

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASSERTIVE LEADERSHIP LEVELS AND EMPLOYEES' STRESS LEVELS IN A COLOMBIAN SERVICE COMPANY

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ABSTRACT

Despite advancements in research on work stress and its relationship with leadership, gaps remain in our understanding of how assertive leadership can mitigate employee stress. This study aimed to delve deeper into this relationship by identifying the underlying mechanisms through which assertive leadership contributes to reducing work-related stress. Addressing this gap is crucial not only for improving employee well-being but also for strengthening organizational health, enhancing talent retention, and boosting business competitiveness. Adopting a mixed-methods design and an explanatory scope, this study employed an assertive leadership questionnaire and a work stress test based on a Likert-type scale to measure the variables of interest. The results indicate that managers' higher perceived assertive leadership levels are associated with lower stress levels among their team members. Specifically, team members with mild stress tend to perceive high assertive leadership levels, those with moderate or high stress often perceive moderate leadership levels, and those without stress exhibit mixed perceptions of assertive leadership, ranging from high to moderate levels.

These findings reveal a strong association between assertive leadership and work stress levels, underscoring the importance of fostering effective leadership as a strategy for improving work environments and organizational well-being. However, assertive leadership is not a universal solution for managing work-related stress. Its effectiveness depends on contextualized implementation that takes into account both team characteristics and workplace demands.

KEYWORDS: Employees, Leadership, Management, Organization, Work-related stress

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, work environments have undergone profound transformations driven by globalization, technological advancements, and flexible work schemes, such as remote or hybrid work. These developments have aroused renewed interest in leadership styles that can balance organizational performance with workers' psychosocial well-being. Assertive leadership, in particular, has attracted increasing attention.

In contemporary work environments, assertive leadership is recognized as a crucial factor for employees' emotional well-being. This is particularly true, and leadership quality can significantly influence work-related stress levels. This study primarily aimed to examine the impact of managers' assertive leadership on stress levels among employees at a Colombian service company by exploring the following research question: How do managers' assertive leadership levels influence workers' stress levels? The specific research objectives were as follows: (1) to identify managers' assertive leadership levels as perceived by their team members, (2) to identify team members' stress levels, and (3) to determine the relationship between managers' perceived assertive leadership levels and team members' stress levels.

To answer the research question, this study employed a mixed-methods descriptive approach with a nonexperimental field methodology using a cross-sectional ex post facto design. The study population consisted of all 29 employees of a company, including 7 managers and 22 team members. Data were collected using two validated instruments adapted to the organizational context under analysis: an assertive leadership questionnaire and a work stress test.

The results showed that assertive leadership levels differentially affected workers' stress levels. In a department whose manager was characterized by high perceived levels of assertive leadership, low employee stress levels were observed. In departments characterized by moderate to high perceived levels of assertive leadership, work-related stress was higher. The findings also suggest that while assertiveness is a valuable leadership competency,

it must be combined with other skills, such as empathy and flexibility, to prevent negative impacts on employees' emotional well-being.

METHODS

This study was based on fieldwork conducted on the company's premises. The study had a projective purpose, seeking to propose solutions to a specific situation based on prior research—in this case, the impact of managers' assertive leadership on employees' stress levels. The research was based on an ex post facto temporality design. A mixed-methods approach was employed to allow a broader interpretation of the results, enabling the identification of factors and impacts on employees and the observation of behavioral patterns during work execution. Moreover, a descriptive scope was adopted to collect information independently or jointly about the variables in question without indicating how they interrelated [1]. This involved specifying the characteristics, and profiles of people, groups, processes, objects, or any other analyzed phenomena. For data collection, two validated instruments were used: a work stress test [2,3] designed to measure perceived stress levels [4] among employees across various dimensions, including workload, work environment, and interpersonal relationships, and an assertive leadership questionnaire [5] designed to identify managers' perceived communication skills [6], clarity of expectations, and balance between firmness and empathy.

