A phenomenological study of mutual respect in aquaculture governance: the case of an intensive shrimp farm in Indonesia

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Abstract. Despite many technical factors such as water quality, biosecurity, and infrastructure impacting the success of intensive shrimp farming, the successful implementation of these requirements also depends on the workers' engagement. Engaged workers may be more willing to report problems to their superior so immediate actions can be taken. This study examines how workers in an owner-managed shrimp farm interpret the involvement of farm leaders and how these experiences shape their engagement through mutual respect mechanism with the leaders. Using an interpretive phenomenological approach, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with 11 workers and managers at an intensive shrimp farming unit in Kaur Regency, Indonesia. Data were analyzed through descriptive coding, identification of recurring units of meaning and development of interpretive themes. The study revealed that workers could distinguish between recognition of personal dignity and recognition of competence from their leaders. Trust, autonomy, and psychological safety influenced their willingness to report problems, admit mistakes, and exercise technical judgement. Furthermore, experiences of recognition and trust were associated with reciprocal forms of engagement, including initiative, vigilance and persistence. The findings suggest that the social dimensions of aquaculture governance should be extended to the internal organisation of farms. In order to achieve sustainability, aquaculture industry should therefore consider worker voice, responsive authority, and safe reporting mechanisms as elements of effective farm-level governance. The contribution of this study for understanding the social sustainability and implementation capacity of aquaculture governance is discussed.
Keywords: employee voice, leadership recognition, organizational sustainability, psychological safety, reciprocal engagement.

Introduction. Intensive shrimp farming is not only about having good technology, feed, pond design, or water management. The actual production process is much less predictable. Disease can appear, equipment may fail, weather can change, and water quality can shift quite quickly. These changes can affect the condition of the pond within a short time. For this reason, water quality needs to be monitored continuously, but the numbers also need to be understood in relation to what is actually happening in the pond (Føre et al., 2018; Orozco-Lugo et al., 2022). In relation to this issue, workers are the ones who notice small changes first, report problems, and sometimes make immediate adjustments before the situation becomes worse. Their work connects many things at once: biological conditions, equipment, instructions from managers, and their own practical experience (Liu et al., 2025). Therefore, some situations require workers to interpret what they see and decide how to respond.

Such work cannot be managed entirely through predetermined procedures. Uncertain conditions require workers to exercise judgement, solve problems, communicate concerns, and adapt locally when circumstances change (Grote, 2015, 2020). The operational issue is therefore not simply whether workers detect a problem, but whether they report it, whether the information is taken seriously, and whether those

receiving it have sufficient authority and resources to respond. Research on employee voice shows that potentially useful information does not necessarily reach those in a position to act upon it (Morrison, 2011). Relationships within the farm are therefore not merely part of its social environment, but also influence how the production system responds to uncertainty.

Such conditions make work engagement in intensive shrimp farming particularly important. Kahn (1990) described engagement in terms of how fully individuals invest themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in their work roles. In intensive aquaculture, engagement has immediate operational relevance, as workers often need to respond to changing pond conditions without waiting for direct instruction. Their willingness to speak up, use judgement, or take initiative may depend partly on their level of engagement, which may in turn be shaped by how they experience their relationships with supervisors and coworkers (Freeney & Fellenz, 2013; Kahn & Heaphy, 2013).

Understanding engagement in this relational way shifts attention from what leaders are or what leadership style they adopt to how leadership is experienced through everyday interactions and practices. This perspective is consistent with leadership-as-practice research, which views leadership as something produced through everyday organisational activity rather than located solely in formal roles or leadership styles (Crevani et al., 2010; Raelin, 2011, 2023). Within these everyday leader-worker interactions, respect may be one mechanism through which the relationship becomes consequential for engagement. Carmeli et al. (2015) describe respectful engagement as interaction that conveys recognition, appreciation, presence, and a sense of worth. Such interactions can foster acceptance and openness while increasing individuals' motivation to interact with and contribute to others. This provides a basis for expecting that workers may become more willing to invest themselves in their work when leader involvement is experienced as recognition of their worth, knowledge, and contribution. Respect from leaders has also been associated with employee well-being, commitment, and performance (Clarke & Mahadi, 2017). However, managerial communication or involvement may not necessarily be experienced as respectful. Workers may interpret similar actions differently depending on how they are enacted and understood (LaGree et al., 2023; Black et al., 2024; Willett et al., 2026). This study therefore examines mutual respect through workers' experiences of how they are treated and whether their knowledge, concerns, and responsibilities are taken seriously. Despite growing attention to engagement, workplace relationships, and respect, several questions remain insufficiently explored, particularly in owner-managed production settings such as intensive aquaculture.

Three gaps are particularly important. First, work engagement has been widely studied through job resources, leadership, and psychological conditions, but much of this research still relies on quantitative and cross-sectional designs (Bailey et al., 2017). Recent studies give greater attention to the relational side of engagement (Kahn & Heaphy, 2013; Owens et al., 2016; Jiang & Shen, 2023; Hakanen & Kaltiainen, 2026). However, less is known about how workers themselves interpret everyday encounters with those in authority and how these relational experiences shape their willingness to invest themselves in their work.

