

Principle-Centered Leadership in Organizations: Pathways to Innovation and Barriers to Implementation

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Abstract. As organizations increasingly rely on innovation, understanding how Principle-Centered Leadership (PCL) fosters Employee Innovative Work Behavior (IWB) is essential. This study addresses this gap by synthesizing research on the key mediators—psychological safety and organizational trust—and the practical implementation challenges. A systematic literature review was conducted using the PRISMA framework, analyzing 52 eligible studies. Findings show the PCL-IWB link is rarely direct; it is primarily mediated by psychological safety and organizational trust. The key challenges identified include the difficulty of translating abstract PCL concepts into concrete measurements and the subjective perception of these principles across different corporate cultures. The practical implication is that organizations should invest in leadership development that goes beyond theory. Training must also equip leaders with tangible tools to intentionally build psychological safety and trust deliberately, thereby creating the environment required to unlock employee innovation.

Keywords: Employee innovation; Leadership development; Organizational trust; Principle-centered leadership; Psychological safety.

1.0 Introduction

Ethical lapses are most often encountered in organizations, even with the recognized importance of moral leadership (Shiundu, 2024). This raises an essential question for analysis: What tangible, measurable outcomes result from a leader's actions and decisions? This question is particularly urgent given the constant stream of ethical scandals across all organizational types. We need to clearly understand how ethical leadership can curb detrimental behaviors, such as corruption, bribery, and nepotism, that undermine performance (Usman & Hameed, 2017; Brown & Treviño, 2006). These harmful practices jeopardize an organization's health and future, a fact that has led to a much-needed increase in scrutiny of leadership ethics across the board (Benlahcene et al., 2022). Over time, leadership theory has evolved. It evolved from trait-based models to behavioral models, and then to modern leadership styles, including transformational, servant, and authentic leadership. However, there is still a void: there is no sufficient description as to how virtue-centered principles produce a lasting organizational effect, although these models explain what ethical leaders look like. The principle-centered Leadership of Stephen Covey serves as a model for a theoretical solution, justifying effective leadership by applying timeless values such as integrity, trustworthiness, and accountability (Bedenkova et al., 2021; Oshame & Maureen, 2023). PCL emphasizes a voluntary commitment to personal growth and regularly practicing universal principles. Unlike other frameworks, which are based on character traits or specific conditions, this service-

focused approach aligns with research that links servant leadership to positive employee outcomes. However, it excludes certain character principles from consideration or emphasis.

Studies have provided tangible evidence that strong character-based leadership has a significant impact on an organization's performance, with clearly visible steps. Ethical consistency among leaders fosters organizational trust and a sense of psychological safety, which, in turn, enables employees to empower themselves, make further commitments, and drive innovation (Murcio & Scalzo, 2021; Saleem et al., 2024). Such ethical environments not only increase productivity (Obuba, 2023; Zhu, 2025) and enhance an organization's resilience (recovery capability) (Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024), but also foster social learning. It implies that employees observe and internalize these ethical practices, thereby disseminating new practices throughout the entire organization (Liu et al., 2023; Pangayom & Kusmaningtyas, 2023).

There are three key gaps regardless of this expansion of evidence base. One, research has established a relationship, or correlation, between ethical leadership and favorable outcomes; however, we have yet to conduct thorough research to understand the underlying mechanism, or process, through which the principles of principle-centered leadership (PCL) are related to innovation outcomes. Second, there has been a lack of theoretical models that describe the mediating roles of organizational trust and psychological safety in this relationship. Third, applied academic practice (scholarship) does not provide clear guidelines for structuring the formal application of PCL principles in training programs to develop innovative employees.

This study addresses limitations in the existing research by examining the impact of the leader's principle-centered leadership (PCL) practices on Employee Innovative Work Behavior (IWB). Such a relationship is indirect but mediated by two critical mechanisms: organizational trust and mental security. We are confident that ethical PCL practices will create an atmosphere of trust and safety, enabling employees to innovate. In particular, the study will elaborate on the subtextual dynamics of ethical leadership as constructive through the lens of Principle-Centered Leadership and its implications for employees, achieved by integrating pivotal psychological constructs into the organizational environment. The given methodology builds upon previous studies and focuses on the specific processes by which ethical leadership promotes innovation, beyond the general associations to actionable knowledge that can be applied to organizational development (Albdareen et al., 2023).

