

Leadership Styles and Organizational Performance in Contemporary Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically reviews the relationship between four influential approaches to leadership—transformational, transactional, servant, and distributed leadership—and organizationally relevant outcomes. It retains the distinction between theoretical propositions and empirical associations and examines evidence concerning motivation, innovation, and performance. The review draws primarily on established meta-analyses, systematic reviews, conceptual critiques, and recent evidence syntheses. The evidence indicates that transformational leadership is consistently associated with follower attitudes and several forms of performance, while contingent reward also shows a substantial and sometimes incremental relationship with task performance. Servant leadership has developed a more coherent conceptual and empirical base and appears to explain some incremental variance beyond transformational leadership, although measurement diversity remains a limitation. Distributed leadership is analytically different from the other approaches because it treats leadership as a practice distributed across people and situations rather than as a single leader characteristic. Recent evidence further strengthens the case for treating context as a boundary condition rather than assuming that leadership effects are uniform across sectors, cultures, occupations, or time. The review therefore does not support the proposition that one leadership style is universally superior. Instead, it suggests that organizations should distinguish among leadership functions, outcome types, and contextual conditions when evaluating leadership development and performance.

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Introduction

Leadership research is often presented in practical language: managers should be visionary, employees should be empowered, and organizations should distribute responsibility. The empirical literature is more qualified. Many studies report positive relationships between particular leadership behaviors and employee or unit outcomes, but the evidence also contains overlapping constructs, common-method concerns, contextual variation, and substantial reliance on perceptual measures. A critical review therefore needs to distinguish what a theory proposes from what research has actually established.

This paper examines leadership styles and organizational performance across contemporary institutions, using the term broadly to include private firms, public agencies, hospitals, universities, and schools. The review does not assume that the same performance criterion has the same meaning across these settings. For a business, performance may involve productivity, sales, or innovation; for a school, it may involve student achievement and teacher outcomes; and for a public organization, it may involve service delivery, compliance, or institutional effectiveness. These differences matter when findings are transferred from one setting to another.

The review focuses on transformational, transactional, servant, and distributed leadership. Transformational and transactional leadership are central to the full-range model associated with Bass and later operationalized through the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Avolio et al., 1999; Bass, 1985). Servant leadership places follower development and service at the centre of leadership practice (Eva et al., 2019; Greenleaf, 2002). Distributed leadership shifts attention from the attributes of an individual leader to the interaction of leaders, followers, and organizational situations (Spillane et al., 2004; Spillane, 2005).

The purpose is not to construct a league table of styles. Instead, the review asks which claims are supported by replicated evidence, which remain conditional, and which require stronger designs. This approach is particularly important because leadership research frequently uses the word 'performance' without distinguishing task performance, contextual performance, team performance, organizational performance, or independently observed outcomes.

A further conceptual point concerns the word 'style'. Quantitative studies often measure dimensions of behavior rather than stable personality categories. An individual may display transformational, transactional, and other leadership behaviors in the same period. Treating a person as belonging to one exclusive style can therefore create a level of precision that the measures do not justify.

Research Problem

Organizations invest heavily in leadership development on the assumption that leadership affects performance. Yet organizational performance is also shaped by strategy, resources, technology, labor markets, institutional rules, professional norms, and external shocks. The research problem is therefore not simply whether leadership matters, but how particular leadership behaviors are related to particular outcomes under particular conditions.

A related scholarly problem is construct overlap. Transformational leadership became a dominant framework, while later forms of positive leadership—including servant, ethical, and authentic leadership—have had to demonstrate that they capture something beyond transformational leadership. Hoch et al. (2018) directly addressed this issue through meta-analysis. Distributed leadership raises a different question because its unit of analysis is not a single supervisor but leadership practice across people and situations. Earlier conceptual criticism also cautioned against heroic and insufficiently specified accounts of transformational and charismatic leadership (Yukl, 1999).

The central problem addressed by this review is therefore the gap between the broad claims made about leadership styles and the more limited, context-dependent evidence available about their relationships with motivation, innovation, and performance.

Research Questions

- How do transformational, transactional, servant, and distributed leadership differ conceptually, and where do their constructs overlap?
- What do major meta-analyses and reviews indicate about their relationships with employee motivation, innovation, and performance?
- What methodological, contextual, and ethical problems arise when these approaches are measured or applied in contemporary institutions?
- What comparative lessons can reasonably be drawn without assuming that one leadership approach is universally superior?

