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Leadership Style and Employee Motivation: A Review

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Abstract

Leadership plays a central role in shaping employees' attitudes, behavior, engagement, and motivation within organizations. The present review examines the relationship between leadership styles and employee motivation, focusing on transformational, transactional, servant, democratic, autocratic, authentic, and situational leadership approaches. The reviewed literature indicates that transformational, servant, authentic, and supportive leadership styles are generally associated with higher employee motivation, engagement, job satisfaction, trust, and organizational commitment. Transformational leadership promotes motivation through vision and inspiration, while servant and authentic leadership emphasize employee development, ethical behavior, and supportive relationships. Transactional leadership may also enhance motivation through clear expectations, performance-based rewards, and structured feedback. However, excessively controlling leadership may reduce employee autonomy and intrinsic motivation. The review highlights the importance of flexible, supportive, and employee-centered leadership practices. Nevertheless, variations in leadership definitions, measurement approaches, organizational settings, and employee characteristics indicate the need for further longitudinal and cross-cultural research. Overall, no single leadership style is universally effective; leadership effectiveness depends on balancing direction, support, recognition, participation, and autonomy according to organizational and employee needs.

Keywords: Leadership Style, Employee Motivation, Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Servant Leadership, Employee Engagement, Job Satisfaction

1. Introduction

Leadership is a fundamental component of organizational functioning because leaders influence employee attitudes, behavior, motivation, engagement, and performance. Contemporary leadership extends beyond directing employees and controlling work activities to include communication, relationship building, employee development, recognition, and the creation of conditions that encourage effective performance (Avolio et al., 2009; Yukl, 2013). As organizations become increasingly dynamic and knowledge-oriented, leadership plays an important role in shaping employees' experiences, professional development, and organizational effectiveness.

Leadership style refers to the characteristic pattern of behaviors and approaches through which leaders influence, guide, and support employees. Leadership research has evolved from traditional approaches emphasizing task orientation and interpersonal relationships toward contemporary perspectives, including transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, democratic, autocratic, and situational leadership (Stogdill, 1974; Northouse, 2021). These approaches differ in their emphasis on authority, participation, inspiration, employee development, ethical conduct, and decision-making (Avolio et al., 2009).

Employee motivation refers to the psychological processes that influence the direction, intensity, and persistence of work-related behavior. It may be intrinsic, arising from interest, achievement, autonomy, and personal growth, or extrinsic, arising from external rewards, recognition, salary, and promotion (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Self-Determination Theory further emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in promoting high-quality motivation and sustained engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Leadership can influence employee motivation through goal setting, communication, recognition, feedback, participation, and supportive relationships. Transformational leadership seeks to motivate employees through vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, whereas transactional leadership emphasizes clear expectations, performance-based rewards, and corrective actions (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Servant and authentic leadership place greater emphasis on employee development, ethical behavior, trust, and supportive relationships (Greenleaf, 1977; Avolio et al., 2009).

Empirical research has demonstrated important relationships between leadership approaches and employee outcomes. Judge and Piccolo (2004), through a meta-analysis, found that transformational and transactional leadership were associated with several leadership effectiveness criteria, although their relative contributions varied. Podsakoff et al. (1990) also identified relationships between transformational leader behaviors, employee trust, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior. More recent meta-analytic evidence has examined the distinctive contributions of authentic and transformational leadership (Banks et al., 2016) and ethical, authentic, and servant leadership (Hoch et al., 2018).

Leadership practices may also influence employee motivation through everyday interactions. Supportive communication, recognition, constructive feedback, and appropriate autonomy can strengthen employees' sense of competence and involvement in their work (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Research on daily leadership behavior further suggests that transformational and transactional leadership may be associated with variations in employees' daily work engagement (Breevaart et al., 2014; Breevaart & Bakker, 2018).

