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When Leaders Are Safe Havens: How Secure Base Leadership Buffers the Impact of Emotional Demands on Exhaustion

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Abstract: Based on attachment theory, this research explores Secure Base Leadership's (SBL) efficacy in mitigating the negative impact of emotional demands on employee exhaustion, with an aim to reduce burnout rates and improve workplace well-being. A survey sample of 428 Spanish employees from various sectors was collected, and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used to test the research model. Emotional demands were found to significantly increase employee exhaustion, whereas SBL reduced and moderated these effects, proving its protective function. Furthermore, increased exhaustion was associated with longer tenure and employment in private organizations. Findings support integrating SBL in leadership development to foster a supportive environment, mitigate burnout, and boost employee well-being. Highlighting the application of attachment theory in organizational settings, this study contributes to understanding SBL's effectiveness against emotional demands, guiding leadership practices to enhance organizational health.

Keywords: leadership; emotional intelligence; exhaustion; attachment theory; stress; job demands–resources

1. Introduction

In modern workplaces, managing emotional demands has become a critical factor in ensuring employee well-being [1,2]. Emotional demands refer to the need for individuals to manage their own emotions while appropriately responding to the emotions of others, a challenge that is particularly intense in roles involving frequent interpersonal interactions [3,4]. These roles are prevalent in sectors with high emotional demands such as healthcare, education, and customer service, and also in the military. In these sectors, the emotional demands can lead to exhaustion, a core component of burnout, characterized by significant energy depletion [5,6]. This condition not only harms individual health but also undermines organizational performance [7,8].

Given the negative consequences of emotional demands, it is necessary to identify leadership practices capable of mitigating the detrimental effects on employees [9]. Secure Base Leadership (SBL), grounded in Bowlby's attachment theory [10], offers a promising avenue. This model frames the leader–follower relationship as one where leaders serve as a safe haven in times of distress and a secure base that fosters employee growth and



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Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/ licenses/by/4.0/). exploration [11–13]. This leadership approach is instrumental in enhancing employees' resilience to stress and fostering an organizational climate of mutual trust and psychological safety. Research further supports its benefits, highlighting how SBL improves emotional well-being and job satisfaction while reducing stress and burnout across various high-emotional-demand sectors, from private companies to the military [12–16].

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model provides a comprehensive framework to understand how SBL mitigates the impact of emotional demands on exhaustion [17]. This model illustrates how organizational and individual resources can reduce the negative impact of job demands. Within this framework, supportive leadership is highlighted as a key organizational resource capable of counteracting these demands [18]. Conceptualizing SBL as a job resource [15] suggests that it not only reduces burnout but also enhances employee engagement, serving as a moderating force against the exhaustion caused by emotional demands in the workplace.

Hence, this study aims to analyze how SBL moderates the relationship between emotional demands and employee exhaustion. We hypothesize that SBL acts both as a direct buffer against exhaustion and as a moderating factor, reducing the negative impact of emotional demands on employees.

1.1. Emotional Exhaustion and Emotional Demands

Emotional exhaustion, identified as the core component of job-related burnout, reflects a deep depletion of an individual's emotional resources [19]. It occurs when individuals feel emotionally overstretched and drained, leaving them with little to contribute in personal or professional contexts. This state is characterized by an overwhelming sense of emotional depletion, which lies at the heart of burnout.

As such, emotional exhaustion triggers a series of detrimental effects that critically undermine employees' physical and mental health, as well as their satisfaction and effectiveness in their roles [6,20]. This syndrome, marked by a profound sense of depletion, notably reduces individuals' performance, creativity, and overall quality of their work outputs [21,22]. It also heightens their vulnerability to physical health issues, including headaches and insomnia [23,24]. From a psychological perspective, emotional exhaustion significantly increases the likelihood of experiencing depression and a feeling of disconnection from one's work [25], which in turn deteriorates job satisfaction [26]. Consequently, it is necessary to preventively address emotional exhaustion to ensure employee well-being.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory [27] and the JD-R model [17] provide comprehensive insights into the mechanisms underlying emotional exhaustion. According to the COR theory, emotional exhaustion is a result of the depletion of essential resources, as individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and protect vital assets such as personal energy and emotional capacity. This state of exhaustion is triggered when these critical resources are threatened, reduced, or not sufficiently replenished after significant investments, thereby inducing stress. Furthermore, the JD-R model elaborates on this by identifying job demands and resources as the primary factors influencing emotional exhaustion. Job demands, encompassing the psychological, physical, organizational, and social aspects of the job that require sustained psychological or physical effort [28], are known to lead to exhaustion and self-undermining, creating a cycle that can perpetuate additional demands on a day-to-day basis.

