A Qualitative Study on Different Types of Group Leader's Leadership Style among Higher Vocational Colleges in Zhejiang Province of China

Qianqian Mo[1,2], Siti Nisrin Mohd Anis[1*]

[1]Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor 81310, Malaysia, [2]Wenzhou Polytechnic, Wenzhou 325035, China
*Corresponding Author Email: nisrin@utm.my

Abstract
The existing leadership style literature focuses mostly on private companies in western nations. In comparison, less studies on leadership styles have been conducted in higher education institutions in emerging countries such as Malaysia and China. Thus, there is a dearth of understanding about the preferred leadership styles in the public higher education sector among these countries.By applying in-depth interviews with 12 public higher vocational college teachers and group leaders in Zhejiang Province of China, this study analyzed qualitative data to propose strategies for improving leadership styles in higher vocational colleges of China.The participants primarily suggested improvement measures in the following areas: establishing effective communication mechanisms,fostering teamwork and innovation, optimizing decision-making processes and participatory practices, strengthening leadership training and assessment, and cultivating a strong team culture. Thus, the investigation of leadership style theories and practices offers valuable new perspectives for advancing the management practices of higher vocational colleges.
Keywords: Leadership Style, Higher Vocational Colleges, Zhejiang Province

Introduction
Leadership research in Asia has gained momentum due to historical, social, economic, and practical factors. China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) may lead to increased influence of Chinese leadership style in the global economy, challenging traditional business, management, and organizational models. In the realm of higher education, the leadership style is reflected in the government's strategic initiatives to bolster academic research, technological innovation, and global competitiveness. China has made substantial investments in its colleges and universities, fostering a culture of academic excellence and research output (Lu&Smith,2020). While this approach has contributed to impressive advancements in research and development, it also raises intellectual freedom and creativity

issues within the higher education system. Thus, a deep understanding of the association between Chinese leadership style and higher education emphasizes the complex balance between centralized authority and the necessity to nurture a dynamic and innovative academic landscape. This study introduces a range of leadership style theories and practices, thereby providing a robust theoretical framework to support related research. Besides, the qualitative analysis reveals that key strategies for enhancing leadership competencies include improving personal abilities, developing emotional intelligence, and maintaining fairness and impartiality.

Leadership styles such as transformational, authoritative, democratic and laissez-faire leadership may influence the educational environment by inspiring and motivating teachers, establishing clear goals, promoting support and collaboration, and encouraging participatory decision-making. The leadership style in higher vocational education in China combines traditional and modern methods, which reflects the broader socio-economic dynamics of the nation. Leaders within these institutions seek to inspire and encourage teachers and students with a well-defined, strategic vision. This visionary method is essential for effectively addressing the swift changes in industry requirements and technological progress. Leadership styles in higher vocational colleges refer to different management roles and titles (Settles et al.,2019). It can be concluded that the roles of leaders in higher vocational education can be complex and varied.

Many people perceive China's extremely pragmatic leadership style as authoritative or bureaucratic, according to Pascal Coppens'2021 blog article, "What We Can Learn from China's Leadership Model". Authoritative leaders stress their authority and control over their followers. Authoritative leaders occupy a fatherly role, and their influence is entrenched. They communicate from the top down and are resistant to delegating. They employ deceptive strategies with ambiguous motivations in order to project a powerful image. As a result of these behaviors, followers experience fear and awe (Du et al.,2020; Yue,2023). Yet, this type of leadership style may be suitable in certain environment but not every circumstance. Thus, exploring the leadership style among higher vocational colleges may contribute to a new understanding of leadership style related to China's cultural context.

The researcher also believes that, while there have been some studies on leadership style and organizational commitment in the West, analogous studies in China are lacking. Because degrees of leadership style and organizational dedication differ among cultures, there is still opportunity for improvement in the Chinese setting. Therefore, the researcher utilizes higher vocational colleges as a sample to in order to uncover the facts and generate new findings (Yue,2023).

In China's higher vocational colleges, the role of the group leaders is mainly a model as well as pioneer within the organization.The leadership style of group leaders significantly influences not only the motivation and creativity of team members but also the overall quality and effectiveness of education.As leaders who are crucial for the development of the groups, are required to lead the team (teachers) to overcome obstacles, make long-term plans and achieve the goals through various leadership styles (Zhang & Wang,2022). However, the relevant studies on group leader's leadership style and its enhancing strategies are rare. Consequently, this study aims to explore the research topic in depth by applying a qualitative

research method, including in-depth interviews with teachers and group leaders from public higher vocational colleges in Zhejiang Province of China. Consequently, optimizing leadership styles and implementing targeted measures are essential for enhancing team effectiveness and fostering the holistic development of the college.

