

Effect of Transformational Leadership on Employee Performance

The Case of East Wallaga Zone Public Sectors

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of transformational leadership on employee performance within public sector organizations in the East Wallaga Zone, Oromia, Ethiopia. Utilizing an explanatory and descriptive research design, the study employed a mixed-methods approach to collect data from a sample of 300 employees across various zonal sectors. Systematic sampling was used to ensure representativeness from a total population of 2,175. The data were analyzed using SPSS through descriptive statistics and inferential tools, including Pearson correlation and multiple regression. Findings reveal a significant positive correlation between transformational leadership dimensions and employee performance. Regression results indicated that leadership behaviors account for 83.7% of the variance in performance (R2=0.837). Notably, Contingent Reward (B=1.293) and Intellectual Stimulation (B=0.433) emerged as the most potent predictors. The study concludes that supervisors who employ idealized influence and inspirational motivation significantly enhance employee engagement. Recommendations include institutionalizing leadership development programs and refining merit-based recognition systems to sustain public sector efficiency.

Keywords
Contingent Rewards
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Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of public administration, the shift from traditional bureaucratic management toward inspirational, vision-driven leadership has become essential for organizational sustainability and effectiveness. Public organizations today operate in increasingly complex environments characterized by rapid socio-economic change, rising citizen expectations, and demands for accountability and efficiency. Under such conditions, leadership approaches that rely solely on rigid rules, hierarchical authority, and transactional exchanges are insufficient to foster innovation, commitment, and high performance. Transformational leadership has therefore emerged as a critical leadership paradigm. Transformational leadership is defined as a process in which leaders and followers elevate one another to higher levels of motivation, performance, and moral purpose. According to Bass and Riggio [1], transformational leaders go beyond simple transactional exchanges and instead focus on inspiring followers, articulating a compelling vision, stimulating intellectual engagement, and fostering a sense of collective purpose. These leaders identify the need for change, communicate it effectively, and execute it collaboratively with motivated and committed group members.

In Ethiopia, and particularly in the East Wallaga Zone, the public sector serves as the primary engine for regional governance, development, and service delivery. Public institutions are responsible for implementing policies, managing resources, and delivering essential services that directly affect citizens' quality of life. The effectiveness of these institutions depends heavily on the performance of their employees, as human capital represents the most valuable organizational asset. Employee performance is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct encompassing efficiency, productivity, quality of service, and the achievement of strategic objectives. It is often considered the "gold standard" indicator of organizational health and effectiveness. While factors such as organizational culture, institutional resources, and structural systems contribute to performance outcomes, leadership remains the central catalyst that can either unlock employee potential or constrain it. Leaders influence employee motivation, commitment, job satisfaction, and willingness to exceed minimum performance expectations.

Despite ongoing civil service reforms in Ethiopia aimed at modernizing public administration and improving service delivery, many public sector organizations continue to face persistent challenges, including low employee morale, limited innovation, stagnant productivity, and inefficient service provision. These challenges suggest that structural reforms alone are insufficient without corresponding improvements in leadership practices. Global empirical studies have consistently demonstrated a strong and positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance. For example, Choi et al. [2] and Zhang

et al. [3] found that transformational leadership enhances employee engagement, motivation, creativity, and overall performance by fostering trust, empowerment, and organizational commitment. Transformational leaders encourage employees to think critically, embrace new ideas, and align their personal goals with organizational objectives.

However, within the Ethiopian context, and particularly in Western Oromia, empirical research on transformational leadership remains limited. Existing studies have primarily focused on private sector organizations, such as banking and manufacturing industries in Addis Ababa [4], leaving a significant research gap in public sector settings, especially at the zonal administrative level. The East Wallaga Zone presents a unique socio-cultural and administrative context, where leadership practices are shaped by local governance structures, cultural norms, and institutional realities. Many public sector leaders in this region continue to rely predominantly on transactional leadership approaches, such as contingent rewards and compliance-based supervision, while underutilizing transformational dimensions such as inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence.