PROCESO GESTIÓN DE TALENTO HUMANO
FORMATO TEST DE ESTRÉS LABORAL

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FECHA: DOCUMENTO DE IDENTIDAD: NOMBRES Y APELLIDOS:

Por favor seleccione y marque con una "X" la frecuencia con la que se le han presentado los siguientes síntomas en los últimos 3 meses, tomando como referencia los siguientes valores:

	1	2	3	4	5
1. NUNCA					
2. RARA VEZ					
3. ALCUNAS VECES					
4. RELATIVAMENTE FRECUENTE					
5. MUY FRECUENTE					

a. Imposibilidad de conciliar el sueño
b. Jaqueca y dolores de cabeza
c. Indigestión y molestias estomacales
d. Sensación de cansancio extremo o agotamiento
e. Tendencia a comer, beber o fumar más de lo habitual
f. Disminución de interés sexual
g. Respiración entrecortada o sensación de ahogo
h. Disminución de apetito
i. Tensiones musculares (por ejemplo, los nerviosos a parientes)
j. Puntos de dolor o sensaciones dolorosas en las distintas partes del cuerpo
k. Tensiones fuertes de no levantarse por la mañana
l. Tensiones sufrir o palpitaciones

SUBTOTAL
TOTAL

*Adaptado del Cuestionario de Problemas Psicosociales (CPP) de Hack (1988), adaptado al español por García y cols., 1993.

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Instrucciones de Diligenciamiento

Solicite al funcionario o contratista que diligencie los datos básicos de la siguiente forma:

FECHA:	Diligenciar el día, mes y año en el que se aplica la prueba al funcionario o contratista.
DOCUMENTO DE IDENTIDAD:	Registrar el número de la cedula de ciudadanía del funcionario o contratista.
NOMBRES Y APELLIDOS:	Registrar el nombre completo del funcionario o contratista.

Posteriormente, solicite que les y diligencie el formato de acuerdo con la instrucción establecida en el primer párrafo del formato.

Una vez diligenciado, para obtener la calificación de la prueba, sume todos los números seleccionados y compare el resultado con la siguiente tabla de rangos:

PUNTAJE	NIVEL DE ESTRÉS	INTERPRETACIÓN
12-24	SIN ESTRÉS	No existe síntoma alguno de estrés. Tiene un buen equilibrio, continúa así y difunda entre los demás sus estrategias de afrontamiento.
25-36	ESTRÉS LEVE	Se encuentra en fase de alarma, trate de identificar el o los factores que le causan estrés para poder ocuparse de ellos de manera preventiva.
37-48	ESTRÉS MEDIO	Haga conciencia de la situación en la que se encuentra y trate de decir qué puede modificar, ya que, si la situación estresante se prolonga, puede romper su equilibrio entre lo laboral y lo personal. No aplique su resistencia.
49-60	ESTRÉS ALTO	Se encuentra en una fase de agotamiento de recursos. Realice un diagnóstico con desgaste físico y mental. Esto puede tener consecuencias más serias en su salud. Consulte orientación psicológica y mantenga apoyo social de personas cercanas.
61-72	ESTRÉS GRAVE	Requiere atención inmediata. Por esta razón es importante acudir a consulta médica y psicológica pronta para verificar preventivamente el estado de salud y dar inicio a un proceso de aprendizaje psicológico de herramientas y técnicas para el manejo del estrés, la ansiedad y los síntomas producidos.

El resultado (Columna: 'NIVEL DE ESTRÉS') debe ser consignado dentro del campo 'DESCRIPCIÓN DE LA ORIENTACIÓN' del Formato Seguimiento a Orientación Psicosocial (FOR-TH-133) o del Formato Orientación Psicosocial (FOR-TH-070), según corresponda, y en el Formato Sistema de Información del PVE de Riesgo Psicosocial (FOR-TH-132).

Figure 1 Work Stress Test Completed by Team Members

Escala valorativa de liderazgo asertivo

Niveles	Intervalo
Bajo	18' - 45
Medio	46 - 68
Alto	69 - 90

Figure 2 Assertive Leadership Levels

This study adhered to ethical research standards [7] and ensured confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

The entire personnel of the company under analysis, consisting of 29 employees, participated in the study. This included 22 team members and 7 department managers, who were evaluated by their team members. Given the study population's accessibility and small size [8], convenience sampling was used [9] to include all individuals who were available and willing to participate, with no exclusion criteria.

Table 1 Company's Organizational Chart

Department	Leadership Position	Number of Leaders	Team Members	Number of Team Members
Operations	Operations leader	1	2 assistants, 2 operatives	4
Finance	Finance director	1	2 assistants	2
IT	IT leader	1	1 technologist, 2 operatives	3
Digital marketing	Digital marketing leader	1	2 assistants, 1 operative	3
Human resources	Human resources leader	1	1 technologist, 1 assistants	2
Customer service	Customer service leader	1	2 technologists, 2 assistants	4
Sales	Sales leader	1	1 administrative staff, 2 assistants, 1 operative	4
Total		7		22
Total workforce				29

3. RESULTS

3.1. Managers' Perceived Assertive Leadership Levels

Figure 3 shows the percentage distribution of perceived assertive leadership levels (low, medium, and high) according to the results of the assertive leadership questionnaire completed by the 22 team members.