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study applied a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) to comprehensively identify, appraise, and synthesize existing studies on Stephen Covey's leadership philosophy. A systematic review is a rigorous, transparent method for summarizing the state of knowledge on a specific topic, minimizing bias through an explicit, replicable process. This also employs the PRISMA 2020 framework, which ensures transparent and complete reporting of the review process. It enhances the reliability and validity of the findings. SLR was used in this study because it provides Comprehensiveness and Depth, ensures Methodological Rigor and Transparency, and is ideally suited for Synthesizing Complex Concepts. This also answers the research questions in the most unbiased way.

2.2 Research Instrument

The study uses an SLR that combines a structured framework to ensure the process is systematic, transparent, and reproducible. It is a multifaceted methodological framework composed of three core components: the Data Extraction Form, the PRISMA 2020 checklist, the flow diagram, and the quality appraisal tool.

2.3 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection will follow the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, which involve a systematic review of selected academic databases (e.g., ERIC, Taylor & Francis). It utilizes keywords (such as leadership, philosophy, and principles) to identify relevant literature focused on the area being studied. It will also apply the inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the literature is relevant. Afterwards, the PRISMA flow diagram was used to remove duplicate data and literature that did not meet the eligibility criteria. Following the compilation of the eligible literature, it will undergo a two-phase screening process. First, a review of the titles and abstracts, and second, to assess the full text of the eligible studies. This process will ensure the transparency and replicability of the document.

2.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis for this SLR was conducted using a structured thematic analysis, which was entirely framed. The data analysis for this SLR was conducted using a structured thematic analysis, guided entirely by the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for research transparency and rigor. To analyze the compiled literature, a literature grid was created to identify gaps in each study and examine similarities. The extracted data were synthesized to address the research problem regarding Covey's leadership philosophy.

