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Leadership styles and their influence on extension worker performance and job satisfaction

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Abstract

Nearly 43% of agricultural extension workers across South Asia report feeling dissatisfied with supervisory support. This research investigated how different leadership styles practiced by extension supervisors affect job performance and satisfaction among frontline extension workers in Sri Lanka. A cross-sectional survey targeted 312 extension workers and 156 supervisors across seven provinces. Data were collected between October 2021 and February 2022 using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), a validated three-dimensional performance scale, and the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire short form. Supervisors were classified as transformational (37.4%), transactional (28.6%), democratic (19.3%), and laissez-faire (14.7%). Transformational leadership dimensions showed the strongest positive associations with intrinsic satisfaction ($r=0.71$ for idealized influence) and contextual performance ($r=0.63$). Path analysis confirmed transformational leadership had both direct effects on performance ($\beta=0.41$, $p<0.001$) and indirect effects mediated through satisfaction ($\beta=0.23$, $p<0.01$). Transactional leadership showed moderate links with extrinsic satisfaction ($r=0.56$) but weaker performance ties. Laissez-faire leadership was negatively associated with all outcomes. Extension organizations should invest in transformational leadership development programs for supervisors.

Keywords: Leadership styles, extension workers, job satisfaction, worker performance, transformational leadership, transactional leadership, agricultural extension, Sri Lanka, supervisory practices

Introduction

Roughly one in three extension workers in developing countries leaves the profession within five years of appointment, and supervisory dissatisfaction is consistently cited among the top reasons for attrition ^[1]. In Sri Lanka, the extension service employs about 3,200 frontline workers, yet vacancy rates in remote districts sometimes exceed 25% ^[2]. The quality of supervision these workers receive may partly explain both retention difficulties and uneven service delivery outcomes.

Leadership in extension organizations has received less attention than in corporate or educational settings, despite supervisors operating under challenging conditions dispersed teams, limited budgets, and workers who spend most time in the field ^[3]. Four styles appear most often in extension management literature: transformational, transactional, democratic, and laissez-faire ^[5]. Each carries different implications for worker attitudes, but empirical evidence specific to extension contexts remains scattered ^[6]. Job satisfaction and performance are distinct but related constructs ^[7]. Several models suggest satisfaction mediates the leadership-performance relationship leaders first influence how workers feel, which then affects how well they perform ^[8]. But this pathway hasn't been tested adequately in extension settings. This research aimed to identify dominant leadership styles among extension supervisors in Sri Lanka, examine their associations with

worker performance and satisfaction, and test whether satisfaction mediates the leadership-performance link ^[9].

Theoretical Framework

The research was grounded in Bass and Avolio's Full Range Leadership Model, which positions transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership along a continuum of engagement ^[5]. This model predicts that transformational behaviors produce "performance beyond expectations" through four mechanisms: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration ^[10]. The research also incorporated Herzberg's two-factor theory of job satisfaction, distinguishing between intrinsic motivators (achievement, recognition, responsibility) and extrinsic hygiene factors (salary, working conditions, supervision) ^[11]. These theoretical perspectives were combined into a path model hypothesizing that leadership style affects performance both directly and indirectly through satisfaction as a mediator ^[8].

Material and Methods

Material

This cross-sectional research was conducted from October 2021 to February 2022 across seven provinces of Sri Lanka. The research was based at the University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya. A total of 312 extension workers and 156 extension supervisors participated. Supervisors were

sampled from all divisional-level agricultural offices using proportionate stratified random sampling, and two workers were randomly selected per supervisor ^[12]. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires. Leadership style was measured using the MLQ-5X ^[10], worker performance through a 15-item scale covering task, contextual, and adaptive dimensions ^[13], and job satisfaction through the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) 20-item short form ^[14].

Methods

Supervisors were classified into dominant leadership style categories based on highest mean subscale scores on the

MLQ-5X. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between leadership dimensions and outcome variables. Path analysis using structural equation modeling tested direct and indirect effects of leadership style on performance, with job satisfaction as the proposed mediator. Model fit was assessed using chi-square, CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR indices. Control variables included worker age, education, years of service, and district remoteness index. All analyses used SPSS 26 and AMOS 24. Ethical clearance was granted by the University of Peradeniya Ethics Review Committee (Protocol UoP-ERC/2021/42, September 20, 2021) ^[15].

Results

Table 1: Mean Scores for Performance and Satisfaction by Supervisor Leadership Style

Leadership Style	Task Perf.	Context. Perf.	Adapt. Perf.	Intrinsic Sat.	Extrinsic Sat.
Transformational	4.12 (0.61)	4.28 (0.54)	3.89 (0.72)	4.31 (0.58)	3.47 (0.69)
Transactional	3.74 (0.68)	3.51 (0.71)	3.42 (0.65)	3.38 (0.74)	3.82 (0.63)
Democratic	3.91 (0.59)	3.87 (0.62)	3.76 (0.58)	3.94 (0.61)	3.56 (0.67)
Laissez-faire	3.18 (0.83)	2.94 (0.79)	3.01 (0.81)	2.87 (0.86)	2.93 (0.78)
F-value	8.74**	12.31**	6.92**	14.57**	7.28**

Workers under transformational supervisors scored highest on task performance (M=4.12), contextual performance (M=4.28), and intrinsic satisfaction (M=4.31). Transactional

leadership linked to highest extrinsic satisfaction (M=3.82). Laissez-faire leadership produced the lowest scores across all measures ($p < 0.01$).