Second, although respectful interaction has been shown to foster acceptance, openness, and willingness to contribute (Carmeli et al., 2015), the presence of respectful behaviour does not necessarily mean that workers experience themselves as respected. Respectful communication and managerial actions may be interpreted differently depending on the situation and the meaning workers attach to them (Black et al., 2024; Willett et al., 2026). This distinction becomes particularly important in owner-managed organisations, where respect may be communicated not only through interpersonal interaction but also through decisions about resources, authority, responsiveness, and delegation (Crevani et al., 2010; Raelin, 2011, 2023).

Third, aquaculture research has focused more heavily on technical, biological, environmental, and economic issues than on the human and relational dimensions of production (Brugere et al., 2023). Yet workers remain important in identifying emerging

problems, communicating concerns, exercising judgement, and responding to changing operational conditions. Organisational research further shows that employees may withhold relevant information when speaking up involves interpersonal risk (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011, 2023). What remains less understood is how these relational conditions operate within intensive aquaculture, where timely worker judgement and communication may have immediate operational consequences.

In an interdependent production system such as intensive shrimp farming, delayed reporting or silence may therefore have consequences that extend beyond the interpersonal relationship to the operation itself.

Taken together, these gaps suggest that engagement in intensive shrimp farming cannot be fully understood only as an individual psychological condition or as a response to formal job resources. What requires closer examination is how workers interpret the involvement of owners and the leaders who represent them, whether such involvement is experienced as recognition and respect, and how these interpretations relate to workers' willingness to speak, exercise judgement, and remain engaged in operational work.

Accordingly, this study asks: how do shrimp farm workers interpret the involvement of the business owner and the leaders who represent the owner in farm operations as the basis for developing engagement grounded in mutual respect? The study makes three related contributions. First, it examines work engagement as a relational as well as psychological experience by focusing on workers' interpretations of everyday encounters with authority. Second, it develops the concept of experienced owner presence, distinguishing physical, responsive, material, and delegated forms of owner involvement. Third, it examines mutual respect not only as interpersonal treatment but also in relation to whether workers' knowledge, concerns, and responsibilities are given practical consequence. Through these contributions, the study seeks to explain how owner and leadership involvement may shape engagement, communication, and operational responsiveness in an uncertain production environment.

Relational foundations of work engagement and respect. Work engagement is commonly treated as an individual psychological experience. Kahn (1990) described engagement in terms of how fully people invest themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in their work roles, while Schaufeli et al. (2002) later conceptualized engagement through vigor, dedication, and absorption. These perspectives, however, do not mean that the conditions producing engagement are located only within the individual. How people experience their work can also depend on the relationships through which that work is carried out.

Recent research gives increasing attention to this relational side of engagement. Kahn & Heaphy (2013) argue that relationships can provide conditions that allow people to bring more of themselves into their work. Related explanations were offered by Owens et al. (2016) through relational energy, referring to psychological resourcefulness generated through interaction with others. Their findings show that relational energy from leaders can contribute to subsequent engagement and performance. Bakker (2022) similarly suggests that engagement can develop through social interaction, while Hakanen & Kaltiainen (2026) highlight the social nature of work engagement, noting that engagement can develop through workplace interactions and can also emerge as a shared experience among people working together. These studies suggest that engagement may be experienced individually while some of the resources supporting it are relational.

This raises a further question concerning the quality of those relationships. Carmeli et al. (2015) provide one explanation through respectful engagement. They describe respectful engagement as a way of interacting that conveys recognition, appreciation, presence, and positive regard. Such interaction can increase acceptance and openness and strengthen people's motivation to interact with and contribute to others. Respectful engagement is not the same construct as work engagement. Its relevance here lies in explaining how particular ways of relating to others can build the willingness and capacity to contribute. In this sense, respect may provide one relational route through which interaction with leaders becomes consequential for engagement.

Respect itself requires some distinction. Darwall (1977) differentiates recognition respect from appraisal respect. Recognition respect concerns acknowledgement of a person's standing, while appraisal respect concerns positive evaluation of qualities such as competence or achievement. Rogers & Ashforth (2017) make a similar distinction between being valued as a person and being valued for what one contributes. These forms of respect can coexist, but they are not identical. Workers may be treated appropriately as organisational members while still feeling that their knowledge carries little weight. In the opposite situation, competence may be recognised while interpersonal treatment remains poor.

Research on dignity at work broadens this distinction. Blustein & Allan (2025) connect dignity with inherent worth, autonomy, meaningful contribution, and the conditions under which work is carried out. Winchenbach (2025), in a study of Cornish fishers, similarly links dignity with recognition, autonomy, and participation in decision making. This suggests that respect at work may be communicated not only through words or interpersonal courtesy. It may also be experienced through whether people are able to contribute and whether what they know has some consequence for the work.