Objectives

- to clarify the principal concepts and assumptions of the four approaches;
- to distinguish theoretical mechanisms from replicated empirical associations;
- to compare the approaches using common outcome categories while recognizing differences in measurement and unit of analysis;
- to examine motivation, innovation, and performance as related but distinct outcomes;
- to identify methodological and contextual limitations in the evidence base; and
- to develop evidence-consistent recommendations for leadership development and future research.

Literature Review

Transformational leadership emerged from Burns's (1978) distinction between transforming and transactional leadership and was developed into a more operational model by Bass (1985). The full-range framework treats transformational behaviors as involving idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, alongside transactional and laissez-faire dimensions. A central theoretical proposition is that transformational behaviors can generate effort beyond basic exchange. Meta-analytic evidence supports meaningful associations, but it does not by itself establish a universal causal effect on organizational performance.

Judge and Piccolo (2004) synthesized 626 correlations from 87 sources and reported an overall validity of .44 for transformational leadership, .39 for contingent reward, and $-.37$ for laissez-faire leadership. They also reported a strong correlation between transformational leadership and contingent reward ($r = .80$). These results are important because they undermine a simple opposition between transformational and transactional leadership. Wang et al. (2011), using 117 independent samples from 113 primary studies, further found positive relationships between transformational leadership and individual, team, and organizational performance. However, the augmentation pattern differed by criterion: transformational leadership added beyond contingent reward for contextual and team performance, whereas contingent reward explained incremental variance in individual task performance.

Servant leadership developed from Greenleaf's (2002) account of leadership as service and has since become a substantial research stream. Eva et al. (2019) systematically reviewed 285 articles published from 1998 to 2018 and identified substantial growth but also conceptual and measurement diversity. Their review highlighted 16 servant-leadership measures and argued for greater conceptual discipline. Hoch et al. (2018) found that servant leadership explained additional variance beyond transformational leadership across follower outcomes, although the size and stability of this

distinctiveness should not be interpreted as evidence that servant leadership is universally more effective.

Distributed leadership developed largely in educational research and treats leadership as a practice constituted through interactions among leaders, followers, and situational resources and routines (Spillane et al., 2004; Spillane, 2005). MacBeath (2005), for example, identified multiple forms of distribution in English schools rather than a single model. A later meta-analysis by Tian et al. (2016) similarly emphasized the continuing conceptual and empirical development of the field. The distributed approach is therefore not readily comparable to the other three approaches as a single leader-centered behavioral scale.

Recent evidence reinforces the need for contextual interpretation. Abbas and Ali (2023), in a meta-analysis of project leadership, found that project and country characteristics moderated the relationships between transformational or transactional leadership and project success. Bonini et al. (2024) found a positive overall relationship between leadership and adaptive performance but did not find clear differences among leadership styles in the studies they synthesized. Most directly relevant to the present review, Maneethai et al. (2026) synthesized 625 samples, 937 transformational-leadership outcome correlations, and more than 200,000 participants across four decades. They found continued positive associations with attitudinal and performance outcomes but significant occupational, cultural, and temporal differences. This recent evidence materially strengthens the article's central caution: leadership effects should not be treated as context-free.

Leadership Theories

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is commonly described through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Avolio et al., 1999; Bass, 1985). The theory proposes that leaders influence followers not only through exchange but also by shaping meaning, challenging assumptions, modelling standards, and attending to individual development.

The empirical evidence is substantial but should be stated precisely. Judge and Piccolo (2004) reported an overall validity of .44 for transformational leadership across 626 correlations from 87 sources. Wang et al. (2011) later synthesized 117 independent samples and found positive relationships with performance across individual, team, and organizational levels. Their findings also showed that transformational leadership did not uniformly add beyond contingent reward: the augmentation effect was present for contextual and team performance, but not for individual task performance. This distinction is central to an accurate interpretation of the evidence.

More recent evidence makes the contextual qualification even stronger. Maneethai et al. (2026) found that transformational leadership continued to predict several attitudinal and performance outcomes, but its levels and effects varied by occupation, culture, and time. The finding does not invalidate transformational leadership; rather, it limits claims that the approach operates in the same way across all institutional settings.

