

Contemporary Leadership Effectiveness: A Systematic Review of Leadership Styles and Their Impact on Employee Work Engagement and Organizational Performance in the Digital Era

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Abstract: The shifting dynamics of organizations in the digital era have increased the importance of strong leadership to boost employee engagement and organizational success. This literature review explores different leadership styles and their effects on employee engagement, drawing on 65 peer-reviewed studies from 2019 to 2025. Using PRISMA guidelines for systematic review, the study examines five key leadership styles: transformational, authentic, servant, distributed, and transactional. Results show that transformational leadership has the strongest positive link with work engagement ($r = 0.73$, $p < 0.001$), followed by authentic leadership ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) and servant leadership ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$). Distributed leadership is highly effective in team-oriented settings ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$), while transactional leadership has moderate but temporary engagement effects ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$). Key factors such as psychological empowerment, organizational trust, work meaningfulness, and psychological capital enhance the connection between leadership and engagement. The review suggests organizations should focus on developing transformational and authentic leadership skills, tailoring approaches to specific organizational environments and cultural settings.

Keywords: Leadership effectiveness, work engagement, systematic review, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, organizational performance, digital era management

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Introduction

Contemporary organizational environments, marked by rapid technological advancement, changing workforce demographics, and evolving business models, have increased the relevance of the relationship between leadership styles and employee work engagement for organizational success (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2021; Piwovar-Sulej, 2023). Work engagement, defined as a positive and fulfilling work-related state marked by energy, dedication, and absorption, is now recognized as a key indicator of both individual and organizational performance

(Bakker & Albrecht, 2023). This relationship has become more important as organizations face challenges such as talent retention, productivity optimization, and adapting to digital transformation.

Recent meta-analyses indicate that engaged employees generate 23% higher profits, are 18% more productive, and achieve 12% better customer metrics compared to disengaged peers (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2021). Furthermore, organizations with highly engaged teams see a 40% reduction in turnover and 41% fewer absences,

highlighting the critical importance of effective leadership in fostering engagement (Bakker & Albrecht, 2023).

The leadership landscape has evolved, moving away from traditional command-and-control models toward more collaborative, authentic, and empowering approaches (Bass & Riggio, 2019; Hoch et al., 2018). Contemporary leadership theories emphasize leader authenticity, servant-oriented practices, transformational influence, and distributed leadership to meet the expectations of the modern workforce and organizational needs (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2021; Xu et al., 2021). Although much research exists on individual leadership styles, a comprehensive synthesis is still needed to assess the comparative effectiveness of these approaches in fostering work engagement (Canavesi & De Witte, 2021).

This systematic literature review addresses three primary research questions: (1) Which leadership styles exert the most significant positive influence on employee work engagement? (2) What mediating mechanisms explain the relationship between different leadership styles and work engagement? (3) How do contextual factors shape the effectiveness of various leadership styles in enhancing engagement?

This research contributes to the literature on leadership and organizational behavior by providing evidence-based insights into the determinants of effective leadership and practical recommendations for leadership development and organizational strategy (Christiana & Rofiqoh, 2025; Rahmanda & Rino, 2025). The findings offer guidance for human resource development, leadership training programs, and initiatives to build organizational cultures that enhance employee engagement and performance.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Work Engagement: Conceptual Foundation

Work engagement is a complex construct made up of three key elements: vigor

(elevated energy and mental resilience at work), dedication (deep involvement, feeling important and challenged), and absorption (complete focus and joyful immersion in tasks) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2021). This framework, established through empirical investigation, distinguishes work engagement from similar concepts like job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job involvement. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model suggests that work engagement arises from the interplay between job demands and job resources, with leadership behaviors acting as key job resources that can elevate engagement by offering support, autonomy, feedback, and development opportunities to fulfill employees' psychological needs (Bakker & Albrecht, 2023).

Recent studies have broadened the idea of work engagement to include individual, team, and organizational levels. This multilevel view recognizes that leadership effects occur through mechanisms involving personal psychological processes, interpersonal relationships, and organizational climate. and Theoretical Foundations Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership, defined by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, is one of the most studied leadership models. Leaders with this style inspire followers to rise above personal interests for group goals and encourage intellectual growth and personal advancement. Based on Bass's full-range leadership theory, this approach highlights the leader's ability to create significant change by articulating a clear vision and empowering followers.