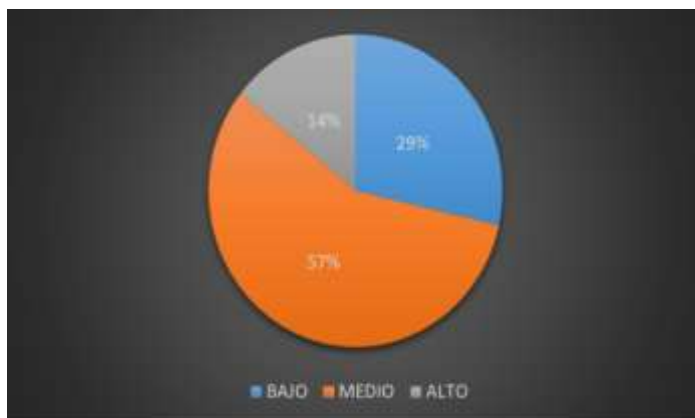


Figure 3 Perceived Assertive Leadership Levels

The analysis showed that 57% of the managers (four departments) had medium perceived assertive leadership levels, with basic communication and decision-making skills but with room for improvement in feedback and team management. Twenty-nine percent (two departments) had low perceived assertive leadership levels, exhibiting deficits in non-imposing communication and active listening. The remaining 14% (one department) had high perceived assertive leadership levels, with a balance between firmness and empathy, and could serve as a benchmark for mentorship programs and the replication of organizational best practices.

3.2. Team Members' Stress Levels

Table 2 shows the team members' work stress levels by department.

Table 2 Team Members' Stress Levels

Department	Respondent	Total	Stress Level
Operations	E1	21	SN
	E2	29	EL
	E3	29	EL
	E4	44	EM

Finance	E5	13	SN
	E6	42	EM
IT	E7	36	EL
	E8	43	EM
	E9	40	EM
Digital marketing	E10	27	EL
	E11	39	EM
	E12	28	EL
Human resources	E13	42	EM
	E14	50	EL
Customer service	E15	17	SN
	E16	12	SN
	E17	32	EL
	E18	21	SN
Sales	E19	36	EL
	E20	37	EM
	E21	36	EL
	E22	45	EM

Note: SN: no stress; EL: mild stress; EM: moderate stress.

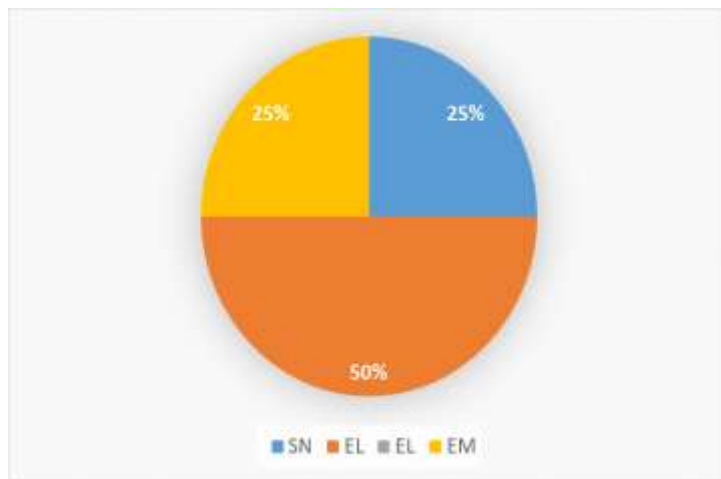


Figure 4 Stress Levels of Operations Team Members. SN: no stress; EL: mild stress; EM: moderate stress

The operations department was characterized by an imbalanced distribution of stress levels (Figure 4). Fifty percent of its team members reported mild stress, 25% reported no stress, and 25% reported moderate stress. This suggests that although part of the team was characterized by emotional equilibrium, there was a significant stress burden that could impact operational efficiency.