To understand the impact of job demands on employee well-being, it is essential to recognize the significant effects of emotional demands, in addition to traditional physical and task-related stresses [12,13]. Emotional demands, such as managing emotionally charged interactions with customers or resolving conflicts with colleagues, often place a heavier strain on employees than physical or task-related demands [29–31]. These challenges are compounded by emotional labor, particularly emotion–rule disso-

nance, which occurs when employees must suppress their genuine feelings to conform to organizational expectations [4,32].

Research consistently shows a strong link between emotional demands and employee exhaustion, emphasizing the stressful nature of emotional labor [31,33,34]. Hochschild's seminal work [35] identifies surface acting—displaying emotions that conflict with genuine feelings—as a key driver of this exhaustion. The JD-R model supports this relationship, highlighting emotional demands as a major factor depleting employees' psychological resources. Consequently, we hypothesize the following:

H1. *Emotional demands will have a positive effect on employee emotional exhaustion.*

1.2. Secure Base Leadership

Research has identified several key job resources that are crucial in mitigating work stress and burnout, including managerial support [20]. Notably, studies support the effectiveness of positive leadership styles such as SBL [15,16]. The SBL approach highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships that nurture, respond to, and enhance overall well-being and health. Furthermore, SBL provides a safe haven for followers, a factor deemed essential for reducing stress and burnout in diverse organizational contexts [14–16].

Within the framework of attachment theory [10], leadership effectiveness is intricately linked to the leader's role as an attachment figure and caregiver, essential for guiding subordinates through distress and facilitating their return to emotional stability by providing safe haven support. Key strategies include emotional reassurance (e.g., offering supportive feedback during crises), non-judgmental listening (e.g., fostering a space for open dialog on concerns), emotion coaching (e.g., aiding in emotional regulation during challenging times), and tangible supports (e.g., adjusting deadlines or workloads to reduce stress). By adopting these practices, leaders embody the qualities of compassionate, dependable caregivers, crucial in times of crisis or stress [36]. This approach not only helps subordinates maintain calmness and build resilience but also solidifies the leader's position as a pivotal attachment figure, ensuring a secure environment that significantly mitigates the risk of exhaustion.

SBL has shown particular effectiveness in highly demanding environments such as the military and various private business sectors [12,13,16]. For example, in the military, where individuals often face significant threat and uncertainty, SBL plays a crucial role in reducing work stress and creating a psychological safety climate, thus preventing organizational dehumanization. Additionally, in private businesses, especially in industries characterized by high pressure and rapid change, SBL has been shown to significantly enhance task and contextual performance, while simultaneously reducing counterproductive work behaviors.

Given these considerations, we propose two hypotheses directly related to these constructs:

H2. SBL will exhibit a negative direct effect on emotional exhaustion.

H3. *SBL* will act as a negative moderator in the relationship between emotional demands and exhaustion, thereby attenuating the potential adverse effects of such demands.

Figure 1 presents our theoretical model, delineating the relationships between SBL, emotional demands, and employee exhaustion. The model posits that emotional demands positively correlate with employee exhaustion (H1), indicating that increased emotional demands lead to greater exhaustion among employees. Furthermore, the model suggests that SBL mitigates this exhaustion (H2) and serves as a buffer, attenuating the impact of emotional demands on exhaustion (H3). Specifically, we are examining the interaction

between SBL and emotional demands in predicting exhaustion, with SBL reducing the strength of the positive relationship between emotional demands and exhaustion. This model highlights the dual role of SBL in directly reducing exhaustion and protecting employees from the adverse effects of emotional demands.