This distinction becomes important because managerial intention and employee experience are not always the same. LaGree et al. (2023) found that respectful communication is associated with engagement, resilience, and job satisfaction, while Willett et al. (2026) show that leader communication is related to workplace respect and that respect, in turn, is associated with engagement and well-being. Yet communication alone does not ensure that respect is experienced. Black et al. (2024) similarly show that recognition practices intended to communicate appreciation may produce different responses from those expected by management. The meaning of a managerial action therefore cannot be determined only from the action itself.

Leadership-as-practice offers a useful way to understand this issue. Rather than treating leadership mainly as a characteristic of an individual leader or as a particular leadership style, this perspective locates leadership in everyday organisational activities and interactions (Crevani et al., 2010; Raelin, 2011, 2023). Attention is therefore given to how authority is exercised, how decisions are made, and how responsibility is distributed in practice. This is especially relevant in owner-managed organisations, where the influence of an owner may extend beyond direct interaction.

From this perspective, physical presence is only one possible form of involvement. Owners may also become present in workers' experience through their responses to operational issues, decisions concerning resources, or the authority given to others. This study uses the term experienced owner presence to distinguish these forms of involvement. Owner presence may therefore be physical, responsive, material, or delegated. The distinction does not assume that one form is necessarily better than another. Rather, it directs attention to how workers interpret different manifestations of owner involvement and what these actions communicate about their standing, knowledge, and responsibility.

Respect in this sense becomes closely connected with what happens after workers contribute information or judgement. Psychological safety provides one explanation for whether workers feel able to take interpersonal risks such as admitting mistakes, asking questions, or challenging a decision (Edmondson, 1999). Research on employee voice adds that people also consider whether speaking is likely to be worthwhile (Morrison, 2011, 2023). Feeling able to speak and believing that speaking has influence are therefore related but different experiences.

This difference is relevant to respect. Being invited to express an opinion may signal openness, but repeated failure to consider that opinion may communicate something else. Respect may therefore be experienced not only through an opportunity to speak but through what follows from speaking. Relational coordination develops a similar argument by emphasising shared knowledge, mutual respect, and communication that allows information to become coordinated action (Bolton et al., 2021). From this perspective, recognition gains practical meaning when another person's knowledge can enter the way work is understood or carried out.

The relational argument also raises the question of how workers respond to these experiences. Social exchange theory suggests that employees may respond to valued organisational resources by investing more of themselves in their work (Blau, 1964; Saks, 2006). However, exchange should not be understood as a simple transaction. Ahmad et al. (2023) show that different resources may follow different exchange rules, while Gervasi et al. (2022) indicate that reciprocity depends on how an exchange is interpreted and towards whom the response is directed. What a leader intends as support may not necessarily be experienced as valuable, and a valued experience does not have to be returned directly to the person who provided it.

This provides a useful way of thinking about engagement without assuming a fixed causal sequence. Recognition, responsiveness, trust, or respect may encourage greater contribution, but the response can take different forms. Workers may invest more attention in their work, communicate concerns earlier, exercise greater judgement, assist others, or persist when work becomes difficult. Such responses can be relational even when they are expressed through the work itself.

The literature therefore points to worker interpretation as an important link between leadership involvement and engagement. Engagement remains an individual experience, but relationships may provide or diminish some of the resources that support it. Respect helps explain whether workers experience themselves and their contribution as valued. Leadership-as-practice draws attention to how such meanings are produced through everyday uses of authority, while psychological safety, voice, relational coordination, and social exchange help explain particular aspects of communication, response, and contribution.

These perspectives are used to help interpret workers' experiences rather than to impose a predetermined model on them. The central concern remains how workers understand the involvement of owners and the leaders who represent them, how they experience recognition and respect within those relationships, and how these experiences become connected with their willingness to engage and contribute in their everyday work.

Material and Method. The study was conducted from January to March 2026 at an intensive shrimp farming unit in Kaur Regency, Bengkulu Province, Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 11 participants, comprising workers and managers.

Bioethical statement. Participation in the study was voluntary. Before the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the intended use of the information they provided. Participants were also informed that they could discontinue their participation without negative consequences.

To protect confidentiality, the name of the company is not reported and participants are identified using codes I1 to I11. Information that could unnecessarily reveal the identity of an individual participant was removed from the presentation of the findings.

Quotations presented in the article were edited only where necessary to remove repetition, hesitation, and filler expressions that did not contribute to substantive meaning. These changes were made to improve readability while preserving the meaning intended by the participants.

Research design and setting. This study employed a qualitative approach using interpretive phenomenology. This approach was selected because the study did not aim to measure the level of work engagement or examine statistical relationships among predetermined variables. Instead, the main purpose was to understand how workers experience and give meaning to their relationships with business owners and leaders in their everyday work. Interpretive phenomenology is appropriate for research that seeks to understand lived experience and how individuals interpret events, relationships, and situations within their social context (van Manen, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the present study, particular attention was given to workers' experiences of owner and

leadership involvement, recognition, mutual respect, trust, psychological safety, and willingness to contribute to farm operations.