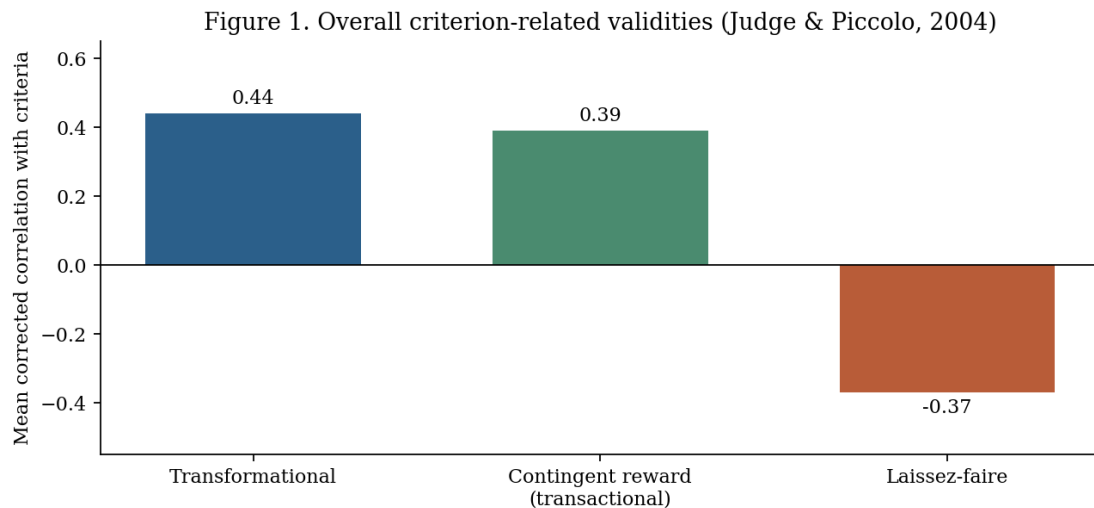
Transactional Leadership

Transactional leadership is based on exchange. Contingent reward involves clarifying expectations and recognizing achievement, while management-by-exception involves intervention when standards are not met. Laissez-faire represents a withdrawal or absence of active leadership within the full-range model (Avolio et al., 1999; Bass, 1985).

Judge and Piccolo (2004) reported an overall validity of .39 for contingent reward, close to the .44 estimate for transformational leadership. Management-by-exception showed less consistent

relationships. The same study reported a strong correlation between transformational leadership and contingent reward, indicating that these behaviors are not independent alternatives.

Wang et al. (2011) provide an especially useful qualification: contingent reward explained incremental variance in individual task performance beyond transformational leadership, whereas transformational leadership added beyond contingent reward for individual contextual and team performance. Transactional leadership should therefore not be treated as merely a weaker version of transformational leadership. Clear standards, recognition, and follow-through may perform different functions from inspiration and developmental attention.



Note. Based on 626 correlations from 87 sources. Values are overall validities across criteria reported by Judge and Piccolo (2004).

Figure 1. Overall criterion-related validities reported by Judge and Piccolo (2004).

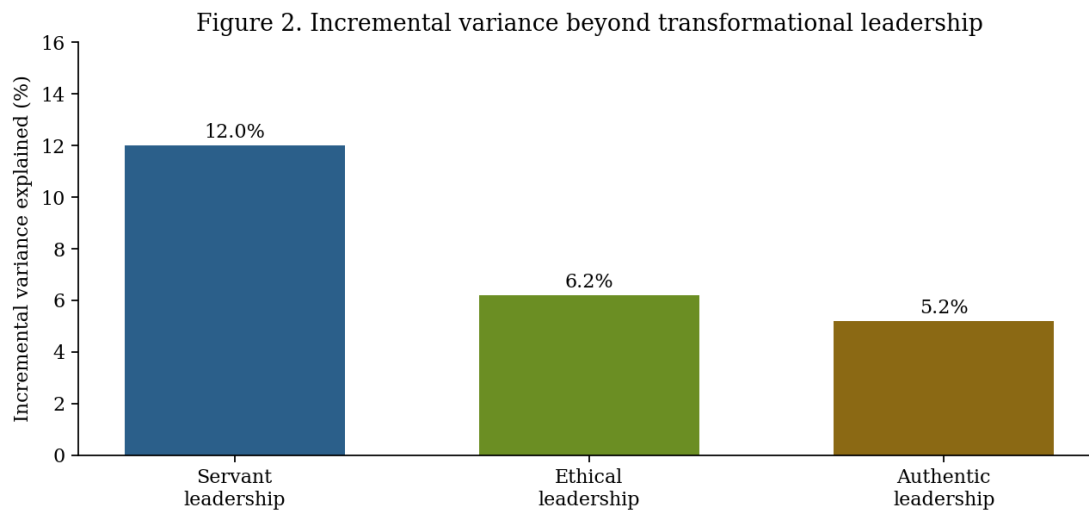
Servant Leadership

Servant leadership places service to followers and their development at the centre of leadership. Greenleaf's (2002) formulation emphasizes a leader's primary orientation toward serving others, while contemporary research has sought to define and measure the construct more precisely.

