning, I appreciated that I had a job like this, which kept me motivated all the time. (Dental Hygienist 1)

Similar to the statement above, all the clinic employees highlighted the importance of flexibility and adaptable working conditions for them. Moreover, all the employees explicitly said that having flexibility at work was an incredible opportunity for someone working at a dental clinic.

The clinic has been really busy lately, and we have been working hard to serve our patients. Leaving work early gives me extra time for rest and hobbies, which is truly motivating. Many of my dentist friends do not have this opportunity. As one of the dentists here, I always try to keep a smile on my face and ensure that our patients feel comfortable during the procedures. And, I must tell you that my job satisfaction fuels my motivation and performance. (Dentist 4)

Another significant strategy employed by the managers is allowing employees to job share. In certain circumstances, employees have the option to arrange coverage for their responsibilities when necessary and feasible, allowing them to be absent from the clinic. Furthermore, job sharing is employee-led, meaning that there is additional flexibility in scheduling and responsibilities. However, we understand that the employees need to have effective communication and coordination between each other to ensure smooth functioning and continuity of their role.

I am grateful for the managers who allow us to run our important errands and take time off when it is necessary for us. They understand our needs and offer support. Recently, I had to go to the bank at 8.00 AM, but my shift starts at 8. I asked the dental hygienist, who was free at 8.00 AM, to cover for me. It was completely fine for my manager, and she covered for me. Moreover, I did not have to compensate for the lost time. Having flexible managers is vital to me. It brings happiness to our workplace and is the main reason why I do not want to look for another job. It increases satisfaction from my job a lot. (Dental Receptionist 1)

These statements indicate that the employees perceive flexibility at work as important and influential on their job satisfaction. We observe that the clinic managers recognize this importance and try to provide flexibility within the clinic's constraints. However, considering the size of the clinic, offering financial rewards is not likely. Thus, managers believe that providing work flexibility, in the absence of substantial financial rewards, significantly contributes to job satisfaction.

Since it is not a super big clinic, as the managers, we cannot offer a lot of financial rewards and incentives to our employees to increase their job satisfaction. However, flexibility is something that we can offer and that can greatly contribute to our employees' job satisfaction. (Manager 1)

## 5.2. Fairness, Trust, and Respect

Trust and respect are important components of a highly functioning workplace. According to Hungerford and Cleary (2021) building trust and respect in the workplace by treating all the employees with fairness and respect creates a high trust work environment. When employees feel trusted and respected by their managers and colleagues, they are more likely to have loyalty, dedication, high performance, and high job satisfaction (Hungerford & Cleary, 2021). At Dental T, we see that dentist managers are aware of the importance of building trust in the work environment and showing respect to all the employees. Therefore, the managers mention that they always treat the employees with fairness and respect. Since dentist managers lack formal management education, they mostly rely on their intuition and ethical values to guide interactions with clinic staff and maintain fairness.

I may lack formal management education, but I rely on my intuition and ethical values to guide my interactions with clinic staff. Maintaining fairness is essential to me. It means that no employee should feel unfairly treated or marginalized. Compromising fairness is something that I cannot reconcile with my conscience. It is crucial for me to ensure that our employees perceive and experience fairness, as this improves trust in the clinic. (Manager 3)

We see that establishing a culture of respect and fairness is crucial for building trust and improving collaboration in the clinic. Thus, irrespective of employees' role or background, the managers aim to prioritize fair and respectful treatment for all the employees. Additionally, managers' previous personal and professional experiences, including instances of working under unfair leadership, drive their commitment to fairness, trust, and respect.

I treat all employees with respect and fairness, regardless of their role or background. Establishing a culture of respect and fairness promotes trust and collaboration among the clinic staff. Moreover, fairness is essential for clinic morale. Without it, employees will not thrive here. I, personally, have experienced how detrimental an unfair and disrespectful manager can be, which even fuels my commitment to fairness. When I used to work for a big dental clinic, my boss did not respect me, and he was definitely not a fair person. So, I know how it feels to have an unfair and disregarded manager. My aim is never to be a manager like that. (Manager 2)

During the field observations, we noticed that the employees at Dental T, who have been working together since the clinic's establishment in 2019, function like a tight-knit family. Consequently, trust plays a pivotal role in workplace relationships. Therefore, we think that it is crucial for the managers to demonstrate this trust to their employees and maintain consistency between their words and actions.

To be honest, I may not be good at making financial and accounting decisions, but I always prioritize treating employees with trustworthiness, respect, and fairness. Consistency between my words and actions builds credibility and fosters trust among us. Our small team operates like a family, making trust even more critical. I must also mention that I demonstrate my trust in each team member, knowing they are capable and committed of delivering excellent patient care at the clinic. I know that it makes our team members happy and proud that I show my trust in them. (Manager 1)

According to the interviews and observations, clinic employees appreciate their managers' fairness and efforts to create a culture of trust and respect. Moreover, we see that Dental T's



commitment to fairness, trust, and respect improves a cohesive, supportive workplace where employees feel valued, respected, and motivated to excel. According to us, the clinic staff feel really trusted to make decisions and take ownership of their work, with support and guidance available when needed. Based on trust, the employees feel that they have autonomy and decision-making authority within their areas of responsibility, which improves confidence, job satisfaction, and happiness at the workplace.

