A Study on Leadership Style and Employee Engagement within Higher Academic Institutions in Ethiopia

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Abstract
This comprehensive study delved into the intricate relationship between leadership styles and employee engagement within higher academic institutions in Ethiopia. Using an explanatory research design with a quantitative approach, the study collected data from 372 selected respondents through a questionnaire. This data was analyzed using SPSS software version 28, applying both correlation and multiple linear regression analyses. The findings revealed that transformational and transactional leadership styles positively impact employee engagement. Transformational leadership, which involves inspiring and motivating employees to exceed expectations, and transactional leadership, which focuses on rewarding employees for meeting specific goals, both contributed to higher levels of engagement among employees. In contrast, the laissez-faire leadership style, characterized by a hands-off approach and minimal direct supervision, was found to have a negative effect on employee engagement. This style of leadership led to decreased employee engagement and lower overall organizational effectiveness. The research suggests that leaders should consider the moral and ethical implications of their decisions and understand their employees' needs. Additionally, leaders should clearly communicate and consistently reinforce the organization's vision to eliminate any uncertainty about its direction.
Keywords: *Employee Engagement; Leadership Style; Higher Institution, Ethiopia*

1. INTRODUCTION
Employee engagement, a burgeoning concept within the realms of business, management, organizational psychology, and human resource development, has garnered significant global attention. It delineates the degree of employees' commitment to their roles, contingent upon organizational strategies aimed at achieving overarching goals (Wollard & Shuck, 2011). Gruman and Saks (2011) underscore employee engagement as pivotal for organizational triumph and competitiveness, emphasizing its direct correlation with organizational success. Engaged employees, as posited by Demerouti and Cropanzano (2010), are instrumental assets to organizations, with their contributions significantly impacting the bottom line. Contemporary organizations are urged to prioritize employee engagement due to the potential ramifications of employee disengagement. The repercussions of disengaged employees, characterized by robotic behavior, lethargy, and minimal effort, pose substantial risks to organizational growth (Allam, 2017). Furthermore, a decline in employee engagement levels can precipitate adverse effects on productivity, customer service, and overall performance (Mone et al., 2011). However, the swift pace of modernization necessitates a workforce equipped with adaptive skills to meet evolving labor market demands (Othman et al., 2018).

One of the key management challenges in organizations lies in determining the most effective leadership styles that managers should employ to motivate, cultivate, and enhance employee engagement (Amna, 2015). In the context of Ethiopian higher education institutions, effective leadership holds immense significance for fostering a conducive work environment and bolstering employee commitment. Despite this, there remains a dearth of comprehensive understanding regarding the influence of various leadership styles on employee engagement levels among faculty and staff within these institutions. Past researchers like Samson (2016), Jember (2015), and Alemu (2017), have focused on the correlation between leadership style and employee performance and satisfaction. The paucity of research specifically tailored to the Ethiopian higher education landscape underscores the imperative to investigate how different leadership approaches impact employee engagement, thereby identifying strategies that catalyze greater engagement and organizational efficacy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Employee Engagement
Employee engagement is highlighted as a crucial factor in organizational success. Engaged employees are described as individuals who are enthusiastic about their work, exhibit a sense of purpose and fulfillment, and are willing to go above and beyond in contributing to the organization's achievements. Employee engagement is

pivotal in today's dynamic and competitive business landscape, emphasizing that engaged employees play a key role in driving organizational success. It is noted that employee engagement is essential for organizations to thrive in a rapidly changing environment, where employees are encouraged to express themselves cognitively, physically, and emotionally in their roles. This highlights the idea that engaged employees are more likely to be proactive, innovative, and committed to achieving both individual and organizational goals (Marcus & Gopinath, 2017). The study conducted by Adeniji *et al.* (2020) also points out that leadership and supervisor roles are fundamental drivers of employee engagement, indicating that effective leadership styles and practices can significantly impact the level of engagement among employees. It is suggested that leaders who understand and prioritize employee engagement can create a positive work culture that fosters high levels of engagement and commitment among employees. This highlights the role of leadership in shaping the organizational climate and influencing employee attitudes and behaviors.