Eva et al. (2019) reviewed 285 articles and identified 16 measures, illustrating both the growth of the field and the problem of conceptual proliferation. Their systematic review also argued for a clearer definition of servant leadership as an other-oriented approach that prioritizes follower needs and redirects concern toward the wider organization and community.

Hoch et al. (2018) provide one of the strongest reasons to include servant leadership in a critical comparison. In their meta-analysis, servant leadership explained incremental variance beyond transformational leadership across the outcomes they examined, with an average incremental contribution reported at approximately 12%, compared with smaller average increments for ethical and authentic leadership. The result supports the proposition that servant leadership is not simply a relabeling of transformational leadership. It does not, however, establish superior effects on independently measured organizational performance.

Servant leadership therefore has a credible conceptual and empirical place in the field, but its evidence base remains more concentrated on follower and relational outcomes than on audited organizational indicators. Measurement diversity also remains an important limitation.



Source: Hoch, Bommer, Dulebohn, and Wu (2018), as summarized in Eva et al. (2019).
Percentages refer to incremental variance in follower outcomes beyond transformational leadership.

Figure 2. Incremental variance in follower outcomes beyond transformational leadership, based on Hoch et al. (2018).

Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership differs from the other approaches because it changes the unit of analysis. Spillane et al. (2004) conceptualized leadership practice as constituted through interactions among leaders, followers, and situational aspects of the organization. Spillane (2005) developed this perspective as a challenge to explanations that locate leadership entirely in the individual office-holder.

MacBeath (2005), drawing on research in English schools, identified several forms of distribution ranging from more formal delegation to more cultural forms of shared practice. This evidence illustrates why distributed leadership should not be equated with simply assigning more titles or tasks to staff. The quality of distribution depends on authority, expertise, routines, relationships, and context.

The evidence base is also less directly comparable with the meta-analytic literature on transformational and transactional leadership. A distributed-leadership study may examine how meetings, routines, expertise, and decision processes jointly constitute leadership practice rather than produce a single effect size for an individual leader. Treating distributed leadership as a fourth score on the same 'style' scale would therefore misrepresent the construct.

Methodology

This study uses a critical narrative review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. The original draft's core sources were retained where they could be independently verified. Priority was given to peer-reviewed meta-analyses, systematic reviews, established conceptual articles, and original books that define the relevant theories. Additional recent evidence was included where it materially improved the treatment of context and contemporary research.

The review was organized around four leadership approaches and three broad outcome domains: motivation, innovation, and performance. Evidence was classified conceptually as theoretical when a source proposed a mechanism without directly testing it, and as empirical when the cited study reported observed associations or meta-analytic estimates. Correlational findings are described as associations rather than causal effects.

Verification was conducted against publisher, journal, DOI, bibliographic, or institutional records. The review does not claim to be exhaustive and does not provide a reproducible systematic-search protocol. It is also limited by the concentration of influential evidence in English-language and Western scholarship. Those limitations should be considered when interpreting the breadth of the conclusions.

Leadership and Employee Motivation

Motivation is often presented as the mechanism connecting leadership to performance, but the evidence requires careful separation of constructs. Transformational leadership proposes that inspirational motivation and individualized consideration can increase the meaning attached to work and encourage effort beyond formal requirements (Bass, 1985). Empirical studies frequently find positive relationships between transformational leadership and follower satisfaction, commitment, and extra effort, but these measures do not by themselves establish a change in observed work effort.

Transactional contingent reward follows a different motivational logic. Clear expectations and recognition create an exchange between performance and valued outcomes. Judge and Piccolo's (2004) meta-analysis indicates that contingent reward has a substantial relationship with leadership criteria and should not be treated as an outdated or inherently inferior form of leadership. Wang et al. (2011) further show that its incremental contribution is particularly relevant to individual task performance.