This study seeks to address this critical research gap by examining the effect of transformational leadership on employee performance in public sector organizations within the East Wallaga Zone. Specifically, the study aims to assess the current state of transformational leadership practices, examine the influence of key leadership dimensions such as idealized influence and intellectual stimulation on employee performance, and analyze the impact of inspirational motivation and contingent rewards on employee outcomes. By providing localized empirical evidence, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of leadership effectiveness in public sector contexts and offers insights for improving leadership practices to enhance organizational performance and service delivery.

Literature Review

A. Full Range Leadership Theory and Transformational Leadership

The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT), which conceptualizes leadership as a continuum ranging from laissez-faire leadership to transactional leadership and ultimately transformational leadership. FRLT was developed to explain how leaders influence followers through varying degrees of engagement, motivation, and behavioral influence. Transformational leadership represents the most effective end of this continuum, as it focuses on inspiring followers to transcend self-interest and work toward collective organizational goals [5], [6]. Unlike transactional leadership, which relies primarily on reward and punishment mechanisms, transformational leadership emphasizes intrinsic motivation, shared vision, and personal development [7].

Transformational leadership consists of four core dimensions, commonly referred to as the "Four I's." The first dimension, Idealized Influence (II), refers to leaders acting as ethical role models who gain trust, respect, and admiration from their followers. Leaders exhibiting idealized influence demonstrate integrity, fairness, and commitment, which strengthens followers' identification with organizational values [8]. The second dimension, Inspirational Motivation (IM), involves leaders articulating a compelling vision that inspires followers to achieve higher levels of performance and commitment [9]. Through clear communication and optimism, leaders enhance employees' sense of purpose and organizational belonging.

The third dimension, Intellectual Stimulation (IS), encourages creativity, innovation, and critical thinking. Transformational leaders challenge existing assumptions and promote problem-solving, enabling employees to explore new approaches and improve organizational performance [10]. The fourth dimension, Individualized Consideration (IC), refers to leaders' attention to individual employee needs, including coaching, mentoring, and personal development support [11]. This individualized attention strengthens employee engagement, satisfaction, and professional growth. Empirical evidence consistently shows that organizations led by transformational leaders demonstrate higher levels of employee motivation, innovation, and overall effectiveness [12].

B. Social Exchange Theory and Leadership–Performance Relationships

In addition to FRLT, this study is supported by Social Exchange Theory, which explains how leadership behaviors influence employee performance through reciprocal relationships. Social Exchange Theory, originally proposed by Blau, emphasizes that social relationships are based on mutual exchange, trust, and obligation [13]. When leaders provide support, recognition, and opportunities for growth, employees feel valued and are more likely to reciprocate with increased effort, loyalty, and performance [14]. This reciprocal dynamic strengthens organizational commitment and enhances employee engagement.

Leadership behaviors such as mentoring, recognition, and empowerment are particularly influential in fostering positive social exchange relationships. When employees perceive their leaders as supportive and fair, they develop higher levels of psychological attachment to the organization [15]. This attachment leads to improved job satisfaction, reduced turnover intentions, and enhanced performance outcomes [2]. Transformational leadership strengthens this exchange process by creating an environment of trust, respect, and mutual commitment [3]. As a result, employees are more willing to go beyond formal job requirements and contribute to organizational success. Such reciprocal relationships reinforce organizational commitment and encourage sustained discretionary effort, which ultimately enhances both individual effectiveness and overall organizational performance.

C. Empirical Evidence on Transformational Leadership and Employee Performance

Extensive empirical research has demonstrated the positive impact of transformational leadership on employee performance across different organizational and cultural contexts. Global studies indicate that transformational leadership enhances employee motivation, organizational commitment, and productivity [16]. For example, research in public sector institutions has shown that leaders who practice intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation significantly improve employee innovation and service delivery outcomes [17]. These leadership behaviors promote creativity, empower employees, and strengthen organizational adaptability.