The study was conducted at one intensive shrimp farming unit located in Kaur Regency, Indonesia. The name of the company is withheld to maintain the confidentiality of the organisation and the participants. The farming unit consisted of cultivation ponds, a laboratory, mechanical workshop, warehouse, wastewater treatment facilities, administrative offices, and residential facilities for workers. Operations followed a farming cycle requiring continuous monitoring, coordination across functions, equipment maintenance, and timely responses to emerging operational problems.

The selection of a single location was intended to provide sufficient contextual depth to understand how workers experienced the same organisational environment from different occupational positions. The farm was therefore treated as a bounded setting for the phenomenon rather than as a case for evaluating organisational performance. The focus was on workers' experiences of owner and leadership involvement and how these experiences were interpreted within daily operational activities.

Using one organisational setting also made it possible to examine differences and similarities across functions. A cultivation technician, for example, may interact with management differently from a laboratory employee, mechanic, administrator, or farm manager. These positions also involve different forms of technical knowledge, responsibility, and dependence on organisational resources. Functional variation was therefore considered more relevant than numerical representation for understanding how the same relational phenomenon could be experienced across different work roles.

Participants and sampling. Participants were selected purposively according to three main criteria. First, participants were required to have at least one year of work experience at the farming unit, providing sufficient exposure to the organisation and its work practices. Second, they needed to be directly involved in farm operations or in functions supporting production. Third, participants were required to have experience interacting with the owner, managers, or other leaders representing the owner in operational matters.

Eleven participants met these criteria and agreed to participate in the study. Their tenure ranged from one to thirteen years. Participants represented cultivation supervision, farm management, administration and human resources, supply chain activities, asset management and procurement, laboratory operations, mechanical and electrical maintenance, general affairs, and support to production management. The participant profile is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant profile

Code	*Main function*	*Tenure (years)*
I1	Cultivation supervisor/technician	10
I2	General farm manager	13
I3	Farm manager	9
I4	Administration/HR/supply chain	11
I5	Head of assets and local procurement	7
I6	Branch head/general affairs	6
I7	Laboratory staff	8
I8	Cultivation supervisor/technician	3
I9	Electrical and generator mechanic	3
I10	Production manager interpreter/assistant	1
I11	Cultivation supervisor/technician	11

The purpose of this functional variation was not to achieve statistical representation. Rather, it was intended to capture different experiences of the same organisational environment from positions involving different responsibilities, types of expertise, and degrees of interaction with organisational authority. This approach was considered

important because the study focused on the meaning workers attached to their experiences rather than on estimating the distribution of those experiences within a larger population.

The adequacy of the participant group was assessed during the data collection and analysis process. Recurring patterns became increasingly visible across interviews, while later interviews generated fewer substantively new units of meaning. This approach is consistent with qualitative research in which adequacy depends on the depth, relevance, and repetition of information related to the phenomenon under investigation rather than on a predetermined numerical threshold (Guest et al., 2006). At the same time, different or contradictory experiences were retained when they provided meaningful variation in how the phenomenon was understood.

Data collection. Primary data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews. This method was selected because it provided a common direction for the interviews while allowing participants sufficient freedom to describe experiences that they considered important. The interviews were therefore guided by broad areas of inquiry rather than a rigid sequence of questions.

Participants were asked about their daily work experiences and interactions with owners and leaders. Questions explored situations in which participants felt valued or not valued, experiences in which their technical knowledge or suggestions were accepted or rejected, feelings of safety when raising concerns, responses from leaders when mistakes occurred, experiences of receiving or not receiving necessary resources, and situations involving the delegation of responsibility or authority. The interviews also explored reasons for persistence, willingness to assist colleagues, and willingness to undertake activities beyond formal job responsibilities.

Follow-up questions were used to obtain more detailed descriptions of particular experiences. Participants were encouraged to explain what happened, who was involved, how they responded, and why the event was important to them. This was important because the study sought to understand the meaning of concrete experiences rather than relying mainly on general evaluations of whether the organisation or its leaders were considered good or bad.

The interviews were complemented by non-participatory observation conducted from 7 to 11 March 2026 and by field documentation. During the observation period, the researchers observed the physical setting of the farm and a range of operational activities, including seed stocking, sampling, water-quality monitoring, technical discussions, workshop activities, informal interactions, and the movement of employees between different work areas. Attention was also given to how managers and other leaders interacted with workers during ordinary operational activities.

Observation was used primarily to provide contextual understanding rather than to verify whether participants' accounts were objectively correct. In phenomenological research, an individual's interpretation remains important even when another person may interpret the same event differently. Observation therefore helped the researchers understand the circumstances in which particular experiences occurred. For example, observing the dependence of farm operations on electrical systems provided important context for understanding why workers considered rapid responses to generator or electricity problems particularly significant.

Similarly, observing equipment, working facilities, and the physical distance between different functions helped provide context for participants' accounts concerning access to resources, procurement, coordination, and managerial response. Field documentation was used to retain information concerning the work environment, interaction between functions, physical facilities, and operational practices. Interviews remained the primary source for understanding lived experience, while observation and documentation were used to enrich the interpretation of those experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Data analysis. Data analysis was conducted iteratively and began during the data collection process. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to develop

an overall understanding of each participant's experience. The researchers then identified statements relevant to the research question and assigned initial descriptive codes while attempting to remain close to the language used by participants.