However, no single leadership style is universally effective across all organizational settings. Leadership effectiveness may depend on organizational culture, task characteristics, employee expectations, individual differences, and situational conditions (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; House, 1971; Yukl, 2013). Consequently, understanding how different leadership approaches influence intrinsic and extrinsic motivation requires consideration of both individual and organizational circumstances.

Therefore, the present review examines the relationship between leadership styles and employee motivation, with particular attention to transformational, transactional, servant, democratic, autocratic, authentic, and situational leadership approaches. It also considers the mechanisms through which leadership may influence motivation, employee engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, while identifying relevant research gaps and implications for effective leadership practices.

Need for the Present Review

Although leadership and employee motivation have been extensively studied, the existing literature remains diverse in terms of leadership theories, measurement approaches, organizational settings, and motivational outcomes. Research on transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, democratic, and situational leadership has produced varied findings, indicating that leadership effectiveness may depend on organizational and cultural contexts (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Avolio et al., 2009; Banks et al., 2016).

In this context, a thematic review is valuable for synthesizing existing evidence, identifying common and contrasting findings, and examining the mechanisms through which different leadership styles influence employee motivation. Accordingly, the present review examines the relationship between leadership styles and employee motivation, with particular attention to the leadership approaches and organizational conditions that contribute to sustained motivation and positive employee outcomes.

2. Objectives

The present review aims to:

1. Examine the relationship between different leadership styles and employee motivation.
2. Identify the major leadership approaches associated with employee motivation, including transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, democratic, and situational leadership.
3. Examine the mechanisms through which leadership influences employee motivation, including autonomy, recognition, feedback, communication, support, goal setting, and employee participation.
4. Review the relationship between leadership-driven motivation and employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, employee engagement, organizational commitment, and work performance.
5. Identify research gaps and provide practical recommendations for developing leadership practices that promote sustainable employee motivation and positive organizational outcomes.

3. Methodology

The present study adopted a narrative literature review approach to examine the relationship between leadership style and employee motivation. Relevant literature was identified through scholarly databases and academic sources using keywords such as *"leadership style," "employee motivation," "transformational leadership," "transactional leadership," "servant leadership," "authentic leadership," "employee engagement,"* and *"job satisfaction."* Relevant peer-reviewed articles, books, and theoretical studies were selected based on their relevance to the review objectives. Studies unrelated to leadership or employee motivation and duplicate or non-scholarly sources were excluded. The selected literature was thematically synthesized around leadership approaches, motivational mechanisms, employee outcomes, organizational context, and emerging research gaps.

4. Review of literature

4.1 Theoretical Foundations of Leadership and Motivation

Leadership and employee motivation are closely connected concepts in organizational behavior. Early leadership theories focused primarily on leader characteristics, behaviors, and the relationship between leaders and followers, while later approaches increasingly emphasized motivation, vision, employee development, and contextual factors (Stogdill, 1974; Yukl, 2013). Over time, leadership research has expanded from viewing leaders mainly as controllers of employee behavior to recognizing their influence on employees' psychological states, work attitudes, and motivation.

Motivation theories provide an important foundation for understanding how leadership affects employee behavior. Maslow (1943) proposed that human behavior is influenced by a hierarchy of needs, while McGregor (1960) emphasized different managerial assumptions about employees and work. Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory further suggested that motivation depends on employees' expectations regarding effort, performance, and valued outcomes. These perspectives indicate that leadership practices can influence motivation by shaping employees' needs, expectations, rewards, and perceptions of their work environment.

4.2 Transformational Leadership and Employee Motivation

Transformational leadership has received substantial attention in research on leadership and motivation. Bass (1985) conceptualized transformational leadership as an approach that encourages followers to move beyond immediate self-interest and work toward broader organizational goals. Transformational leaders motivate employees through vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1990).

Podsakoff et al. (1990) found that transformational leader behaviors were associated with follower trust, satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behaviors. These findings suggest that transformational leadership can influence employee motivation through psychological and relational mechanisms rather than relying exclusively on external rewards.

