

# Connecting leaders and employees' affective commitment: a multilevel analysis

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Marisa Santana-Martins and M. Isabel Sánchez-Hernández

*Universidad de Extremadura, Badajoz, Spain*

Jose Luis Nascimento

*Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal, and*

Florence Stinglhamber

*Universite Catholique Louvain, Louvain, Belgium*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This research aims to identify whether leaders' affective organizational commitment influences employees' affective commitment to both the leader and the organization. Additionally, the study explores the role of employees' emotional awareness in shaping these relationships.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Examining a sample of 154 leaders and 249 employees in multinational companies, this study adopts a multilevel approach.

**Findings** – The results reveal a positive influence between the two foci of commitment (leaders and organization) at both the leader and employee levels. Furthermore, it confirms that employees' emotional awareness plays a positive role in the commitment process.

**Practical implications** – This research highlights the significance of implementing internal policies and measures that consider the various foci of commitment. To foster employees' commitment, it is crucial to establish a robust alignment between human resources management and leaders.

**Originality/value** – This study delves into the exploration of two commitment foci to deepen our comprehension of the directional relationship between them in the workplace. More specifically, our research scrutinizes the impact of leaders' affective organizational commitment on employees' affective commitment to the organization, while also analyzing its reciprocal influence on employees' affective commitment toward their leaders.

**Keywords** Commitment, Employee involvement, Engaged leadership, Emotions in organizations, Leader commitment

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Commitment has a strategic relevance for management. Employee commitment is a global concern and ranks among the foremost and most challenging priorities for companies worldwide. Since the nature of work and workplaces continues to evolve, research in this area remains highly relevant. With the emergence of remote work, flexible work arrangements, and changing employee expectations, understanding workplace commitment is crucial for maintaining organizational success and competitiveness.

Various models have proposed that certain personal characteristics can serve as antecedents to commitment, acting as triggers for employee commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Klein *et al.*, 2012). One such characteristic is the employee's emotional awareness, which refers to their ability to recognize and interpret their own and others' emotions (Santana-Martins *et al.*, 2022a). This ability enhances their accurate understanding of the context and guides their behavior accordingly. Additionally, emotional awareness enables individuals to perceive and express their emotions, supporting their capacity to regulate their feelings and develop emotional maturity (Rimé, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2018; Santana-Martins *et al.*, 2022b). Hence, conducting studies that investigate antecedents such as emotional maturity and



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different commitment foci, including commitment to leaders, career commitment, commitment to colleagues, among others, is posited as essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the employee commitment process (Klein *et al.*, 2021; van Rossenberg *et al.*, 2022). While numerous studies have confirmed the ongoing relevance of organizational commitment as a focal point, further exploration is claimed to delve into its directionality and influence on different foci within the workplace. Multilevel studies investigating the influence of employees' affective commitment to the leader on their affective organizational commitment are notably absent (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2019; Klein *et al.*, 2021; van Rossenberg *et al.*, 2022).

Thus, this work addresses a significant gap in the existing literature, investigating the relationship between workplace commitment, emotional awareness, and maturity within the context of evolving work environments. That is crucial for understanding the dynamics that underpin effective leadership, employee commitment, and organizational success in the present and future. The primary objective of this study is to ascertain the potential influence exerted by leaders' affective organizational commitment on fostering corresponding affective commitment among employees towards both the leader and the overarching organization. Furthermore, this research endeavors to examine the pivotal role played by employees' emotional awareness in delineating and shaping the dynamics inherent in these relationships.

For that purpose, the study uses a multilevel approach, and explores the role of employees' emotional awareness in this process through these research questions: (1) To what extent does a leader's affective organizational commitment influence the employee's affective commitment to the leader? (2) To what extent does a leader's affective organizational commitment influence the employee's affective commitment to the organization? (3) What is the role of employees' emotional awareness to their affective commitment, both towards the leader and the organization?

This research is grounded in the Organizational Behavior literature which explores how individuals, groups, and structures within an organization interact and influence each other's behavior. Workplace commitment refers to the level of dedication and loyalty employees feel towards their organization and its goals. The combination of these two subjects offers valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying leader and employee organizational commitment by examining various theoretical perspectives and empirical findings. By understanding the factors that influence commitment, organizations can develop strategies to foster a positive work environment, enhance employee satisfaction, and improve organizational performance (Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Vandenberghe *et al.*, 2004; van Rossenberg *et al.*, 2022). This study is specifically grounded in a theoretical framework that encompasses both the Social Learning Theory and the Affective Events Theory.