Figure 1. Theoretical model and hypotheses.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

The study sample consisted of 428 Spanish employees from various sectors, including both private companies and public administration. The average age of the participants was 39.16 years (SD = 10.53), with a range from 18 to 64 years. The average tenure in employment reported was 6.77 years (SD = 6.84), with a range from 0.1 to 40 years. Further details on the sample description are presented in Table 1.

Tal	ble	21.	Description	of sample	e (N :	= 428).
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Demographic and Control Variables	n	%
Sex		
Male	216	51
Female	212	49
Education		
Basic	32	7
Secondary	29	7
Vocational training	102	24
High school	33	8
University	223	52
Other	9	2
Sector		
Primary (Agriculture, Mining)	18	4
Secondary (Industry, Construction, Manufacturing)	141	33
Tertiary (Health, Education, Hospitality)	269	63
Type of organization		
Public	120	28
Private	308	72
Organization size		
Large (>250 people)	148	35
Medium (50–249 people)	120	28
Small (<49)	160	37

Participants completed an online questionnaire that concluded with a section gathering sociodemographic information. To recruit participants, we utilized a non-discriminatory exponential snowball sampling method. Initially, Spanish university students enrolled in a master's degree program in occupational risk prevention were invited to participate. These students then invited employees within their professional networks to join the study, providing detailed instructions and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality for their responses. This process aimed to reach a broader range of participants beyond the initial group of students.

2.2. Measures

Upon obtaining consent from participants, they were provided with a questionnaire that included the following scales:

Emotional Demands (EDs): To assess employees' perceptions of the emotional demands of their work, we utilized the six-item Emotional Demands Scale (EDS) [37], with an additional item from the Frankfurt Emotion Work Scales (FEWSs) [38], further validated in Spain [39]. This added item, "At work, I often have to hide how I really feel", addresses emotional dissonance encountered in the workplace. Responses to all items are recorded on a five-point Likert scale, from 0 (Never) to 4 (Always). The overall ED score is calculated as the average of the seven items, with higher scores indicating greater perceived emotional demands.

Secure Base Leadership (SBL): Employees were asked to evaluate the extent to which they perceive their direct manager or supervisor as a secure base, utilizing the 15-item Leader as Secure Provider Scale (LSPS) [14]. Participants rated their agreement with each statement on a Likert scale from 0 (Not at all agree) to 4 (Strongly agree), evaluating the leader as an attachment figure who provides a safe haven (e.g., "When something bad happens or I feel upset at work, I turn to my leader for support"). The SBL score is calculated by averaging the responses to the 15 items, with higher scores reflecting a stronger perception of leadership as a secure base.

Emotional Exhaustion (EX): We used the emotional exhaustion scale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS) [40] (MBI-GS; Maslach et al., 1997), specifically adapted for the Spanish context [41]. Participants rated their feelings of being emotionally overextended and depleted by their work on a scale from 0 (Never) to 4 (Always), with statements like "I feel emotionally drained by my work" serving to gauge the level of emotional exhaustion. The EX score is computed as the average of all items, with higher scores indicating greater emotional exhaustion.

2.3. Data Analysis

In this study, we employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the data. PLS-SEM is a non-parametric technique particularly effective for complex mediation models and for exploring advanced options such as the assessment of multiple mediators [42,43]. This method offers two key advantages for our study. First, like other SEM techniques, PLS-SEM accounts for measurement error, providing more accurate estimates of moderation effects compared to regression analyses. Second, PLS-SEM is designed to handle non-normal data distributions and can deal with collinearity among predictors [42]. Analyses were conducted using SmartPLS v4.0 software [44]. Statistical significance was evaluated using the bootstrapping method with 10,000 samples of 428 cases, applying a critical t-value of 1.96 to determine significance at a p < 0.05 level. The model analysis was conducted in two phases [43]. First, we assessed the reliability and validity of the measurement model, and second, we tested the hypothesized structural model to evaluate how SBL affects emotional stress and exhaustion among employees.

