

## A Review of the Impact of Leadership Styles on Employee Innovation Performance

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### Abstract

With the vigorous growth and structural transformation of the Chinese economy, corporate managers increasingly recognize the strategic importance of fostering employee innovation. In the competitive landscape, businesses must continually innovate to enhance their competitiveness, viewing innovation as the cornerstone of survival. Against this environment, leadership styles become crucial, as employees play the pivotal role of executing all strategic plans and objectives. This study explores the relationship between different leadership styles and employee innovation performance through a literature review approach. The research reveals that close collaboration between leaders possessing various leadership styles and their employees is essential to spark the courage for innovation, thereby enhancing employee innovation performance. Based on a synthesis of existing literature, this paper outlines prospective directions for future research: Firstly, expanding the study on the impact and mechanisms of inclusive leadership on employee innovation performance, unravelling the potential mechanisms through which leadership styles stimulate employee innovation. Secondly, there is a need to enrich research on various leadership styles to comprehensively understand the role of leadership behaviour in shaping innovation performance. Furthermore, considering the unique characteristics of different industries in China, there should be in-depth investigations into the specific mechanisms through which leadership styles influence employee innovation performance across diverse sectors, providing more targeted management recommendations. Through these efforts, a better understanding and effective responses to the complex relationship between leadership styles and employee

innovation can be achieved, offering scientifically grounded and practical guidance for sustained corporate innovation.

**Keywords:** Employee Innovation Performance, Leadership Styles, Benevolent Leadership, Inclusive Leadership, China.

### **Introduction**

In the face of an increasingly complex and unpredictable external environment, organizations, while constantly confronted with severe challenges, must formulate practical and effective strategies to sustain and strengthen their core competitiveness (Lin, 2022). In today's intricate competitive landscape, traditional basic strategies such as market expansion and product replication are no longer sufficient. As emphasized by Liang (2018), innovation is a powerful force that enables organizations to flexibly respond to the surrounding environment and gain a competitive advantage. The 19th Academician Conference of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the 14th Academician Conference of the Chinese Academy of Engineering in 2018 emphasized that the fundamental driving force of innovation lies in talent. The innovation capability and performance of employees are the pillars of corporate innovation, drawing increasing attention from society and enterprises, and leading to a sharp increase in research on motivating employee innovation. An important aspect of this research is examining contextual factors influencing employee innovation and identifying key elements that can stimulate innovative thinking (Luo, 2022). Research by Sun (2021) pointed out that among the numerous factors shaping the organizational environment, leadership behaviour is considered the most substantial and crucial factor (Sun, 2021). Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the factors driving employee innovation and how it further benefits the organization, this paper reviews recent studies on how different leadership styles influence employee innovation performance. Considering the unique national conditions of China, this paper aims to provide insights for future research in this field.

### **Study Methodology**

This paper is grounded in a narrative literature review, employing research methods that involve consulting books, journal articles, and papers within the relevant research domain, utilizing a checklist to systematically gather essential information. The article conducts a conceptual analysis through the literature review, with a particular focus on investigating the correlation between different leadership styles and employee innovation performance. The primary objective of the literature review is to identify, select, and critically evaluate research to precisely define relevant concepts and formulate research questions. In the actual study, the defined understanding of all concepts and variables will be applied.

### **An Understanding of the Concept of Innovation Performance**

In 1912, American scholar Joseph Schumpeter formally introduced the theory of innovation in his work "The Theory of Economic Development," laying the foundation for subsequent innovation research. Subsequently, Damanpour (1991) found that innovation is not limited to a specific aspect of production and operation but can occur at various levels, leading to diverse outcomes of innovation.

In recent years, scholars have defined innovation performance in three main directions: behaviour, results, and the combination of behaviour and results (Zhong et al., 2019). Viewing innovation performance as behaviour emphasizes the actions of employees in their work or within the organization. This perspective considers employee innovation performance as a

series of innovative processes that include generating innovative ideas, setting clear implementation goals, and transforming goals into performance (Scott and Bruce, 1994). Thomas (2010) views process innovation as a creative process to achieve goals, involving the introduction of new technologies and ideas. Mumford (2011) defines employee innovation performance as the process where employees generate and promote innovative ideas within their roles, work teams, or organizations, ultimately leading to improved innovation performance.

Another perspective on innovation performance is to consider it as the outcome of employees achieving results within the organization. Coombs (1996) suggests that innovation performance is the result of employees' creative thinking, serving as an indicator of the effectiveness of their innovation behaviour. Tierney and Farmer (2002) further emphasize that innovation performance is the result of valuable innovative work.

Considering both behaviour and results, Rosing (2016) argues that employee innovation performance comes not only from the process of innovation but also from focusing on the results of innovation. Xu (2022) emphasizes that employee innovation performance is the unity of innovative behaviour and outcomes, encompassing both the innovative process and behaviour of employees in teams or organizations and the beneficial results brought about by implementing innovative ideas and actions.

