

## Original Article

# A Contemporary Evidence Synthesis of Leadership Styles and Their Impact on Organizational Performance: A Systematic Review

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**Abstract.** This systematic review examined the relationship between various leadership styles and organizational performance, drawing on 42 studies published between 2019 and 2025. Although extensive research exists, the literature remains fragmented due to inconsistent contexts, overlapping constructs, and diverse performance indicators. The review aimed to (1) determine which leadership styles are most strongly linked to performance outcomes, (2) identify mediating and moderating factors that shape this relationship, and (3) highlight gaps for future research. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework, relevant studies were systematically gathered from Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. A narrative synthesis approach was used to integrate both quantitative and qualitative evidence. Findings revealed that transformational leadership most consistently enhances innovation, employee engagement, and long-term organizational performance. Transactional leadership contributes to short-term efficiency and goal attainment, while servant leadership fosters ethical cultures and supports employee well-being. Emerging models, remarkably adaptive and distributed leadership, are gaining prominence in post-pandemic and digital work environments. The results also indicate that leadership effectiveness is context-dependent, with cultural and sector-specific differences influencing outcomes. Overall, the review concludes that no single leadership style universally guarantees organizational success. Instead, a blended approach incorporating transformational, servant, and adaptive elements appears most effective in promoting resilience and sustainable performance. These insights offer valuable implications for leadership development, organizational policy, and innovation strategies in rapidly evolving environments.

**Keywords:** Adaptive leadership; Organizational performance; Servant leadership; Systematic review; Transformational leadership.

Leadership is key to turning organizational strategy into coordinated action. Business researchers continue to debate the extent to which leaders influence organizational outcomes and how different leadership styles – such as transformational, transactional, servant, ethical, and shared leadership – affect productivity, innovation, employee engagement, and long-term performance. Interest in this topic has grown as organizations face rapid technological changes, globalization, and rising demands for ethical and sustainable practices. Companies are seeking clearer, evidence-based guidance on which leadership styles reliably improve performance in specific situations (Deng, 2023; Maheshwari, 2023).

Despite progress, research on leadership and performance remains scattered. Transformational leadership, for example, is often associated with higher employee engagement, commitment, innovation, and safety in service-oriented and healthcare settings (Jiatong et al., 2022; Ystaas et al., 2023). Research also shows that daily changes in transformational behaviors can predict engagement and performance the next day (Bakker et al., 2023). At the same time, transactional and contingent-reward practices remain crucial for operational stability and short-term goal achievement (Abbas & Ali, 2023). New leadership models, such as shared, servant, and ethical leadership, provide more insights. Shared leadership boosts team effectiveness in complex, busy environments (Wu & Cormican, 2021). Servant and ethical leadership also positively impact employee well-being and citizenship behaviors (Zhang et al., 2021; Alkhadra et al., 2022). Research indicates that leadership affects long-term sustainability and environmental performance, thereby shaping ESG outcomes (Piwower-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023).

Several challenges make it hard for scholars and practitioners to reach consistent conclusions. First, the impact of leadership is highly context-dependent and varies across industries, cultures, team stages, and performance measures (Jun & Lee, 2023; Wu & Cormican, 2021). Second, there is conceptual overlap among modern leadership styles, especially transformational, authentic, and servant leadership, which raises questions about whether newer frameworks add real value beyond established ones (Deng, 2023). Third, inconsistencies in measurement and methods, such as different scales, timeframes, and what is measured, make it tough to compare findings and weaken causal interpretations (Maheshwari, 2023; Bonini et al., 2024). These challenges create practical difficulties for leaders seeking sound advice, as it is unclear which leadership investments will yield the most significant performance gains in their unique contexts.

Recent reviews highlight both progress and ongoing gaps. For instance, systematic reviews in healthcare consistently link transformational leadership to safer patient environments and highlight the importance of factors such as empowerment and engagement. They stress the need for long-term research to prove cause and effect (Ystaas et al., 2023; Seljemo et al., 2020). Meta-analytic and bibliometric studies show consistent associations between leadership behaviors and follower outcomes, while revealing uneven geographic representation and variability in research design (Maheshwari, 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that the effects of leadership depend on contextual factors: transformational leadership tends to encourage innovative behavior primarily when employees are committed to change and when there is organizational support for creativity (Jun & Lee, 2023). Furthermore, leadership's role in sustainability and ESG-related outcomes has only recently gained attention, leaving practitioners with limited guidance on aligning leadership development with long-term sustainability objectives (Piwower-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023).