During the initial stage, the analysis was not organised according to predetermined theoretical categories. Statements concerning being greeted by an owner, receiving assistance, being trusted to make decisions, having a proposal rejected, reporting equipment failure, experiencing a response to a mistake, or voluntarily assisting another work function were initially retained in descriptive form.

The next stage involved comparing statements across participants to identify recurring units of meaning. Similar experiences were grouped into provisional patterns such as being recognised as a person, being considered technically capable, being able to raise concerns safely, receiving sufficient authority to act, or feeling willing to contribute beyond formal responsibilities. These patterns were then compared across participants and gradually developed into broader themes.

The analytical process involved continuous movement between original quotations, codes, units of meaning, and emerging themes. This process was intended to avoid developing themes that appeared conceptually attractive but had limited empirical support. Data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing were used as practical procedures to organise and compare the qualitative material (Miles et al., 2014).

Theoretical concepts were introduced mainly during the later stage of interpretation. Recognition-based respect, psychological safety, social exchange, leadership-as-practice, relational energy, and relational coordination were treated as sensitising concepts rather than predetermined coding categories. In other words, participants' statements were not initially labelled as examples of psychological safety or social exchange simply because these concepts were identified in the literature review. Instead, theoretical concepts were used after recurring patterns had become visible in the data. For example, participants' descriptions of whether they felt able to report mistakes or disagree with managers could subsequently be interpreted in relation to psychological safety. Experiences concerning whether technical knowledge was acknowledged could be examined through recognition and appraisal respect. Accounts of voluntarily providing additional effort after receiving support could be considered in relation to reciprocity and social exchange. Similarly, situations involving the exercise, delegation, or representation of authority could be interpreted through leadership-as-practice.

This sequence was important because the study did not intend to test a predetermined theoretical model. The analytical process moved from participants' language towards more abstract interpretation while maintaining a clear connection between theoretical explanations and the empirical material. The final themes therefore represented an interpretive synthesis of what workers experienced and how they understood those experiences within the organisational and operational setting (van Manen, 2014).

Trustworthiness. Several procedures were used to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. First, variation in participant roles provided source triangulation by allowing similar experiences to be examined across different functions and levels of responsibility. This enabled the researchers to assess whether a pattern appeared only within one occupational group or was also visible in the accounts of participants working in other parts of the farming operation.

Second, triangulation method was conducted by comparing interview material with contextual information obtained from observation and field documentation. The purpose was not to use observation as proof that a participant's experience was correct or incorrect. Instead, different forms of evidence were used to develop a more complete understanding of the setting in which the experience occurred.

Third, important interpretations were cross-checked with participants through summaries of their experiences. This process was intended to identify substantial misunderstandings and to ensure that the researchers' interpretation remained reasonably consistent with the experiences participants intended to describe.

Particular attention was also given to divergent accounts. A theme was not retained simply because it was supported by one particularly interesting quotation. Recurring themes required support from several participant accounts or relevant contextual evidence. However, statements that differed from the dominant pattern were not removed simply to create a consistent picture.

For example, concerns regarding unclear rewards, procurement delays, safety equipment, or insufficient recovery needs were retained even when participants described positive relationships with owners or managers in other respects. Such accounts were analytically important because they showed the possible limits of positive interpersonal relationships and provided a more balanced understanding of workers' experiences.

This treatment of convergent and divergent evidence was consistent with the interpretive purpose of the study. The intention was neither to construct a positive image of the organisation nor to identify organisational weaknesses as an evaluation exercise. Rather, the analysis sought to understand workers' experiences in their complexity, including situations characterised by tension, contradiction, and ambivalence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; van Manen, 2014).

Results. The analysis identified five themes describing how workers experienced owner and leadership involvement and how these experiences became connected with mutual respect and work engagement. The themes were developed from recurring patterns across interviews and were interpreted in relation to field observations and the theoretical perspectives discussed earlier. Although presented separately, the themes were closely connected. Workers' experiences generally moved from how leadership was encountered, to whether they felt recognised and trusted, and finally to how these experiences influenced their willingness to contribute. At the same time, participants also identified organisational conditions that could strengthen or weaken these relational experiences. The themes are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Main themes and meanings identified from participants' experiences

Theme	*Description*
Layered leadership presence	Owner and leadership involvement was experienced through physical presence, responsiveness, delegated authority, and material support.
Recognition of dignity and competence	Workers distinguished between being treated respectfully as persons and having their practical knowledge taken seriously.
Trust, autonomy, and psychological safety	Respect became meaningful when workers were trusted to use judgement, raise concerns, and discuss mistakes without intimidation.
Reciprocity and engagement	Experiences of recognition and trust were associated with initiative, cross-functional assistance, persistence, and concern for wider farm outcomes.
Relational respect requires organisational consistency	Positive interpersonal relationships were more credible when supported by clear rules, resources, fair rewards, safety arrangements, and recovery opportunities.