In summary, Joseph Schumpeter's work since 1912 has had a lasting impact on innovation research. These studies demonstrate efforts to understand innovation performance from multiple dimensions, ranging from the behavioural process of innovation to tangible outcomes, providing rich theoretical support for exploring the influencing factors and driving mechanisms of employee innovation performance.

### **An Understanding of Leadership Styles**

Leadership style refers to how leaders influence subordinates through behaviour or character patterns (Khursheeduddin, 2023). Within the context of Chinese leadership theory and practice, leadership style is also referred to as leadership behaviour or leadership behaviour types (Qin, 2018). It represents the consistent behavioural patterns displayed by leaders in their leadership activities (Miao, 2021).

In the early research, scholars primarily focused on the relationship between some "classic" leadership styles and employee innovation performance, such as transformational leadership and transactional leadership (Hammond et al., 2015; Huang & Tang, 2016; Watts et al., 2020; Bao et al., 2023). However, in recent years, scholars have shown an increasing interest in some "emerging" leadership styles, including inclusive, benevolent, and charismatic leadership styles. A significant amount of research indicates that these emerging leadership styles are also associated with employee innovation performance (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee, Legood et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023).

This study aims to delve into the relationships between various leadership styles and employee innovation performance, taking into account the essence of innovation performance. Specifically, the research seeks to explore the impact of transformational leadership, transactional leadership, inclusive leadership, benevolent leadership, and charismatic leadership on innovation performance. In this process, we will examine the unique roles these leadership styles play in inspiring employee innovation and the different roles they may play in organizational environments.

Through a comprehensive study of these leadership styles, we hope to distil best practices for leaders in promoting innovation performance and provide more precise

management recommendations for organizations. Additionally, we will examine the applicability of these leadership styles in different industries and cultural backgrounds to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their impact on employee innovation performance. Such in-depth research will contribute to providing nuanced insights for future leadership theory and practice, offering robust support for organizations on the path of innovation development.

## **Literature Review Findings**

### **(1) Innovation performance and transformational leadership**

The concept of transformational leadership was first introduced by Burns in the 1980s in his work "Leadership," marking a significant evolution in leadership theory. Before this, leadership theories were primarily based on trait theory, behavioural theory, and the theory of leader-member exchange. In his 1978 study, Burns explored various leadership theories, suggesting that transformational leadership is suitable for leaders who exhibit higher levels of qualities and ideologies. This leadership quality enables them to clearly articulate the mission and responsibilities of employees and cultivate a positive work attitude.

Further research conducted by Bass (1985) emphasized the importance of leaders articulating organizational development goals and providing support and care to employees when facing challenges. Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) underscored the role of transformational leadership in creating a safe working environment, motivating employees, and fostering adaptability. This ultimately prompts employees to rethink problems and propose innovative solutions. Scholar Lee and his colleagues (2008) confirmed the significant impact of transformational leadership on employee innovative behaviour.

Yuan (2017) argues that transformational leadership utilizes institutional development as a means to actively cultivate an innovation-friendly cultural atmosphere within the organization. In this process, leaders encourage employees to fully leverage their individual strengths and inspire a desire for self-learning and self-improvement. By providing opportunities conducive to career development, transformational leaders guide employees in profound contemplation of their career paths, thereby motivating them to work diligently towards their goals (Bi, 2016). Under the guidance of transformational leadership, employees, in the process of deep contemplation, are stimulated to generate innovative thinking. Simultaneously, leaders, leveraging personal influence, steer the wave of innovation within the organization, creating a positive environment where all members are involved in innovation (Xu, 2014). While perceiving the organizational environment, employees, through cognitive processing, alter their behaviors and actively participate in various innovative activities (Yang, 2011).

Scholar Li (2018) suggested that by cultivating leaders with a transformational leadership style, organizations can inspire innovative behaviour among employees. Miao (2020), in examining matched data of direct leaders and subordinates in Chinese enterprises, found that transformational leadership has a positive impact on employee innovation performance. These leaders excel at creating an environment conducive to innovation, inspiring employee creativity, and thereby enhancing the overall innovation level of the organization. Nguyen (2023), in a survey of 15 Vietnamese companies with a quantitative analysis of 455 valid responses, revealed a positive correlation between transformational leadership and employee innovative behaviour. In general, transformational leadership, utilizing institutional, cultural, and personal guiding influences, endeavors to construct an organizational ecosystem conducive to innovation, thereby stimulating the innovative

potential of individual employees as well as the collective (Valero, 2021). This innovation-oriented leadership style plays a crucial role in guiding companies through the process of adaptation to change and fostering innovation (Costa, 2023).