A meta-analysis by Judge and Piccolo (2004) demonstrated the importance of transformational leadership across several leadership outcomes. This approach may be particularly relevant in organizational environments where employees are expected to demonstrate creativity, commitment, adaptability, and willingness to engage with organizational change.

4.3 Transactional Leadership and Extrinsic Motivation

Transactional leadership is based largely on exchanges between leaders and employees. Leaders establish expectations and performance standards and provide rewards or corrective actions according to employee performance (Bass & Avolio, 1994). This approach is closely associated with extrinsic motivation because employees may be encouraged to achieve organizational objectives through clearly defined rewards and consequences.

Transactional leadership can be useful in situations requiring clear responsibilities, structured tasks, and measurable performance standards. However, excessive reliance on external rewards may be insufficient on its own to sustain intrinsic motivation. The literature therefore suggests that transactional leadership may be most effective when appropriately combined with developmental and supportive leadership behaviors (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

4.4 Servant Leadership and Employee Motivation

Servant leadership provides an alternative perspective by placing employee development, well-being, ethical behavior, and service at the center of leadership practice. Greenleaf (1977) argued that effective leaders should prioritize the growth and needs of followers rather than focusing exclusively on organizational authority.

Servant leadership may strengthen motivation by creating a supportive environment in which employees feel valued and respected. Such conditions may contribute to trust, organizational commitment, and willingness to contribute beyond formal job requirements. A meta-analysis by Hoch et al. (2018) also found that servant leadership showed potential for explaining a range of organizational outcomes beyond transformational leadership.

4.5 Authentic Leadership and Psychological Motivation

Authentic leadership emphasizes self-awareness, transparency, ethical standards, and genuine relationships between leaders and followers. Avolio et al. (2009) identified authentic leadership as an important contemporary approach associated with positive organizational processes.

Authentic leaders may influence motivation by creating trust and supportive working relationships. When employees perceive leaders as transparent and consistent, they may feel more comfortable expressing ideas, participating in decision-making, and taking responsibility for their work. Such conditions may contribute to stronger engagement and positive work attitudes.

4.6 Self-Determination and Leadership

Self-Determination Theory provides a useful framework for explaining how leadership can influence employee motivation. Deci and Ryan (2000) proposed that individuals have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are supported, individuals are more likely to experience autonomous forms of motivation.

Gagné and Deci (2005) applied Self-Determination Theory to work motivation and suggested that workplace conditions can influence the quality of employee motivation. Leadership practices that provide meaningful choices, constructive feedback, opportunities for skill development, and supportive interpersonal relationships may therefore encourage higher-quality motivation.

This perspective suggests that effective leadership is not simply about providing rewards. Leaders can also create conditions that encourage employees to internalize organizational goals and develop a genuine interest in their work.

4.7 Goal Setting, Feedback, and Recognition

Goal setting is another important mechanism connecting leadership with employee motivation. Locke and Latham (2002) demonstrated that clear and challenging goals can contribute to stronger task motivation when employees understand the goals and receive appropriate feedback.

Leaders play an important role in translating organizational objectives into meaningful individual goals. Regular feedback helps employees understand their progress, while recognition can reinforce achievement and strengthen perceptions of competence. Consequently, leadership behaviors related to goal clarity, feedback, and recognition can contribute to both extrinsic and intrinsic motivational processes.

4.8 Leadership, Employee Engagement, and Job Satisfaction

Leadership style can influence employee motivation through engagement and job satisfaction. Employees who perceive their leaders as supportive, inspiring, fair, and trustworthy may be more likely to develop positive attitudes toward their work.

Breevaart et al. (2014) found that daily transformational leadership and contingent rewards were associated with employees' daily work engagement. Similarly, Breevaart and Bakker (2018) examined how daily transformational leadership behavior relates to work engagement under different job demands.

These findings suggest that employee engagement and motivation are not static conditions. They may change according to daily leadership behaviors, workplace demands, available resources, and employees' experiences.