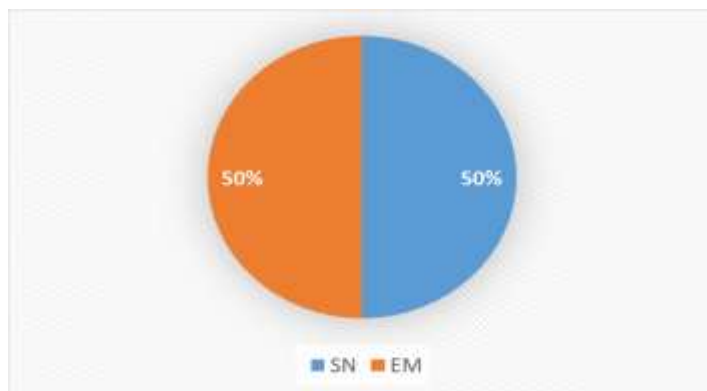


Figure 5 Stress Levels of Finance Team Members. SN: no stress; EM: moderate stress

Figure 5 shows an even distribution of stress levels reported by the finance team members. Fifty percent reported no stress, suggesting a favorable perception of the work environment and a potentially positive influence of leadership in this department. On the other hand, 50% reported moderate stress, indicating the presence of factors that might impose significant emotional burdens or psychological demands. The absence of team members reporting mild stress indicates polarization between those reporting no stress and those reporting moderate stress.

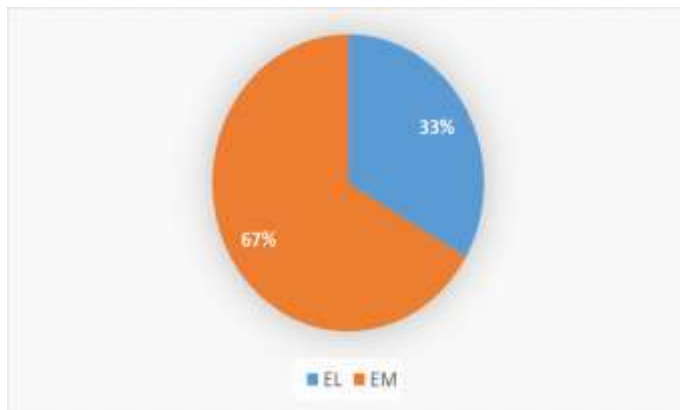


Figure 6 Stress Levels of IT Team Members. EL: mild stress; EM: moderate stress

Figure 6 reveals a concerning distribution of stress levels in the IT department. Sixty-seven percent of its members reported moderate stress, and only 33% reported mild stress. No team members reported no stress, indicating constant exposure to stress factors. These findings indicate a need for psychosocial interventions, as sustained high stress levels may affect both performance and well-being.

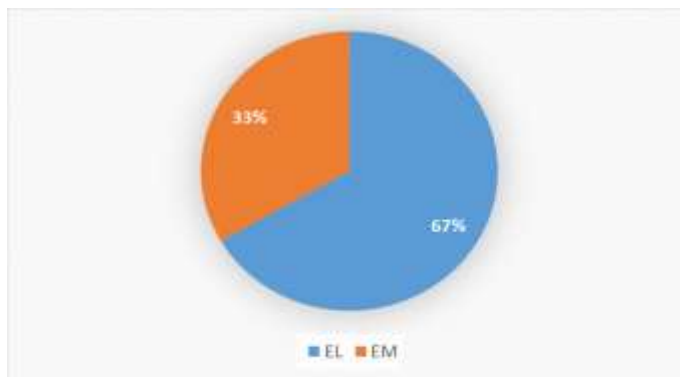


Figure 7 Stress Levels of Digital Marketing Team Members. EL: mild stress; EM: moderate stress

As shown in Figure 7, 67% of the digital marketing team members reported mild stress, while the remaining 33% reported moderate stress. This distribution indicates that, while most team members had manageable stress levels, one-third experienced more intense stress. These findings suggest a need to prevent escalation into severe stress by implementing strategies for self-care and emotional regulation in the workplace.

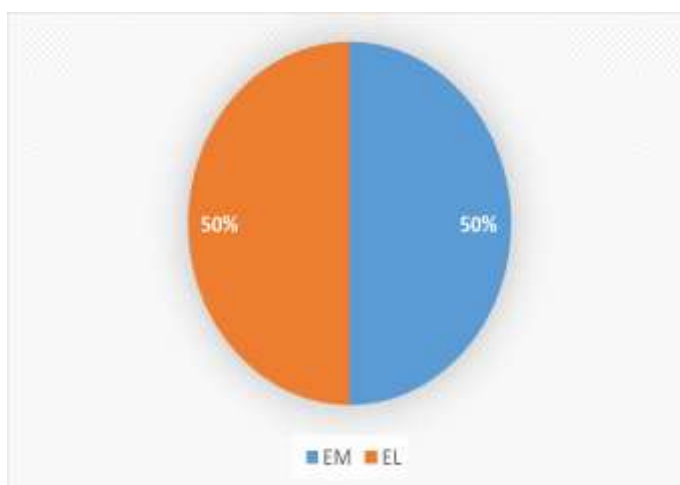


Figure 8 Stress Levels of Human Resources Team Members. EL: mild stress; EM: moderate stress