## **(2) Innovation performance and transactional leadership**

Burns (1978) first introduced the concept of transactional leadership in his work "Leadership," describing it as a leadership style in which leaders induce desired performance from subordinates by providing rewards, resulting in mutually beneficial outcomes. Bass (1985) further emphasized that to inspire employee effort and establish clear work standards and guidelines, leaders should define their roles and responsibilities clearly. Peilai et al (1999) defined transactional leadership as a process based on the exchange of employee effort and performance levels. Chen and Shi (2007) argued that transactional leadership is a leadership style that communicates to employees their roles, task completion levels, and ultimate goals in various ways to motivate them to actively engage in their work.

Wu (2010) suggested that organizations dominated by transactional leadership may impose certain limitations on the innovative behaviour of knowledge workers. However, through goal-oriented behavioural regulation, a transactional leadership style might also facilitate the innovation of knowledge workers. Zhao (2010) proposed that, when combined with purposeful actions, transactional leadership is likely to evoke positive emotions among employees, thereby driving innovation. Rashwan (2022) defined transactional leadership as a leader-member relationship based on exchanges, where superiors mainly motivate employees through direct rewards or punishments, focusing on employees' organizational contributions.

Miao (2020) found that transactional leaders focus on achieving organizational goals, actively identify and correct deviations from standards, excel in emergency management, and emphasize excellence in management. These traits contribute to sustained employee innovation. Luo (2023) indicated that transactional leadership has a positive impact on employee innovation performance. He recommended that leaders should allocate more tasks related to innovation to employees, set innovation-oriented goals, and take proactive intervention measures to guide employees in the right direction. These studies collectively highlight the multifaceted roles of transactional leadership in organizations, not only in performance management but also in positively influencing employee innovative behaviour, providing practical guidance for leaders in fostering a direction towards innovation.

## **(3) Innovation performance and inclusive leadership**

Nembhard et al (2006) introduced the concept of inclusive leadership, defining it as leaders motivating and recognizing employees' efforts and contributions through speech and actions. In this leadership style, leaders not only actively listen to subordinates' opinions but are also willing to accept employees' management suggestions. Gu (2010) regards inclusive leadership as a fundamental form of relational leadership, emphasizing its outstanding performance in listening and meeting individual needs within organizational teams. It reflects an open, efficient, and approachable leadership style.

Zhong (2018) pointed out that inclusive leadership not only guides employees to exhibit positive work attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes, such as increasing employees' dedication and commitment to work (Choi, 2015; Jian, 2017) but also encourages employees to offer suggestions. It influences employees' psychological safety (Hirak, 2012) and fosters employee creativity. Wu (2020) suggests that by influencing employees' suggestion behaviour through

inclusive leadership, organizations can effectively enhance innovation performance. Li (2021), through a study on the new generation of employees in Chinese manufacturing, found that inclusive leadership has a significantly positive impact on employees' innovation performance (Li, 2023).

Organizations can enhance employee innovation performance through various means, one of which is recruiting leaders with higher levels of inclusiveness. Furthermore, by evaluating and rewarding the inclusive behaviour of leadership (Wang, 2021) and implementing training and development activities for inclusive managers, organizations can further strengthen the role of inclusive leadership in promoting employee innovation performance. In summary, by adopting these measures, organizations can create a more inclusive and innovation inspiring work environment, providing stronger support for employee innovation.

#### **(4) Innovation performance and benevolent leadership**

The initial research primarily focused on leadership styles in Western cultures. However, as scholars like Lu (2022) introduced paternalistic leadership as a leadership style suitable for the Chinese cultural organizational context, the research gradually shifted towards exploring the impact of paternalistic leadership on employee behaviour. In this context, benevolent leadership is regarded as a constructive and well-received leadership type under paternalistic, moral, and autocratic leadership. Nevertheless, there is still relatively limited research on the influence of benevolent leadership on employee innovation performance.

Manager Fan (2000) defines benevolent leadership as leaders showing individual, comprehensive, and enduring care and grace towards subordinates' well-being. Wang and Cheng (2010) point out that benevolent leadership has a positive facilitating effect on subordinates' innovative behaviour execution, creating a psychologically safe environment and providing more resources and support for employees. Li (2017) suggests that compassionate leadership demonstrates sufficient tolerance for errors in the innovation process, viewing mistakes as inevitable. Under compassionate leadership, superiors avoid publicly criticizing employees, adhering to the principles of two-way communication to collaboratively address various challenges encountered in the innovation process. Together, they strive to identify better solutions, further inspiring employees' innovative behaviors. According to Chen (2018), when employees encounter difficulties in innovation activities, compassionate leaders are inclined to provide authorization to some extent and offer additional resources to address current challenges. Such actions make employees feel recognized and supported, strengthening their subjective sense of value within the organization and motivating them to achieve outstanding innovation performance.