Servant leadership places follower development, empowerment, and well-being closer to the centre of the motivational account. The evidence summarized by Eva et al. (2019) and Hoch et al. (2018) supports relationships with follower outcomes, including some incremental validity beyond transformational leadership. The safer interpretation is that servant leadership is associated with motivationally relevant outcomes; the review does not claim that it uniquely causes motivation.

Distributed leadership complicates the motivational story because influence may depend on whether employees have meaningful participation in decisions and access to expertise rather than on the behavior of a single supervisor. That proposition is plausible, but evidence is more context-bound and less consistently measured than in the transformational and transactional literatures.

Finally, leadership is only one source of motivation. Pay, workload, job design, professional identity, peer relationships, organizational justice, and institutional constraints can affect motivation independently of the immediate leader. Leadership research becomes misleading when the manager is treated as the organization's principal motivational technology.

Leadership and Organizational Innovation

Innovation is a more demanding outcome than satisfaction because it involves both generating ideas and implementing them. Rosing et al. (2011) reviewed and meta-analytically integrated research on leadership and innovation and argued that innovation requires both exploration and exploitation. Their ambidextrous-leadership model therefore distinguishes opening behaviors that encourage exploration from closing behaviors that support implementation and delivery.

This framework helps explain why no single leadership behavior should be expected to dominate every phase of innovation. Intellectual stimulation may support exploration, whereas contingent reward, monitoring, and structured follow-through may become more relevant during implementation. The implication is not that leaders must switch between named 'styles', but that leadership behavior should respond to the stage and demands of the innovation process.

Servant and distributed leadership may also support innovation through different mechanisms. Servant leadership may encourage development, trust, and participation, while distributed leadership can bring expertise from multiple actors into decisions. These mechanisms should be treated as plausible pathways unless a particular study directly measures innovation outcomes. Perceptions of an innovative climate are not equivalent to observed implementation, process change, patents, or new products.

Recent research on adaptive performance reinforces the importance of this distinction. Bonini et al. (2024) found a positive overall association between leadership and adaptive performance but did not find clear evidence that one leadership style was differentially related to adaptive performance

across the studies reviewed. The finding is consistent with a function- and context-based interpretation rather than a style-ranking approach.

Leadership and Organizational Performance

Organizational performance should not be treated as a single dependent variable. Individual task performance, contextual performance, team performance, organizational effectiveness, and independently audited outcomes represent different levels and criteria. Wang et al. (2011) are especially useful because their meta-analysis separates these levels rather than treating all forms of performance as interchangeable.

Transformational leadership was positively related to individual, team, and organizational performance in Wang et al.'s (2011) synthesis. However, the augmentation pattern differed across criteria, with contingent reward remaining important for individual task performance. Judge and Piccolo (2004) similarly found substantial associations for transformational and contingent-reward leadership, while laissez-faire leadership was negatively related to the criteria they examined.

Servant leadership has a growing performance literature, but much of the strongest evidence concerns follower and relational outcomes. Distributed leadership has particularly extensive discussion in educational settings, where leadership practice may be related to student and teacher outcomes. Wu and Shen (2022), in a meta-meta-analysis of 12 prior meta-analyses, found a positive relationship between principal leadership and student achievement ($d = 0.34$), while also concluding that the available evidence did not justify claiming that one leadership model was more effective than others and that educational context moderated effects.

Project-based evidence also illustrates the importance of context. Abbas and Ali (2023) synthesized 64 effect sizes from 41 primary studies and found that project size, project type, and some country-level characteristics moderated the relationships between transformational or transactional leadership and project success. Such evidence makes it difficult to defend a general claim that one style produces a predictable percentage increase in organizational performance.

The recent four-decade meta-analysis by Maneethai et al. (2026) provides the strongest contemporary qualification. Across 625 samples and more than 200,000 participants, transformational leadership remained positively associated with several outcomes, but significant occupational, cultural, and temporal differences were observed. The appropriate conclusion is therefore that leadership matters, but the meaning and magnitude of its relationships with performance depend on the outcome and context.

Challenges in Applying Leadership Theories

Measurement is the first challenge. The MLQ has a substantial empirical history, but its factor structure and ratings can vary with context (Antonakis et al., 2003; Avolio et al., 1999). Transformational and contingent-reward dimensions are also strongly related. Servant leadership has multiple measures, and distributed leadership is not reducible to one individual-level scale (Eva et al., 2019; Spillane et al., 2004). Organizations should therefore avoid treating a single survey score as a complete description of organizational leadership.