These insights highlight the need for a new, comprehensive synthesis. First, it is crucial to identify which leadership styles consistently predict different aspects of organizational performance—financial, operational, innovative, employee-related, and sustainability outcomes across various contexts. Second, identifying key factors such as engagement, empowerment, and psychological safety, along with influences such as culture, team structure, and digital maturity, can help explain inconsistencies in the research (Jun & Lee, 2023; Wu & Cormican, 2021). Third, assessing the added value of newer leadership concepts is necessary to determine whether they offer insights beyond established frameworks such as transformational leadership (Deng, 2023). Finally, the growing focus on sustainability reveals a gap: empirical evidence linking leadership styles to long-term sustainability and ESG performance remains limited and scattered across various fields (Piwower-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023).

This systematic review aims to bring together and critically assess research from 2019 to the present on leadership styles and organizational performance. Specifically, it will (1) identify which leadership styles align with specific performance outcomes, (2) explore key factors that shape these relationships, and (3) evaluate the conceptual overlap among different leadership frameworks to clarify their unique contributions. By combining various findings into a straightforward narrative, this review seeks to resolve theoretical uncertainties and provide practical, evidence-based guidance for leaders and decision-makers. Ultimately, this work aims to bridge the gap between academic research and practical needs, offering a comprehensive synthesis that supports the advancement of theory and informed leadership development in organizations facing rapid change and greater accountability.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a systematic review research design guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework (Page et al., 2021). The design was selected to gather, evaluate, and integrate empirical evidence on the relationship between leadership styles and organizational performance, using a transparent, repeatable process that minimizes bias and enhances reliability. The review focused on studies published between January 2019 and September 2025 to capture recent developments in leadership research within modern organizational contexts. Both qualitative and quantitative analyses were included to provide a broad, integrative understanding of how leadership styles influence outcomes such as employee performance, innovation, profitability, and sustainability.

### **Samples and Sampling Technique**

Purposive sampling was used to identify studies that aligned with the review's objectives and satisfied the inclusion criteria:

1. Empirical, peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2025.
2. Written in English.
3. Examined the relationship between at least one leadership style (e.g., transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, ethical, shared) and organizational performance.
4. Provided sufficient methodological detail for quality assessment.

#### **Exclusion Criteria:**

Conceptual papers, editorials, dissertations, book chapters, and studies outside management or business contexts (e.g., military or political leadership). A total of 42 articles met all criteria and were included in the final synthesis.

### **Research Instrument**

No researcher-developed instruments were used. Instead, a structured data extraction matrix was created to systematically capture key information from each article, including author(s), publication year, country, leadership style examined, research design, sample details, performance indicators, mediators or moderators, and primary findings. The matrix followed the data extraction framework of Popay et al. (2006). It was piloted across five randomly selected studies to ensure clarity and consistency before full implementation.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

Data collection adhered to the four-stage PRISMA 2020 process: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion (Page et al., 2021).

#### **Identification**

Relevant literature was sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar using Boolean search strings combining terms related to leadership and organizational performance (e.g., "leadership style" AND "organizational performance").

#### **Screening**

Duplicates were removed using Mendeley. Titles and abstracts were screened to determine alignment with the inclusion criteria.

#### **Eligibility**

Full-text articles were assessed for methodological adequacy and relevance.

#### **Inclusion**

Only studies rated as moderate to high quality using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist (Aromataris & Munn, 2020) were included.

To ensure consistency, two independent reviewers conducted each stage. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus, and when necessary, consultation with a third reviewer. Data collection occurred from July to September 2025.