Zhang (2019) argues that benevolent leadership, through favoring subordinates, encourages employees to take risks, propose new ideas, try new methods, and explore new markets, thus fostering a comfortable and innovation-supportive atmosphere, and enhancing innovation performance. Research by Xia (2020) found that benevolent leadership's care and tolerance can enhance employees' sense of psychological safety. Moreover, when organizations grant employees a certain degree of autonomy in their work, it can further stimulate employees' enthusiasm for innovation, prompting them to generate more innovative performance through innovative practices for the organization.

Xu (2020) argues that the interaction between leaders and employees is mutually influential. Compassionate leadership, which emphasizes caring for employees' families,

alleviates concerns for employees and enables them to focus more on innovative work. The personalized care from leaders significantly enhances employees' mental and psychological security, reducing the loss of resources due to non-productive emotions such as stress and anxiety. This, in turn, promotes the effective transformation of intellectual resources into innovative talents within the organization (Zhu, 2017).

Wei (2021) survey on the new generation of Chinese employees indicates that benevolent leadership effectively enhances the innovation performance of the new generation of Chinese employees. He suggests that leaders should possess a compassionate heart, show grace and care to employees, and establish high-quality reciprocal relationships with the new generation of employees to inspire their innovative behaviour. These studies provide valuable insights into understanding the impact of benevolent leadership on employee innovation performance in the Chinese cultural environment.

### **(5) Innovation performance and charismatic leadership**

The charismatic leadership theory was initially proposed by organizational behaviour scholar, House (1977), who believed that outstanding leaders could influence the attitudes and behaviours of subordinates through extraordinary charisma. Furthermore, Conger et al. (1998) expanded this theory, defining charismatic leadership as a style that excels at motivating subordinates by creating an attractive vision, making them highly adaptable, attentive to individual needs, and possessing the ability to influence the attitudes and behaviours of subordinates. German scholar, Weber (1978) described charismatic leaders in the early 20th century as individuals with "extraordinary charm," characterized by high self-confidence, a tendency to dominate others, and unwavering ideal beliefs.

Bass (1988) pointed out in his research that charismatic leadership style has a positive promoting effect on subordinates' work attitudes and innovation performance, motivating them to achieve innovative results beyond expectations. Matthew (2010) found that charismatic leaders exhibit extraordinary behaviour, possess innate creativity, and encourage employees to break through traditions, thereby supporting employees' innovative behaviour. They can inspire a new generation of employees to generate and implement more distinctive innovative ideas.

Zhang (2011) noted that charismatic leaders dare to challenge existing paradigms and do not shy away from risks associated with innovative activities. This sets an example for employees, giving them the courage and confidence to actively engage in innovation activities, particularly motivating the new generation of employees with high self-efficacy to participate in innovation activities. Zhang (2019) research on China's new generation of employees found that charismatic leadership effectively enhances the innovation performance of the new generation of employees.

Therefore, organizations need to recognize the importance of charismatic leadership in unlocking the innovative potential of the new generation of employees. By cultivating charismatic leadership, organizations can establish a positive work atmosphere, stimulate employees' innovation motivation, and drive the organization towards a more innovative and vibrant direction. This is crucial for organizations to maintain a leading position in a competitive environment and promote sustained innovation.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Leadership styles, due to their profound impact on various aspects of organizations and their prominent position in discussions on employee management, have increasingly

garnered attention from scholars. This article provides an overview of employee innovation performance, various leadership styles, and their interrelationships. A review of existing research indicates that scholars have conducted in-depth studies on innovation performance and different leadership styles from various perspectives over an extended period. These leadership styles not only directly influence employee innovation performance but also exert indirect effects through various mediating factors. Overall, existing research offers valuable insights into understanding how different leadership styles impact innovation performance to some extent.

### Future Research Suggestions

However, current research still requires more targeted exploration, especially in different industry sectors. Here are several aspects that scholars can focus on and explore in the future

(1) Expand research on the impact of inclusive and benevolent leadership on employee innovation performance: Currently, there is relatively limited research on the influence of inclusive and benevolent leadership on innovation performance in the context of Chinese industries. Future research can delve deeper into analyzing the antecedents of these leadership styles and investigate the mediating factors between them and employee innovation performance.

(2) Diversify the study of other leadership styles: Although current research covers some positive leadership styles, there is relatively less research on negative leadership styles existing in various organizational environments. Future research should delve into how these negative leadership styles affect employee innovation performance.

(3) Explore the impact of different industry leadership styles: Despite the increasing research on the innovation performance of the new generation of employees within organizations, studies in other fields such as hospitals, banks, public institutions, etc., remain limited. Future research should actively apply various leadership theories to different industries in China, utilizing on-site research, case analyses, and other methods to comprehensively understand how diverse leadership styles impact employee innovation performance. This will contribute to forming more specific and actionable management recommendations to meet leadership challenges in different industry contexts.

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