3. Results

3.1. Reliability and Construct Validity

We evaluated the validity, reliability, and internal consistency of the scales, calculating Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. Our preliminary model included 27 indicators, which were grouped into three latent constructs. The reliability of each indicator was assessed by its factor loadings (λ), with loadings greater than 0.60 considered adequate for representing a latent variable by explaining a substantial amount of variance [43]. Factor loadings for most indicators across all scales were strong (Table 2); however, one indicator from the Emotional Demands Scale (Item 7: "I work with people who do not treat me with the respect and courtesy I deserve") did not meet this criterion and was therefore excluded. This adjustment resulted in a refined model consisting of 26 indicators, each showing high factor loadings. Regarding reliability of the study scales, all results surpassed the recommended cut-off values [43], with Cronbach's Alpha and CR coefficients exceeding the 0.70 threshold, and AVE values exceeding 0.50 (Table 2).

Table 2. Factor loadings (λ), t-values, Cronbach's alpha (α), composite reliability coefficient (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE).

Indicator	λ	t-Value	α	CR	AVE
Emotional Demands			0.84	0.85	0.55
ED1	0.83	15.71 **			
ED2	0.67	7.38 **			
ED3	0.72	13.27 **			
ED4	0.76	13.24 **			
ED5	0.70	10.32 **			
ED6	0.67	11.18 **		CR AVE 0.85 0.55 0.90 0.70 0.96 0.60	
Emotional Exhaustion			0.89	0.90	0.70
EX1	0.88	25.09 **			
EX2	0.81	20.81 **			
EX3	0.87	23.89 **			
EX4	0.82	20.78 **			
EX5	0.80	18.75 **			
Secure Base Leadership			0.95	0.96	0.60
SBL1	0.72	9.463 **			
SBL2	0.60	4.318 **			
SBL3	0.82	12.112 **			
SBL4	0.83	9.617 **			
SBL5	0.85	12.293 **			
SBL6	0.83	11.079 **			
SBL7	0.82	12.901 **			
SBL8	0.75	9.719 **			
SBL9	0.80	11.005 **			
SBL10	0.78	9.818 **			
SBL11	0.79	10.766 **			
SBL12	0.70	9.075 **			
SBL13	0.78	9.187 **			
SBL14	0.76	10.173 **			
SBL15	0.73	9.747 **			

Note: ** *p* < 0.01.

After confirming the reliability and internal consistency of the scales, we assessed discriminant validity following Fornell and Larcker's criterion. According to this criterion,

the AVE for each construct must exceed the squared inter-construct correlations, ensuring that each scale distinctly and accurately measures unique constructs [43]. Our model met these essential requirements for discriminant validity (Table 2).

3.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Analysis

Table 3 illustrates the descriptive statistics and the Pearson correlation coefficients for the study's variables. The mean values for emotional demands (M = 2.95), emotional exhaustion (M = 2.59), and SBL (M = 2.85) are moderate. The positive correlation between emotional demands and exhaustion (r = 0.53, p < 0.01) substantiates Hypothesis 1, asserting that an escalation in emotional demands is likely to be concomitant with an amplification in exhaustion levels. In contrast, the negative correlation identified between SBL and emotional exhaustion (r = -0.25, p < 0.01) lends empirical support to Hypothesis 2, positing that SBL may have a mitigating effect on the exhaustion experienced by employees. Additionally, emotional demands negatively relate to SBL (r = -0.25, p < 0.01). This correlation indicates that in contexts where SBL is low, emotional demands tend to be higher. Conversely, high levels of SBL are associated with reduced emotional demands, reflecting the role of secure base leaders in creating supportive environments that alleviate these demands.

Table 3. Descriptive results, correlations, and discriminant validity.