2.1. Transformational Leadership Style

Transformational leadership is a style of leadership that involves coordinating interactions among stakeholders to focus on a shared collective purpose. This approach aims to significantly boost motivation and inspiration within the organization. By doing so, it seeks to activate, transform, motivate, and elevate the ethical actions and aspirations of followers, as described by Simola et al. (2012). Geib and Swenson (2013) further elaborate that transformational leadership strives to bring about positive changes in followers and achieves the desired transformation through strategic and structural changes within the organization.

Jong and Hartog (2007), along with Kent, Crotts, and Aziz (2001), emphasize that transformational leaders have the unique ability to help followers see challenges from new perspectives. This capability enables followers to realize their full potential and enhances their creativity. Transformational leadership focuses on the growth and productivity of followers by nurturing their value systems, boosting their motivation, and strengthening their ethical standards. According to Bass, the primary objective of transformational leadership is to fundamentally "transform" individuals and organizations. This transformation involves changing their mindsets, broadening their vision, deepening their understanding, aligning their behaviors with core values and principles, and fostering lasting, self-sustaining changes that create positive momentum.

The core concern of transformational leadership is the development of followers and addressing their needs. Leaders who adopt this style focus on enhancing the value systems, motivational levels, and ethical foundations of their employees while also refining their skills (Ismail et al., 2009). The concept of transformational leadership, introduced by James MacGregor Burns in 1978, has become a widely discussed paradigm among scholars (Poturak, 2020). Transformational leaders inspire their followers to achieve significant accomplishments and simultaneously strive to improve their own leadership skills and capabilities. These leaders have a profound impact beyond basic leadership responsibilities; they help followers develop into leaders by fostering growth, providing inspiration and motivation, and sharing leadership techniques derived from their own experiences and expertise (Demir et al., 2021). Research shows that transformational leaders create a supportive work environment where employees are encouraged to participate actively, express their opinions, engage in decision-making, and progress within the organizational hierarchy (Tajeddini, 2016).

Transformational leaders often exhibit charisma, a trait associated with charismatic leadership. Charismatic leaders wield significant influence over their followers, who are dedicated to the leader's goals and work diligently to achieve them (Sundi, 2013). According to Bass (2005), "Socialized charismatic leadership is based on egalitarian behavior, serves collective interests, and develops and empowers others." However, both charismatic and transformational leadership styles share a common criticism: they may exploit their followers by compelling them to undertake tasks that could be harmful to themselves, society, or the well-being of the followers.

2.2. Transactional Leadership Style

Transactional leadership focuses on the exchange process between leaders and employees, driven by external demands and specific goals. This approach structures the relationship around achieving organizational objectives through clearly defined roles and mission design, with the primary goal of maintaining stability within the organization. In transactional leadership, there is a reciprocal relationship where the leader offers something to the group in return for a desired outcome. Burns (1978) describes this type of leadership as "exchanging one thing for another; jobs for votes or subsidies for campaign contributions."

This leadership style approves subordinates to meet their needs and reduce anxieties, all while concentrating on the company's vision. Transactional leadership can be applied in various contexts, including both organizational and governmental settings. For example, when a company's leader implements a reward system for employees

who put in extra work hours, it creates a transactional exchange where the leader uses their authority to motivate employees by offering incentives in return for their effort (Mohammed et al., 2020).
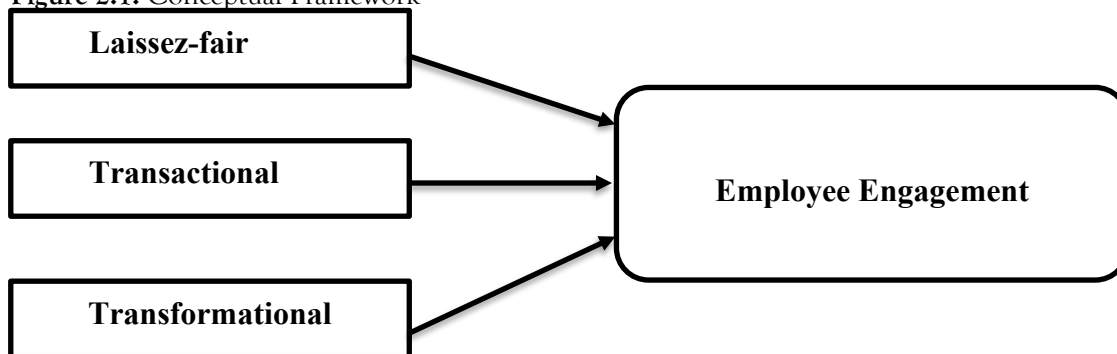
2.3. Transactional Leadership Style