Figure 8 shows a balanced distribution of stress levels in the human resources department. Fifty percent of its members reported mild stress, while the other 50% reported moderate stress, indicating the presence of significant stress. These findings also indicate polarization between team members in terms of emotional states, which may reflect differences in workload, responsibilities, or personal resources for coping with demands. Although half the

team exhibited emotional well-being, the significant proportion of moderate stress should be addressed, as it could negatively impact decision-making, internal communication, and organizational climate management.

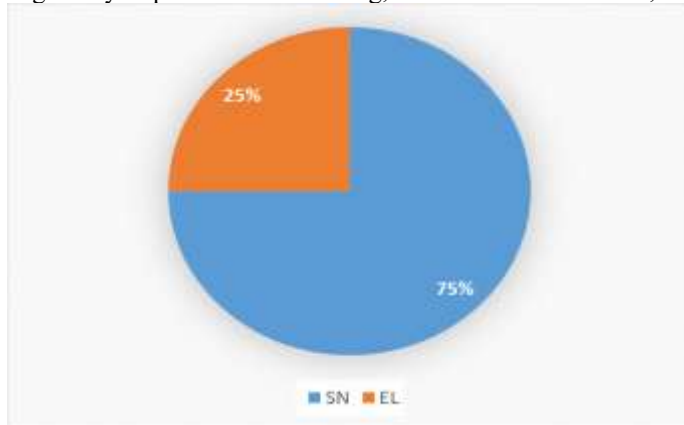


Figure 9 Stress Levels of Customer Service Team Members. SN: no stress; EL: mild stress

As shown in Figure 9, 25% of the customer service team members reported mild stress, indicating that, while stress factors existed, they remained manageable and did not significantly affect performance, although they indicated that there was room for improvement in workplace climate management. The remaining 75% reported no stress, reflecting a mostly positive work environment.

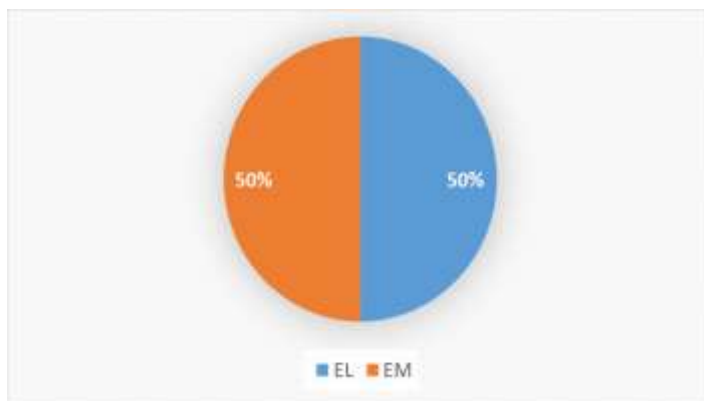


Figure 10 Stress Levels of Sales Team Members. EL: mild stress; EM: moderate stress

Figure 10 shows an unfavorable distribution of stress levels in the sales department. Fifty percent of its members reported mild stress, indicating manageable but still significant work pressures, and the other 50% reported moderate stress, likely associated with high sales demands, excessive workloads, or lack of support resources, suggesting a significant impact on well-being and performance. These findings indicate a need for immediate interventions, such as goal revisions, stress management workshops, and the creation of channels for effective communication with leadership, as well as more in-depth investigation through focus groups to identify specific causes and develop customized strategies for improving working conditions.

3.3. Relationship Between Managers' Assertive Leadership Levels and Team Members' Stress Levels

Departments whose leaders had higher perceived levels of assertive leadership (clear communication, balance between firmness and empathy) were characterized by lower stress levels. Conversely, in departments with lower levels of assertive leadership, higher—particularly moderate—stress levels were observed, indicating the direct influence of assertive leadership levels on team members' psychosocial well-being.