Indicator	M	DT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	39.16	10.53	-							
2. Sex $(0 = male; 1 = female)$	0.49	0.50	0.01	-						
3. Education	3.96	1.33	-0.08	0.20 **	-					
4. Tenure	6.77	6.84	0.52 **	0.06	0.02	-				
5. Type of Organization (0 = public; 1 = private)	0.72	0.45	-0.29 **	-0.015 **	-0.18 **	-0.22 **	-			
6. Emotional Demands	2.95	1.29	-0.02	0.09	0.10 *	-0.01	-0.03	0.74		
7. Emotional Exhaustion	2.59	1.42	0.07	0.03	-0.01	0.14 **	0.11 *	0.53 **	0.84	
8. Secure Base Leadership	2.85	1.41	-0.15 **	0.10 *	0.17 **	-0.07	0.07	-0.25 **	-0.38 **	0.78

Note: * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01. Theoretical model variables are measured on a Likert scale from 0 to 4. For discriminant validity, \sqrt{AVE} should be greater than off-diagonal elements in the same row and column.

The control variables, namely age, sex, education level, tenure, and organizational type, exhibit diverse correlations with the study's primary constructs. There is a significant but modest correlation between sex (where 1 indicates male and 2 female) and SBL ($\mathbf{r} = 0.10$, p < 0.05), suggesting minor gender-based differences in the perception of SBL. A stronger correlation is observed between education and emotional demands ($\mathbf{r} = 0.20$, p < 0.01), with higher education levels associated with the perception of increased emotional demands. Tenure is associated with emotional exhaustion ($\mathbf{r} = 0.14$, p < 0.05), suggesting that the length of service might be related to higher levels of exhaustion. The type of organization (where 1 indicates a public organization and 2 a private organization) also has a positive correlation with exhaustion ($\mathbf{r} = 0.11$, p < 0.05), potentially indicating higher exhaustion levels within a private organization. These correlations offer insight into the influence of various demographic and job-related factors on the primary variables of interest in this study.

3.3. Hypothesis Testing

The structural model analysis reveals a positive relationship between emotional demands and exhaustion ($\beta = 0.50$, p < 0.01), thus supporting Hypothesis 1. Conversely, SBL exhibits a significant negative direct effect on exhaustion levels ($\beta = -0.15$, p < 0.01), indicating that the implementation of effective SBL practices can reduce emotional exhaustion, in alignment with Hypothesis 2. Additionally, SBL moderates the effect of emotional demands on exhaustion, evidenced by a negative path coefficient ($\beta = -0.16$, p < 0.01), which supports Hypothesis 3 by suggesting a protective role of SBL against the adverse effects of emotional demands.

The explanatory power of the proposed model is substantial, accounting for 37% of the variance in emotional exhaustion (Figure 2). Except for tenure and organizational type, control variables did not exhibit a significant influence on exhaustion within the overall model. In particular, tenure is associated with a significant increase in emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.17$, p < 0.01), indicating a potential cumulative effect of organizational tenure on employee exhaustion. The analysis also reveals a significant contribution of organizational type to exhaustion levels ($\beta = 0.44$, p < 0.01), indicating that employment within private organizations may increase exhaustion.



Figure 2. Standardized estimations for the full model. Note: ** p < 0.01; R²—coefficient of determination.

The simple slopes analysis (Figure 3) clarifies the moderating role of SBL in the relationship between emotional demands and exhaustion. Illustrated by three distinct lines, the analysis compares low (-1 SD), average, and high (+1 SD) levels of SBL. The red line, depicting low SBL, ascends sharply, indicating a strong positive relationship between emotional demands and exhaustion, and the blue line indicates a more moderate positive relationship at the mean level of SBL. Most notably, the green line, representing high levels of SBL, shows a significantly flatter slope, indicating that higher levels of SBL substantially reduce the impact of emotional demands on exhaustion. This pattern highlights that SBL is more effective in buffering the adverse effects of emotional demands, especially in environments where these demands are high. This finding clearly supports the efficacy of SBL as a robust buffer against emotional exhaustion, particularly beneficial in high-demand settings.