4.9 Leadership and Employee Performance

Employee motivation is important because of its potential relationship with performance. Motivated employees may demonstrate greater effort, persistence, engagement, and commitment toward organizational objectives. Leadership can influence these processes by providing direction, resources, support, recognition, and meaningful goals (Vroom, 1964; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

However, leadership does not necessarily influence performance directly in all situations. Motivation, engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and psychological well-being may function as important pathways connecting leadership behavior with performance outcomes. Therefore, leadership effectiveness should be considered in relation to broader organizational and psychological processes.

4.10 Situational and Contextual Leadership

The literature also indicates that leadership effectiveness depends partly on context. Situational approaches suggest that leaders may need to adapt their behaviors according to employee readiness, task requirements, and organizational circumstances (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Yukl, 2013).

This perspective challenges the assumption that one leadership style is universally effective. Employees may require greater direction when tasks are unfamiliar, while experienced employees may respond more positively to autonomy and participation. Similarly, organizational change may require inspirational leadership, whereas highly structured tasks may benefit from clear expectations and performance monitoring.

4.11 Leadership, Trust, and Organizational Commitment

Trust represents another important mechanism through which leadership may influence motivation. Employees are more likely to respond positively to leaders whom they perceive as fair, reliable, ethical, and supportive. Transformational and authentic leadership research has emphasized the role of trust in developing positive follower attitudes (Podsakoff et al., 1990; Avolio et al., 2009).

Strong leader–employee relationships may also contribute to organizational commitment. Employees who feel respected and supported may be more willing to identify with organizational goals and maintain their involvement in the organization.

4.12 Individual and Organizational Differences

The effect of leadership on motivation may vary according to employee characteristics, organizational culture, job demands, and broader social conditions. Employees differ in their needs for autonomy, recognition, achievement, security, and social connection. Consequently, the same leadership behavior may not produce identical motivational responses among all employees (Yukl, 2013; Northouse, 2018).

Organizational culture may also influence whether a particular leadership style is accepted and effective. Participative leadership, for example, may be more suitable in environments that value employee involvement, while directive approaches may be expected in highly structured settings.

4.13 Overall Synthesis of the Literature

Overall, the literature suggests that **leadership style is an important factor associated with employee motivation**, but the relationship is complex and context-dependent. Transformational, servant, and authentic leadership approaches emphasize psychological support, development, trust, and meaningful involvement, whereas transactional leadership provides structure, performance expectations, and external rewards.

The literature also indicates that leadership may influence motivation through multiple mechanisms, including autonomy, competence, relatedness, recognition, goal clarity, feedback, trust, employee participation, and organizational support (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Locke & Latham, 2002). Thus, effective leadership should not be understood as the simple application of one fixed style.

A broader synthesis suggests that employee-centered, supportive, ethical, and context-sensitive leadership practices can contribute to sustainable motivation. At the same time, clear goals, performance standards, and appropriate rewards remain important in many organizational settings. The suitability of a leadership approach therefore depends on an appropriate combination of direction, support, recognition, autonomy, and employee development according to organizational and individual circumstances.

5. Findings and Discussion

The reviewed literature indicates that leadership style is an important factor associated with employee motivation. Its influence, however, varies according to leadership behaviors, employee needs, organizational context, and the type of motivation involved. Supportive communication, recognition, trust, and employee development can create favorable conditions for motivation (Avolio et al., 2009; Yukl, 2013).

Transformational leadership emerges as one of the most extensively studied approaches in relation to employee motivation. Vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration can encourage employees to develop commitment toward organizational goals (Bass, 1990; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). In contrast, transactional leadership emphasizes clear expectations, performance standards, rewards, and corrective feedback. These mechanisms can support extrinsic motivation, particularly where tasks and performance outcomes are measurable (Bass & Avolio, 1994). However, reliance on external rewards alone may not adequately sustain intrinsic motivation.