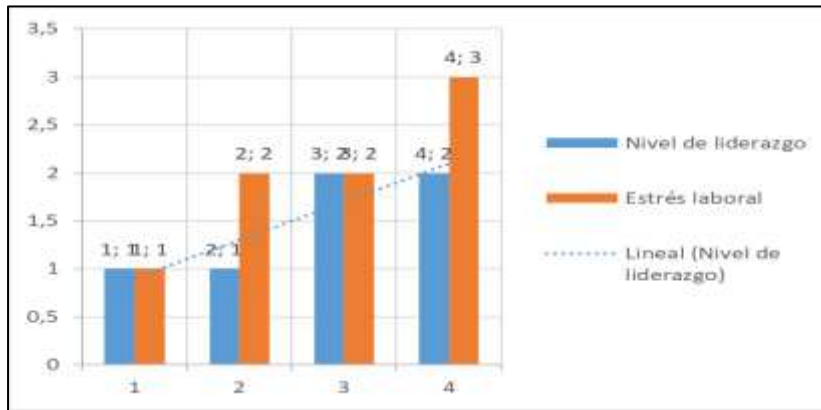


Figure 11 Relationship Between Assertive Leadership and Team Stress Levels in the Operations Department
Figure 11 shows an inversely proportional relationship between assertive leadership levels and work-related stress in the operations department. Higher assertive leadership scores (e.g., 4 points) corresponded to lower stress levels (3 points), while lower leadership scores (1–2 points) were associated with higher stress levels (2–4 points). This linear trend indicates that teams with more assertive leaders experienced significantly less stress. Notably, an assertive leadership score of 4 (maximum score) was associated with a stress score of 1 (minimum score), highlighting the importance of developing assertive leadership competencies to improve organizational well-being.

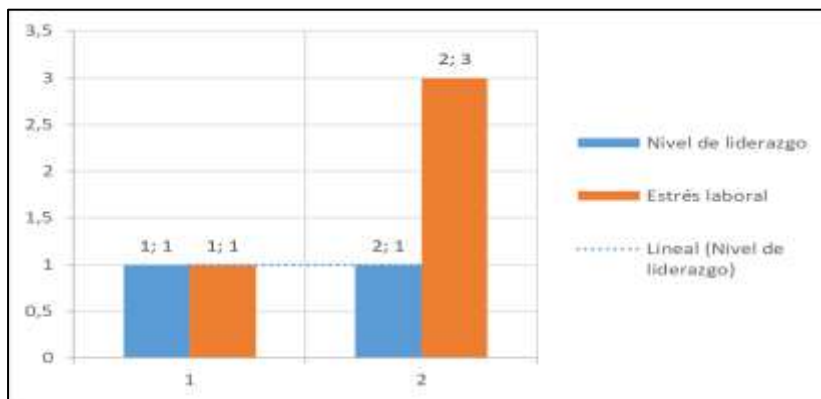


Figure 12 Relationship Between Assertive Leadership and Team Stress Levels in the Finance Department

Figure 12 shows a clear inverse relationship in the finance department. When assertive leadership was at high levels (3.5 out of 4), team stress was very low (1 out of 5), while during periods of lower assertive leadership levels (1–2), stress increased (2–3). This linear trend suggests that the level of assertive leadership directly impacted team well-being, highlighting the importance of maintaining clear communication practices and support for optimizing the work environment during critical periods.

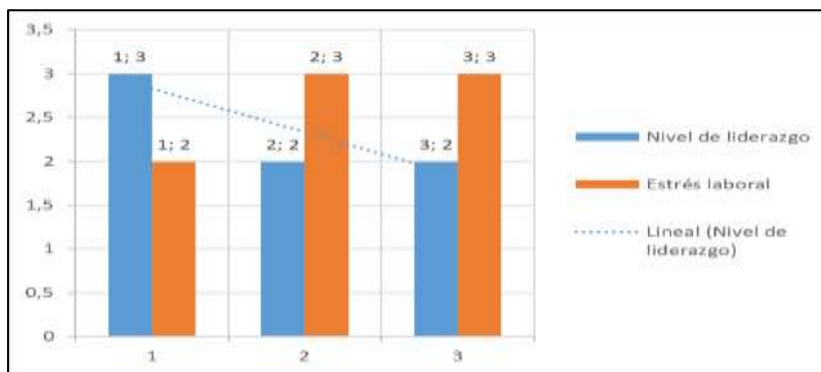


Figure 13 Relationship Between Assertive Leadership and Team Stress Levels in the IT Department

Figure 13 shows that when the level of assertive leadership in the IT department was high (3.5 out of 4), the team's stress was at a medium level (3 out of 5), while when the assertive leadership level was lower (1–2), stress slightly increased (2–3). This trend suggests that, although an inverse relationship existed, other technical or operational workload factors might increase stress levels, highlighting the need to complement assertive leadership with specific strategies for managing the inherent pressure in this department.