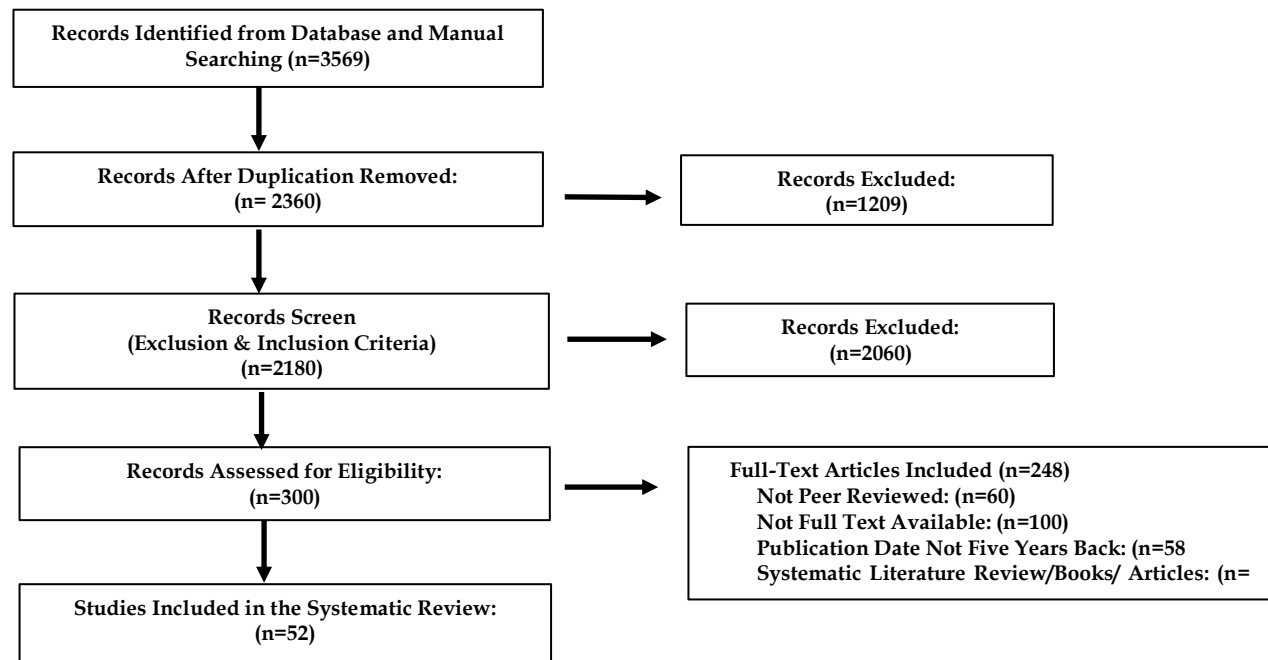


Figure 1. PRISMA (2020) Flow Diagram

2.5 Ethical Considerations

This systematic literature review centers on researcher integrity, analyzing existing public documents and not involving human participants. The primary ethical commitment is to conduct the review with objectivity, mitigating bias by strictly adhering to the predefined systematic methodology and transparently reporting all steps in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines. This includes an obligation to accurately represent the original authors' findings and arguments without misinterpretation, ensuring that all conclusions are a faithful synthesis of the literature. Furthermore, the highest standards of academic integrity will be upheld through meticulous citation and attribution, ensuring proper credit is given to the scholars whose work underpins this review and avoiding plagiarism.

3.0 Results and Discussion

This systematic literature review identified 52 studies that met the predefined eligibility criteria. These studies predominantly employed survey methodologies, with a notable focus on mediating mechanisms, such as organizational trust and psychological safety, across diverse organizational contexts (Qi et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2017). A significant portion of these investigations highlighted inclusive leadership as a key predictor of innovative work behavior, often mediated by psychological safety and creative self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2021; Li & Tang, 2022).

3.1 PCL Practices and Employee Innovative Work Behavior

Empirical evidence consistently shows that leaders who practice positive, constructive, and legitimate behaviors cultivate environments conducive to innovation, primarily by fostering employee engagement and commitment to organizational goals. Such leadership approaches encourage proactive behaviors and knowledge sharing, which are critical to generating and implementing novel ideas in the workplace (Meriweather, 2024). Moreover, a

significant body of research indicates that participative leadership, a facet of PCL, directly influences employee innovative behavior by fostering a sense of ownership and shared vision among team members (Meriweather, 2024). The emphasis on leader behaviors in promoting creativity and innovation, through various mediating mechanisms, necessitates robust methodological designs to assess causal inferences accurately (Hughes et al., 2018). Unfortunately, existing research often relies on designs that are ill-suited for establishing such causal relationships, necessitating more rigorous methodologies to accurately discern these connections (Hughes et al., 2018).

Furthermore, empirical studies underscore that inclusive leadership positively influences innovative work behavior, as employees tend to engage in creative activities when they perceive a supportive relationship with their leaders that encourages risk-taking in idea generation and execution (Sharma et al., 2023). This suggests a direct link where leaders who embody PCL practices inherently create conditions ripe for innovation by nurturing an environment where employees feel secure enough to experiment and voice unconventional ideas (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). This is further supported by findings that inclusive leadership directly enhances innovative behavior through mechanisms such as perceived organizational support and psychological safety (Qi et al., 2019).

Furthermore, ethical leadership, a core component of PCL, has been shown to foster creativity and flexibility, ultimately increasing employee efficacy and contribution to innovation (Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024). This ethical foundation builds a climate of trust and integrity, which is essential for employees to feel secure in expressing novel ideas and engaging in innovation efforts (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024; Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024). This inclusive approach, characterized by a leader's willingness to involve employees in decision-making, significantly influences innovation and organizational commitment by creating an environment where employees feel valued and empowered (Riza et al., 2025).