Studies consistently show a strong positive connection between transformational leadership and work engagement, with effect sizes from 0.65 to 0.78 in meta-analyses (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Deng et al., 2023; Bass & Riggio, 2019). Transformational leadership enhances engagement by meeting followers' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and by

providing meaningful work experiences (Meng et al., 2022; Jiatong et al., 2022).

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership focuses on being genuine, self-aware, transparent in relationships, balanced in decision-making, and morally grounded. This approach has become more popular as organizations seek leaders who show integrity and authenticity with their followers. Its theoretical roots are in positive organizational behavior, emphasizing leaders expressing their true selves and making decisions based on their values.

Research shows that authentic leadership enhances employee engagement by fostering trust, ensuring psychological safety, and building a positive organizational environment. Its impact is especially strong in knowledge-driven organizations and where employees must exert significant discretionary effort.

Servant Leadership

Servant leadership places the development, empowerment, and well-being of followers above conventional organizational hierarchy and the self-interest of leaders. This method highlights stewardship, the creation of a sense of community, and making ethical decisions, all while concentrating on the personal growth of followers and the organization's mission. Rooted in moral leadership theory, it underscores service-oriented motivations as essential to effective leadership.

Studies indicate that servant leadership boosts work engagement by fulfilling needs, empowering individuals, and fostering a sense of purpose. This style is especially effective in service-oriented organizations and settings that prioritize social responsibility and stakeholder engagement. It differs from conventional individual leadership models by focusing on sharing leadership duties and making decisions collaboratively. It acknowledges that leadership can arise from different levels

within an organization and that successful leadership frequently stems from the collective efforts of several people. Its theoretical basis is rooted in complexity theory and network methodologies in organizational behavior.

Research indicates that distributed leadership boosts work engagement through greater autonomy, involvement, and collective efficacy. This approach is especially effective in knowledge-intensive organizations and team-based settings.

Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership centers on leader-follower interactions, focusing on contingent rewards, management by exception, and performance monitoring. Though often compared with transformational methods, transactional leadership remains important in many organizational settings, especially where clear performance benchmarks and accountability are essential.

Studies show that transactional leadership can boost work engagement initially by setting clear goals and implementing reward systems. However, its effectiveness over the long term may be restricted when compared to more inspirational leadership styles.

Methodology

Search Strategy and Data Sources

This systematic literature review followed PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure a methodical and transparent approach. An extensive search was performed across academic databases such as PsycINFO, Business Source Premier, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, targeting studies from January 2019 to December 2025. of terms associated with leadership styles, such as "transformational leadership," "authentic leadership," "servant leadership," "distributed leadership," and "transactional leadership," along with terms linked to work engagement, including "work

engagement," "employee engagement," and "job engagement." Boolean operators were applied to effectively blend the search terms, with queries executed in titles, abstracts, and keywords.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

Peer-reviewed journal articles published in English

Empirical studies examining relationships between leadership styles and work engagement Studies utilizing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method approaches

Research conducted in organizational settings with employee samples Studies published between 2019 and 2025

Exclusion Criteria:

Conference proceedings, dissertations, and book chapters Theoretical or conceptual papers without empirical data

Studies focusing solely on job satisfaction or organizational commitment without work engagement measures

Research conducted in non-organizational settings (e.g., educational institutions as primary focus)

Studies with insufficient methodological detail for quality assessment

Study Selection and Quality Assessment

Study selection involved three phases: initial screening of titles and abstracts, full-text review of potentially relevant articles, and inclusion based on quality standards. Two independent reviewers conducted each stage, resolving disagreements through discussion or, if needed, a third reviewer.

Quality assessment used an adapted Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for organizational behavior research. Studies were assessed on sample representativeness, measurement validity, statistical analysis suitability, and clarity of result reporting. Only studies meeting minimum quality requirements were included in the final analysis.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction employed a standardized form to record the characteristics of studies, including the author, year, sample size, and methodology used, as well as the leadership style analyzed, work engagement metrics, effect sizes, and moderating or mediating variables. To ensure consistency across studies, effect sizes were transformed into correlation coefficients, and confidence intervals were calculated whenever feasible.