Our managers never make me feel bad about my thoughts and decisions at work. They trust us in our work and show that to us. Moreover, they always listen to each of us and value our ideas and thoughts, meaning that they show great respect to us. Furthermore, they do not only listen to us, but they also hear us, which makes me feel really valued. They also give us autonomy and decision-making authority within the areas of our responsibility, making me feel confident and satisfied about my job. They trust us to make decisions and take ownership of our work, and provide support and guidance whenever needed. (Dentist 2)

As we expect, the management's approach to the clinic employees creates a sense of value among the clinic staff. Moreover, the managers are perceived as colleagues rather than hierarchical figures, creating a supportive and respectful environment akin to a second home. We can see that all these factors significantly boost job satisfaction.

As a dental assistant, I feel valued here. I have had this job since this clinic was first founded in 2019. However, this is not my first job. Before having this job, I changed two jobs and was not happy. The main reason is that my bosses were terrible and that they made me feel awful about how I did my job. Their ego went through the roof. They used to treat their employees as if their employees were silly and useless. There was no respect. Moreover, they were not fair either. They used to favor some employees and explicitly show which employees they favored. I can say that it is not good to feel disrespected and undervalued. But now, the situation is completely different. I have bosses who are truly fair and respectful. As a matter of fact, our managers are not like managers. They are our colleagues at work. Even though they have managerial roles at the clinic, they like showing their clinician side more, meaning that there is no hierarchy. Our clinic is like my second home. It increases my job satisfaction every single day. (Dental Assistant 2)

Similar to the statement above, all the employees put emphasis on the fact that their managers create a family-like and supportive work environment. We observe that this work environment increases overall happiness and satisfaction at the workplace.

Our managers' fairness and care create a family-like atmosphere, boosting trust and respect among our team members. Our trustworthy managers and colleagues contribute to a supportive work environment that feels like a second home. Therefore, every morning, I come to the clinic with full of energy and desire to work like a champion. My job satisfaction is always high. (Dentist 4)

### **5.3. Effective Communication**

Effective communication is the process of explaining information, ideas, and thoughts in a clear, direct, concise, and understandable manner to achieve a desired outcome. It involves accurately transmitting a message from one person to another. The aim is to ensure that the message is understood and interpreted by the recipient in the intended way (Fashiku, 2017). In line with this, dentist managers at Dental T believe that clear, direct, and respectful communication between managers and employees ensures that everyone is well-informed about

objectives, tasks, goals, and expectations. According to the managers, this facilitates smooth clinic operations. We see that the employees acknowledge and are satisfied with the management's approach.

Our managers are naturally very good at communication. Even though we face complex issues, they always know how to approach us in a good way. When something happens, they explain everything so that everyone on the team is on the same page. They make sure that everyone understands the goals and what is expected of them. This definitely helps to prevent misunderstandings and miscommunications that could otherwise lead to important problems or delays. For instance, in the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, our managers implemented a great communication strategy, providing guidance and support amid uncertainty. And, during the pandemic, I got infected with the virus. Without having any concern, I told my managers that I was sick and would be in quarantine for 14 days. Some of my dentist friends were very afraid of getting COVID and being on sick leave. Because their managers did not communicate with them very well and put a lot of pressure on them not to get sick. As a result, my friends were afraid of having COVID, not primarily out of concern for their health, but rather because they wished to avoid any potential unpleasant communication with their managers. However, when I told my managers that I got sick, the first thing they told me was to get better and not to think about work. My colleagues and managers at the clinic covered for me and cared for my patients when I was home. So, of course, I love that I have managers who are good at communication and who have understanding. This gives me energy for my job and increases my overall job performance and satisfaction. (Dentist 3)

The clinic managers emphasize that effective communication is vital for employee retention and key for having a successful business.

Clear, direct, and respectful communication is crucial for a successful business. As a small team of 15, many of us have worked together since the clinic's inception in 2019. It means that we know each other quite well. Not to mention, we think that effective, open, and honest communication has a huge impact on employees' decision to stay with us from the beginning. But, even though, as a team, we know each other well, it does not lessen the importance of effective communication. Effective communication plays a critical role in employee retention at the clinic. With the help of effective communication, it is obvious that our employees feel valued and appreciated. Thus, communication helps us build a positive and supportive work environment, fostering belonging and engagement. (Manager 4)

Since the managers believe that effective communication is crucial in the workplace, they have worked to establish a communication culture within the clinic. According to our observations, this culture is highly appreciated by the employees. The employees perceive that their job satisfaction has improved with the culture established by the managers.