The perspective of the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), also known as Social Cognitive Theory, emphasizes the role of observational learning and cognitive processes in shaping human behavior (Ambrose *et al.*, 2016; Xie *et al.*, 2019; Wo *et al.*, 2019). Accordingly, this theory suggests that individuals learn by observing the behaviors of others, as well as through cognitive processes involved in encoding, retaining, and reproducing learned behaviors. This perspective supports this study which explores the impact of leaders' affective organizational commitment on employees and emphasizes the critical role of leaders as sources of influence for employees' commitment. In addition, the present research incorporates the lens of the Affective Events Theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996, 2017), which examines the influence of emotional experiences on individuals' attitudes, behavior, and job-related outcomes in the workplace. The theory suggests that events or situations in the work environment can trigger emotional responses, which subsequently impact various aspects of an individual's work life (Zapf *et al.*, 2016; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017; Weiss and Cropanzano, 2017). In line with these assumptions, this study specifically focuses on the

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influence of leaders' affective organizational commitment on employees' affective commitment to both the leader and the organization. This theory underscores the importance of emotional aspects within the leader-employee relationship and highlights the significance of affective experiences in shaping commitment.

Following this introduction to the research gap and establishment of the theoretical background, the subsequent section is dedicated to formulating the hypotheses that will undergo rigorous testing in section three. Section four presents the obtained results, while sections five and six are dedicated to an examination of these findings, offering discussions and conclusions inclusive of identified limitations and prospective avenues for future research.

## 2. Hypotheses development

Employee commitment, encompassing emotional attachment, sense of obligation, and continuance in the organization, has significant implications for organizational outcomes and performance (Beer *et al.*, 2015; Park *et al.*, 2022). The affective component of commitment is considered the most influential when compared to the normative and continuance components (Mercurio, 2015). The affective component captures the emotional attachment and identification individuals feel towards their organization, making it a significant determinant of their intention to remain with the company (Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Klein *et al.*, 2021; Iqbal *et al.*, 2023; Ngah *et al.*, 2023).

The leader, as a critical role common to all organizations, has immense responsibility and exerts a direct influence on employees (Liu *et al.*, 2021). Studies on leadership, encompassing direct supervisors, line managers, and top management, have highlighted the significant influence of leaders on employee behavior (Stinglhamber *et al.*, 2015; Khaola and Rambe, 2020). Moreover, the leader plays a pivotal role in implementing organizational changes, including human resources (HR) policies and practices, ensuring that their effectiveness influences employees' affective organizational commitment.

Prior research has shown that employees' commitment to their leader influences their commitment to the organization because the leader is perceived as an agent or representative of the organization (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2010). Loi *et al.* (2012) indicated a positive influence of leaders' affective commitment on employees' affective organizational commitment, which in turn impacted both the employees' extra-role behaviors and task performance. Recently, Santana-Martins *et al.* (2022b), in a comparative study to identify the foci (organization and leader) with higher explanatory influence on employees' commitment, concluded that affective commitment to the leader has a greater impact on employees' organizational commitment than the reverse.

Drawing upon the Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), individuals learn through observing the behaviors of others, while engaging in cognitive processes such as encoding, retaining, and reproducing learned behaviors. This process involves attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Individuals pay close attention to the behaviors being demonstrated, retain the observed information in memory, reproduce the behaviors through imitation or modeling, and are motivated to engage in similar behaviors based on the observed consequences or outcomes. A leader who is strongly committed to the organization demonstrates enthusiastic behavior and maintains a positive attitude. Such leaders exhibit proactive problem-solving skills, going above and beyond to achieve goals and develop innovative solutions. These leaders prioritize effective communication, cooperation, and mutual respect within the team, contributing to the collective pursuit of goals (Loi *et al.*, 2012). On the one hand, and according to the previously presented Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977, 1986), higher self-efficacy instils greater confidence and motivation to engage in a particular behavior, whereas lower self-efficacy may lead to avoidance or a lack of

motivation. Cognitive processes, such as attention, perception, memory, and problem-solving, are actively employed by individuals when observing and imitating others. These cognitive processes also aid in evaluating the potential outcomes and consequences of one's own behaviors.