Theme 1: layered leadership presence. The first theme concerns how workers experienced the presence of owners and leaders. Participants did not understand owner involvement only in terms of how frequently the owner visited the farm. Direct interaction occurred during particular visits, while much of the daily work was coordinated through the general manager, farm manager, supervisors, and other representatives of management. I5 explained that the owner normally communicated operational direction through the management structure, meaning that employees did not always interact directly with the owner.

Participants nevertheless described several ways in which the owner remained present in their work. These included direct visits to the farm, responses to operational problems, delegation of authority to managers, and decisions to provide equipment or improve facilities. The findings therefore suggest that workers distinguished between physical presence and broader forms of involvement.

The material dimension was particularly visible in I8's account. He described the owner's willingness to invest in facilities and farm improvements despite uncertainty about the outcome: *"The owner is willing to invest capital; why shouldn't we be willing to work hard?"*

For I8, the investment was not understood only as a financial decision. It was also interpreted as evidence that the owner was willing to assume part of the risk involved in improving the operation. His response indicates how a material decision could acquire relational meaning.

A similar pattern appeared in the responsive dimension of leadership. I9 recalled an incident involving damage to an electrical panel that interrupted the power supply. According to him, the manager's immediate response was to ask: *"How is the situation? What support is needed?"*

What I9 considered important was that the initial response focused on dealing with the problem rather than identifying who should be blamed. This type of response was particularly meaningful because continuous electricity was critical to the operation of the farm.

The field observations provided additional context for these accounts. The general manager was observed taking part in fry acclimatisation, water-quality checking, sampling activities, discussions with laboratory staff and cultivation supervisors, and informal interaction with workers in the workshop. Such observations did not establish how every worker interpreted management involvement, but they helped explain the situations in which workers encountered leaders as part of everyday operations.

These experiences are consistent with a leadership-as-practice perspective, which places leadership within situated activities and interactions rather than treating it only as an individual characteristic or formal role (Raelin, 2011, 2023). The present findings add an owner-managed perspective to this argument. Workers could experience an owner as involved even when the owner was not continuously on site, provided that authority, resources, and responses remained accessible through the organisational structure.

The findings therefore suggest the concept of experienced owner presence. In this setting, owner presence could be physical, responsive, material, or delegated. These forms should not be interpreted as equivalent, but they indicate that workers judged owner involvement partly from whether it had practical consequences for their work rather than simply from frequency of contact.

***Theme 2**: **recognition as a person and as a competent worker**.* The second theme concerns how workers experienced recognition. Participants' accounts suggested two related but distinguishable forms. The first involved being acknowledged and treated respectfully as a person. The second involved having one's competence and practical judgement taken seriously.

Simple interpersonal practices were frequently mentioned in relation to the first form. Participants referred to greetings, expressions of thanks, apologies, asking permission, and personal attention as behaviours that made everyday interaction more respectful. I4 explained: *"It always comes from the language of apology and thanks."*

He also described how being addressed respectfully when passing a manager or colleague could contribute to the feeling of being acknowledged. These practices were relatively small in themselves, but participants interpreted them as evidence that hierarchical differences did not remove the expectation of respectful interpersonal treatment.

This experience differs from recognition of competence. For workers with technical or managerial responsibilities, being valued was also associated with whether their knowledge influenced decisions. I9 recalled a situation in which a technical proposal was first supported by his manager, then approved by the owner, and finally implemented.

The importance of the experience was not simply that his suggestion had been heard. The proposal resulted in action, which indicated that his technical judgement had organisational value.

I10 described a similar form of recognition through the trust placed in her to assist communication with foreign parties. She considered the responsibility meaningful because it indicated that management regarded her language ability and communication skills as useful to the organisation.

Recognition also appeared in participants' descriptions of different occupational functions. I2 stated: *"Everyone in this farm is important. Even the office boy is important, according to his function."*

His account suggests that recognition was not understood as the removal of hierarchy. Responsibilities and authority remained different across positions. Rather, participants emphasised that every function contributed something necessary to farm operations.

These findings are consistent with the distinction between recognition and appraisal respect. Darwall (1977) distinguishes recognition of a person's standing from respect based on qualities or achievements, while Rogers & Ashforth (2017) similarly distinguish being valued as an organisational member from being valued for particular contributions. The findings also support research showing that dignity at work involves both humane treatment and recognition of an individual's contribution (Hodson, 2001; Blustein & Allan, 2025).

The distinction was particularly visible among participants with longer experience. For them, general praise appeared less important than having practical knowledge considered when decisions were made. This suggests that respect was not experienced only through interpersonal courtesy. For experienced workers, recognition increasingly involved whether their accumulated knowledge was treated as relevant to the organisation.