This empowerment, in turn, boosts employee self-efficacy, enabling them to contribute to organizational innovation actively (Gupta et al., 2022). Moreover, the consistent application of PCL principles, such as ensuring equitable treatment and transparent value placement, provides a vicarious experience that enhances employee self-efficacy, a critical cognitive factor in promoting innovation (Bao, 2024). Such inclusive leadership practices, by encouraging open communication and collaboration, further stimulate employees' innovative behaviors by creating a psychologically safe space for experimentation and knowledge sharing (Bao, 2024). This supportive environment facilitates the exploration of diverse perspectives, leading to more robust and innovative solutions (Guo et al., 2022; Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). This atmosphere of psychological safety, fostered by PCL practices, encourages employees to proactively engage in problem-solving and idea generation, directly translating into enhanced innovative work behaviors (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024; Qi et al., 2019). Indeed, an ethical climate, often a byproduct of consistent PCL practices, is instrumental in cultivating organizational trust, which in turn motivates employees to contribute to positive change and responsible innovation (Lythreathis et al., 2022).

3.2 Mediating Factors: Organizational Trust and Psychological Safety

The review reveals that both organizational trust and psychological safety act as critical mediating factors in the relationship between PCL practices and innovative work behavior (Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024). Organizational trust, particularly trust in leadership, has been consistently linked to higher levels of employee creativity and innovation, though some empirical support for this mediating role remains inconsistent across studies (Hughes et al., 2018). Psychological safety, on the other hand, robustly mediates the effects of inclusive and PCL leadership styles on innovative work behavior by fostering an environment in which employees feel secure enough to express ideas and take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences (Wang et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2022). This environment is crucial for encouraging extra-role behaviors, such as innovative working behaviors, as employees are more likely to generate and present new ideas when they perceive their leaders as open and accessible listeners (Li & Tang, 2022). Indeed, democratic leadership, a practice aligned with PCL principles, has been demonstrated to cultivate a creative and safe organizational climate, thereby fostering employee innovation (Imran et al., 2025). Furthermore, ethical leadership, by fostering cognitive engagement and a sense of value among employees, also significantly contributes to an environment conducive to innovative endeavors (Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023). This ethical foundation is paramount for encouraging employees to exhibit proactive behaviors, including innovative work behaviors, by mitigating perceptions of risk associated with proposing novel solutions or challenging existing norms.

Thus, when leaders consistently demonstrate benevolence, integrity, and competence, employees are more likely

to exhibit innovative behaviors, as their trustworthiness encourages participation and risk-taking (Dagogo & Barasin, 2020). Such an environment empowers employees to not only generate novel ideas but also to champion their implementation, knowing their contributions are valued and protected within the organizational framework. This aligns with findings suggesting that constructive leadership significantly enhances employees' trust and psychological well-being, thereby increasing innovative behavior (Rahimizhian & Irani, 2021). Moreover, inclusive leadership practices are particularly adept at creating a safe environment where diverse team members feel empowered to contribute novel ideas and engage in decision-making processes, thereby fostering innovation (Guo et al., 2022). Specifically, inclusive leadership is understood to positively influence employee innovative behavior, with psychological safety serving as a significant, albeit not the sole, mediating mechanism (Wang et al., 2021). This multifaceted mediation underscores the complexity of fostering innovation through leadership, suggesting that a holistic approach that considers multiple mediating pathways is essential. Specifically, transformational leadership, which shares elements with PCL, cultivates an environment where intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation directly enhance an organization's innovative potential (Meriweather, 2024; Alateeg & Alhammadi, 2024).