In the African context, studies conducted in Kenya and Ethiopia confirm that transformational leadership positively influences employee engagement, performance, and organizational commitment. Leaders who demonstrate idealized influence and provide intellectual stimulation foster higher levels of trust, motivation, and productivity among employees [14], [16]. However, much of the existing research in Ethiopia has focused on private sector organizations, particularly in urban centers, leaving public sector institutions in regions such as East Wallaga underexamined. Public sector organizations operate under different institutional, cultural, and administrative constraints, which may influence leadership effectiveness and employee performance dynamics [2].

Therefore, there is a critical need for localized empirical research examining the influence of transformational leadership within the East Wallaga Zone public sector. Understanding how leadership dimensions such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration affect employee performance will provide valuable insights for improving leadership practices and strengthening public sector effectiveness. This study contributes to filling this gap by examining the relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance within this specific administrative and socio-cultural context.

Research Methodology

A. Research Design and Approach

This study employed an explanatory research design to examine the causal relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance in East Wallaga Zone public sector organizations. The explanatory design was appropriate because it enables researchers to identify cause-and-effect relationships between independent and dependent variables through statistical analysis. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to enhance the validity and comprehensiveness of the findings. Quantitative data provided measurable evidence of leadership effects on performance, while

qualitative insights helped contextualize leadership behaviors and employee perceptions. This integration ensured methodological rigor and provided a deeper understanding of how transformational leadership influences employee performance within public sector institutions.

B. Target Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of 2,175 employees working across various public sector offices in the East Wallaga Zone. These employees represent diverse administrative departments responsible for public service delivery. Using Yamane's [18] sampling formula with a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 338 respondents was determined to ensure representativeness and statistical reliability. Systematic sampling was employed to select participants from official employee lists, ensuring fairness and reducing selection bias. Only employees with at least one year of work experience were included, as they were considered sufficiently familiar with their supervisors' leadership styles and organizational environment, enabling accurate assessment of leadership influence on performance outcomes.

C. Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires adapted from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), which measures transformational and transactional leadership dimensions. Employee performance was assessed using a performance scale, ensuring reliable evaluation of performance-related behaviors and outcomes. Both instruments used a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), allowing respondents to express their perceptions consistently. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 23. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, summarized respondent characteristics and variable distributions. Inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation and multiple linear regression, were used to examine relationships and determine the predictive effect of leadership dimensions on employee performance.

Results and Discussion

A. Response Rate and Demographics

Out of 338 distributed questionnaires, 300 were returned and valid, representing an 88.76% response rate. The sample was 72% male and 28% female. Most respondents (36%) were aged 41-50, and 62.6% held a first degree or higher. This indicates a mature, educated workforce with significant institutional memory (39.6% having 10-14 years of experience).

B. Descriptive Analysis

The mean score for "Supervisor provides a clear vision" was 2.80, indicating a moderate level of inspirational clarity. However, "Supervisor acts as a role model" scored higher (3.15),

suggesting that leaders in the East Wallaga Zone are perceived more as ethical icons than as visionary articulators.

C. Correlation Analysis

Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation matrix examining relationships among leadership dimensions and employee performance. The results indicate significant positive correlations across all variables at the 0.01 level. Inspirational leadership (TII) shows a strong correlation with intellectual stimulation (TIS) (r = .756), suggesting that leaders who inspire employees also tend to promote critical thinking. Intellectual stimulation is strongly associated with employee performance (TEP) (r = .667), indicating its important role in enhancing work outcomes. Contingent reward (TCR) demonstrates the strongest correlation with employee performance (r = .840), highlighting the critical influence of recognition and reward mechanisms on performance improvement. Additionally, TCR shows moderate correlations with both inspirational leadership (r = .396) and intellectual stimulation (r = .434), suggesting that reward-based leadership complements transformational leadership behaviors. Overall, the findings confirm that both transformational and transactional leadership dimensions are significantly linked to improved employee performance.