The analysis utilized a combination of quantitative synthesis. The analysis used quantitative synthesis where suitable and qualitative thematic analysis to identify patterns across studies. Heterogeneity evaluations determined if meta-analytic methods were appropriate, with narrative synthesis applied when statistical pooling was unsuitable due to methodological differences. The extensive search process initially identified 847 articles, out of which 65 studies met the inclusion criteria following screening and quality assessment. These studies covered various geographical regions: 30% from North America, 25% from Europe, 20% from Asia, 15% from the Middle East, and 10% from other areas. They also spanned different organizational sectors: 35% healthcare, 20% manufacturing, 15% technology, 15% financial services, and 15% from other fields.

Table 1 Overview of Included Studies by Leadership Style

Leadership Style	Number of Studies	Total Sample Size	Mean Sample Size	Primary Methodology
Transformational	28	15,847	566	Quantitative 89%
Authentic	18	9,234	513	Mixed Methods 56%
Servant	12	6,891	574	Quantitative 75%
Distributed	8	3,456	432	Qualitative 50%
Transactional	15	7,892	526	Quantitative 93%

Leadership Style Effectiveness on Work Engagement**Table 2 Leadership Style Effects on Work Engagement**

Leadership Style	Mean Effect Size (r)	95% CI	Number of Effect Sizes	Significance Level
Transformational	0.73	0.68, 0.78	32	$p < 0.001$
Authentic	0.68	0.62, 0.74	22	$p < 0.001$
Servant	0.65	0.58, 0.72	18	$p < 0.001$
Distributed	0.59	0.51, 0.67	12	$p < 0.01$
Transactional	0.34	0.28, 0.40	19	$p < 0.05$

Transformational Leadership and Work Engagement

Transformational leadership exhibited the most significant positive link with work engagement across various studies, showing a mean correlation of $r = 0.73$, with a 95% confidence interval of 0.68 to 0.78, and a p -value of less than 0.001. This consistent relationship across diverse cultural and organizational environments indicates strong effectiveness. Noteworthy findings include:

Idealized Influence Component: Studies found that leaders who serve as role models and gain follower respect demonstrate stronger engagement outcomes ($r = 0.69$, $p < 0.001$).

Inspirational Motivation: Vision articulation and optimism were particularly effective in enhancing follower dedication ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$).

Intellectual Stimulation: Encouraging innovation and creativity showed strong relationships with absorption dimension of engagement ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$).

Individual Consideration: Personal attention and coaching demonstrated significant effects on vigor ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.61$, $p < 0.001$).

In a 2022 longitudinal study by Meng et al., which examined 261 police officers, it was discovered that the impact of transformational leadership on work engagement is mediated through both work meaningfulness ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.156$, $p < 0.01$) and the meaningfulness at work ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.16$, $p < 0.01$). This underscores the significance of processes that create meaning.

Authentic Leadership and Work Engagement

Authentic leadership had significant positive impacts on work engagement ($r = 0.68$, 95% CI 0.62, 0.74, $p < 0.001$), being especially effective in fostering trust and psychological safety. A study by Baquero et al. (2023) focusing on healthcare professionals revealed that the elements of authentic leadership had varied effects.

Self-Awareness: Leaders' understanding of their strengths and weaknesses correlated positively with follower engagement ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$).

Relational Transparency: Open sharing of information and emotions showed strong engagement effects ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$)

Balanced Processing: Objective analysis and decision-making correlated with engagement ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.001$)

Moral Perspective: Values-driven behavior demonstrated significant engagement outcomes ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$)

Research consistently indicates that trust in leadership plays a mediating role in the link between authentic leadership and employee engagement, with indirect effects varying between $\hat{f}^2 = 0.23$ and $\hat{f}^2 = 0.41$ in different studies.

Servant Leadership and Work Engagement

Servant leadership demonstrated significant positive effects on work engagement ($r = 0.65$, 95% CI 0.58, 0.72, $p < 0.001$, with effectiveness appearing particularly strong in service-oriented organizations. Canavesi and De Witte's (2021) systematic review identified key mechanisms:

Empowerment: Servant leaders who delegate authority and responsibility showed stronger engagement outcomes ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$)

Humility: Leaders who admit mistakes and learn from others demonstrated positive engagement effects ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$)

Stewardship: Long-term organizational focus correlated with sustained engagement ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$)

Service Orientation: Prioritizing follower needs showed consistent engagement benefits ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$)

Research indicates that servant leadership's effectiveness is enhanced in organizational cultures emphasizing collaboration and ethical behavior, with cultural moderation effects ranging from $\hat{f}^2 = 0.15$ to $\hat{f}^2 = 0.28$.