Laissez-faire leadership, also known as free rein or non-directive leadership, empowers team members to work independently and solve their own problems. The leader is available for advice and assistance but provides little to no specific guidance to followers. This style promotes freedom of choice for employees, allowing them to operate autonomously and make decisions according to their own discretion. Laissez-faire leaders typically do not give feedback on completed tasks (Smion, 2014). Leaders who adopt a laissez-faire approach show minimal concern for the actions of their followers and the resulting impact on organizational outcomes. This lack of involvement often leads to the demotivation of their followers. Due to these negative traits, laissez-faire leadership is often considered a non-leadership style and is generally dismissed from the outset (Anderson & McColl-Kennedy, 2005; Robbins & Coulter, 2007).

2.4. Conceptual Framework

As outlined in the literature review section, Figure 2.1 illustrates the connection between the chosen independent variables and the dependent variable.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

Source: Adapted from Draganska and Vitorino (2022)

Hypothesis

Ho_1: Transformational leadership style has no significant effect on employee engagement.
Ho_2: Transactional leadership style has no significant effect on employee engagement.
Ho_3: Laissez-fair leadership style has no significant effect on employee engagement.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the study on the impact of leadership style on employee engagement within higher academic institutions in Ethiopia, the researcher effectively used both descriptive and explanatory research designs. A descriptive study design allows researchers to systematically gather, summarize, interpret, and present data to achieve clarity and understanding (Cresswell, 2003). An explanatory research design is most effective when the research aims to identify associated factors or determine the key predictors of the dependent variable (Demissie & Lamoria, 2025). In this study, a quantitative research approach was employed, focusing on the collection of numerical data such as scores, metrics, and other quantitative indicators.

The data was sourced directly from employees at higher academic institutions in Ethiopia. Within the selected higher institutions boasting a workforce of 5242 employees, the necessity for meticulous sampling procedures became apparent to ensure comprehensive research outcomes. Guided by Yamane's (1967) formula and accounting for a five percent margin of error, researchers calculated a sample size of 384 individuals, aiming for a representative cross-section of the employee population. This approach, recognized for its efficacy in large-scale studies, sought to minimize sampling bias and enhance the generalizability of findings. The sample will be gathered using stratified random sampling. The research utilized a questionnaire as its main tool for gathering data, which included a mix of open-ended and closed-ended questions. This approach aimed to gather pertinent and trustworthy information from the chosen participants. The data collection process was supervised by the researcher and trained enumerators, ensuring a methodical and dependable approach to collecting data. Data analysis entails converting raw information into a format that is useful for decision-making by both users and researchers. After gathering the data, it is crucial to examine it thoroughly for valuable insights. The data collected

from the questionnaire underwent coding, entry, editing, and analysis using SPSS software version 26. Correlation analysis was utilized to explore the relationship between leadership style and employee engagement, while multiple linear regression was used to assess the impact of leadership style on employee engagement.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, the outcomes of the analysis were shown, followed by a thorough discussion of what was found. The careful gathering of data and its detailed analysis has provided valuable insights into various parts of the topic being studied. By closely looking at the data, the researchers aim to give a detailed understanding of the trends, patterns, and connections observed, explaining their importance within the broader scope of the study. This section is crucial as it's where the actual data meets the theories, helping to have a strong and well-informed conversation about the main points of the research.