Table 1. Correlations among Leadership and Performance Constructs

Variable	TII (Inspirational)	TIS (Intellectual)	TCR (Reward)	TEP (Performance)
TII	1.000	.756**	.396**	.477**
TIS	.756**	1.000	.434**	.667**
TCR	.396**	.434**	1.000	.840**
TEP	.477**	.667**	.840**	1.000

Note: **Significance at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

D. Regression Analysis

Table 2 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis examining the predictive effects of leadership dimensions on employee performance. The overall model is highly significant, with an R-square value of .837, indicating that 83.7% of the variance in employee performance is explained by the independent variables included in the model. Among the predictors, contingent reward demonstrates the strongest influence ($\beta = .735$, $t = 24.387$, $p < .001$), indicating that performance is highly responsive to reward-based leadership practices. Intellectual stimulation also shows a substantial and significant effect ($\beta = .479$, $t = 12.744$, $p < .001$), suggesting that encouraging innovation and critical thinking enhances employee performance. Idealized influence, while smaller in magnitude, remains a significant predictor ($\beta = .160$, $t = 4.364$, $p < .001$), indicating that role modeling and leader credibility contribute positively to performance outcomes. These findings confirm that both transformational and transactional leadership behaviors play critical roles in predicting employee performance.

Table 2. Regression Coefficients

Model	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.126	.728	-	1.548	.123
Idealized Influence	.185	.042	.160	4.364	.000
Intellectual Stimulation	.433	.034	.479	12.744	.000
Contingent Reward	1.293	.053	.735	24.387	.000

Dependent Variable: Employee Performance

The model summary revealed an R-Square of .837, indicating that transformational leadership behaviors explain 83.7% of the variance in employee performance.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of transformational and transactional leadership dimensions in influencing employee performance within the East Wallaga Zone public sector. Among the transformational leadership components, Intellectual Stimulation emerged as a significant predictor of employee performance (B = .433). This finding indicates that when supervisors encourage employees to question existing procedures, think critically, and develop innovative solutions, employee performance improves substantially. Intellectual stimulation promotes creativity, learning, and problem-solving, which are essential in overcoming bureaucratic rigidity commonly associated with public sector institutions. According to Bass and Riggio [1], transformational leaders enhance organizational effectiveness by fostering intellectual engagement and encouraging followers to challenge conventional assumptions. Similarly, Judge and Piccolo [10] found that intellectual stimulation significantly improves employee motivation and performance by enhancing cognitive engagement and empowerment. In public sector environments, where standardized procedures often dominate, leaders who promote intellectual stimulation enable employees to become proactive contributors rather than passive implementers of policy.

Interestingly, Contingent Reward demonstrated the strongest influence on employee performance (B = 1.293), highlighting the continued importance of transactional leadership mechanisms. This finding reflects the practical reality that employees respond positively to tangible recognition and performance-based rewards. Contingent reward reinforces desired behaviors by linking performance outcomes with clear incentives, thereby strengthening motivation and accountability. Bass [6] explained this phenomenon through the “augmentation effect,” which suggests that transformational leadership is most effective when built upon a solid transactional foundation. Transactional leadership establishes clear expectations and performance standards, while transformational leadership enhances intrinsic motivation and commitment. Cropanzano and Mitchell [14] further support this finding through Social Exchange Theory, arguing that when employees perceive fair and rewarding leadership behaviors, they

reciprocate with improved performance and organizational commitment. In resource-constrained public sector environments, tangible rewards such as recognition, promotion opportunities, and performance incentives serve as powerful motivators that complement inspirational leadership practices.

Idealized Influence also showed a statistically significant effect on employee performance (B = .185), indicating that employees are motivated by leaders who demonstrate ethical behavior, integrity, and professionalism. Leaders who act as role models gain the trust and respect of their employees, which strengthens emotional attachment and commitment to organizational goals. According to Northouse [9], idealized influence fosters trust and credibility, which are essential for leadership effectiveness. Employees are more likely to emulate leaders who demonstrate fairness, accountability, and ethical decision-making. Wang et al. [12] similarly found that trust in leadership enhances employee performance by strengthening leader–member relationships and promoting organizational identification. In public sector institutions, where ethical leadership is critical for maintaining public trust, idealized influence plays a particularly important role in motivating employees.