The literature also highlights the motivational value of servant and authentic leadership. By emphasizing employee development, ethical behavior, transparency, and supportive relationships, these approaches may strengthen trust, belonging, and organizational commitment (Greenleaf, 1977; Avolio et al., 2009; Hoch et al., 2018). This suggests that employees may be motivated not only by financial rewards but also by the quality of their relationships with leaders and their experience within the organization.

Self-Determination Theory provides an important explanation of these findings. Employees are more likely to experience autonomous motivation when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005). Leadership practices that provide reasonable choices, responsibility, constructive feedback, and opportunities for development may therefore encourage more sustainable motivation. Similarly, clear goals, meaningful feedback, and recognition can strengthen employees' understanding of expectations and their sense of achievement (Locke & Latham, 2002).

The findings further indicate that leadership is associated with employee engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Daily leadership behaviors, in particular, may influence employees' work engagement through routine workplace interactions (Breevaart et al., 2014; Breevaart & Bakker, 2018). These outcomes are also relevant to employee performance, as motivation may

influence the effort, persistence, and commitment employees bring to their responsibilities. Nevertheless, leadership should be considered one contributor to performance rather than its sole determinant.

Another important finding is that no single leadership style is equally effective in every organizational situation. Employee experience, task complexity, organizational culture, and workplace conditions may influence how employees respond to particular leadership behaviors (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Yukl, 2013). Employees performing unfamiliar tasks may need greater direction, while experienced employees may benefit more from autonomy and participation.

Overall, the reviewed evidence suggests that sustainable employee motivation is supported by a combination of psychological, relational, and organizational factors. Transformational leadership may provide inspiration and meaning, transactional leadership may offer structure and clear expectations, while servant and authentic leadership may strengthen trust and employee development. Therefore, organizations may benefit from a balanced and context-sensitive approach that combines direction, support, recognition, participation, autonomy, and opportunities for growth.

6. Research Gaps and Future Recommendations

6.1 Research Gaps

The reviewed literature reveals several gaps in research on leadership and employee motivation. Methodologically, many studies rely on cross-sectional designs and self-reported data. More longitudinal, experimental, and mixed-method studies are needed to examine how leadership behaviors influence employee motivation over time and whether such effects are sustained.

A measurement gap also exists because studies use different definitions and instruments to assess leadership styles and employee motivation. Greater use of standardized and validated measures would improve the comparability and reliability of research findings.

Contextual and comparative gaps are also evident. Much of the available research focuses on specific organizational and cultural settings, while evidence from developing countries, including Nepal and other South Asian contexts, remains limited. Furthermore, many studies examine individual leadership styles separately, creating a need for comparative research across transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, democratic, and situational leadership.

Another important gap concerns the mechanisms through which leadership influences motivation. Further investigation is needed into factors such as autonomy, trust, psychological safety, recognition, employee engagement, and organizational commitment. Individual differences, including employees' personality, experience, values, and career stages, also require greater attention when examining motivational responses to leadership.

Finally, the expansion of remote and hybrid work has created new research needs. More evidence is required on how digital communication, virtual trust, employee autonomy, and reduced face-to-face interaction influence motivation and engagement. Longitudinal research is particularly important for understanding whether leadership practices produce sustained improvements in employee motivation and performance.

6.2 Future Recommendations

Future research and organizational practices should consider the following recommendations:

- **Strengthen research designs:** Use longitudinal, experimental, and mixed-method approaches to examine the nature and sustainability of leadership–motivation relationships.
- **Conduct comparative studies:** Examine different leadership styles across organizational settings, employee groups, and types of work.
- **Explore motivational mechanisms:** Investigate the roles of autonomy, engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust, psychological safety, recognition, and organizational culture.