The theory underscores the importance of role models, social environments, and cognitive factors in shaping behavior. Hence, it is reasonable to expect that a leader's affective organizational commitment would have an impact on the employee's affective organizational commitment. On the other hand, the Affective Events Theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996, 2017) emphasizes the dynamic and episodic nature of emotions in the workplace. Emotional experiences can accumulate over time and significantly impact an individual's overall work-related attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, the theory acknowledges that affective events can have both direct and indirect effects on outcomes, as they have the potential to influence other psychological processes, including cognition and motivation. Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that a leader's affective organizational commitment would exert influence on the employee's affective commitment to the leader. The influential factor in shaping employees' understanding of their work environment is the emotions exhibited by their leaders, perceiving the leader's emotional bonds.

Research on emotions has indicated that the expression of emotions by one individual can shape the thoughts and behaviors of others. For instance, Cardon (2008) and Morris and Keltner (2000) have proposed the concept of emotional contagion, suggesting that leaders are more likely to transmit emotions while employees are more likely to receive them. Within the existing literature, there is generally a positive association between affective commitment and positive affect. Meyer and Herscovitch (2001) have emphasized that a strong positive emotion is the most salient aspect of affective commitment, while Herrbach (2006) has found that affective commitment reflects a favorable evaluation of the work environment and should correlate with more positive affective states at work. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that leaders with higher levels of affective commitment will display more positive emotions such as pride and joy (Loi et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2018; Klein et al., 2021). As employees observe these emotional displays from their leaders, they may draw inferences regarding the association between the leaders' affective commitment and the positive emotions exhibited. Consequently, employees' affective orientation towards the organization and the leader will be reinforced. Based on the aforementioned arguments, it is expected that the leader's affective organizational commitment influences the employee's affective commitment to both the leader and the organization. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are formulated (Figure 1):

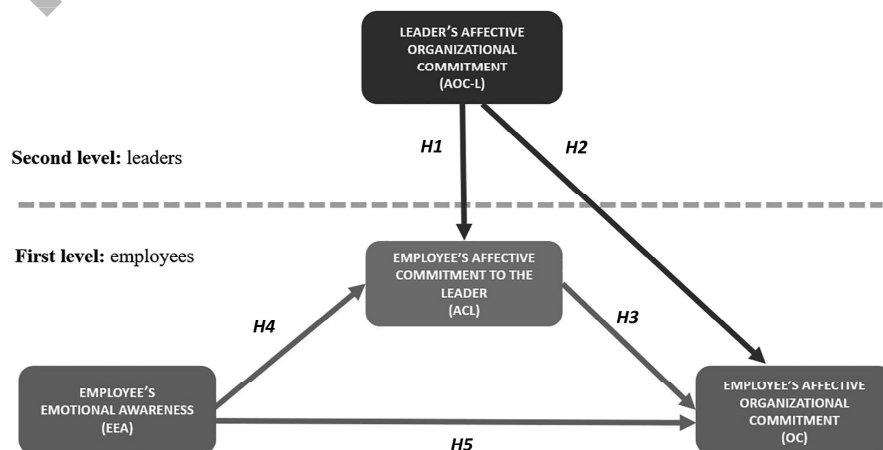


Figure 1. Proposed multilevel model

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- H1.* The leader's affective organizational commitment positively influences the employee's affective commitment to the leader.
- H2.* The leader's affective organizational commitment positively influences the employee's affective organizational commitment.
- H3.* The employees' affective commitment to the leader positively influences the employee's affective organizational commitment.

In addition, emotions are considered an integral part of everyday work life, ranging from enthusiasm, joy, and frustration to stress and apathy. These emotions are influenced by various factors, including personal experiences, job satisfaction, work relationships, and organizational culture. The impact of emotions on employee performance is significant, as positive emotions such as enthusiasm and happiness can enhance creativity, problem-solving abilities, and motivation, while negative emotions like anger and anxiety can hinder productivity, decision-making, and overall job performance (Côté, 2014).

Studies on commitment have identified a set of variables that influence positively employees' commitment, often referred to as antecedents of commitment. These variables include work conditions, organizational and supervisor support, leadership style, climate and culture, relationships, and even organizational purpose (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe, 2003). Different models have proposed that certain personal characteristics can act as antecedents of commitment, facilitating individual commitment to specific foci. These variables play a role in influencing the employee's commitment process (Meyer and Allen, 1997). One such characteristic may be the employee's emotional awareness, which refers to their ability to accurately interpret their own and others' emotions, enabling a better understanding of the context and guiding appropriate behavior (Mayer and Salovey, 1997; Gara Bach Ouerdian *et al.*, 2021).