Table 4.1: *Correlation Analysis Result*

Variable		Transformational	Transactional	Laissez-faire	Employee Engagement
Transformational	r	1			
	n	372			
Transactional	r	.557**	1		
	Sig	<.001			
	n	372	372		
Laissez-faire	r	-.555**	-.445**	1	
	Sig	<.001	<.001		
	n	372	372	372	
Employee Engagement	r	.663**	.723**	-.613**	1
	Sig	<.001	<.001	<.001	
	n	372	372	372	372

Note: **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: Model output, 2024

The correlation matrix above presents the relationships between transformational, transactional, laissez-faire leadership styles, and employee engagement. Firstly, there is a strong positive correlation between transformational leadership and employee engagement (r = 0.663, p < .001), indicating that as transformational leadership increases, so does employee engagement. This suggests that leaders who inspire and motivate their employees tend to have higher levels of engagement among their workforce.

Secondly, there is also a strong positive correlation between transactional leadership and employee engagement (r = 0.723, p < .001). This implies that leaders who focus on rewarding employees for meeting specific goals or expectations also tend to have higher levels of employee engagement. Transactional leaders often provide clear guidelines and incentives, which can contribute to a sense of accomplishment and motivation among employees. Conversely, there is a strong negative correlation between laissez-faire leadership and employee engagement (r = -0.613, p < .001). This suggests that leaders who adopt a hands-off approach and provide little to no guidance or direction tend to have lower levels of employee engagement. Employees may feel unsupported or uncertain about their roles and responsibilities under laissez-faire leadership, leading to decreased engagement and productivity. Overall, these findings highlight the significant impact that different leadership styles can have on employee engagement within an organization.

Table 4.2: *Model Summary of the Regression Analysis*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.817[a]	.667	.665	.16833

a. Predictors: (Constant), Laissez-faire, Transactional, Transformational
Source: Model output, 2024

The multiple linear regression analysis model summary, as depicted in Table 4.2, reveals crucial insights into the relationship between the independent variables (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership) and the dependent variable (employee engagement). The R-value of 0.817 indicates a strong correlation between the

independent and dependent variables, suggesting a robust relationship. This means that the leadership styles included in the model collectively have a significant influence on employee engagement.

Furthermore, the R-squared (R^2) value of 0.667 indicates that approximately 66.7% of the variation in employee engagement can be explained by the combination of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. This suggests that these leadership styles together have a substantial impact on the level of employee engagement within the organization. These findings underscore the importance of considering multiple factors, including leadership styles, when examining employee engagement. While transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles explain a significant portion of the variance in employee engagement, there may be other factors not accounted for in the model that also influence employee engagement levels. Further research and analysis could help identify these additional factors and provide a more comprehensive understanding of employee engagement dynamics within the organization.

Table 4.3: *Results of ANOVA Output*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	20.915	3	6.972	246.055	<.001[b]
	Residual	10.427	368	.028		
	Total	31.342	371			
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Laissez-faire, Transactional, Transformational						

Source: Model output, 2024

The model summary table presents the results of the regression analysis, showcasing the relationship between the independent variables (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership) and the dependent variable (employee engagement). The regression analysis indicates that the model as a whole is statistically significant ($F_{(3, 368)} = 246.055$, $p < .001$). This means that the combination of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles significantly predicts employee engagement levels. Specifically, the regression model accounts for a significant amount of variance in employee engagement, as indicated by the large F-value ($F_{(3, 368)} = 246.055$) and the associated p-value of $< .001$. This suggests that the model's predictors collectively contribute to explaining the variation in employee engagement.