Effective communication is important in a workplace. We always feel that we can openly and honestly communicate with our managers as well as our team members. We trust each other and work together more efficiently because there is a great communication culture in our clinic, improving our job satisfaction. I can tell that this communication culture has been built by our managers. Our managers always say that communication is the heart of team relationships. They are right about that. (Dental Assistant 1)

However, effective communication requires effort and begins with a culture of collaboration in the workplace. It involves daily interaction and continuous effort built on foundations of trust and honesty (Kelso, 1997). Therefore, the managers understand that effective communication is not always straightforward. To mitigate misunderstandings, their primary policy is to deliver

clear messages while treating the employees with continuous respect and professionalism. They say that they always refrain from interrupting or dismissing employees' opinions and consistently show appreciation for their contributions. Moreover, the managers always ensure consistency in messaging and align with each other to avoid confusion or contradictions.

From the field observations and interviews, we see that communication is one of the most important tools for the clinic employees to understand each other's perspectives, prevent misunderstandings, strengthen relationships between employees, and find solutions. With the help of open dialogue and mutual respect, communication paves the way for constructive conflict resolution in the clinic. During the field observations, one of the receptionists of the clinic demonstrated how communication helped them at the clinic prevent misunderstandings.

I always try to perform in the best way and try to make our patients comfortable during the time they spend at the clinic. However, one of our patients wrote a bad comment about how I did my job on Google Reviews. Basically, the patient was not satisfied with the way I treated her. Since it is a small clinic with only a bunch of people, our managers regularly follow what has been written about the clinic on Google Reviews. Moreover, as a clinic, we always get good reviews and rarely get bad feedback. When the managers read the negative feedback, which is mostly about me, they wanted to have a small meeting with me. Without having any prejudice, they asked me what happened with the patient. I explained everything in detail, and they listened to me very carefully without interrupting or criticizing me. So, they handled the situation with grace and provided a platform for open dialogue. In the end, they told me that they believed in me and that I did nothing wrong. Their understanding and support not only resolved the issue but also bolstered my job satisfaction. (Dental Receptionist 1)

#### **5.4. Manageable Workload and Realistic Expectations**

Employee workload refers to the level of intensity in job assignments. A manageable workload means that the amount of work assigned to each employee is reasonable and realistic and does not cause excessive stress or burnout. When the workload is manageable, employees do not feel excessive stress or burnout (Inegbedion et al., 2020). Related to that, managers at Dental T follow a straightforward policy. The managers emphasize the importance of allocating sufficient time for each patient at the clinic, thereby ensuring employees maintain a manageable workload. To the managers, this approach improves employees' well-being, decreases work related stress, and ultimately leads to increased overall job satisfaction.

Our policy is to allocate an appropriate amount of time for each of our patients—not too much nor too little. For instance, our standard teeth cleaning procedure typically requires one hour. While it might be tempting to shorten this time to have more patients and increase revenue, such a practice would be neither realistic nor ethical. Rushing through treatments compromises quality and can lead to a decline in patient satisfaction. Furthermore, it would increase our workload, putting undue stress on our team, and decrease our employees' job satisfaction. With a staff of 15, trying to handle the workload of 30 would be impractical and detrimental to our overall efficiency. Thus, we always prioritize quality care and maintain a manageable workload to ensure the well-being of both our patients and our team members. I am confident that our team members appreciate the reduced stress associated with their work. (Manager 1)

As the manager mentioned, the employees recognize that they do not have too much work-related stress. Moreover, the employees think that this manageable workload enables clinic staff

to allocate sufficient time for each procedure, ensuring comprehensive treatment and boosting job satisfaction.

From time to time, we are busy. However, our workload is always manageable. Compared to the other dental clinics, our work environment is pretty stress free. Even though our managers are always disciplined, they never put unnecessary pressure on us. Since I have a manageable workload, it allows me to allocate appropriate time for each procedure and ensure thorough treatment and patient satisfaction. In the end, it increases my job performance and job satisfaction. (Dentist 1)

Another clinic employee emphasizes that they can manage the workload effectively without enduring long hours or excessive stress, leading to error-free results and increased job performance and satisfaction.

I don't have to endure long hours without breaks. Each day, I can effectively manage my workload without feeling overly stressed. In addition, I can spend enough quality time with each of my patients. By working with careful attention to detail, I make sure that all procedures performed on patients are thorough, accurate, and virtually error-free. As expected, this significantly impacts my job performance. As I consistently deliver better results, my job satisfaction increases, and I feel more confident in my practice. (Dentist 3)

Concerning the unmanageable workload, the clinic managers recognize how persistent work stress can impact emotional well-being and personal relationships, causing continuous tension and conflicts outside of work. Thus, we observe that the managers prioritize their employees' well-being and carefully manage the workload. This attentiveness is noticed by the employees, contributing to satisfaction and fulfillment in both their professional and personal lives.