LBS at -1 SD LBS at Mean LBS at +1 SD

Figure 3. The simple slopes analysis of the moderating effect of Secure Base Leadership (SBL) on emotional demands and exhaustion. (The red line (low SBL, -1 SD) shows a steep positive slope, indicating that as emotional demands increase, exhaustion rises sharply when SBL is low. The blue line (mean SBL) shows a more moderate positive relationship, while the green line (high SBL, +1 SD) displays a much flatter slope. This interaction effect highlights that at higher levels of emotional demands, SBL significantly reduces the impact of these demands on exhaustion, demonstrating its protective role in buffering employees against emotional exhaustion).

4. Discussion

This study was designed to explore how SBL moderates the effects of emotional demands on employee exhaustion. Our findings lend support to each of the hypotheses posited in our theoretical model. Specifically, consistent with Hypothesis 1, our findings confirm the wellestablished link between emotional demands and employee exhaustion [31,33,34]. Regarding Hypothesis 2, we found that SBL significantly reduces employee exhaustion, consistent with the results of previous studies [14,15]. Furthermore, the study provides empirical support for Hypothesis 3 regarding SBL's moderating role, showing that SBL mitigates the adverse effects of emotional demands on exhaustion.

Our analysis identified significant correlations between control variables and employee exhaustion, with tenure and organizational type emerging as significant predictors in the structural model. Specifically, longer tenure may correlate with an accumulation of work-related stressors and heightened levels of burnout. This association is congruent with Hobfoll's COR theory [45], which suggests that prolonged exposure to stress gradually depletes psychological resources, thus potentially precipitating emotional exhaustion [22]. Furthermore, the organizational type, particularly in private companies, significantly impacts exhaustion levels. Here, the emotional demands arising from interactions with customers and colleagues are key stressors [12,13,46], supporting the JD-R model, which posits that such job demands critically deplete physical and psychological resources, thereby escalating burnout.

The buffering effect of SBL on the relationship between emotional demands and exhaustion draws significant theoretical support from Bowlby's attachment theory [10], which underscores the importance of nurturing, responsive, and supportive relationships

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for enhancing well-being and health across the lifespan. The 'safe haven' principle, which involves helping team members in managing their emotions and regaining calm during challenging times, has been shown as instrumental in fostering psychological well-being and reducing stress and burnout in a range of organizational settings [14–16].

The theoretical contributions of this study extend attachment theory by providing empirical evidence of its applicability in organizational contexts. Specifically, our findings show that leaders can act as attachment figures by fostering safe haven environments that mitigate the adverse effects of emotional demands. By doing so, they reinforce the role of attachment-based leadership in improving employee well-being and resilience in high-pressure work settings. Moreover, this study highlights how attachment theory, traditionally explored in personal and developmental contexts, can be effectively applied to understanding and improving workplace dynamics, offering a novel lens through which to study leadership practices.

To counteract the adverse effects of emotional demands and avert exhaustion, leaders must cultivate attributes such as empathy, commitment to alleviating distress, emotional stability in response to challenges, and confidence in managing distress, which are essential for establishing themselves as safe havens that enhance team resilience and well-being. Moreover, this leadership approach not only creates a supportive environment conducive to managing role-related emotional demands but also promotes psychological safety, enabling employees to navigate and express their work-related emotions without fear of repercussions [47]. These distinct benefits of SBL are particularly pronounced in sectors characterized by high emotional demands, such as healthcare, education, customer service, and the military. In these environments, the emotional stability and proactive support provided by secure base leaders are critical in managing the frequent and intense interpersonal interactions inherent in these fields.

The negative relationship between emotional demands and SBL suggests that when SBL is low—such as in cases of passive–avoidant leadership—emotional demands tend to be higher. This occurs because passive–avoidant leaders fail to actively address or buffer the emotional challenges their teams face, leaving employees to manage these demands on their own [13]. In contrast, secure base leaders take proactive steps to protect their teams by fostering a supportive environment, promoting psychological safety, and managing workloads effectively. This reduces the impact of emotional demands, making them less overwhelming for employees. Therefore, the crucial nature of these effects in high-emotional-demand sectors underscores the importance of leadership behaviors in both helping employees handle emotional challenges and creating a work environment that inherently minimizes such demands.