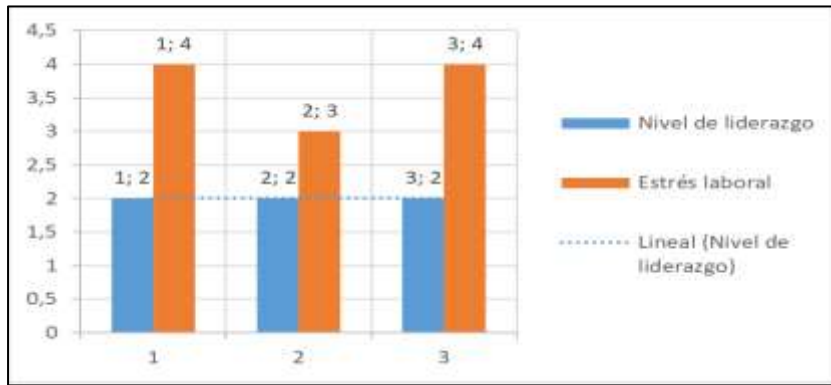


Figure 14 Relationship Between Assertive Leadership and Team Stress Levels in the Digital Marketing Department

Figure 14 shows an inconsistent relationship between assertive leadership and team stress in the digital marketing department. While, in some cases, stronger assertive leadership (3 out of 4) was associated with lower stress (2 out of 5), there were also situations in which a high assertive leadership level (3) was associated with a higher stress level (4), suggesting that external factors, such as aggressive campaigns or performance metrics, might negatively affect team well-being, regardless of leadership quality.

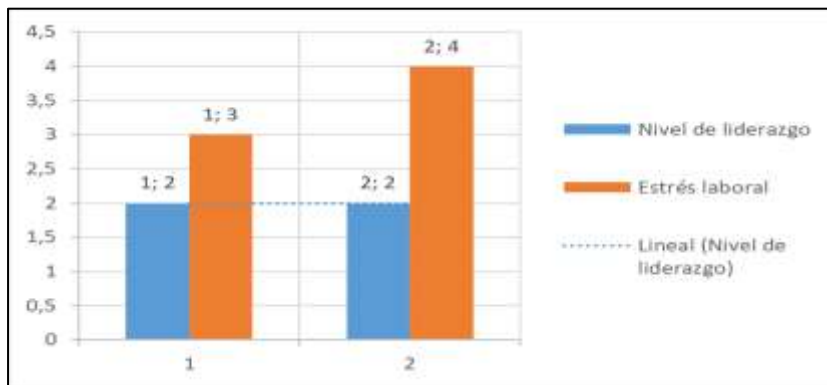


Figure 15 Relationship Between Assertive Leadership and Team Stress Levels in the Human Resources Department

Figure 15 shows a moderate relationship between assertive leadership and team stress in the human resources department. When leadership was more assertive (3–4), team stress tended to be low (2–3). However, in some cases, even with good leadership (2), stress was high (4), suggesting that organizational factors, such as interdepartmental conflicts or administrative burdens, might independently affect the department's dynamics.

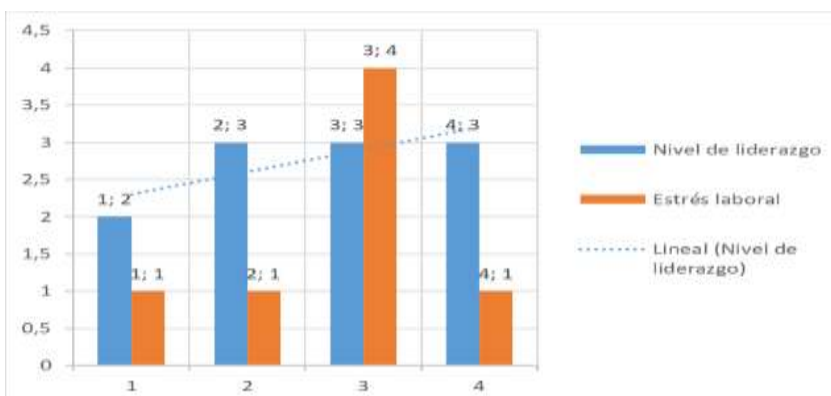


Figure 16 Relationship Between Assertive Leadership and Team Stress Levels in the Customer Service Department

Figure 16 shows a clear inverse relationship between assertive leadership and team stress in the customer service department. When leadership was more assertive (3–4), team stress was low (1–3), while with lower assertive leadership levels (1–2), stress increased (3–4). This linear trend suggests that strong leadership was associated with low stress in this department, highlighting its importance in customer interaction roles.