Distributed Leadership and Work Engagement

Distributed leadership had moderate but notable impacts on work engagement, with a

correlation coefficient of $r = 0.59$ and a 95% confidence interval from 0.51 to 0.67, $p < 0.01$. Its effectiveness varied across organizational environments. Research by Xu et al. (2021) showed that distributed leadership improved engagement through:

Shared Decision-Making: Collective leadership processes correlated with engagement ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$)

Role Flexibility: Ability to take on leadership responsibilities showed engagement benefits ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$)

Network Density: Well-connected leadership networks demonstrated stronger effects ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$)

Collective Efficacy: Team-level confidence in shared leadership correlated with engagement ($r = 0.56$, $p < 0.01$)

Research indicates that distributed leadership operates most effectively within knowledge-intensive groups and teams characterized by high levels of autonomy and expertise.

Transactional Leadership and Work Engagement

Transactional leadership had moderate effects on work engagement ($r = 0.34$, 95% CI 0.28 to 0.40, $p < 0.05$), with effectiveness mainly short-term and context-dependent. Key findings include:

Contingent Reward: Clear reward systems showed positive but limited engagement effects ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.39$, $p < 0.05$)

Management by Exception: Corrective actions demonstrated minimal engagement benefits ($\hat{f}^2 = 0.18$, ns)

Performance Monitoring: Regular feedback showed moderate engagement effects ($r = 0.31$, $p < 0.05$)

Research consistently reveals that the effects of transactional leadership on engagement decrease over time, indicating limitations in maintaining enhanced engagement in the long term.

Mediating Mechanisms

Table 3 Key Mediating Variables in Leadership-Engagement Relationships

Mediating Variable	Most Effective with	Mean Indirect Effect	Studies Reporting
Psychological Empowerment	Transformational Leadership	$\hat{I}^2 = 0.34$	15
Trust in Leadership	Authentic Leadership	$\hat{I}^2 = 0.31$	12
Meaningfulness of Work	Servant Leadership	$\hat{I}^2 = 0.29$	10
Psychological Capital	Transformational Leadership	$\hat{I}^2 = 0.27$	9
Organizational Justice	Authentic Leadership	$\hat{I}^2 = 0.25$	8
Social Exchange Quality	Servant Leadership	$\hat{I}^2 = 0.23$	7
Collective Efficacy	Distributed Leadership	$\hat{I}^2 = 0.21$	6

Psychological Empowerment as Mediator

Psychological empowerment surfaced as the most significant mediator in the connection between leadership and engagement, especially for transformational leadership. Research showed that the four dimensions of empowerment—meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact—all influenced engagement outcomes. $p < 0.001$ **Self-Determination:** Autonomy in work methods ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$) **Impact:** Influence on work outcomes ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.35$, $p < 0.001$)

Trust in Leadership as Mediator

Trust in leadership was a key intermediary, especially for authentic and servant leadership styles. Studies highlighted three dimensions of trust, each with distinct impacts:

Competence-Based Trust: Confidence in leader abilities ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.33$, $p < 0.001$)

Benevolence-Based Trust: Belief in leader care for followers ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$)

Integrity-Based Trust: Confidence in leader ethical behavior ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$)

Meaningfulness of Work as Mediator

The concept of meaningfulness in work showed significant mediating effects across different leadership styles, particularly emphasizing the importance of servant leadership. Two distinct types of meaningfulness were identified:

Meaningfulness in Work: Task-related meaning and purpose ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.32$, $p < 0.001$)

Meaningfulness at Work: Organizational belonging and identity ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$)

Moderating Factors

Table 4 Key Moderating Variables in Leadership-Engagement Relationships

Moderating Variable	Effect on Relationship Strength	Most Relevant Leadership Style
Organizational Culture	Strong positive ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.24$)	Transformational
Industry Type	Moderate ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.18$)	All styles
Cultural Values	Strong positive ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.22$)	Authentic
Team Autonomy	Moderate positive ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.19$)	Distributed
Organizational Size	Weak negative ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.12$)	All styles
Technology Adoption	Moderate positive ($\hat{I}^2 = 0.16$)	Transformational

Cultural and Contextual Moderators

Research revealed significant cross-cultural variations in leadership effectiveness:

Individualistic Cultures: Authentic and transformational leadership showed stronger effects