Table 4.4: *Results of Multiple Linear Regression Analysis*

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistics	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	2.181	.183		11.919	<.001		
	Transformational	.190	.029	.260	6.538	<.001	.572	1.747
	Transactional	.394	.031	.462	12.509	<.001	.663	1.508
	Laissez-faire	-.189	.027	-.263	-7.128	<.001	.665	1.503
a. Dependent Variable: Employee Engagement								

Source: Model output, 2024

The unstandardized coefficient for transformational leadership ($B = 0.190$, $p < .001$) indicates a statistically significant positive relationship with employee engagement. This suggests that for every one-unit increase in transformational leadership, there is a corresponding increase of 0.190 units in employee engagement. This finding underscores the importance of transformational leadership behaviors, such as inspiring and motivating employees, in fostering higher levels of engagement within the organization. Leaders who exhibit transformational qualities, such as vision, charisma, and empowerment, are more likely to cultivate a positive work environment that encourages employee commitment and productivity, ultimately contributing to organizational success. . This is in line with previous studies that have found a positive correlation between transformational leadership and employee engagement, with the link potentially being explained by the ability of transformational leaders to instill a sense of meaningfulness and purpose in their followers. The study by Mazzetti & Schaufeli (2022) and Ghadi et al. (2013) indicated that the relationship between transformational leadership and employee engagement is partially mediated by employees' perceptions of meaning in their work.

This suggests that transformational leaders can enhance employee engagement by helping employees find greater purpose and significance in their roles

Transactional leadership (B = 0.394, p < .001) reveals a statistically significant positive relationship with employee engagement. This suggests that for every one-unit increase in transactional leadership, there is a corresponding increase of 0.394 units in employee engagement. Transactional leaders, who focus on rewarding employees for meeting specific goals and expectations, play a crucial role in fostering a sense of accomplishment and motivation among employees. By providing clear guidelines and incentives, transactional leaders contribute to higher levels of engagement and performance within the organization, ultimately driving towards achieving organizational objectives. A study by Mittal (2023) indicated that transactional leadership is a well-established leadership style that has garnered significant attention in the academic literature. This leadership approach emphasizes the importance of setting clear expectations, defining roles and responsibilities, and using rewards and punishments to drive employee performance. The researcher further argued that that transactional leadership can be particularly effective in situations where efficiency, accountability, and immediate feedback are paramount.

The unstandardized coefficient for laissez-faire leadership (B = -0.189, p < .001) demonstrates a statistically significant negative relationship with employee engagement. This implies that for every one-unit increase in laissez-faire leadership, there is a decrease of 0.189 units in employee engagement. Leaders who adopt a hands-off approach and provide little to no guidance or direction may leave employees feeling unsupported or uncertain about their roles and responsibilities. As a result, employee engagement levels tend to decline under laissez-faire leadership, potentially impacting organizational effectiveness and performance negatively. However, A study by Zhang et al. (2023) suggested that laissez-faire leadership may not always lead to negative outcomes, as it can promote employee autonomy and empowerment. In supporting the current finding Mittal (2023) indicated that laissez-faire leadership has a negative relationship with employ engagement. This type of leadership style, characterized by a hands-off approach where leaders provide little to no direction or guidance, has been shown to have detrimental effects on employee outcomes. Laissez-faire leaders tend to be passive and avoid making decisions, which can lead to confusion, lack of accountability, and decreased performance among their subordinates.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the significant impact of leadership styles on employee engagement within organizational settings. The analysis indicates that both transformational and transactional leadership styles positively influence employee engagement, while laissez-faire leadership exhibits a negative effect. Transformational and transactional leaders, by inspiring, motivating, and providing clear direction, contribute to heightened levels of employee engagement. Conversely, laissez-faire leaders, with their hands-off approach, tend to diminish employee engagement levels. These findings underscore the pivotal role of leadership behaviors in shaping organizational dynamics and employee satisfaction.

Based on these insights, organizations should prioritize the cultivation and reinforcement of transformational and transactional leadership qualities among their leaders. Investing in leadership development programs that emphasize these attributes can empower leaders to inspire their teams, set clear goals, and provide meaningful feedback, thus fostering a culture of engagement and commitment. Additionally, organizations should ensure that leadership roles are filled by individuals who demonstrate a genuine commitment to employee well-being and empowerment. By nurturing a supportive and collaborative leadership environment, organizations can cultivate a motivated and engaged workforce, leading to enhanced productivity, retention, and overall organizational success.

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