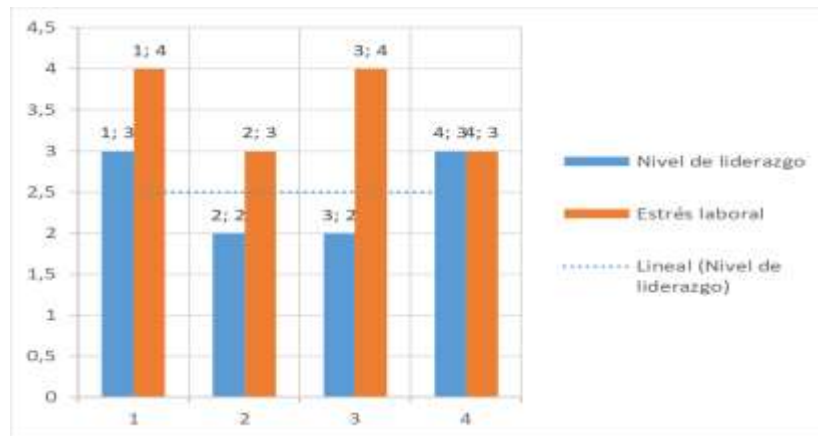


Figure 17 Relationship Between Assertive Leadership and Team Stress Levels in the Sales Department

Figure 17 shows that high assertive leadership levels (3–4) were associated with lower team stress (2–3), while low levels (1–2) were associated with higher stress (3–4). However, there were also atypical cases in which, even with good leadership, stress was high (4), suggesting that external factors, such as pressure to reach targets, significantly influenced stress levels.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal a nonlinear relationship between assertive leadership and team stress levels, with the effectiveness of assertive leadership depending heavily on the organizational context and employee perceptions. In the customer service department (14% of the sample), high levels of assertive leadership were associated with low stress levels. This is consistent with the clear communication style and defined boundaries reported by Villacís [10]. In other departments (57%), medium assertive leadership levels were associated with higher stress levels, possibly due to perceptions of inflexible demands. This is in line with Ames and Flynn’s findings about mismanaged assertiveness [11]. This duality supports Lazarus’s model [12], in which individual cognitive appraisal mediates the impact of stressors: Assertiveness may be interpreted as either a resource facilitating autonomy or a burdensome demand if it exceeds a team’s adaptive capacity. The presence of moderate stress in 29% of the employees despite medium assertive leadership levels suggests that factors such as emotional loads (e.g., due to intense client interactions) or an effort–reward imbalance [13] can interact with management styles. These results emphasize the need to adapt assertiveness to role-specific demands (e.g., greater empathy in high-pressure environments), as proposed by Giraldo Gonzales and Naranjo Agudelo [14], and avoid rigid applications that contradict situational leadership principles. Future research should control for moderating variables, such as organizational culture and social support, which were limited in this study due to its cross-sectional design.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the impact of assertive leadership on work stress levels does not follow a uniform pattern; but rather varies according to the organizational context and employee perceptions. In departments with high emotional demands, such as customer service, high assertive leadership levels can help reduce stress through clear communication and defined structures; in other departments, they may have the opposite effect, increasing stress when perceived as inflexible or overly demanding.

The results show that, even with medium levels of assertive leadership, 36% of the employees exhibited moderate stress, suggesting that factors such as workload, type of required interactions, and effort–reward balance significantly influence this dynamic. This highlights the importance of considering each team’s and function’s particularities when implementing leadership strategies.

The findings also suggest that the effectiveness of assertive leadership depends on its adaptability. In high-pressure environments, it must be complemented with empathy and flexibility to avoid being perceived as an additional source of stress. This also underscores the need for interventions tailored to each department’s specific needs, such as emotional management training for roles involving intense social interactions, or adjustments to work recognition policies.

In summary, this study shows that assertive leadership is not a one-size-fits-all solution for managing work stress. Its success requires contextualized application that takes into account both team characteristics and work environment demands. Organizations must devise comprehensive strategies that combine adaptive leadership styles with workplace well-being policies. Future research could explore how variables such as organizational culture or social support moderate the relationship between assertive leadership and employee stress using larger samples and longitudinal designs.

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Data Availability: The data used in this study are available at <https://repository.uniminuto.edu/items/f63c6512-9e7c-4634-92a7-8255eca6bf08>.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that no conflicts of interest exist regarding this research or the publication of this article.

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