Research Methodology
Research Participants
As for qualitative research design, purposive sampling is chosen to recruit participants to the study.The purposive sampling technique, also called judgment sampling, is the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. It is a nonrandom technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants (Etikan et al.,2016), just as the case in this study. The researchers can ensure that the sample is highly relevant to the study by selecting participants who meet specific criteria. Furthermore, this method can be less time-consuming and less costly than probability sampling methods, and the researcher is able to have the flexibility to select participants who can provide the most valuable information (Palinkas et al.,2015; Patton,2002). The researcher compiled the email contact information of group leaders and teachers from 37 public higher vocational colleges in Zhejiang Province and distributed in-depth interview questionnaires. Positive responses were received from eight young teachers and four group leaders representing six institutions: Zhejiang Financial College, Ningbo Polytechnic, Zhoushan Tourism and Health College, Zhejiang Institute of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering, Wenzhou Polytechnic, and Zhejiang Economic and Trade Polytechnic.

The demographic information of the 12 participants, comprising higher vocational college teachers and group leaders, is presented in Table 1.1. The sample selection was relatively balanced concerning school level, professional position, age, and academic title, ensuring a diverse and representative participant group.

Table 1.1
Demographic Information of the Participants

Code	Gender	Highest Level of Education	Professional Title	Teaching Subject	Years of working experience	Current Administrative Position
T-1	Male	PhD	Lecturer	Humanistic Science	10 years and under	No
T-2	Female	PhD.	Associate Professor	Natural Science	10 years and below	No
T-5	Male	PhD	Associate Professor	Social Science	11-20 years	No
T-6	Female	PhD	Lecturer	Natural Science	10 years and below	No
T-7	Female	PhD	Lecturer	Humanistic Science	10 years and below	No
T-10	Female	M.S.	Associate Professor	Humanistic Science	11-20 years	No
T-11	Male	M.S.	Lecturer	Humanistic Science	10 years and below	No

T-12	Female	PhD.	Associate Professor	Natural Science	11-20 years	No
A-1	Female	M.S.	Professor	Natural Science	More than 20 years	Associate Dean of the Faculty
A-2	Male	PhD.	Associate Professor	Humanistic Science	11-20 years	Associate Dean of the Faculty
A-3	Female	PhD.	Professor	Natural Science	More than 20 years	Dean of the Faculty
A-4	Male	PhD in progress	Professor	Social Science	11-20 years	Dean of the Academic Affairs Office

Data Collection and Analysis

The raw interview data were analyzed using NVivo10 software. Twelve valid interview transcripts were imported into NVivo10 as "internal materials". Following the principles of thematic analysis, the data were coded through a three-level, bottom-up coding process. During the open coding phase, 15 codes were generated. These were further integrated during the axial coding phase to form 4 categories. Finally, in the selective coding phase, the core categories were summarized and refined. The coding process was summarized in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2
Thematic analysis

Code	Category	Theme
a1:Enhancing personal charisma and appeal a2:Enhancing intellectual stimulation ability a3:Cultivating strategic thinking and visioning ability a4:Enhancing team building and collaboration skills	Transformational Leadership	Enhancement of the group leader's leadership style
b1:Enhancing decision-making capacity b2:Enhancing communication and feedback b3:Developing emotional intelligence and leadership b4:Focusing on personal image and charisma	Authoritative Leadership	
c1:Sharing your own experiences and lessons learned c2:Being fair and impartial c3:Sharing results and promote teamwork:	Democratic Leadership	
d1:Developing a sense of trust and responsibility in leaders d2:Providing necessary training and support d3:Creating a positive team atmosphere d4:Adapting leadership style flexibly	Laissez-faire Leadership	

Results

Response to "What strategies should be used in China's higher vocational colleges to enhance the Transformational Leadership style of group leaders?"