4.1. Limitations and Future Research

While our study contributes valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The crosssectional design employed constrains our ability to establish causal relationships between SBL and emotional demands. To address this limitation, future research could employ longitudinal studies to provide a more nuanced understanding of how the impact of SBL evolves over time, particularly in response to varying levels of emotional demands [48].

Additionally, our use of a non-discriminatory exponential snowball sampling method, primarily involving Spanish university students, introduces potential biases that may affect the representativeness of our sample and the generalizability of our findings. The cultural homogeneity of our sample, largely limited to a specific sociodemographic group, warrants caution when extrapolating these results to more diverse cultural contexts. Recognizing these limitations, we acknowledge that our findings may not accurately reflect the broader population's experiences and behaviors. To address these issues and enhance the applica-

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bility of our results across different regions, we recommend that future studies adopt more inclusive and representative sampling strategies. Further research should also investigate how cultural differences might influence the perception and effectiveness of SBL across various cultural backgrounds. In line with Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions [49], we suggest exploring the interplay between cultural factors and SBL effectiveness to deepen our understanding of its relevance and applicability in diverse settings.

4.2. Practical Applications

Implications for organizational practice involve steps that organizations can take to avoid or mitigate the potential negative effects of emotional demands. Central to this endeavor is the recognition of the pivotal role of SBL in mitigating emotional exhaustion stemming from emotional demands. Integrating SBL-focused training programs within organizational frameworks emerges as a critical strategy to cultivate leadership qualities conducive to fostering supportive work environments. Such initiatives should not only encompass training on attachment theory but also prioritize the cultivation of psychological safety among leaders [47]. By prioritizing the emotional well-being of teams, organizations can catalyze a transformative change in work cultures, thereby mitigating the prevalence of occupational stress disorders and associated costs.

Furthermore, from an attachment perspective, effective leadership training programs should aim to cultivate trainees' understanding of leadership as an attachment relationship. Consultants play a crucial role in assisting trainees to recognize the significance of relational dynamics in leadership, wherein leaders wield considerable power over subordinates and are entrusted with guiding, directing, and empowering them for optimal performance. Importantly, trainees should comprehend that subordinates are not merely objects but human beings with inherent needs for safety and security, the fulfillment of which is essential for optimal performance within the organizational context [36].

To operationalize these concepts, training programs should focus on equipping leaders with skills that align with the principles of attachment theory, such as fostering trust, emotional attunement, and responsiveness. These programs should include practical tools for developing psychological safety within teams and creating secure environments where employees feel valued and supported. Additionally, leadership consultants should incorporate structured exercises that help leaders recognize the relational aspects of their roles and their capacity to act as attachment figures for their teams.

Moreover, structured mentorship programs could pair new leaders with experienced mentors who demonstrate effective SBL behaviors. This relationship would provide real-time feedback and support, fostering a leadership culture that prioritizes safety and trust.

These strategies are essential for translating the theoretical insights of this study into practical applications that enhance leadership effectiveness and workplace well-being, ensuring that leaders are equipped to manage high-stakes environments effectively.

5. Conclusions

This study explores the effectiveness of leadership from an attachment theory perspective in mitigating the adverse effects of emotional demands on employee exhaustion. Our findings showed that SBL significantly reduces employee exhaustion by serving as a safe haven. The implications of these results are twofold. Theoretically, they contribute to the growing body of literature integrating attachment theory with organizational behavior, offering a novel perspective on how SBL can influence employee well-being. From a practical standpoint, it suggests that organizations should prioritize the development and implementation of SBL practices among their managers to prevent employee emotional exhaustion, especially in an environment of high emotional demands. **Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/merits5010003/s1.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This manuscript, along with the supplementary data, does not contain any identifying information of the participants. The data were collected anonymously, so it was not necessary to obtain consent forms. Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, as the research does not affect the fundamental rights (life, physical/psychic integrity, health, freedom/autonomy in any of its mani-festations, personal dignity, etc.) of the subjects involved, and no personally identifiable data is used, according to the Research Ethics Committee at UNED. https://www.uned.es/universidad/inicio/unidad/comite-de-etica-de-la-investigacion.html.

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