The Affective Events Theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996, 2017) highlights the significance of affective events, some specific incidents or situations evoke emotional responses in individuals. These events can be positive or negative and have immediate and subjective emotional reactions. The emotional reactions triggered by affective events are believed to have consequences or outcomes in the workplace, impacting various aspects of work life such as job satisfaction, job performance, motivation, turnover intentions, and overall well-being. Overall, employees' emotional awareness contributes to their well-being, enhances interpersonal relationships, facilitates conflict resolution, and promotes adaptability and resilience.

Emotions profoundly impact interpersonal relationships in the workplace, with positive emotions fostering better communication, cooperation, and collaboration among colleagues. Individuals with high emotional awareness can be characterized by their ability to recognize and understand their own emotions, motivations, and reactions. Following Mayer and Salovey (1997) and Rego and Fernandes (2005), the present study aims to examine the antecedent influence of emotional awareness, specifically understanding self-emotions (USE), self-control when facing criticism (SFC), and understanding others' emotions (UOE), on affective commitment to the leader and the organization. USE refers to an individual's ability to comprehend and manage their own emotions effectively. SFC is associated with an individual's capacity to regulate their emotions and handle feedback or criticism. UOE encompasses an individual's capability to comprehend the emotions of others with whom they interact.

We highlight that the emotional climate within an organization profoundly influences employees' perceptions of their work, colleagues, and the overall work environment, but it also depends on their emotional awareness (Gara Bach Ouerdian *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, emotional awareness enables employees to recognize and connect with the emotions of their colleagues and leaders. This emotional connection promotes a sense of camaraderie, trust,

and support within the workplace (Rimé, 2020). Thus, it is expected that employees' emotional awareness positively influences the employees' affective commitment to both foci (leader and organization) as expressed in the following additional hypotheses (Figure 1):

- H4. The employee's emotional awareness positively influences the employee's affective commitment to the leader.
- H5. The employee's emotional awareness positively influences the employee's affective organizational commitment.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Population, sampling, and aggregation process

The study employed a convenience non-probabilistic sample consisting of 403 participants from three different types of companies. Among these, two were multinational companies, one French (with 106 participants) and the other Portuguese (with 190 participants). The third group included several public entities and private companies (with 107 participants). We formally informed the participants that their participation should be voluntary, and we guaranteed confidentiality since we would not collect any personal data. During the entire process, national and international ethical standards were strictly followed.

The collected data were subjected to statistical analysis using SPSS 22 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and LISREL 9.3 (Linear Structural Relations). Aggregation is a crucial step in multilevel statistical analysis, particularly when dealing with hierarchical data structures where lower-level units are nested within higher-level units (e.g. employees within organizations). The aggregation process involves combining or summarizing individual-level data to create higher-level units for analysis (Hair *et al.*, 2019; Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002). Therefore, this study adopted a two-level analysis approach, with the first level focusing on the employees and the second level examining the leaders.

Within the original sample, 62% of participants held non-managerial positions, while 38% had leadership roles. The average age of the sample was 37 years, with a standard deviation of 9.05 (minimum of 20 years old to a maximum of 65 years old). In terms of tenure, the minimum was 1 year, the maximum was 40 years, and the average tenure in the companies was 10 years, with a standard deviation of 8.13.

Level 2 data was obtained through a data aggregation process, which corresponded to the level of leadership. Two descriptive variables were used in this aggregation process: participants with leadership roles and the organization to which the participants belonged. In the initial phase we created three subsamples: subjects with leadership, participants without leadership roles, and a third subsample divided on the three types of participants (Portuguese, French and others). Based on these two criteria, the value of the variable Affective Organizational Commitment of Leaders – Level 2 – was calculated for each of them. At the end of this process, the variable Leader's Affective Organizational Commitment was included in the subsample of non-leaders (Level 1).

The subsample of non-leaders (Level 1) comprised 249 participants, with an average age of 36 years (SD = 9.00; Minimum = 20 years; Maximum = 61 years) and an average tenure of 9 years (SD = 8.12; Minimum = 1 year; Maximum = 20 years). The subsample of leaders (Level 2) had an average age of 39 years (SD = 8.99, Minimum = 20 years, Maximum = 35 years).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was undertaken on the sample to validate measurement instruments, assess the theoretical model, and ensure the reliability and validity of latent constructs. This method enables the evaluation of the fit between observed data and hypothesized models, thereby enhancing the robustness and credibility of research findings. To account for the ordinal nature of the variables, the Robust Maximum Likelihood

Method was employed to estimate the model and calculate polychoric correlations. Subsequently, the structural relationships were examined. The internal consistency of the latent variables was assessed using established criteria, such as a variance extracted value of  $\geq 0.5$  and construct reliability ranging between 0.6 and 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2019). During each phase of the structural multilevel analysis, statistically non-significant structural relationships were removed from the model, following guidelines outlined by Hair *et al.* (2019). A multi-level confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to assess the properties of the measures, while hierarchical linear modeling was employed to test the hypotheses (Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002).