Most participants agreed that transformational leadership is a highly influential and forward-looking style of leadership. As the participant A-2 put it, *"Transformational leaders motivate their employees through inspirational vision, personalized care and recognition. They encourage employees to look beyond their personal interests and pursue higher-level goals and values, which leads to higher levels of motivation and creativity at work."* In addition, participant A-2 indicated that *"Transformational leaders value the personal growth and development of their employees. Transformational leaders provide training, coaching, and feedback to help employees improve their skills and knowledge while guiding them to recognize their strengths and potential. By increasing employees' self-confidence and sense of efficacy, transformational leaders promote overall team competency."*

Nevertheless, participant A-3 suggested that *"Transformational leaders need to demonstrate strong personal charisma and convening power to engage and motivate team members. This requires strong beliefs, a positive attitude and excellent communication skills."* In addition to demonstrating a leader's personal charisma, participant A-3 suggested that *"Intellectual stimulation is one of the key characteristics of transformational leadership."* Both of the two participants suggested that *"Transformational leaders need to be able to think strategically and have the visioning skills to be able to set clear, long-term goals for the team and the organization, and to lead the team toward those goals."*

Response to "What strategies should be used in China's higher vocational colleges to enhance the Authoritative Leadership style of group leaders?"

Most participants believed that *"Authoritative leadership is a style of leadership that emphasizes centralized control, clear direction, and strict rules. This type of leadership can motivate employees to constantly challenge themselves and improve the quality and efficiency of their work, but it can also limit the development of their potential and the organization's ability to innovate."* As quoted from participant T-2, *"Authoritative leaders are able to make decisions quickly because they usually have the final say, which reduces delays and uncertainty in the decision-making process. This efficient decision-making process helps organizations respond quickly to market changes or unexpected events."*

Yet, due to the above characteristics of authoritative leadership, participant A-4 suggested *"Establish an effective communication mechanism to ensure that team members can fully understand the leader's intentions and decisions. Encourage team members to provide feedback and suggestions to adjust the leadership style and decision-making direction in a timely manner."* In addition, most of participants agreed that authoritative leaders should improve their emotional intelligence or learn other leadership theories and methods. *"Improve your level of emotional intelligence, including emotional management, interpersonal and conflict resolution skills." "Learn leadership theories and methods, such as transformational leadership and servant leadership, to enrich your leadership style."*

Response to "What strategies should be used in China's higher vocational colleges to enhance the Democratic Leadership style of group leaders?"

Most participants believed that democratic leadership is a style of leadership that emphasizes teamwork, employee participation, and collective decision-making. This style of leadership encourages employees to express their opinions and ideas and actively participate in the decision-making process. Participants offered fewer suggestions for democratic leadership, with some feeling that *"In working together with subordinates, leaders should share their experiences and lessons learned to help subordinates better understand the importance and complexity of their work."* Participant T-1 revealed that if democratic leaders can *"Maintain a fair and impartial attitude in dealing with subordinates' problems, without taking sides. This will help create a harmonious working atmosphere and make subordinates more willing to devote themselves to their work"* and *"Give timely recognition and rewards when the team achieves results, so that subordinates feel that their efforts have been rewarded. This helps to stimulate subordinates' motivation and creativity."*

Response to "What strategies should be used in China's higher vocational colleges to enhance the Laissez-faire Leadership style of group leaders?"

The majority of participants agreed that laissez-faire leaders *"Give a high degree of freedom and autonomy to team members, with little interference or control over their work. However, decisions are implemented without the direct intervention of the leader. This type of leadership emphasizes personal responsibility and autonomy, but can also lead to a lack of clear guidance and direction for the team."* ParticipantT-10 suggested that laissez-faire leaders may have less time to devote to team management, and that in addition to changing their own leadership style, they could, on the one hand, *"Assess the abilities and needs of team members and provide the necessary training and development opportunities. Provide team members with the resources, tools and information they need to do their jobs better."* On the other hand, they can *"Promote a positive team culture, including collaboration, innovation, and responsibility. This helps to stimulate motivation and creativity among team members and improve the overall competitiveness of the team."* But most importantly for the laissez-faire leader, *"The laissez-faire leader needs to be clear about his or her role and mission, and be accountable for the overall goals and results of the team. By setting clear goals and expectations, this inspires a sense of responsibility and mission in team members and pushes them to work toward achieving their goals."* And *"Based on the needs and feedback from the team, leaders should be flexible in adjusting their leadership style. While maintaining a laissez-faire leadership style, intervene and coach as necessary on a case-by-case basis to ensure that the team can function efficiently."*

Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals the need for effective communication, teamwork, and leadership training to optimize leadership styles. Furthermore, participants emphasize the importance of balancing leadership behaviors to meet the unique needs of higher vocational colleges. While existing research predominantly focuses on the impact of leadership styles on employees in large commercial organizations, private enterprises, and academic universities (Hou et al.,2004), there is a notable gap in understanding their influence on teachers in higher vocational colleges.

