

Which Leadership Works, And Why? Leadership Styles, Psychological Mechanisms and Organisational Effectiveness

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Abstract—Leadership is widely believed to shape organisational effectiveness, but the comparative evidence across leadership styles is scattered and rarely appraised. This review mapped 44 sources on transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, ethical and laissez-faire leadership in relation to performance, commitment, job satisfaction, engagement and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB): five meta-analyses, two systematic reviews, 35 primary quantitative studies and two qualitative studies. Each primary study was coded for design, sample and direction of findings and appraised on design, sample adequacy and measurement. Of 68 coded style–outcome findings, 63 were positive, three negative, one mixed and one conditional, and none was null. Transformational leadership accounted for 38 findings and had the largest meta-analytic validity ($p = .44$), closely followed by contingent reward ($p = .39$); laissez-faire leadership was negative ($p = -.37$). Servant leadership correlated .36 with OCB across 22 studies and added value beyond transformational leadership, whereas authentic and ethical leadership overlapped with it heavily. Evidence quality was modest: 25 of 35 primary studies were single-source cross-sectional surveys and none met all appraisal criteria. Findings were consistent across cultural settings, although relational mechanisms such as trust, leader–member exchange and meaningful work were most prominent in higher power–distance settings. Six testable propositions and practical implications are offered.

Index Terms—Leadership styles, organisational effectiveness, transformational leadership, servant leadership, psychological mechanisms

I. INTRODUCTION

Organisational effectiveness, the capacity of an organisation to achieve its goals through its members,

is usually assessed through performance, job satisfaction, commitment, engagement and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB). Leadership is consistently named as one of its most important influences, and organisations invest heavily in leadership development on that assumption. The leadership literature, however, offers many competing styles. Full Range Leadership Theory distinguishes transformational, transactional and laissez-faire leadership [1], and servant, authentic and ethical leadership have since been proposed as relational and moral alternatives [2], [3], [4].

Three problems limit what practitioners can take from this literature. First, the evidence is dispersed across reviews that usually examine one style or one outcome. Second, the quality of the underlying studies is seldom appraised, even though most rely on single-source surveys that are vulnerable to common-method bias [5]. Third, findings from different cultural settings are rarely compared, although cultures differ in power distance and in-group loyalty in ways that may change how leadership works [6], [7]. This review therefore asks: (RQ1) which leadership styles are most consistently associated with effectiveness outcomes, and how strong is that evidence; (RQ2) which psychological mechanisms explain these associations; and (RQ3) which contextual factors, such as national culture and sector, condition them?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Full-range leadership styles

Transformational leadership comprises idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration; transactional leadership comprises contingent reward

and management-by-exception; laissez-faire leadership is the avoidance of leadership [1]. In the most-cited meta-analysis, transformational leadership and contingent reward were both strongly related to leadership criteria and were correlated at .80, while laissez-faire leadership was negatively related [8]. Recent meta-analytic evidence from the public sector confirms positive associations of transformational leadership with individual and organisational outcomes [9]. Laissez-faire leadership has also been described as a form of destructive leadership linked to role stress and distress [10].

B. Relational and moral styles

Servant leadership puts followers' needs and growth first [3], [11]. Meta-analyses suggest that it predicts outcomes beyond transformational leadership, whereas authentic and ethical leadership overlap with it heavily [12], [13], [14]. Authentic leadership emphasises self-awareness, transparency and internalised moral standards [4], and ethical leadership emphasises normatively appropriate conduct and its promotion among followers [2].

C. Psychological mechanisms

Several psychological theories explain why leadership style should matter. Social exchange and leader-member exchange (LMX) theory propose that employees reciprocate a leader's investment with commitment and discretionary effort [15], [16]. The social identity approach holds that leaders are effective when they represent and advance the group [17]. Justice research shows that fair procedures and treatment build trust and commitment [18]. Self-determination theory links autonomy, competence and relatedness to intrinsic motivation [19], psychological safety explains whether people speak up [20], and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model treats supportive leadership as a resource that sustains engagement [21].

D. Culture and context

Cultures differ in power distance, individualism and in-group loyalty [6], and cross-cultural research shows that these differences shape which leader behaviours are endorsed [7].

In an experiment, collectivist followers performed better under transformational leadership and

individualists under transactional leadership [22]. In relationship-oriented cultures, leadership ideals have been described as blending nurturance with expectations of hierarchy [23]. Whether findings transfer across settings therefore needs to be examined rather than assumed.

E. Critical perspectives

The field faces well-known criticisms. Transformational leadership is defined partly by its effects, its dimensions lack a clear causal model, and common measures confound behaviour with followers' evaluations [24]. Newer styles may be partly redundant with it [12], [14]. Single-source designs can inflate correlations [5], and destructive leadership, which harms attitudes and well-being [25], is under-represented in studies of style and effectiveness.

Fig. 1 summarises the input-process-outcome framework used to organise the review: leadership styles act through psychological processes on effectiveness outcomes, with context conditioning these links.