### 3.2 Research instrument

We have used seven-point Likert scales. Organizational commitment was measured using the scale developed by Meyer and Allen (1997) and adapted to the Portuguese context by Nascimento *et al.* (2008). The employee affective organizational commitment shows a proper convergent validity ( $\alpha = 0.825$ , AVE = 68%, CR = 0.86). Commitment to the leader was assessed using an adapted scale derived from the organizational commitment scale, specifically the affective sub-scale focused on the leader. The convergent validity was also acceptable ( $\alpha = 0.879$ , AVE = 78%, CR = 0.91). For the emotional awareness variables, it was used the scale developed by Rego and Fernandes (2005) for the Portuguese context and based on Mayer and Salovey's (1997) model of Emotional Intelligence. All three dimensions had an acceptable convergent validity (understanding self-emotions:  $\alpha = 0.875$ , AVE = 81%, CR = 0.93; self-control when facing criticism:  $\alpha = 0.761$ , AVE = 58%, CR = 0.80, and understanding others' emotions:  $\alpha = 0.690$ , AVE = 61%, CR = 0.82).

To mitigate the potential influence of common method bias, we implemented several strategic measures. Firstly, we ensured the respondents' anonymity and confidentiality, fostering an environment where participants felt secure in providing honest and unbiased responses. Additionally, to counteract response patterns and reduce potential biases, the survey scales incorporated both reversed items and a varied order of items. As suggested by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), these methodological choices were aimed at enhancing the robustness of our data collection process and fortifying the validity of the study outcomes. These authors also suggest using common method analysis to assess the impact of common method variance. This analysis revealed that the variance resulting from the common method accounted for 20.2%, which is below the general reference criterion of 25 and 40.7% established for attitude measurement.

## 4. Results

In terms of the descriptive statistics for the latent variables (Table 1) indicate that the means generally exhibit high correlation values. Notably, a significant correlation of 0.432\*\* is

	Mean	SD	A-CL	AOC	USE	SFC	UEO	AOC_L
A-CL	4.67	1.43	1					
AOC	4.23	1.23	0.466**	1				
USE	5.49	0.92	0.240**	0.338**	1			
SFC	3.89	1.00	0.287**	0.177**	0.174**	1		
UEO	4.77	0.63	0.216**	0.329**	0.380**	0.238**	1	
AOC_L	4.50	0.38	0.184**	0.432**	0.157*	0.123	0.076	1

**Note(s):** \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. \*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

**Table 1.**  
Descriptive statistics  
and correlations

observed between employees' affective organizational commitment and leaders' affective organizational commitment.

The findings reveal several statistically significant relationships, particularly between affective commitment to the leader and all variables considered in this study. Affective commitment to the leader exhibits a significant and positive relationship with affective organizational commitment (0.466\*\*).

Regarding the emotional awareness variables, all of them demonstrate a positive relationship with an affective commitment to the leader (understanding self-emotions: 0.240\*\*; self-control when facing criticism: 0.287\*\*; understanding others' emotions: 0.216\*\*). A similar trend is observed between the emotional awareness variables and affective organizational commitment (understanding self-emotions: 0.338\*\*; self-control when facing criticism: 0.177\*\*; understanding others' emotions: 0.329\*\*).

Furthermore, the leader's affective organizational commitment displays a positive and statistically significant association with both affective commitment to the leader (0.184\*\*) and affective organizational commitment (0.432\*\*). Regarding the relationship between the leader's affective organizational commitment and the emotional awareness variables, understanding self-emotions yields a positive and statistically significant result (0.157\*), while self-control when facing criticism also shows a positive relationship (0.123). However, the relationship between understanding others' emotions and the leader's affective organizational commitment is non-significant (0.076).

The final model obtained from the structural multilevel analysis demonstrates an acceptable level of goodness-of-fit ( $\chi^2 = 9.80$ ;  $df = 7$ ;  $RMSEA = 0.034$ ;  $GFI = 0.965$ ;  $SRMR = 0.054$ ;  $NFI = 0.958$ ;  $CFI = 0.987$ ;  $RFI = 0.910$ ). This model explains 13% of the variance in affective commitment to the leader (ACL) ( $R^2 = 0.13$ ) and 38% of the variance in affective organizational commitment ( $R^2 = 0.38$ ) (Figure 2).