I know that unmanageable workload in a workplace can cause stress. Persistent work stress can take a toll on emotional health and cause frustration, exhaustion, and helplessness. I know it from my sister. She has a very stressful job, and her job requires her to deal with unmanageable workload. Thus, her work stress never stays only at work. It spills over into her relationships and causes tension, arguments, and conflicts with her partner, friends, and family members. Therefore, the effects of work stress on personal life can diminish overall quality of life and affect happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Thankfully, I consider myself lucky not to be in a similar situation. My job comes with a manageable workload that allows me to maintain a healthy work-life balance. As a result, I am able to get satisfaction and fulfillment from both my professional and personal life. (Dental Assistant 1)

Likewise, the employees acknowledge that they do not feel pressured to achieve unattainable goals or compromise patient care to increase patient numbers. Therefore, we understand that they have satisfaction with realistic expectations that prevent feelings of overwhelm or exhaustion.

At the clinic, we have realistic expectations, which prevent us from feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, or demotivated. We do not set unattainable goals and sacrifice from patient care to be able to treat more patients, helping us maintain morale and productivity. Moreover, I have administrative responsibilities such as maintaining patient records, scheduling follow-up appointments, and coordinating with other staff members. Since we use a good electronic dental record system, I can easily access patient records, update them in real time, and create follow-up appointments. Thus, I do not spend a lot of time dealing with administrative tasks, allowing me to have a manageable workload and spend sufficient time for my patients. (Orthodontist)

## 5.5. Recognition and Appreciation

For organizations, recognition and appreciation for employees involves acknowledging, valuing, and expressing their efforts, contributions, and achievements for the organization (Brun & Dugas, 2008; Abdullah et al., 2016). There are various forms of recognition and appreciation, including expressing satisfaction with employees' performance, incentive bonuses, professional practices awards and career support (Brun & Dugas, 2008). Since Dental T is a small clinic, we see that financial incentives or performance awards are unlikely. However, the managers emphasize expressing recognition and appreciation for their employees. Thus, dental managers think that they improve their employees' job satisfaction through verbal recognition, considering it a simple yet highly effective method.

Verbal recognition is highly valuable for our employees. Through verbal recognition, we express gratitude and appreciation directly with words. We do this in person, in team meetings, and in one-on-one meetings. It is very simple, yet effective. Its impact is usually immediate, and it has a powerful influence on employees' job satisfaction. While financial rewards are not feasible due to our size, verbal recognition remains a constant motivator for our team members. (Manager 1)

We understand that the management's efforts to demonstrate recognition and appreciation are highly valuable for the clinic staff and increase job satisfaction.

A couple of months ago, I was working on a particularly challenging dental implant case. The complexity stemmed from the patient's osteoporosis, which posed difficulties due to bone loss, making the implant treatment unpredictable. Despite these challenges, I treated the patient successfully. Following the procedure, our patient wrote a glowing review of my performance on Google Reviews. Upon noticing this feedback, our managers complimented me on my work, which significantly motivated me and boosted my job satisfaction. Receiving positive recognition from my managers regarding my practice truly enhances my job satisfaction. (Dentist 2)

In addition to verbal recognition, the clinic's management also tries to provide growth and development opportunities to show its support and appreciation to its employees. Due to its small size, the management cannot provide costly training programs. Instead, the managers allow employees to attend government-sponsored sessions or workshops relevant to their roles or career goals.

Considering the fact that we are a small clinic, we cannot offer expensive training programs or workshops. However, we allow our employees to attend government-sponsored training sessions or workshops related to their roles or career aspirations, free of charge. Moreover, if an employee wants to attend a paid workshop, we cannot cover the cost. However, we permit the employee to participate and excuse his or her absence from the clinic without requiring him or her to make up for lost time. Even though it does not happen a lot, it is an opportunity that we offer to our employees. (Manager 4)

We see that the employees realize the management's sincere dedication to their professional growth. The staff know that the management does its best to provide professional development opportunities, such as training programs and workshops, for its employees. Moreover, they believe that if the clinic had sufficient resources, the managers would offer financial support for these development opportunities.