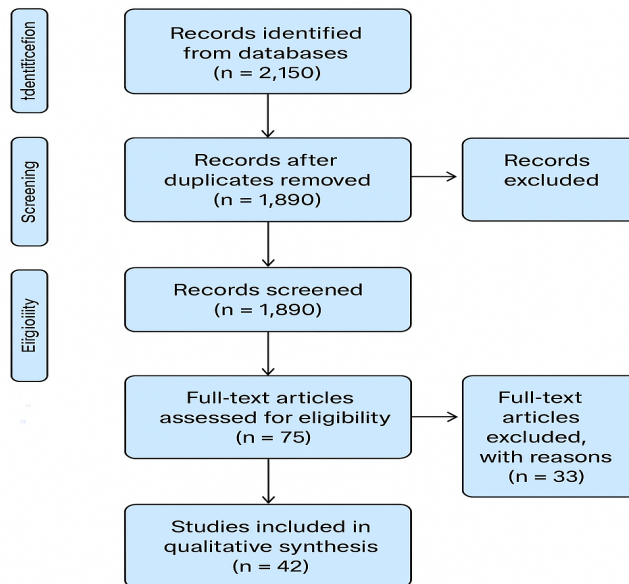


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow of the Study

### Data Analysis Procedure

Given the diversity of research designs and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis approach (Popay et al., 2006) was employed rather than a meta-analysis. This method enabled the integration of qualitative and quantitative findings to identify recurring patterns, relationships, and inconsistencies.

The analysis followed four main steps:

1. Categorizing studies by leadership style (transformational, transactional, servant, ethical, authentic, shared).
2. Mapping performance outcomes (financial, operational, employee-based, innovation, sustainability).
3. Identifying mediators and moderators influencing the leadership-performance relationship (e.g., culture, engagement, innovation climate).
4. Synthesizing trends, theoretical insights, and research gaps.

Double-coding and cross-validation by both reviewers enhanced the trustworthiness of the synthesis. Only findings supported by multiple high-quality studies were emphasized in the final analysis.

### Methodological Limitations

While rigorous procedures were followed, this review has limitations. Restricting the search to English-language, peer-reviewed studies may have excluded relevant research. Additionally, publication bias may influence available evidence, as studies with significant findings are more likely to be published. Finally, the use of narrative synthesis limits the ability to quantify effect sizes.

### Ethical Considerations

Although this study did not involve direct interaction with human participants, it followed high research ethics standards to ensure integrity, transparency, and academic responsibility. As a systematic review, the research relied only on secondary data from previously published studies. Therefore, no informed consent or review board approval was required. However, ethical principles were respected throughout the research process, including data collection, analysis, and reporting.

The researcher ensured that all reviewed articles were obtained from trustworthy academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and Google Scholar. Only studies published in peer-reviewed journals from 2019 to 2025 were included to maintain academic quality and reliability. Proper citations and acknowledgments were used to prevent plagiarism and protect intellectual property, in accordance with the

American Psychological Association (APA, 7th edition) standards.

During data extraction, the researcher accurately recorded information, including authors, publication years, research designs, and findings, without altering or misrepresenting any content. The integrity of each study was respected by presenting its conclusions and methodological limitations accurately. If findings seemed inconsistent or unclear, the researcher avoided making unsupported assumptions and instead noted these issues in the synthesis discussion.

To promote transparency and replicability, the review process adhered to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021), which stress methodological clarity, disclosure of inclusion and exclusion criteria, and systematic reporting of search and screening procedures. All electronic files, records, and notes generated during the review were securely stored in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the researcher, preventing unauthorized access and maintaining data confidentiality, even though the data were publicly available.

Finally, the study adhered to the principles of academic honesty, respect for authorship, and responsible scholarship. The researcher aimed to report findings objectively, without bias or manipulation, ensuring that the conclusions drawn from the review accurately reflected the evidence from the included studies. The overall process complied with institutional ethical guidelines and international standards for conducting and publishing systematic reviews in business and management.

## **Results and Discussion**

The systematic review included 42 empirical studies published between 2019 and 2025. These studies were obtained from reputable databases like Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Emerald Insight. The articles examined how different leadership styles, including transformational, transactional, servant, autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire, affect organizational performance in various sectors such as business, education, healthcare, and public administration. Reviewing these studies provides a broad overview of current leadership research and its impact on organizational outcomes.