Table 2: Path Analysis: Direct and Indirect Effects on Worker Performance

Path	Direct β	Indirect β	Total β	p-value
Transform. $\rightarrow$ Performance	0.41	0.23	0.64	<0.001
Transactional $\rightarrow$ Performance	0.18	0.11	0.29	0.008
Democratic $\rightarrow$ Performance	0.27	0.16	0.43	0.002
Laissez-faire $\rightarrow$ Performance	-0.31	-0.14	-0.45	<0.001
Satisfaction $\rightarrow$ Performance	0.56	—	0.56	<0.001
Model fit: $\chi^2/df=1.87$, CFI=0.953, RMSEA=0.048, SRMR=0.041				

Transformational leadership had the strongest total effect on performance ($\beta=0.64$), with satisfaction mediating 36% of that effect. Laissez-faire leadership showed significant

negative effects. The path model demonstrated good fit across all indices.

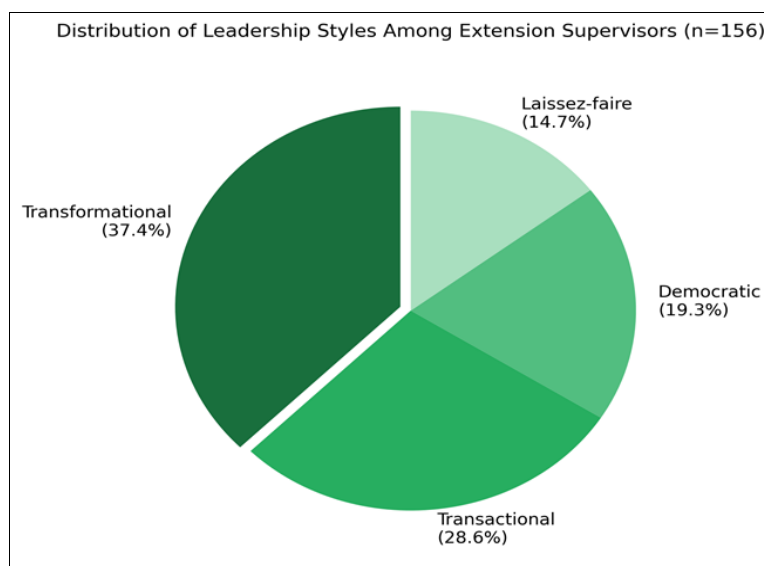


Fig 1: Distribution of Dominant Leadership Styles Among Extension Supervisors (n=156)

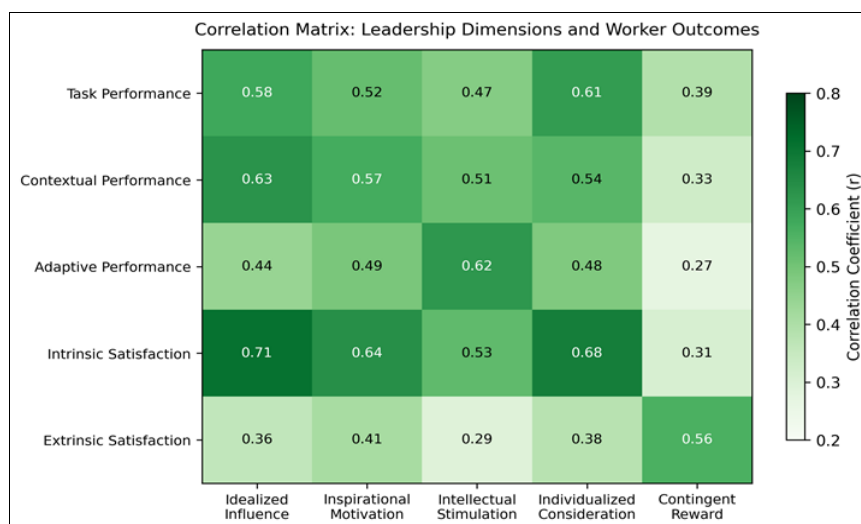


Fig 2: Correlation Matrix of Leadership Dimensions and Worker Outcome Variables

Discussion

The dominance of transformational leadership (37.4%) among Sri Lankan extension supervisors is encouraging, given this style's strong association with positive outcomes. This proportion is somewhat higher than the 28% reported in Indian extension organizations [6], possibly reflecting Sri Lanka's emphasis on participatory agricultural policy [2]. The finding that transformational leadership affects performance both directly and through satisfaction confirms this mediation pathway operates in extension settings, consistent with meta-analytic evidence from other sectors [16].

The transactional-extrinsic satisfaction link makes intuitive sense: supervisors who focus on clear rewards produce satisfaction with tangible job benefits but not necessarily inspiration [17]. Democratic leadership showed moderate effects between transformational and transactional styles. The negative effects of laissez-faire leadership are worth highlighting: extension workers under minimal supervision reported the lowest scores across every dimension. In a field service context with geographically dispersed workers and ambiguous task demands, absent leadership seems especially harmful, possibly through feelings of neglect and role confusion [18].

Limitations

This research relied on self-reported measures for both leadership perception and job satisfaction, introducing common method bias. The cross-sectional design prevents causal conclusions about directionality. Worker performance was assessed through self-ratings rather than objective output measures. The classification of supervisors into single leadership categories oversimplifies the reality that most leaders display a mix of styles. Future research should incorporate supervisor self-ratings, objective performance data, and longitudinal designs to address these constraints [19].

Conclusions

This research demonstrates that leadership style matters for extension worker performance and satisfaction in Sri Lanka. Transformational leadership produced the strongest positive outcomes, with satisfaction serving as a partial mediator.

Transactional leadership linked to extrinsic satisfaction but showed weaker performance effects. Laissez-faire leadership was consistently negative. Extension organizations should invest in transformational leadership development for supervisors to improve service delivery. The path model suggests even moderate shifts toward transformational behaviors could generate compounding benefits through the satisfaction-performance pathway.

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