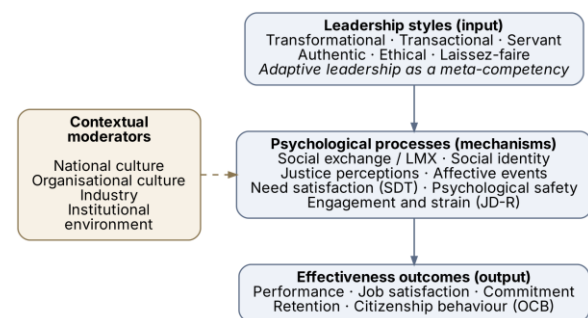


Fig. 1. Framework guiding the review

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Design

The study is a structured narrative review with evidence mapping. A narrative design was chosen because the studies use different measures, outcomes and designs that cannot be pooled. To increase transparency, every study was coded on fixed characteristics, appraised against explicit criteria, and its findings were counted by style and outcome. Sources were selected purposively rather than through a structured database search, so the review is not presented as a systematic review and no PRISMA flow is reported.

B. Source selection and eligibility

Sources were selected purposively from the published literature, starting from key meta-analyses and reviews and the studies they cite, and adding studies to cover each style and outcome and to widen geographical coverage. No structured database search was conducted. Peer-reviewed meta-analyses, systematic reviews and empirical studies published in English between 2004 and 2026 that linked a named style or leadership resource to an effectiveness outcome were included. Opinion pieces, purely conceptual papers and studies without an effectiveness outcome were excluded.

C. Extraction and appraisal

For each source, country, setting, design, sample, measures, outcomes and main results were extracted from abstracts and publisher records. Each style–outcome association was coded as positive, negative, null, mixed or conditional, with outcomes grouped into performance, commitment and retention, job satisfaction, engagement, and OCB, innovation and other extra-role behaviour. Primary studies were appraised on three criteria adapted from the JBI checklist for analytical cross-sectional studies: a design beyond single-source cross-sectional surveys; an adequate sample (≥ 200 individuals, $\geq 1,000$ repeated observations or ≥ 50 organisations); and validated instruments or reported reliabilities. Studies meeting three criteria were rated High, two Medium and fewer Low; ratings with undeterminable criteria were marked provisional.

D. Synthesis

The evidence was profiled descriptively, findings were vote-counted in a style-by-outcome matrix, meta-analytic effect sizes were reported where available, and the direction of findings was re-examined using only Medium-rated studies as a sensitivity check.

IV. RESULTS

A. Profile and quality of the evidence

Forty-four sources were included (Table I). Of the 35 primary studies, 25 (71%) were single-source cross-sectional surveys, and only eight used multi-source,

time-lagged, diary or multi-study designs. The median individual-level sample was 378 (range 38–845). No primary study met all three appraisal criteria; 12 were rated Medium and 23 Low, and 28 ratings were provisional because at least one criterion could not be confirmed.

TABLE I. PROFILE AND QUALITY OF THE EVIDENCE BASE

Characteristic	Value
Meta-analyses / systematic reviews	5 / 2
Primary quantitative studies	35
Single-source cross-sectional	25 (71%)
Multi-source, diary or multi-study	8 (23%)
Organisation-level, unclassified	2
Qualitative studies	2
Median sample (range)	378 (38–845)
Quality: High / Medium / Low	0 / 12 / 23
Provisional ratings	28

B. Findings by style and outcome

The sources yielded 68 coded findings: 63 positive, three negative, one mixed and one conditional; no null finding was reported (Table II). Transformational leadership accounted for 38 findings, all positive except one conditional result: its link with innovative behaviour held only when employees felt empowered [26].

Transactional leadership was positive for performance in five studies, and in real-estate brokerage it predicted performance more strongly than transformational leadership [27]; for innovation, however, it was negative under high empowerment [26] and mixed in a municipal organisation, where only verbal rewards helped [28].

Servant leadership produced eight positive findings across performance, commitment and OCB, and authentic and ethical leadership six each. Laissez-faire leadership produced two negative findings, both from a single meta-analysis [8]. When only Medium-rated studies were considered, the direction of findings did not change.

TABLE II. STYLE-BY-OUTCOME MATRIX (NUMBER OF FINDINGS)

Style	Perf.	Comm.	Sat.	Eng.	OCB/Inn.	Total
Transformational	17+	5+	1+	8+	6+ 1c	38
Transactional	5+	—	1+	—	1m 1—	8
Servant	4+	2+	—	—	2+	8
Authentic	2+	—	1+	2+	1+	6
Ethical	2+	1+	1+	—	2+	6
Laissez-faire	1—	—	1—	—	—	2

Note: + positive, – negative, c conditional, m mixed.
 Perf. = performance; Comm. = commitment/retention;
 Sat. = job satisfaction; Eng. = engagement; OCB/Inn.
 = OCB, innovation and extra-role behaviour.