### **Transformational Leadership Dominates the Literature**

A significant trend in the studies is that transformational leadership is the most frequently researched and is positively correlated with organizational performance. Researchers have found that transformational leaders enhance employee motivation, innovation, and job satisfaction, which in turn improve productivity and overall organizational outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2019; Pradhan et al., 2020; Akram et al., 2021). This finding supports earlier theories suggesting that transformational leadership nurtures commitment and adaptive cultures, leading to long-term success (Asbari et al., 2020). The discussion notes that, while transformational leadership is effective across contexts, its success depends heavily on the leader's authenticity and cultural adaptability, underscoring the need for cross-cultural validation (Buil et al., 2021).

### **Transactional Leadership and Short-Term Performance**

Studies on transactional leadership have shown that it yields positive yet short-term performance improvements, particularly in task-focused or highly regulated settings. Transactional behaviors, such as offering rewards and setting clear role expectations, can improve efficiency and goal achievement but may stifle creativity and innovation (Chaudhry & Javed, 2020; Ahmad et al., 2022). This pattern suggests that while transactional leadership ensures compliance and productivity in the short term, it may not support long-term adaptability or employee engagement. The varied results imply that organizations that rely heavily on transactional methods should pair them with transformational practices to achieve broader growth (Yukl et al., 2021).

### **Servant Leadership and Employee Well-being**

A growing number of studies since 2020 have shown that servant leadership significantly enhances employee well-being, ethical culture, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Eva et al., 2021; Khan et al., 2022). Servant leaders focus on the needs of their followers, thereby building trust and reducing turnover intentions (Liden et al., 2020). The studies revealed that organizations led by servant-oriented leaders showed improved teamwork and service quality, especially in service-focused industries. However, the effect of servant leadership on financial performance has been less explored, highlighting a gap for future research.

### Emerging Interest in Distributed and Adaptive Leadership

Recent literature from 2021 to 2024 points to the rise of distributed and adaptive leadership models. These approaches prioritize flexibility, collaboration, and group decision-making in rapidly changing surroundings (Zhu et al., 2021; Tummers & Knies, 2022). This type of leadership became especially important in post-pandemic restructuring, where decentralization and empowerment were crucial for maintaining resilience and innovation (Zeb et al., 2023). The findings suggest a shift from individual-based leadership to shared, context-oriented models that better align with the complexities of modern organizations.

### Leadership Styles and Sectoral Variations

The synthesis revealed that the effects of leadership style differ greatly across sectors. In business environments, transformational and transactional leadership were the most effective predictors of financial and productivity outcomes (Nguyen et al., 2020). In education, instructional and participative leadership have been shown to enhance teacher performance and student outcomes (Harris et al., 2021). In healthcare and public service organizations, servant and adaptive leadership styles have been associated with improved employee morale and client satisfaction (Saleem et al., 2023). These results highlight that leadership effectiveness is not one-size-fits-all but depends on the organization's culture, mission, and stability.

### The Leadership-Performance Mechanism

In the reviewed studies, the relationship between leadership and performance was mediated by several organizational factors, including employee engagement, innovation capability, and organizational learning (Alrowwad et al., 2020; Kalyar et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). This supports the idea that leadership affects performance indirectly by shaping organizational culture and psychological empowerment. The discussion emphasizes that future research should employ longitudinal study designs to capture better the dynamic causal relationships between leadership and performance indicators.

### Identified Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the large number of studies on leadership styles, the review found several gaps in the research. First, there is limited exploration of hybrid leadership models that combine transformational and digital leadership in post-pandemic organizations (Miao et al., 2023). Second, the contextual and cultural factors that affect leadership effectiveness remain under-researched, particularly in non-Western settings (Wang et al., 2024). Finally, the lack of standardized performance metrics across studies complicates the comparison of outcomes. Addressing these gaps could improve the integration of theory and practice in leadership development.