Last year, there was a training program for masseter Botox, and I was highly interested in attending. Given my role as a dentist and my utilization of Botox injections in practice, I realized the importance of this program for my professional growth. However, it was not offered free of charge. When I expressed my interest to my managers, they showed their support for my attendance but explained their inability to cover the fee. Nevertheless, they granted me permission to participate in the program and waived the need for me to make up for the lost hours during training. While I understand the clinic's financial constraints, I have no doubt that if the management had enough resources, it would have granted financial support as well. This experience shows the sincere commitment that our managers have towards our professional development. Working under their guidance is indeed a valuable opportunity for us. (Dentist 1)

The management's commitment to recognition and appreciation was evident during the field observations as well. During one instance, a middle-aged patient arrived at the clinic for a tooth extraction. Right after entering the dental operatory room, she expressed considerable fear and anxiety about the procedure. Even though the dental assistant attempted to reassure her, the patient remained visibly distressed. Sensing the patient's apprehension, the assistant offered to hold her hand for comfort during the procedure, reassuring the patient that they could explore other methods to calm her if needed. This gesture succeeded in calming the patient, allowing the dentist, also one of the clinic managers, to complete the procedure smoothly. Following the successful treatment, the dentist manager expressed gratitude and appreciation to the assistant for her support. Moreover, the manager acknowledged and thanked her in front of the other employees, making her feel valued and recognized for her efforts. After this incidence, the dental assistant explained how motivated and satisfied from her job after hearing the appreciation.

It was incredibly great to receive verbal appreciation from both my managers and colleagues. Such recognition consistently motivates me to perform better in my role and enhances my overall job satisfaction. If I were to go unrecognized for my accomplishments, it would certainly discourage my spirits and diminish my satisfaction at work. Thankfully, our clinic has a 'thank you culture', where our managers actively show gratitude and appreciation for our efforts. This continual acknowledgment, from especially our managers, significantly improves our morale and job satisfaction. (Dental Assistant 2)

## **6. Analysis/Discussion**

The combined use of relational and distributed leadership frameworks delivers an extensive understanding of the ways in which organizational practices impact employee's job satisfaction in the field of dentistry clinic. In order to investigate further into the this study, these new contemporary relational leadership frame emphasized the importance of building strong relationship among colleagues and focuses on interpersonal connections and communication to inspire and motivate followers, creating a collaborative and cohesive organizational environment (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006); while distributed leadership decentralizes decision-making authority and encourages shared leadership across various levels of the organization (Jackson & Parry, 2018). Moreover, distributed leadership involves the spread of roles and responsibilities among professionals, allowing for greater autonomy, creativity, and problem-solving capabilities throughout the organization. First one of the findings regarding flexible working conditions in the dental clinic emphasize the importance of organizational practices aligning with the principles of distributed leadership and relational

leadership (Jackson & Parry, 2018; Bolden, 2011). Secondly, the emphasis on fairness and respect reflects a decentralized approach to leadership, where decision-making authority is shared among all members of the organization (Bolden, 2011; Jackson & Parry, 2018). Thirdly, the theme of effective communication at Dental T emphasizes the importance of clear, transparent, and respectful communication practices in promoting employee satisfaction, performance, and organizational success. Fourthly, the theme of manageable workload and realistic expectations at Dental T highlights the importance of prioritizing employee well-being and maintaining a balanced work environment. Last but not least, recognition and appreciation play a crucial role in nurturing a positive organizational climate within dental clinics. This aspect emphasizes the significance of acknowledging and valuing the efforts of employees, ultimately leading to increased job satisfaction and improved organizational performance.

All these findings resonate strongly with the principles of the distributed leadership and relational leadership frameworks, as outlined in the theoretical framework. By embracing these contemporary leadership paradigms, dental clinics can create a supportive organizational culture characterized by collaboration, mutual respect and trust and improve employee job satisfaction and organizational performance.

### **6.1. Raising Autonomy through Flexible Work Practices**

Flexible working arrangements, such as adjustable work hours and job sharing, may demonstrate aspects of a decentralized approach to decision-making and potentially contribute to employee empowerment, characteristics often associated with distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011; Jackson & Parry, 2018). By allowing employees to leave when patient demand subsides and facilitating job sharing arrangements, the clinic's management distributes leadership responsibilities among employees, granting them autonomy to manage their work schedules effectively (Jackson & Parry, 2018). For instance, the strategy of permitting employees to leave work early when there are no patients after a certain time serves as a significant motivator. The flexibility to leave early may not only enhance job satisfaction and allow for a better work-life balance but also may create a sense of gratitude and loyalty towards the clinic. Moreover, the emphasis on flexibility reflects the relational leadership perspective, which prioritizes the quality of relationship between leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The evidence from both employees and managers highlights the positive impact of flexible working conditions on job satisfaction and motivation. Employees perceive flexibility as a form of support from their managers, encouraging trust and mutual respect, key components of relational leadership (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Managers, in turn, recognize the importance of accommodating employees' needs to maintain a positive work environment, thus nurturing strong interpersonal connections within the organization. This may suggest that Dental T exemplifies the concept of leadership by example, demonstrating their commitment to empowering employees and strengthening a more democratic and vocal work environment through more decentralized decision-making.