The final model reveals a positive influence of leaders' affective organizational commitment (AOC-L) on both employees' affective commitment to the leader (0.13) and employees' affective organizational commitment (AOC) (0.34). Regarding the emotional awareness variables, it is found that only understanding self-emotions (0.18) and self-control when facing criticism (0.24) has a positive relationship with an affective commitment to the

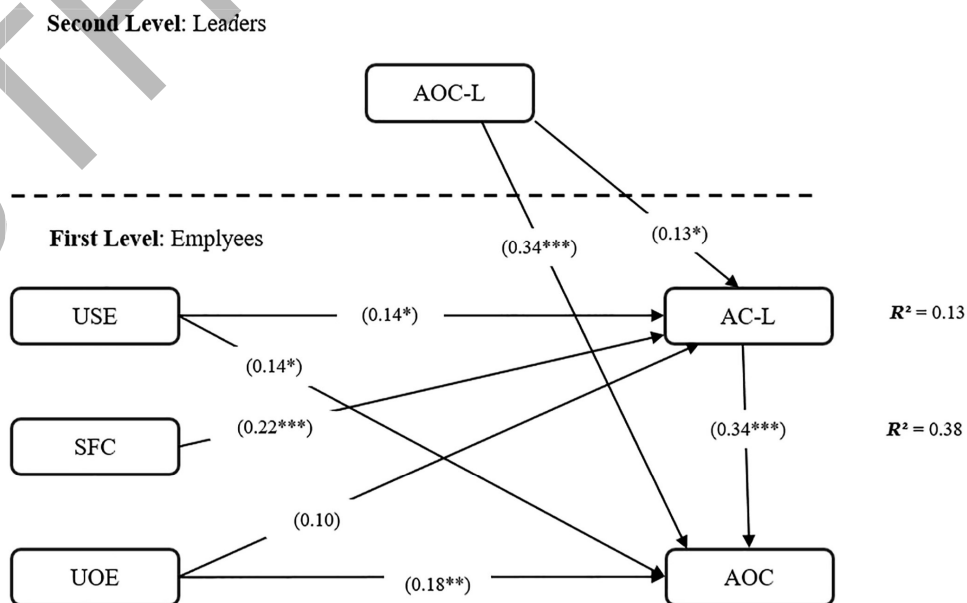


Figure 2. Final multilevel model



leader. Furthermore, concerning the relationship between emotional awareness and organizational commitment, understanding self-emotions (0.14) and understanding others' emotions (0.18) positively influence employees' affective organizational commitment.

Based on these findings, **H1** is confirmed, suggesting that the leader's affective organizational commitment positively influences employees' affective commitment to the leader (0.13). **H2** is also confirmed, as the leader's affective organizational commitment positively influences employees' affective organizational commitment (0.34). **H3** is partially confirmed, suggesting that employees' affective commitment to the leader (ACL) has a positive influence on employees' affective organizational commitment (AOC) (0.33). Regarding **H4**, it is partially confirmed, indicating that understanding self-emotions (0.18) and self-control when facing criticism (0.24) positively influence employees' affective commitment to the leader. Finally, **H5** is partially confirmed, revealing that understanding self-emotions (USE) and understanding others' emotions (UOE) only have a positive influence on employees' affective organizational commitment (0.14 and 0.18, respectively).

## 5. Discussion

While organizational commitment has been extensively studied, further exploration is necessary to understand its directionality and influence on different commitment foci. Focusing exclusively on organizational commitment limits the understanding of the interplay between different foci that coexist in the workplace (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2019; Klein *et al.*, 2021; van Rossenberg *et al.*, 2022).

The classical theoretical framework suggests that organizational commitment has traditionally been a stable focus, but the influence of other commitment foci on organizational commitment and the reciprocal influence remain to be explored.

This study builds upon the work initiated by Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe (2003), which examined supervisors as potential foci of commitment in the workplace. Loi *et al.* (2012) proposed a positive relationship between supervisors' affective commitment and employees' affective commitment, subsequently impacting employees' extra-role and task performance. These findings underscore that supervisors' affective mindset concerning their relationship with the organization significantly influences employees' emotional attachment to the organization. Subsequently, Meyer *et al.* (2015), Klein *et al.* (2021), and van Rossenberg *et al.* (2022) highlighted the need for studies on commitment to the leaders, considering their important role in the workplace, as well as the directionality between different foci of commitment and their mutual influence. To address this gap, this study used a multilevel approach aligned with these suggestions, to test the influence across different commitment foci.