Construct overlap is a second challenge. Hoch et al. (2018) showed that ethical and authentic leadership explain less incremental variance beyond transformational leadership than servant leadership in their meta-analysis. This does not make the newer constructs useless, but it does require researchers to demonstrate conceptual and empirical distinctiveness rather than simply changing labels.

Heroic bias is a third challenge. Yukl (1999) identified conceptual and methodological weaknesses in transformational and charismatic theories, including problems of construct validation and insufficient specification of how leadership operates. Distributed leadership offers a useful corrective because it directs attention toward organizational routines and interactions. However, the opposite error is also possible: distributing responsibilities without providing authority, time, resources, or accountability can amount to work intensification rather than meaningful leadership distribution.

Context is a fourth challenge. Occupational roles, professional norms, organizational structures, national culture, power distance, crisis conditions, and institutional rules can shape how leadership behavior is interpreted and whether it is useful. Recent meta-analytic evidence confirms that contextual moderators should not be treated as minor exceptions (Abbas & Ali, 2023; Maneethai et al., 2026).

Ethics is a fifth challenge. Inspiration can become pressure when commitment is demanded rather than earned. Servant-leadership language can become paternalistic if leaders claim to know what is best for followers. Distributed leadership can become problematic when responsibility is shared without genuine decision authority. These risks do not disprove the theories; they show why implementation requires institutional safeguards.

Time and causal direction are further problems. Many leadership studies are cross-sectional, making it difficult to determine whether leadership improves performance, whether successful organizations produce more favorable leadership ratings, or whether both processes occur. Longitudinal and multisource evidence improves the position, but it does not eliminate the problem. The appropriate language is therefore 'associated with' unless a design supports a stronger causal claim.

Finally, common-method bias and halo effects can inflate observed relationships when the same respondent rates leadership and outcomes. Future evaluations should, where feasible, combine leadership measures with temporally separated outcomes, independent performance indicators, multiple raters, and objective organizational data.

Comparative Discussion

The four approaches should not be treated as four mutually exclusive identities. Transformational and transactional leadership share a measurement family and have the most developed meta-analytic evidence in this review. Servant leadership places greater emphasis on service and follower development and has evidence of incremental validity beyond transformational leadership. Distributed leadership addresses a different analytical question by examining how leadership work is distributed through people, interactions, and organizational situations.

The comparison is more useful when framed in terms of functions and outcomes. Where role clarity, standards, recognition, and follow-through are weak, contingent-reward behaviors may be directly relevant. Where contextual performance, shared purpose, or developmental attention are important, transformational behaviors may be relevant. Where follower development and service are central concerns, servant-leadership practices may offer a useful framework. Where leadership is embedded in professional teams and routines, distributed leadership may provide a more appropriate unit of analysis.

These statements are not recommendations to select a single style. They are propositions about fit between a problem and a set of behaviors or practices. The evidence does not justify treating any one approach as universally superior.

Table 1. Comparison of four leadership approaches (synthesis of the sources reviewed).

Approach	Core idea	What is better established	What remains more theoretical or bounded
Transformational	Inspire, model, stimulate thinking, and attend to individuals.	Replicated positive associations with follower and unit criteria; contextual and team performance show evidence of incremental value beyond contingent reward in some analyses.	Causal claims about institutional results; universal applicability; clean separation from contingent reward.
Transactional	Clarify goals, recognize achievement, and correct deviations.	Contingent reward has a substantial overall association with criteria and explains incremental variance in individual task performance in Wang et al. (2011).	Management-by-exception findings are less consistent; “transactional” is too broad if treated as one homogeneous construct.
Servant	Prioritize follower development, service, and wider organizational/community interests.	Growing evidence base and incremental validity beyond transformational leadership for follower outcomes.	Measurement diversity; less evidence on audited organizational outcomes; causal claims remain limited.
Distributed	Treat leadership as practice stretched across people, interactions, and situation.	Strong conceptual alternative to leader-hero models; useful in schools and professional settings.	Less directly comparable effect-size literature; risk of confusing genuine distribution with delegation or extra work.

Discussion

The evidence reviewed here supports a moderate rather than maximal conclusion. Leadership behaviors are meaningfully associated with employee attitudes and several performance criteria, but the named styles are not cleanly separable and their effects are not uniform. Transformational leadership has the largest accumulated quantitative evidence among the approaches considered, while contingent reward also shows substantial validity. Servant leadership has demonstrated some incremental distinctiveness, and distributed leadership contributes by changing the unit of analysis rather than by supplying another individual-level style score.