***Theme 3**: **trust**, **autonomy**, **and psychological safety**.* The third theme describes how recognition became connected with trust and the opportunity to exercise judgement. Several experienced workers regarded autonomy as one of the more meaningful ways in which management demonstrated confidence in their ability. I3, for example, explained: *"I feel free to achieve my targets without being given more homework. That respects me."*

His account indicates that respect was associated with being trusted to organise the work required to achieve agreed targets rather than being continuously instructed about how tasks should be completed. I11 similarly interpreted responsibility for managing a pond under difficult conditions as an opportunity to demonstrate technical judgement.

However, participants did not understand autonomy as freedom from accountability. I8 described the opportunity to innovate as a form of trust, but also recognised that such freedom created responsibility for the results. In this sense, autonomy was accompanied by an expectation that workers remained answerable for their decisions.

Participants also discussed how leaders responded when mistakes or negative information had to be reported. I7 summarised the approach in his work area by saying: *"We talk about solutions, not sanctions."*

I10 similarly recalled experiences in which admitting mistakes did not immediately lead to punishment. Instead, the production manager emphasised that errors could be corrected and that openness was preferable to concealing the problem.

These accounts are consistent with psychological safety, which concerns whether people are able to take interpersonal risks such as admitting mistakes, asking for help, or expressing disagreement (Edmondson, 1999). In the farming context, such experiences also had an operational dimension. Workers sometimes possessed information about technical problems before managers were able to observe them directly. A work environment in which employees were reluctant to communicate bad news could therefore delay the organisational response.

The findings also indicate that psychological safety did not mean the absence of disagreement. Participants described situations in which technical opinions differed while working relationships remained intact. I3 used the metaphor that team members did not necessarily need to "get along too well", but that "the gears have to fit right". I11 also described disagreeing with an owner's technical decision because he considered the proposed course of action risky.

Such accounts suggest that respect could coexist with disagreement. The important issue was whether disagreement could remain focused on the operational problem rather than being interpreted as a personal challenge. This is consistent with Edmondson's (1999) argument that psychological safety concerns interpersonal risk taking rather than an absence of standards or accountability.

At the same time, the findings indicate an important qualification. Autonomy was valued when workers had sufficient authority, resources, and managerial support to act. Without these conditions, delegation could be interpreted differently. Trust therefore appeared to depend not only on giving workers responsibility but also on whether the organisation supported them when exercising that responsibility.

***Theme 4**: **reciprocity**, **belonging**, **and engagement**.* The fourth theme concerns what workers described as their response to being trusted, supported, and recognised. Participants frequently discussed actions that extended beyond narrowly defined job responsibilities, particularly when operational problems required cooperation across functions.

I5, whose primary responsibilities involved assets and procurement, described helping with pumps and generators even though these activities were outside her main role. She explained that employees frequently helped one another when the situation required it. I9 similarly stated that restoring power could not always be treated as somebody else's responsibility because the survival of the shrimp depended on a functioning electrical system.

Such behaviour was particularly visible in situations where functional boundaries became less important than the immediate operational problem. Cultivation staff discussed monitoring water quality, feed, growth, and pond conditions, while employees in supporting functions described responding to electrical problems, equipment needs, procurement, and coordination requirements. Field observations also showed interaction across functions during sampling, fry distribution, and technical problem solving.

These experiences suggest that engagement was not limited to enthusiasm for one's individual task. Participants also described concern for whether the wider operation continued to function. In this regard, their accounts were consistent with the relational understanding of engagement discussed by Kahn & Heaphy (2013) and Bakker (2022).

A number of participants connected such willingness to contribute with longer-term feelings of belonging. I4 referred to the farm as a "second home" after eleven years of employment. I11 associated belonging with having observed the site develop over a long period. I10 described the relationship between herself and the company as a form of "mutual symbiosis", because the organisation benefited from her abilities while she received sufficient flexibility to continue her education.

These accounts should not be interpreted as evidence of unconditional organisational loyalty. Rather, participants described relationships in which they perceived some form of mutual benefit. The pattern is therefore broadly consistent with social exchange theory, which suggests that employees may reciprocate organisational resources and favourable treatment through greater investment in their roles (Blau, 1964; Saks, 2006).

Importantly, the reciprocal contribution described by participants did not always return directly to the individual who had provided support. Trust from an owner or manager could be expressed through helping colleagues, caring for equipment, reporting problems quickly, or putting additional effort into production activities. This finding is consistent with more recent research showing that workplace reciprocity can vary in both form and target (Gervasi et al., 2022).

However, participants' willingness to contribute beyond their formal responsibilities should not be interpreted as an unlimited resource. Several accounts indicated that strong engagement and belonging could coexist with concerns about rewards, resources, or working conditions. This qualification became particularly visible in the fifth theme.

***Theme 5**: **mutual respect requires organisational consistency**.* The fifth theme presents an important qualification to the generally positive relational experiences described above. Participants did not regard good interpersonal relationships as sufficient when organisational systems created uncertainty or inconsistency.

One concern involved reward transparency. Participants generally acknowledged the existence of salaries, bonuses, and other forms of reward, but some employees, particularly those in support functions, were unclear about how contributions were evaluated and how rewards were calculated. Their concern was not necessarily the absence of rewards, but the difficulty of understanding the relationship between contribution and outcome.