Hence, our study aligns with social learning theory and affective events theory, confirming the influence of a leader's affective organizational commitment on employees' affective commitment to both the leader and the organization. Individuals learn through observing others' behaviors, and these cognitive processes aid in evaluating the potential outcomes and consequences of one's behaviors. The theoretical framework underscores the importance of role models, social environments, and cognitive factors in shaping behavior and commitment, particularly among leaders, employees' emotional awareness, and the organization. In line with the affective events theory, our results suggest the congruence of emotional awareness as an antecedent to commitment, fostering affective commitment to the leader and affective organizational commitment (Becker, 2016; Santana-Martins *et al.*, 2022a). This study underscores the relevance of socioemotional aspects in workplace commitment, emphasizing the importance of affective commitment to both the leader and the organization. This conclusion aligns with arguments put forth by authors such as Solinger *et al.* (2008) and Klein *et al.* (2012), asserting that affective bonds often form the strongest foundation for employee commitment.

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The results suggest a positive influence of leaders' affective organizational commitment on employees' affective commitment to the leader. This indicates that as employees perceive the leader's strong commitment to the organization, their emotional bond with the leader tends to strengthen. Furthermore, the results also indicate a significant influence of leaders' affective organizational commitment on employees' affective organizational commitment. This suggests that as employees perceive the leader's strong commitment to the organization, it has a notable impact on their overall commitment to both the leader and the organization.

These findings highlight two important aspects: first, the pivotal role of the leader in fostering commitment, not only towards themselves but also towards the organization; and second, the power of affective bonds in both the leader-employee relationship and the employee-organization relationship.

Individuals are highly attentive to the behaviors exhibited by others, particularly leaders, and they retain these observed behaviors in their memory. Subsequently, individuals may reproduce these behaviors through imitation or modeling. A leader who displays a strong commitment to the organization not only exhibits enthusiastic behavior but also maintains a positive attitude. When employees witness a leader who is enthusiastic about their work and displays a positive outlook, it influences their attitudes and behaviors. They are more likely to be motivated and inspired to engage in similar behaviors that align with the leader's commitment. The impact of a committed leader goes beyond the surface level. It may foster a sense of purpose and dedication among employees, instilling a shared commitment to the organization's goals and values. This commitment is reinforced when employees observe the positive outcomes that result from the leader's enthusiastic behavior and positive attitude, such as increased productivity, enhanced team cohesion, and improved job satisfaction. Therefore, a leader's strong commitment to the organization not only influences their behavior but also catalyzes shaping the attitudes and behaviors of their followers. By embodying enthusiasm and maintaining a positive attitude, leaders can effectively inspire and motivate their employees, contributing to a culture of commitment and ultimately driving organizational success.

Additionally, in line with trickle effects research ([Wo et al., 2019](#)), the results suggest that employees' emotional awareness reflects a positive trickle-up effect on affective commitment to the leader and to the organization.

Based on these findings, it is recommended to adopt an organizational leadership model that promotes cohesion and closeness with employees throughout the hierarchical structure ([Raudenbush and Bryk, 2002](#)). This model should prioritize people-oriented leadership, wherein leaders provide support in challenging and stressful situations, offer guidance and advice, create opportunities for employee skill development, recognize achievements, and empower team members to make decisions without constant approval. Leaders should serve as more than mere role models; they should act as facilitators, understanding employee needs and aligning them with organizational goals.

The results are aligned with the affective events theory ([Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996](#)) which suggests that emotional experiences can impact various aspects of work life, including job satisfaction, job performance, motivation, turnover intentions, and overall well-being. The ability to understand self-emotions allows individuals to stay connected with themselves, be aware of their emotional state, and comprehend the underlying reasons for their emotions. This ability plays a crucial role in empowering employees to understand their motivations, values, and aspirations. By being attuned to their emotions, individuals can engage in self-reflection, evaluating the alignment between their values and those of the organization. This introspection fosters a deeper sense of personal investment and commitment to the organization. These emotional dynamics explain the positive relationship between this variable and affective commitment to the leader and affective organizational commitment.