Currently, the Chinese government has prioritized and strongly supported the development of higher vocational education. Government bodies such as the State Council, the General

Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, and the General Office of the State Council have issued a series of policy documents highlighting the significance of vocational education. This underscores the urgent need for research on leadership styles within the context of vocational education (Chen&Liu,2015). Given this context, it is particularly vital to explore strategies for enhancing leadership practices that align with the unique characteristics of Chinese vocational education.

According to previous research, transformational leadership significantly enhances employees' capabilities. Under the guidance of transformational leaders, employees exhibit a more positive work attitude, demonstrate exceptional skills, and contribute to a constructive organizational atmosphere (Bass&Avolio,1993; Hu,2015). Furthermore, this study found that democratic leadership also ranks highly, potentially due to the enduring influence of Confucianism. In Chinese society, the concept of "harmony" is deeply valued, with particular emphasis on maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships, including within management processes (Hofstede,1993). In contrast, certain higher vocational colleges in China lag behind in adopting advanced leadership styles. These institutions often place excessive emphasis on short-term gains and superficial accomplishments, while neglecting the long-term development and substantive growth of the institution (Jabbar et al, 2024; Kong et al., 2015). Such outdated leadership philosophies may hinder the sustainable development of these schools, potentially leading to stagnation or even further regression.

All participants concurred that enhancing the leadership styles of group leaders in China's higher vocational colleges would contribute to improving leadership skills and promoting teacher's job performance. Each leadership style presents a unique combination of strengths and weaknesses. For commonly observed styles such as transformational, authoritative, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership, participants primarily recommended improvement measures in several key areas: establishing effective communication mechanisms, fostering teamwork and innovation, optimizing decision-making processes and participation, reinforcing leadership training and evaluation, and emphasizing the development of team culture.

The result of the qualitative research reveals that most teachers and group leaders believe that strengthening leadership styles positively impacts teachers in higher vocational colleges. In the context of transformational leadership, this study reveals that teachers prioritize charisma and personal intelligence over leadership behaviors that have traditionally received significant attention in academic discourse, such as "visionary motivation". This finding contrasts with the prevailing academic perspective, which has been extensively explored in scholarly literature (Burns,1978; Bass,1990) and widely applied in school management practices (Yu&Zhou,2009; Wen, 2023).

For authoritative leaders, prominent scholars in the field of principal leadership (Fullan,2002; Hallinger,2020) have underscored the pivotal role principals play as instructional leaders in teaching and learning. This role requires them to effectively lead and guide both teachers' instructional practices and students' learning processes. However, the extent of this guidance must be carefully calibrated by each leader. Furthermore, teachers identify the enhancement of emotional intelligence as a critical competency for authoritative leaders, as it contributes significantly to improved decision-making.

In the context of democratic leadership, it is imperative for leaders to exemplify fairness, particularly in matters directly affecting the interests of teachers. Leaders are required to maintain transparency, impartiality, and equity, ensuring that all teachers are treated equally. Additionally, they must consider and judiciously balance the perspectives and demands of diverse stakeholders in the decision-making process. While democratic leaders are expected to engage with and consider teachers' viewpoints, it is crucial to avoid practices that may foster perceptions of inequity, such as prioritizing individuals based on the size of their support group, the prominence of their advocacy, or personal proximity to leadership, as these actions may undermine trust and fairness in areas such as remuneration or professional recognition.

With regard to laissez-faire leadership, digital leadership is increasingly gaining prominence within the academic field of education management, particularly in an era marked by rapid advancements in media technology and artificial intelligence. Most participants express optimism about the potential of digital technology to enhance their professional capabilities. For instance, one of them noted, *"I have personally benefited the most from the high-tech initiatives at school, such as the online class platform. Previously, we were required to attend in-person training sessions collectively, but now we can engage in learning anytime and anywhere."*

Furthermore, the majority of participants perceive leadership style as the behaviors, attitudes, and approaches demonstrated by leaders during the management process. In China's higher vocational colleges, the leadership style of group leaders significantly influences not only the motivation and creativity of team members but also the overall quality and effectiveness of education.