C. Effect sizes

Table III summarises magnitudes where meta-analyses reported them. Transformational leadership ($\rho = .44$) and contingent reward ($\rho = .39$) differ only slightly [8], and servant leadership correlates .36 with OCB across 22 studies [29]. Single cross-sectional studies tend to report larger associations, such as $r = .63$ between servant leadership and commitment among hospital staff [30], which is consistent with method inflation.

TABLE III. KEY META-ANALYTIC EFFECT SIZES

Source	Association	Estimate
Judge & Piccolo (k = 87)	Transformational criteria	$\rho = .44$
Judge & Piccolo	Contingent reward criteria	$\rho = .39$
Judge & Piccolo	Laissez-faire criteria	$\rho = -.37$
Suyasa et al. (k = 22)	Servant – OCB	$r = .36$ [.27, .44]
Hoch et al.	Authentic, ethical vs TF	Small increment
Lee et al. (k = 130)	Servant beyond TF, AL, EL	Significant

D. Mechanisms

Engagement was the most frequently tested mediator. It carried transformational effects on performance in a multi-source study of nurses [31] and fully mediated them in a private-sector sample [32], and diary studies showed daily transformational behaviour sustaining next-day engagement and performance [33], [34].

Servant and ethical leadership worked mainly through trust, procedural justice and LMX [13], [35]. Engagement did not always translate into performance, however [36].

E. Cultural setting

The direction of findings was the same across cultural settings. Transformational leadership predicted engagement, commitment and performance among hotel and private-sector employees [32], [37], while transactional leadership out-predicted it in real-estate brokerage [27]. Servant leadership correlated .63 with commitment among hospital staff [30] and predicted team commitment through trust among IT professionals [38]; ethical leadership predicted service innovation through LMX in hotels [35]; and transformational leadership predicted commitment through meaningful work among IT professionals [39]. In public-sector innovation studies, empowerment and reward design shaped the effects [26], [28]. What varied was the route: relational mechanisms were most prominent in higher power-distance settings, whereas studies in more individualist settings emphasised empowerment and autonomy. Few settings had studies of transactional or laissez-faire leadership.

V. DISCUSSION

The evidence consistently favours active, relational leadership, but it is stronger in consistency than in design. Transformational leadership has the broadest base, yet contingent reward is nearly as effective for defined performance, which supports treating the two as complementary. Servant leadership emerges as the most distinct of the newer styles, while authentic and ethical leadership add little beyond transformational leadership for most outcomes [12]. The absence of null findings in a literature of this size points to publication

bias, and the dominance of single-source designs means that reported effects are probably inflated [5]. Different styles appear to work through different psychological routes. Transformational leadership operates mainly through engagement, identification and meaning, consistent with the JD-R and social identity perspectives; servant and ethical leadership operate through trust, LMX and fairness, consistent with social exchange and justice theory. In higher power-distance, in-group-oriented settings, the mediators tested were most often relational or meaning-based, which fits descriptions of relationship-oriented work cultures [23], [40].

A. Propositions for future research

The synthesis suggests six propositions.

P1: In high power-distance, in-group-oriented settings, trust and LMX will mediate the effects of servant and ethical leadership more strongly than elsewhere.

P2: Contingent reward will predict task performance at least as strongly as transformational leadership in routine work, whereas transformational leadership will better predict OCB and innovation in non-routine work.

P3: Transformational effects on innovation will depend on employee autonomy, and controlling transactional behaviour will weaken innovation under high autonomy.

P4: Associations will be smaller, but still positive, in multi-source and time-lagged designs.

P5: Laissez-faire leadership will reduce engagement through role ambiguity, with effects comparable to those of contingent reward.

P6: In relationship-oriented cultures, transformational effects on identification will strengthen with relationship duration through meaningful work.

B. Practical implications

Leadership development should build a range of behaviours, combining transformational and servant-oriented practices with clear goals and fair contingent rewards, and should target mechanisms such as trust, fairness and engagement that can be measured before and after training. In relationship-oriented cultures, protecting leader–team continuity and helping new leaders build relationships early may be especially valuable. Passive leadership should be identified and corrected, not simply outweighed by rewarding positive styles.

C. Limitations

The review is narrative rather than systematic, its sources were selected purposively and may not be exhaustive, study details were drawn from abstracts and publisher records, and many quality ratings are provisional. Vote counting shows direction but not magnitude, and restricting the review to English-language peer-reviewed sources may reinforce publication bias.

VI. CONCLUSION

Leaders who are present, explain their decisions, develop people and treat them fairly are consistently linked with better organisational outcomes, and leaders who withdraw are linked with worse ones. Different styles reach these outcomes by different psychological routes, and the evidence suggests that effective leaders use more than one. Because the evidence is consistent in direction but weak in design, and thin in several settings, the priority for research is stronger designs across a wider range of cultural settings, sectors and styles.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This study is a review of published literature and did not involve new data collection from human participants.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

Generative AI tools were used to assist with language editing, reference checking and formatting. All content was reviewed by the author, who takes full responsibility for the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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