The meaning of organizational performance is particularly important. Evidence is stronger when the outcome is a follower attitude, contextual behavior, or rated effectiveness than when the outcome is an independently audited institutional result. This distinction should be explicit in both research and management practice. A positive relationship between leadership ratings and employee satisfaction should not be translated into a claim that a leadership programme caused revenue growth, student achievement, or public-service effectiveness.

The review also identifies a continuing research gap. The literature contains far more evidence about how followers describe their leaders than about what happens when organizations deliberately change leadership behavior and then assess independent outcomes over time. This is especially important for leadership-development programmes, where the intervention and evaluation often use closely related questionnaires. Stronger designs would use longitudinal data, multiple raters, objective or independently assessed outcomes, and explicit attention to context.

Recent evidence does not eliminate the value of the established theories; it refines their boundaries. The 2026 meta-analysis by Maneethai et al. demonstrates that transformational leadership remains relevant while showing meaningful occupational, cultural, and temporal variation. Bonini et al. (2024) likewise show that leadership is positively associated with adaptive performance without

establishing a clear superiority of one style. These findings support a functional and contextual approach to leadership rather than a search for a universal style.

Recommendations

- Establish baseline role clarity and performance expectations. Leadership development should not assume that vision and inspiration can compensate for unclear responsibilities, weak follow-through, or poorly defined standards.
- Use transformational behaviors selectively for functions such as shared purpose, intellectual stimulation, development, and contextual cooperation, while retaining task-management and recognition practices where they are needed.
- Treat servant leadership as a set of practices that can strengthen follower development and ethical attention, rather than as a branding exercise or a universal solution.
- In professional and knowledge-intensive institutions, map leadership practice as well as individual leadership behavior. Identify who actually sets direction, coordinates work, makes decisions, and maintains the routines through which leadership occurs.
- Evaluate innovation by distinguishing idea generation from implementation. Opening behaviors and closing behaviors may both be necessary at different stages of an innovation process (Rosing et al., 2011).
- Evaluate leadership-development programmes using outcomes that are not identical to the training questionnaire. Where possible, use independent indicators, multiple raters, and follow-up measurements over time.
- Avoid treating leadership styles as mutually exclusive identities. Research and practice should focus on observable behaviors, functions, and contextual fit rather than on assigning a permanent label to an individual.

Conclusion

This critical narrative review began with a simple question: what can reasonably be said about the relationship between leadership styles and organizational performance? The evidence supports neither the claim that leadership is irrelevant nor the stronger claim that a single style reliably produces superior organizational results.

Transformational leadership and contingent reward have the strongest accumulated quantitative evidence among the four approaches examined. Transformational leadership is positively associated with several follower and performance outcomes, but its effects vary across criteria and contexts. Contingent reward is not merely a lesser form of leadership; evidence indicates an important relationship with task performance. Servant leadership has a substantial and increasingly coherent research base and shows incremental validity beyond transformational leadership for some follower outcomes. Distributed leadership makes a different contribution by examining leadership as a collective practice rather than as an attribute of one office-holder.

The most defensible practical conclusion is therefore functional and contextual. Institutions need leadership that can clarify work, recognize achievement, develop people, coordinate expertise, and support adaptation. Those functions may be carried out through combinations of behaviors rather than through one named style. Future research should place greater emphasis on causal designs, independent performance measures, longitudinal development studies, cross-cultural evidence, and organizational contexts that remain underrepresented in the literature.

The review consequently recommends a smaller and more precise language of leadership. The evidence is sufficiently strong to justify investment in leadership development, but not sufficiently uniform to justify universal prescriptions. A credible leadership strategy should begin with the

institutional problem, identify the relevant leadership function, specify the outcome to be improved, and evaluate the result with measures capable of distinguishing association from change.

Future Research

Future reviews could extend this analysis in three directions. First, relational approaches such as leader-member exchange could be examined alongside style and practice perspectives. Second, evidence from public, private, and third-sector organizations should be synthesized separately before being combined. Third, digital and hybrid workplaces deserve closer attention because individualized consideration, coordination, and distributed practice may operate differently when leadership is mediated by technology. These are directions for further research rather than findings established by the present review.

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