A second concern involved procurement. I9, I10, and I11 discussed delays in obtaining spare parts or equipment required for operational work. I10 explained that cost efficiency could sometimes result in important items being postponed or not purchased, including basic field equipment such as raincoats and footwear.

These accounts are relevant to the earlier discussion of respect because they show that interpersonal treatment and organisational arrangements could communicate different messages. Workers might experience supportive interaction with managers while simultaneously becoming frustrated when the resources necessary to perform the work were unavailable.

A third concern involved recovery from demanding work periods. I4 and I7 suggested recreational or family-oriented activities because the cyclical character of farming made it difficult for employees to disengage completely from work. Their accounts indicate that financial rewards and close interpersonal relationships did not remove the need for physical and psychological recovery.

These findings suggest that workers assessed respect through both interpersonal and organisational experiences. Friendly communication could strengthen relationships, but participants also expected understandable rules, adequate work resources, appropriate safety equipment, and reasonable opportunities for recovery. In this sense, respect became more credible when interpersonal messages and organisational practices were reasonably consistent.

The finding also qualifies the idea that a family-like workplace necessarily produces positive outcomes. Close relationships may provide support, but workers still expected standards and responsibilities to be applied consistently. Several participants regarded firm rules as compatible with respect when such rules were clearly communicated and fairly applied.

Based on these accounts, the study proposes the idea of respect coherence: the extent to which interpersonal treatment and organisational arrangements convey compatible messages about workers' value. This concept emerged from the contrast between positive interpersonal relationships and participants' concerns regarding rewards, procurement, safety resources, and recovery. It does not imply that workers expected every request to be accepted. Rather, they appeared concerned with whether organisational systems provided reasonable support for the responsibilities they were expected to carry.

Discussion. The findings suggest that worker engagement in intensive shrimp farming has relevance beyond employees' psychological attachment to work. Participants expressed engagement through vigilance, willingness to report problems, cross-functional assistance, initiative, and continued attention to operational conditions. These behaviours are important in intensive aquaculture because changes in water quality, equipment, or production conditions may first be recognised by workers located closest to ponds and operational facilities. This extends relational perspectives on engagement (Kahn & Heaphy, 2013; Bakker, 2022) by showing that engagement may also contribute to the

implementation capacity of farm-level governance. Environmental requirements, biosecurity procedures, occupational safety standards, and operational protocols depend not only on formal rules but also on whether workers notice deviations, communicate concerns, and remain willing to act.

A second contribution concerns experienced owner presence. Workers did not assess owner involvement only through the frequency of physical visits. They also experienced presence through responsiveness to operational problems, material support, and authority delegated to managers. This finding is consistent with leadership-as-practice research, which understands leadership through situated activities and interactions (Raelin, 2011, 2023). For owner-managed aquaculture, the policy implication is that physical proximity may be less important than whether authority is accessible when operational problems occur. Farms may therefore benefit from clear escalation procedures and delegated decision authority, particularly for situations requiring urgent expenditure, equipment replacement, safety responses, or other time-sensitive actions.

The findings also distinguish interpersonal recognition from recognition of competence. Courteous treatment contributed to workers' sense of dignity, while technical respect was experienced when their knowledge, concerns, and judgement were taken seriously. This distinction becomes important when considering worker voice. Psychological safety may allow workers to report mistakes or disagree with managers (Edmondson, 1999), but speaking alone does not guarantee that information will influence organisational action. The findings therefore point to the importance of consequential participation, where workers have a credible pathway for raising concerns and receiving a response. Aquaculture governance and assurance systems could consider not only whether reporting mechanisms exist, but also whether responsibilities for responding are clear and whether workers can communicate operational risks without intimidation or retaliation.

Reciprocity provides another part of this relational process. Workers who experienced recognition and trust described helping colleagues, responding to emergencies, caring for equipment, and contributing beyond narrow job boundaries. These experiences are broadly consistent with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Saks, 2006) and with evidence that reciprocity may differ in form and target (Gervasi et al., 2022). In interdependent aquaculture operations, the benefits of such exchanges may therefore extend beyond the original worker-manager relationship and support coordination across functions.

However, positive interpersonal relationships were not sufficient when organisational systems were perceived as inconsistent. Concerns regarding reward transparency, procurement delays, safety equipment, and recovery indicate that workers also judge respect through organisational arrangements. The study refers to this alignment as respect coherence, where interpersonal treatment and organisational practices convey compatible messages about workers' value. This finding connects social sustainability with farm-level governance. It suggests that worker-centred aquaculture policy should not attempt to regulate interpersonal friendliness, but should strengthen the institutional conditions that make respectful participation credible, including clear authority, safe reporting, adequate resources, procedural fairness, and opportunities for recovery.

Conclusions. Taken together, the findings suggest that the human infrastructure of aquaculture governance deserves greater attention. Sustainable aquaculture depends not only on technical standards and formal regulation, but also on whether people closest to production conditions can observe, communicate, exercise appropriate judgement, and obtain timely organisational responses. This extends calls to place human and social concerns more centrally within aquaculture development.

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