However, Individualized Consideration was not statistically significant (p = .643), suggesting that personalized coaching and mentoring may be less influential in this specific administrative context. This finding may reflect cultural and organizational norms within public sector institutions, where leadership tends to focus more on collective performance and institutional objectives rather than individual employee development. Robbins and Judge [11] note that leadership effectiveness can vary depending on organizational culture and structural context. In bureaucratic environments, leaders often prioritize efficiency, compliance, and standardized performance outcomes over individualized support. Furthermore, employees in public institutions may place greater value on fairness, recognition, and institutional stability rather than personalized mentoring.

Overall, these findings confirm that both transformational and transactional leadership dimensions play complementary roles in improving employee performance. Transformational leadership, particularly intellectual stimulation and idealized influence, enhances intrinsic motivation, innovation, and trust, while transactional leadership mechanisms such as contingent rewards provide essential extrinsic motivation and performance reinforcement. This supports the Full Range Leadership Theory, which emphasizes the combined importance of transformational and transactional leadership behaviors in maximizing organizational effectiveness [1]. The results also align with empirical studies demonstrating that leadership effectiveness depends on a balanced integration of inspirational vision and performance-based reward systems [10],[14].

Conclusion

The study concludes that transformational leadership plays a critical role in enhancing employee performance within the East Wallaga Zone public sector. Leadership dimensions such as intellectual stimulation and idealized influence significantly improve employee motivation, innovation, and commitment by encouraging critical thinking and fostering trust. In addition, contingent reward emerged as a strong predictor of performance, indicating that employees respond positively to clear expectations and tangible recognition. These findings highlight the importance of integrating both transformational and transactional leadership practices to create a high-performance work environment. The high coefficient of determination (R^2 = 83.7%) confirms that leadership style is the primary determinant of employee performance and organizational effectiveness in the study area. Therefore, public sector institutions should prioritize leadership development programs that strengthen transformational leadership competencies while maintaining fair and consistent reward systems. Such efforts will enhance employee productivity, improve service delivery, and support sustainable organizational performance in the public sector.

Recommendations

Public sector organizations in the East Wallaga Zone should prioritize leadership training programs that emphasize intellectual stimulation as a core managerial competency. Such training should equip supervisors with the skills needed to encourage critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving among employees. Instead of relying solely on compliance-based management, leaders should be trained to facilitate open dialogue, support new ideas, and empower employees to contribute innovative solutions. This approach will help foster a more adaptive and responsive organizational culture. By strengthening leaders' capacity to stimulate intellectual engagement, public institutions can enhance employee motivation, improve performance outcomes, and increase overall service delivery effectiveness.

In addition, public sector offices should refine and strengthen their reward systems to ensure that high performance is consistently and fairly recognized. Transparent, merit-based recognition frameworks can reinforce positive work behaviors and motivate employees to maintain high levels of productivity. Rewards may include formal recognition, career advancement opportunities, financial incentives, or public acknowledgment of achievements. When employees perceive reward systems as fair and performance-based, their trust in leadership and organizational commitment increases. Establishing clear performance criteria and ensuring consistent implementation of reward policies will help create a culture of

accountability, fairness, and motivation, ultimately improving organizational efficiency and employee satisfaction.

Leaders should also focus on improving their ability to communicate a clear and compelling vision that aligns with the socio-economic priorities of the Oromia region. Effective vision communication helps employees understand the purpose and importance of their work, strengthening their sense of responsibility and engagement. Leaders should connect organizational goals with local development priorities, ensuring that employees see the broader impact of their contributions. By communicating realistic and meaningful goals, leaders can inspire employees to work collaboratively toward shared objectives. Strong inspirational motivation enhances employee morale, strengthens organizational cohesion, and supports long-term institutional effectiveness and public service improvement.

Finally, future research should adopt longitudinal research designs to better understand how leadership influences employee performance over time, particularly during periods of political, economic, or organizational change. Longitudinal studies can capture leadership dynamics, employee adaptation, and performance trends more effectively than cross-sectional studies. Such research would provide deeper insights into the sustainability and long-term effects of transformational leadership practices. Additionally, future studies could explore other contextual variables, such as organizational culture, employee engagement, and institutional reform processes. This will help policymakers and administrators develop evidence-based leadership strategies that support sustainable public sector performance and organizational resilience.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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