Equally, self-control when facing criticism, which refers to an individual's ability to manage their emotions when receiving criticism or feedback, is positively related to affective commitment to the leader. This finding suggests that employees with a greater capacity to interpret feedback constructively, regardless of whether it is positive or negative, are more likely to develop an affective bond with their leader. However, it is crucial to note that the leader's approach during the feedback process plays a significant role in how employees receive and interpret such feedback (Zheng *et al.*, 2015; Khaola and Rambe, 2020; Cencki *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, the employee's ability to understand others' emotions is positively associated with affective organizational commitment. This finding indicates that the capacity to understand others' emotions enables individuals to be more empathetic, thereby supporting the development of satisfactory relationships in the workplace and reinforcing a tendency to strengthen the affective commitment to the leader and the organization.

Finally, organizations should invest in the emotional development of both employees and leaders, fostering a human-centric organizational culture that recognizes the power of emotions, honesty, and empathy as fundamental elements for sustainable personal growth and organizational success. The current context is characterized by tremendous changes, highlighting the importance of leaders effectively communicating how these changes will impact employees, and what they need to be aware of, to adapt successfully to new circumstances. This focused attention can be viewed as constructive feedback, helping employees understand how they can improve and adapt to changes while aligning themselves with the company's goals. Furthermore, this feedback or mentoring program between employees and leaders can prove to be an effective approach to enhance commitment levels.

These measures collectively reinforce the relationship between employees, leadership, and the organization, potentially fostering affective commitment and a reciprocal sense of duty, as employees recognize the respect and consideration shown by their leaders. Additionally, alongside these measures and behavioral suggestions, a well-structured communication strategy can be implemented to enhance how the leader's affective organizational commitment is perceived by employees.

## 6. Conclusion, limitations and future lines of research

The role of commitment in shaping the success and long-term sustainability of organizations has been widely discussed in organizational behavior and management research. This study has made expressive strides in addressing gaps in the existing literature by comprehensively examining multiple targets of commitment and employing a robust multilevel methodology to explore the dynamics of commitment. By considering the leader and the organization, we have broadened the scope of our analysis and shed light on the relationship between these different foci. Furthermore, our utilization of a multilevel methodology has been instrumental in capturing the complex dynamics of commitment. Rooted in organizational behavior, this approach recognizes that commitment is not solely an individual-level phenomenon but is influenced by various contextual factors at the organizational and leadership level. By examining commitment dynamics across different levels, we have unraveled the intricate interplay between individual and organizational factors, providing a more nuanced understanding of commitment in the workplace.

Our study recognizes the leader as a focal point of commitment with a significant impact on the employee's commitment process. Leaders can reinforce employees' commitment toward different foci in the workplace. Furthermore, organizations remain an important focus of commitment, as employees' perception of leaders' affective organizational commitment influences their affective organizational commitment. Hence, although organizational commitment is a stable focus, it can be nurtured by effective leadership.

Our findings make substantial contributions to commitment literature by addressing gaps and elucidating underlying mechanisms and antecedents. This understanding can inform the development of more efficacious strategies to foster commitment among employees, leaders, and organizations. Additionally, the study's novel contributions, considering multiple commitment targets and employing a multilevel methodology, deepen our comprehension of commitment dynamics, offering valuable insights for academia and practice. Nonetheless, a limitation in our study arises from we considered the mean of the leader's affective commitment and the employee's commitment towards their organization. The lack of correspondence between the leader and his or her specific team on Level 2 was necessary for preserving the anonymity of the participants.

Considering the above, we suggest that future research explore the dynamics between leaders and their team members. As work environments continue to evolve, organizations need to future-proof themselves. Understanding how emotional awareness and maturity affect commitment can help in nurturing leaders who can foster a more committed workforce. Research in this area can contribute to creating frameworks and practices that align with emerging trends, technological advancements, and shifting workforce demographics, ensuring sustained commitment and success.

Throughout the present study, several new questions have emerged, such as the influence of e-leadership on employees' commitment to both the leader and the organization. Exploring this area could serve as a fruitful avenue for future research. Additionally, understanding how emotional awareness operates concerning different targets, such as colleagues or career aspirations, would be of interest. Furthermore, there is a need for more studies that consider different foci of commitment, expanding beyond the examination of directionality to explore the influence between different organizational levels. Longitudinal studies are also recommended to gain a deeper understanding of dynamics over time and to identify the antecedents and consequences of commitment. Overall, by addressing these considerations, future research can contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of commitment.

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#### Further reading

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#### Corresponding author

M. Isabel Sánchez-Hernández can be contacted at: [isanchez@unex.es](mailto:isanchez@unex.es)

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