**Table 1.** *Summary of Findings*

Key Focus	Main Findings
Transformational Leadership Dominates the Literature	Transformational leadership is the most extensively studied and shows strong positive relationships with innovation, motivation, job satisfaction, and overall performance. Its effectiveness is consistent across many contexts but depends on authenticity and cultural adaptability.
Transactional Leadership and Short-Term Performance	Transactional leadership improves efficiency, compliance, and short-term goal achievement. However, overreliance may restrict creativity and long-term adaptability. Best used in combination with transformational leadership for sustainable performance.
Servant Leadership and Employee Well-being	Servant leadership enhances trust, teamwork, ethical behavior, service quality, and employee well-being. It lowers turnover intentions but has limited evidence linking it directly to financial performance, revealing an important research gap.
Emerging Interest in Distributed and Adaptive Leadership	Distributed and adaptive leadership have gained prominence, especially post-pandemic. These models emphasize collaboration, flexibility, shared decision-making, and resilience, making them well-suited to dynamic, uncertain environments.
Leadership Styles and Sectoral Variations	Leadership effectiveness varies by sector: transformational and transactional leadership perform well in business; instructional and participative leadership excel in education; servant and adaptive leadership are effective in healthcare and public service. Leadership fit depends on an organization's mission, culture, and stability.
Leadership-Performance Mechanism	Leadership influences performance indirectly through mediators such as employee engagement, innovation capability, and organizational learning. Findings highlight the need for longitudinal studies to clarify causal mechanisms.
Research Gaps and Future Directions	Key gaps include: (1) limited study of hybrid leadership models (e.g., transformational + digital leadership); (2) insufficient attention to cultural/contextual differences, particularly in non-Western settings; and (3) lack of standardized performance metrics across studies.



## Conclusions

This systematic review synthesized evidence from forty-two empirical studies published between 2019 and 2025, offering a comprehensive understanding of how various leadership styles influence organizational performance across sectors. Its primary contribution lies in integrating transformational, transactional, servant, adaptive, and distributed leadership into a unified explanatory framework that captures both their direct and indirect effects on organizational outcomes. This synthesis advances leadership scholarship by demonstrating that effective leadership is inherently situational: no single style ensures universal success, and organizational performance is maximized when leaders adopt context-responsive, people-centered, and flexible approaches.

The findings affirm that transformational and servant leadership consistently promote sustainable performance by fostering trust, engagement, and innovation. At the same time, the growing relevance of adaptive and distributed leadership reflects the demands of uncertainty, digital transformation, and post-pandemic restructuring—signaling a shift from hierarchical models toward collaborative, agile, and learning-driven leadership cultures. These insights highlight today's organizational need for leaders who balance efficiency with empathy, authority with inclusiveness, and stability with adaptability.

In practical terms, the results underscore the need for organizations to redesign leadership development programs. Training should move beyond authority-oriented models and instead emphasize emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, collaborative problem-solving, and digital adaptability. Organizations can apply the evidence by adopting blended leadership frameworks that integrate transactional clarity with transformational vision and servant-driven care, thereby equipping leaders to navigate complex environments. Likewise, policy designers, particularly in the public sector, should embed leadership competencies such as adaptability, inclusivity, and ethical behavior into performance management systems to strengthen organizational transparency and accountability.

In education, the review highlights the importance of refreshing leadership curricula at universities and training institutions. Programs that incorporate experiential learning, cross-cultural competencies, reflective practice, and leadership simulations can better prepare future leaders to manage diverse teams amid volatility and rapid change. From a research perspective, the review identifies several directions for future inquiry: examining hybrid leadership models that merge digital and transformational practices, employing longitudinal and cross-cultural designs to capture leadership effects over time, and standardizing performance indicators to enable more accurate comparisons across contexts. Combining qualitative insights with quantitative evidence would further enrich the understanding of how leadership behaviors influence both measurable and intangible organizational outcomes.

In conclusion, this systematic review strengthens both theory and practice by demonstrating that leadership is a critical driver of organizational resilience and innovation. By embracing flexible, ethical, and people-focused leadership styles, organizations can cultivate high-performing cultures that thrive in dynamic, uncertain environments. The study's integrated framework offers a valuable foundation for future scholarship and practical leadership development in modern organizational contexts.

## Contributions of Authors

Author 1: conceptualization, data gathering, data analysis  
Author 2: data analysis, data gathering  
Author 3: proposal writing, data gathering

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## Conflict of Interests

None.

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