Another significant strategy employed by the managers is allowing employees to job share. In certain circumstances, employees have the option to arrange coverage for their responsibilities when necessary and feasible, allowing them to be absent from the clinic. This collaborative

approach not only empowers people to manage their workload effectively but also advances a sense of ownership and accountability among team members, essential elements of distributed leadership (Bolden, 2011). The positive reception of job sharing among employees and its impact on their job satisfaction emphasize the effectiveness of this approach. Through the facilitation of flexibility and employee empowerment, the clinic demonstrates a commitment to less centralized management principles that foster collaboration and a supportive work environment. Additionally, the emphasis on building strong relationships between managers and employees reflects the relational leadership perspective, promoting trustworthiness, transparent communication, and mutual respect within the organization (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). The establishment of trust and respect among employees is fundamental to creating a high-trust work environment, where individuals feel valued, esteemed, and motivated to perform at their best (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Dene & Thornton, 2017). The evidence demonstrates that managers and employees at the clinic highlight the significance of fairness, trustworthiness, and utmost respect in forwarding a positive organizational culture. The flexibility provided at the clinic not only boosts morale but also sets the clinic apart as an attractive workplace, despite its limited capacity to offer financial rewards.

However, while these flexible practices seem to contribute significantly to employee satisfaction, they also introduce potential challenges. The horizontal leadership approaches to management and the blurring of roles and responsibilities, while beneficial for work-life balance, might lead to issues in the long term. For instance, a lack of clear boundaries and role definitions might result in confusion and inefficiencies, particularly during busy periods or when unexpected absences occur. The findings suggest that the clinic's current flexible working conditions are well-received, but further research is needed to understand the long-term impacts on organizational efficiency and employee performance in dental settings while increasing the job satisfaction of the employees. Moreover, while the findings demonstrate a high level of job satisfaction among employees, it is important to note that this is based on a single case study within a small and specific clinic. Therefore, while these practices appear successful in this context, their applicability and effectiveness in other settings, particularly larger clinics, require further research. The potential for scalability and the challenges that might arise with a larger and more diverse workforce should be carefully considered.

## **6.2. Forging Fellowship: Sculpting Mutual Trust**

Workplaces are often regarded as micro-political environments where professional groups of people establish and maintain boundaries that dictate tasks, timing, and methods (Franzen, 2012). Although the boundaries between the roles and responsibilities of dentists and other healthcare professionals within the dental team are not always clearly defined, and it might be creating ambiguity; when managed well, this might lead to improved collaboration among team members, facilitating mutual assistance and learning opportunities (Chreim & MacNaughton, 2016; Franzen, 2012). Managers at Dental T prioritize fairness by ensuring that all employees are treated equitably and with respect, regardless of their role or background. This commitment to fairness promotes trust and collaboration among team members, advancing a cohesive and supportive work environment (Dene & Thornton, 2017; Bolden, 2011). Additionally, the



evidence from interviews indicates that managers at Dental T adopt a participative leadership style, involving employees in decision-making processes and valuing their input and contributions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Moreover, our findings suggest that trust and respect are vital components in maintaining high job satisfaction at the clinic. The managers' approach of relying on intuition and ethical values, despite lacking formal management education, highlights a hands-on involvement in daily operations. This intuitive decision-making process ensures that fairness is consistently upheld, creating a high-trust environment. For instance, managers emphasize the importance of treating all employees with respect and fairness, reflecting the relational leadership perspective, which prioritizes the quality of relationships within the workplace (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Managers at Dental T actively engage in team-building activities and maintain open-door policies to encourage transparent communication among employees.

Managers at Dental T have shown that establishing a culture of respect and fairness is crucial for building trust and increasing collaboration. This approach is further demonstrated by the managers' dedication to ethical principles and their previous experiences with unfair leadership, which drive their dedication to fairness, trust, and respect. As Manager 2 mentioned, personal experiences with unfair management have influenced their commitment to fostering a fair and respectful work environment at Dental T. Field observations revealed that employees at Dental T, who have been working together since the clinic's establishment in 2019, function like a tight-knit family. Consequently, trust plays a pivotal role in workplace relationships. Managers demonstrate this trust through consistent actions that align with their words, building credibility and raising trust among employees. Manager 1 highlighted the importance of demonstrating trust in each team member, which significantly contributes to a high-trust work environment.

The interviews and observations indicate that clinic employees appreciate their managers' fairness and efforts to create a culture of trust and respect. Dental T's commitment to fairness, trust, and respect strengthens a cohesive, supportive workplace where employees feel valued, respected, and motivated to excel. The employees feel trusted to make decisions and take ownership of their work, with support and guidance available when needed. This autonomy and decision-making authority within their areas of responsibility significantly enhance their job satisfaction. For example, Dentist 2 noted that managers never make them feel bad about their thoughts and decisions at work, and always listen to and value their ideas. This approach not only makes employees feel respected and valued but also boosts their confidence and job satisfaction. The management's unique approach enriches a sense of value among the clinic staff, with managers perceived as colleagues rather than hierarchical figures, creating a supportive and respectful environment akin to a second home.

