

Context matters: The effects of trust in hierarchical leadership and work engagement before and during military operations

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Trust in leadership is particularly important in high-risk occupations such as the police, emergency services or the military. Trust facilitates open communication, mutual cooperation, mutual dependence and empowerment – factors that are indispensable in dangerous and challenging situations. What is more, trust in leadership protects followers against the negative impact of demands.

In the present study, we compared the influence of trust in three hierarchical levels of leadership on soldiers' work engagement and burnout symptoms before and during deployment. Data were collected from Dutch soldiers who participated in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

Multi-level regression analyses demonstrated that trust in the direct, lower-level leader was most important for soldier's work engagement and burnout symptoms, both before and during deployment. However, comparing regression coefficients, the negative relationship between trust in direct, lower-level leaders and soldier's burnout symptoms was stronger during deployment, as compared to before. The positive relationship between trust in highest level of leadership (i.e., company commander) and soldier's work engagement was stronger during deployment, as compared to before.

In other words, when soldiers move into the deployment environment, the direct leader becomes more important for buffering against the negative impact of operational demands on burnout, whereas the indirect, highest level of leadership becomes more important to maintain positively engaged with the work. These results highlight that taking hierarchical leadership structure and context into account are important as they may change the nature and role of key processes in the relationship between followers and different hierarchical leaders.