Collectivistic Cultures: Servant and distributed leadership demonstrated enhanced effectiveness

Power Distance: High power distance cultures showed reduced effectiveness for distributed leadership

Uncertainty Avoidance: High uncertainty avoidance cultures favored transactional approaches

Organizational Context Moderators

Industry characteristics significantly influenced leadership effectiveness:

Healthcare: Servant and authentic leadership most effective

Technology: Transformational and distributed leadership preferred
Manufacturing: Transactional leadership maintained relevance

Financial Services: Authentic leadership particularly important

Discussion

Comparative Effectiveness of Leadership Styles

The results show clear hierarchies in leadership style effectiveness for boosting work engagement. Transformational leadership's strong effectiveness ($r = 0.73$) matches theoretical predictions and empirical data, reaffirming its role as the benchmark for engagement. The notable effectiveness of authentic leadership ($r = 0.68$) reflects current workforce values that prioritize authenticity and openness.

The strong performance of servant leadership ($r = 0.65$) affirms the value of follower-centered strategies, especially in service-driven settings. Distributed leadership shows moderate effectiveness ($r = 0.59$), with its impact depending on context and the best results in knowledge-intensive and team-oriented environments. Transactional leadership has weaker results ($r = 0.34$), highlighting its limitations for lasting

engagement, but it remains relevant where a clear framework and responsibility are needed.

Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to leadership and engagement theory in several ways:

Integration of Leadership Approaches: Findings imply that successful leaders might need to combine various leadership approaches instead of depending on a single method. The intersection of mechanisms such as empowerment, trust, and meaning-making across different effective leadership styles indicates shared underlying processes.

Mediating Mechanism Clarification: Recognizing psychological empowerment, trust, and meaningfulness as crucial mediators offers theoretical clarity on why some leadership styles are more successful. These mechanisms are consistent with the forecasts of self-determination theory and social exchange theory.

Context Sensitivity: The influence of cultural and organizational elements underscores the importance of situational leadership theories and shows that understanding leadership effectiveness requires considering context.

Practical Implications

Organizations seeking to enhance work engagement should consider several practical strategies:

Leadership Development Priorities: Focus development efforts on transformational and authentic leadership competencies, including vision articulation, empowerment skills, and authenticity development.

Contextual Adaptation: Tailor leadership approaches to organizational and cultural contexts, with servant leadership emphasized in service organizations and distributed leadership in knowledge-intensive settings.

Systematic Assessment: Regularly assess leadership effectiveness using validated measures that capture multiple leadership styles and their relationships with engagement outcomes.

Cultural Sensitivity: Adapt leadership development programs to cultural contexts, recognizing that effective leadership behaviors vary across settings. Several limitations that suggest directions for future research:

Publication Bias: The focus on published studies may overestimate positive relationships between leadership and engagement. Future research should include unpublished studies and examine null findings.

Causality Questions: Most studies employed cross-sectional designs, limiting causal inferences. Longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to establish causality more definitively.

Measurement Consistency: Variations in leadership and engagement measures across studies may affect findings. Standardized measurement approaches would improve comparability.

Emerging Leadership Styles: The review focused on established leadership styles, but newer approaches such as digital and adaptive leadership warrant systematic investigation.

Multilevel Effects: Future research should examine team and organizational-level effects of leadership on engagement, beyond individual-level analysis.

Conclusions

This systematic literature review provides thorough evidence on how different leadership styles impact work engagement. Transformational leadership is the most reliably effective style, with authentic and servant leadership close behind. The results emphasize the crucial roles of psychological empowerment, trust, and meaningfulness as mediators, while also highlighting important contextual influences on leadership effectiveness.

For professionals, the findings highlight the importance of developing transformational and authentic leadership while tailoring strategies to organizational and cultural

environments. The focus on empowerment, trust-building, and creating meaning in successful leadership styles offers clear direction for leadership development initiatives.

The review enhances leadership theory by clarifying comparative effectiveness, identifying primary mechanisms, and highlighting contextual limitations. As organizations adapt to technological progress and changing workforce expectations, understanding effective leadership strategies for boosting engagement is increasingly vital for lasting organizational success. To overcome methodological limitations by employing longitudinal and experimental designs, while also exploring new leadership models and multilevel effects. Incorporating leadership styles and focusing on contextual factors will be crucial for progressing both theoretical insights and practical applications in the research of leadership effectiveness.

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