3.3 Challenges in Formalizing and Measuring PCL Principles

A significant challenge lies in translating the nuanced and often context-dependent nature of PCL practices into standardized, measurable metrics suitable for formal leadership development programs. This difficulty is further compounded by the subjective interpretation of terms such as "positive," "constructive," and "legitimate" across various organizational cultures and leadership paradigms, hindering the establishment of universally applicable benchmarks. Moreover, defining clear, behavioral indicators for these abstract principles poses a considerable hurdle, as traditional leadership assessment tools often struggle to capture the complex interplay of these elements (Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024). For instance, while inclusive leadership is acknowledged to foster innovation, measuring its consistent application and impact across diverse generational working groups remains a complex undertaking (Fang et al., 2019). This complexity extends to quantifying the effects of ethical leadership, which, despite its recognized importance in fostering creativity and resilience, often eludes precise measurement in traditional performance metrics (Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024) (Askew, 2023). The challenge is further exacerbated by the difficulty of establishing clear causal links between specific PCL behaviors and tangible innovative outcomes, particularly in diverse, rapidly evolving organizational landscapes. The indirect nature of leadership influence on innovative work behaviors through psychological states and attitudes presents an additional measurement challenge, as many studies focus on outcomes rather than the intricate psychological processes underlying these behaviors (Iqbal et al., 2020). This necessitates the development of sophisticated methodologies capable of reliably capturing the subtle yet profound impact of PCL practices on these psychological mediators.

This systematic literature review highlights the crucial role of Positive, Constructive, and Legitimate leadership practices in promoting innovative work behavior among employees, primarily mediated through organizational trust and psychological safety. The findings highlight that a leader's positive actions, adherence to ethical principles, and commitment to legitimate authority significantly cultivate an environment conducive to innovation by building employee confidence and fostering a secure space for ideation and experimentation (Araslı et al., 2020; Rahimizhian & Irani, 2021). Specifically, leaders who empower employees, actively create opportunities for innovation, and provide support and recognition for inventive contributions are more likely to elicit innovative work behaviors (Liehr & Hauff, 2024). Conversely, the absence of such leadership attributes, characterized by an overemphasis on broad leadership styles without specific guidance, significantly impedes an organization's capacity to stimulate and harness employee innovation effectively (Liehr & Hauff, 2024). This perspective extends existing leadership theories by explicitly integrating the PCL framework, which provides a more granular understanding of how specific leadership behaviors influence intermediate psychological states that, in turn, drive innovation. This integration bridges gaps in the literature by illuminating the nuanced mechanisms through which ethical and legitimate leadership practices, often overlooked in broader innovation studies, contribute to a resilient and innovative workforce (Bunkaewsuk et al., 2024) (Liu et al., 2023). From a practical standpoint, organizations should prioritize leadership development programs that specifically integrate PCL principles, focusing on cultivating leaders who can intentionally build trust and psychological safety within their teams. This involves training leaders in effective communication, conflict resolution, and empathy, all of which foster a supportive and open work environment. Moreover, leaders need to be equipped with the skills to assess and enhance employee well-being, as this directly correlates with a heightened capacity for innovative contributions and creative performance (Rahimizhian & Irani, 2021; Slåtten et al., 2020).

While this review offers substantial insights, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations inherent to systematic literature reviews, such as reliance on published research, which may introduce publication bias or limit the scope to studies that meet specific inclusion criteria. Building upon the current understanding, future research could explore the mediating roles of meaningfulness and workflow in the relationship between authentic leadership (a component of PCL) and innovative work behavior.

4.0 Conclusion

This systematic review unequivocally demonstrates the profound impact of Positive, Constructive, and Legitimate leadership practices on cultivating Employee Innovative Work Behavior, primarily through the vital mediating roles of organizational trust and psychological safety. This comprehensive understanding underscores the necessity for organizations to invest in leadership development programs that specifically integrate PCL principles to foster a thriving culture of innovation. Such strategic investments in leadership development are crucial for enabling organizations to adapt to rapidly changing market demands and maintain a competitive edge. Ultimately, by prioritizing PCL leadership, organizations can create environments where employees feel empowered and secure, thereby unlocking their full innovative potential and driving sustained growth.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Author 1: Conceptualization, Abstract, Research Design, Results and Discussion, PRISMA
 Author 2: Conceptualization, Introduction, Data Analysis, Data Procedure
 Author 3: Research Problem, Instrumentation
 Author 4: Conclusion
 Author 5: Conceptualization

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

There is no conflict of interest.

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