Correspondingly, the relational leadership perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding leadership as a social process is essential and the importance of building strong relationships based on trustable interactions, respect, and mutual support (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Managers at Dental T prioritize establishing a culture of respect and fairness, which contributes to the development of trusting relationships among team members. By demonstrating consistency between their words and actions, managers build credibility and

forward trust within the organization (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Moreover, the evidence from interviews and observations demonstrate that employees feel valued and respected, contributing to a positive work environment characterized by high levels of job satisfaction. By prioritizing fairness, trust, and respect, the clinic's management exemplifies the principles of distributed leadership, promoting shared decision-making and collaboration among employees. Additionally, the emphasis on building strong relationships reflects the relational leadership perspective, providing trustworthiness, open and clear communication, and mutual respect within the organization (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

### **6.3. Communicating with No Boundaries and Keeping Discursiveness**

The presence of authoritarian management in dental settings can lead to a network of unmotivated and uncommitted professionals, resulting in an inefficient system that promotes mechanical health practices devoid of genuine emotional connections (Andraus et al., 2017). This emotional disconnection reduces extra-role behaviors such as employee voice and creativity (Maritsa et al., 2022). In response, dental managers invest considerable time and effort in communicating and advocating for shared management processes, employing inherently discursive and rhetorical means to engage various stakeholders (Suominen & Mantere, 2010; Andraus et al., 2017). This strategic management aims not only to boost organizational performance but also embodies the shared ideology that individuals continuously and openly engage in its routines and practices (Suominen & Mantere, 2010).

From a distributed leadership perspective, effective communication reflects a decentralized approach to leadership, where information flows freely among all members of the organization (Maritsa et al., 2022; Bolden, 2011; Jackson & Parry, 2018). At Dental T, dentist managers prioritize clear, direct, and respectful communication to ensure that all employees are well-informed about clinic objectives, tasks, and expectations. For instance, when faced with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, managers implemented a communication strategy providing guidance and support, ensuring that employees felt informed and supported during uncertain times at the company. By advancing a culture of open dialogue and transparency, managers promote collaboration and engagement among team members, contributing to a positive work environment (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Bolden, 2011). Testimonies from employees also highlight the role of effective communication in enhancing job satisfaction and performance, indicating alignment with the principles of distributed leadership (Maritsa et al., 2022).

In parallel, the relational leadership perspective emphasizes building strong relationships based on trust, respect, and mutual support in everyday interactions (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Spillane, 2005; Uhl-Bien, 2006). At Dental T, managers prioritize honesty, transparency, and consistency in their communication practices, fostering reliance and respect among employees. By creating a supportive communication environment, managers demonstrate their commitment to providing positive relationships and promoting employee well-being (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Evidence from employees underscores the role of effective communication in resolving conflicts, enhancing job satisfaction, and advancing a sense of belonging within the organization. For instance, during a patient complaint situation, managers handled the issue

with grace, providing a platform for open dialogue and resolving the issue without criticizing the employee involved. By creating a supportive communication environment, managers demonstrate their devotion to providing positive relationships and promoting employee well-being. Furthermore, dental hygienists often exhibit a strong inclination for active participation in operations and can actively contribute to the planning and management process, thereby enhancing awareness and collaboration between staff (Nakayama, 2023). Managers' dedication to listening to their employees' opinions and decisions, and verbally appreciating their contributions, fosters collaboration and performance. From a relational leadership perspective, managers focus on sensing and responding to the present moment, understanding communication as a relational process that redefines relationships within organizations and offers a practical framework for collaboration (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). Relational leadership perspective detaches hierarchical roles because that perspective is defined as “a practice of caring, enabling others to act and learning from one’s mistakes” (Cardiff et al., 2018). Moreover, from a distributed leadership approach, empowering staff to gain power and motivation through distributed leadership increases positive relationships between employees, encourages voluntary engagement, and promotes problem-solving beyond job descriptions, crucial for healthcare effectiveness (Ansong et al., 2024; Lumby, 2013).

#### **6.4. Maintaining Work-Life Balance**

From a distributed leadership perspective, the emphasis on manageable workloads reflects a decentralized approach to decision-making and task allocation within the organization (Bolden, 2011; Jackson & Parry, 2018). At Dental T, dentist managers prioritize quality patient care over quantity, ensuring that each patient receives adequate time and attention during appointments (Spillane, 2005). By distributing workloads in a manner that prioritizes patient care and employee well-being, managers demonstrate a commitment to encouraging a supportive work environment and promoting job satisfaction among team members (Jackson & Parry, 2018; Bolden, 2011). Moreover, reallocating tasks among employees underscores the relational leadership approach, highlighting its efficacy in enhancing workforce outcomes and organizational performance when contrasted with task-oriented methodologies (Cummings et al., 2018). In Dental T, job roles' responsibilities are shifting according to the employee's workload, and when employees have more leisure time after work, their job satisfaction increases, and they identify themselves as “happy”. The company's way of doing the job demonstrates MacBeath's (2005) works of opportunistic distribution and Spillane's (2006) coordinated distribution of leadership, where employees willingly take on additional responsibilities and individuals work in sequence to complete the work routine.