- **Expand contextual research:** Conduct more studies in Nepal, South Asia, and other developing-country contexts to examine the applicability of leadership theories across different cultural environments.
- **Improve leadership development:** Develop training programs emphasizing communication, recognition, ethical behavior, employee participation, supportive feedback, autonomy, and employee development.
- **Encourage flexible leadership practices:** Combine clear direction, supportive relationships, recognition, autonomy, and developmental opportunities according to employee needs and organizational circumstances.
- **Examine digital workplaces:** Investigate how digital communication, virtual trust, availability expectations, and reduced face-to-face interaction influence employee motivation and engagement in remote and hybrid settings.

7. Practical Implication

- **For Organizations:** Organizations should recognize leadership as an important factor in employee motivation. Leadership development programs should focus on supportive, ethical, participative, and employee-centered practices that encourage trust, engagement, and commitment.
- **For Managers and Leaders:** Managers should combine clear expectations with supportive communication, constructive feedback, recognition, and appropriate employee autonomy. Leaders should understand that employees may respond differently to the same leadership approach and should therefore adapt their behavior according to individual and situational needs.
- **For Human Resource Management:** Human resource departments can integrate leadership development with employee motivation and engagement programs. Leadership assessments, training, mentoring, and regular employee feedback can help identify leadership behaviors that strengthen motivation.
- **For Employee Motivation:** Organizations should not depend exclusively on salary and external rewards. Opportunities for autonomy, competence development, recognition, meaningful work, participation, and career growth can support more sustainable forms of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005).
- **For Workplace Performance:** Leaders can contribute to better employee performance by establishing clear goals, providing appropriate resources, recognizing achievement, and maintaining supportive work relationships. Motivated employees are more likely to demonstrate sustained effort and engagement toward organizational objectives.
- **For Remote and Hybrid Work:** Organizations should develop leadership practices suited to virtual and hybrid environments. Clear communication, trust, autonomy, regular feedback, and appropriate digital boundaries are particularly important when direct face-to-face interaction is limited.
- **For Leadership Development:** Leadership training should move beyond authority and task supervision and emphasize emotional intelligence, ethical conduct, communication, employee development, recognition, pa rticipation, and adaptive leadership. A context-sensitive leadership approach is more likely to support sustained employee motivation and positive organizational outcomes.

8. Limitations

The present review has several limitations. First, it is based on previously published literature and does not include primary data from employees or organizations. Second, the reviewed studies use different definitions, measurement instruments, research designs, and samples, which makes direct

comparison of findings difficult. Third, many studies are cross-sectional and rely on self-reported data, limiting the ability to establish causal relationships between leadership style and employee motivation. Fourth, existing evidence is concentrated in particular organizational and cultural contexts, while research from developing countries, including Nepal and South Asia, remains comparatively limited. Finally, the rapidly changing nature of remote and hybrid workplaces means that some earlier findings may not fully reflect emerging forms of digital leadership and employee motivation. These limitations highlight the need for more longitudinal, comparative, mixed-method, and cross-cultural research.

8. Conclusion

The reviewed literature indicates that leadership style is an important factor associated with employee motivation and related organizational outcomes. Transformational, servant, and authentic leadership generally provide favorable conditions for motivation through inspiration, trust, autonomy, recognition, employee development, and supportive relationships. Transactional leadership can also contribute to motivation by providing clear expectations, performance standards, feedback, and appropriate rewards.

However, the review suggests that no single leadership style is universally effective. The impact of leadership depends on employee characteristics, organizational culture, task requirements, and contextual conditions. Sustainable motivation is more likely when leaders combine clear direction with autonomy, recognition, supportive communication, meaningful goals, and opportunities for growth.

Overall, leadership should be viewed not simply as a mechanism of control but as an important organizational resource for supporting employee motivation, engagement, satisfaction, and performance. Organizations can therefore benefit from developing adaptive, ethical, supportive, and employee-centered leadership practices. Future research should strengthen the evidence through longitudinal, comparative, mixed-method, and cross-cultural studies, particularly in under-researched contexts such as Nepal and South Asia.

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