Consequently, optimizing leadership styles and implementing targeted measures are essential for enhancing team effectiveness and fostering the holistic development of the college. Recommended strategies include strengthening leadership training, organizing regular leadership development seminars and workshops, and integrating theoretical knowledge with practical applications to enhance leaders' comprehensive competencies. Additionally, introducing situational leadership theory can equip leaders with the ability to adapt their leadership styles based on the diverse needs and abilities of their team members, thereby enabling personalized management (Klemsdal,2025). Achieving these objectives requires the collaborative efforts of both group leaders and teachers in higher vocational colleges .

Limitations
This study is subject to several limitations due to constraints in resources and time. Given the diversity of educational contexts, future research could meaningfully extend this analysis to private higher education institutions or other types of schools, such as general high schools, technical schools, and international schools. Besides, if conditions allow, conducting long-term longitudinal research across various educational institution—encompassing basic education, higher education, vocational education, and online education—could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership styles influence teacher's effectiveness and adaptability. Such research would facilitate the development of a robust framework for leadership competencies in higher vocational colleges, offering a new standard

for evaluating and guiding educational management and leadership development. Additionally, due to limited research funding, the study was unable to expand its geographic scope to include other provinces in China, such as Jiangsu, Guangdong, Fujian, Shandong, and Sichuan. Future studies addressing these regions could provide valuable insights into regional variations and broader applicability of the findings.

References

Lu, X., & Smith, R. (2020). Leadership in Chinese higher education and the influence of sociocultural constructs. Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 1-19.https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1768827

Settles, I. H., Brassel, S. T., Soranno, P. A., Cheruvelil, K. S., Montgomery, G. M., Elliott, K. C. (2019). Team climate mediates the effect of diversity on environmental science team satisfaction and data sharing. PLoS One 14:e0219196. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0219196.

Du, J., Li, N. N., & Luo, Y. Y. (2020). authoritative Leadership in Organizational Change and Employees' Active Reactions: Have-to and Willing-to Perspectives. Frontiers in Psychology, 10, Article 3076.

Yue, C. (2023). Educational Administrators' Leadership Styles and Teachers' Organizational Commitment: Inputs for a Work Engagement Program. Open Journal of Leadership, 12, 352-373. doi: 10.4236/ojl.2023.123017.

Zhang, W., & Wang, Z. (2022). Role positioning of professional leaders of "double higher institutions", Competency structure model and lifting path. Hei Bei Vocational Education, 06(06), 80–85.

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. American journal of theoretical and applied statistics, 5(1), 1-4.

Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N., & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 42(5), 533-544.

Hou, J., Wen, Z., & Cheng, Z. (2004). Structural Equation Modeling and Its Applications. Beijing: Educational Science Press.

Chen, W., Liu, J. J. (2015). Introduction to Social Research Methods, Beijing: Tsinghua University Press.

Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1993). Transformational leadership and organizational culture. Public administration quarterly, 112-121.

Hu, Y. Q.(2015). Educational and Psychological Research Methods. Xiangtan: Xiangtan University Press.

Hofstede, G.(1993). Cultural Constrains in Management Theories. Academy of Management Executive,7(1), pp.81-94.

Jabbar, R., Akmal, F., & Hassan, K. H. U. (2024). Exploring the Impact of Organizational Culture on Leadership Style in Higher Educational Institutions. Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences, 5(3), 109-124.

Burns, J. M.(1978).Leadership. Harper & Row, New York.

Bass, B. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. Organizational Dynamics, 18(3), pp.19-31.

Yu,Y., & Zhou, M. (2009). On the Approaches to Improving the Leadership of Primary School Principals. Shanghai Research on Education, (3), pp.74-75.

Wen, Z. (2023). Cultivation of Principals' Leadership in the New Era. Primary & Secondary School Administration, (3), pp.38-40.

Fullan, M. (2002). The change. Educational Leadership, 59(8), pp.16-20.

Klemsdal, L. (2025). Managing the Work Situation: A Phenomenological Approach to Organization and Management in a Complex World of Work. Taylor & Francis.