Furthermore, the testimonials from employees highlight the positive impact of manageable workloads on job performance, stress levels, and work-life balance, indicating that managers' practices align with the principles of distributed leadership. Employees express satisfaction with the company's approach, highlighting how they feel valued and recognized for their efforts. For instance, Dentist 1 acknowledges that compared to other dental clinics, the workload at Dental T is relatively stress-free, allowing for effective time management and comprehensive patient care.

Likewise, the relational leadership perspective points out the importance of building trust and mutual respect among team members (Maritsa et al., 2022; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Building trust and mutual respect are essential for success and require empathic processes among people because empathy, as a relational practice subject, acknowledges the potential role of both leaders and members and emphasizes the importance of co-production (Jian, 2022). Although most of the healthcare management still adheres to a leader-centered approach, within dentistry, the recognition of the advantages inherent in constructive and collaborative decision-making processes creates an environment where leaders and employees are placed on equal footing in the decision-making process. This approach cultivates and forwards a reciprocal dynamic of empathy among leadership stakeholders, resulting in a more committed and supportive work environment (Jian, 2022).

At Dental T, managers prioritize realistic expectations and provide sufficient resources and support to help employees manage their workloads effectively. Managers showcase their dedication to advancing employee success and well-being through the establishment of achievable goals and objectives (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Moreover, the evidence from employees highlights the role of manageable workloads in promoting job satisfaction, reducing stress levels, and enhancing overall quality of life, furthering the importance of relational leadership in providing a positive work environment. By aligning organizational practices with the principles of distributed and relational leadership, managers at Dental T create a supportive work environment where employees feel valued, respected, and motivated to perform at their best.

## **7. Conclusion**

We believe that relational and distributed leadership approaches are not commonly seen in practice. However, in our case, these approaches are used by the dentist managers. Without having management education, the dentist managers unintentionally apply principles of modern leadership approaches, influencing their employees' job satisfaction positively. Therefore, in this case, these leadership approaches have a key role in improving job satisfaction.

By using relational leadership principles, dentist managers improve collaboration, trust, and empowerment among their team members. Similarly, distributed leadership empowers clinic staff by encouraging collaboration, autonomy, and innovation within the dental team. Despite challenges such as hierarchical structures and external pressures, dentist managers implement distributed leadership principles. Together, these leadership approaches contribute to a dynamic and effective work environment in the dental clinic. Thus, we observe that there is a strong relationship between these leadership approaches and our empirical findings, with managers positively influencing the job satisfaction of their dental teams.

Furthermore, we think that although previous studies emphasize the importance of management training for dentist managers, those without formal management education have been successful in our case. We attribute the successful management of dentist managers to three significant reasons. Their success is characterized by their hands-on involvement, intuitive decision-making, and leadership by example. These attributes contribute to a cohesive and

thriving workplace culture in the clinic and improve the clinic's overall performance and employee satisfaction. Firstly, these managers maintain an active role in working with their employees in the daily clinic work, even though they are the managers of the dental clinic. Their hands-on involvement helps them deeply understand the challenges and demands faced by their team members. Moreover, this firsthand experience improves their empathy towards their staff and enables them to provide sufficient support, flexibility with scheduling, and address concerns about patient care. As a result, they develop a deep understanding of their employees and strengthen relationships within the clinic. This deep understanding helps managers have effective communication skills. Secondly, since the managers lack formal management training, dentist managers often rely on their intuition when making critical decisions at the clinic. This intuitive approach, coming from instincts, past experiences, and tacit knowledge, is effective and well-received by the employees. By not adapting rigid decision-making frameworks and structures and by embracing their intuition, dentist managers manage complex situations with agility and creativity. Lastly, dentist managers naturally adopt a "lead by example" approach, showing professionalism, dedication, and a strong work ethic to their employees. With their actions, dentist managers exemplify the values and standards they expect from their staff, creating a positive and dynamic work environment. Their active involvement in clinical work with their team members gives inspiration to their employees, creates a culture of excellence, and motivates employees to perform at their best. On the other hand, although dental managers use a "lead by example" approach, they try to involve their employees in the management process and make them a part of the management.

It is important to note that our study is a single case study conducted in a small dental clinic with a limited study period. Therefore, the results might differ if a similar study is conducted in a larger dental clinic. We recommend that future studies be observational and cover a longer period to validate our findings.

Finally, our findings suggest that small dental clinics and their dentist managers might benefit from implementing similar leadership activities as those outlined in our study. These activities have the potential to improve job satisfaction within their clinics. By adopting strategies that promote flexible working conditions, improve effective communication, create a supportive work environment, and encourage professional development, dental clinics might create a more satisfying workplace for their staff. Therefore, we recommend that small dental clinics consider integrating these leadership activities to reap similar benefits.

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