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The Impact of Leadership Style on Employee Performance in Higher Vocational Colleges: A Case Study of Guangxi Finance Vocational and Technical College

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Abstract- This study empirically explores how leadership styles shape the multidimensional employee performance (task, contextual/organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and adaptive performance) of full-time staff at Guangxi Finance Vocational and Technical College (GFVTC), a key vocational education institution in China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Grounded in Bass's Transformational and Transactional Leadership Theory (1990) and Campbell's Multidimensional Job Performance Model (1990), the quantitative research addresses critical gaps in existing literature—scant empirical evidence on leadership-performance relationships in Chinese higher vocational education and the narrow measurement of employee performance in prior studies. Using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and validated performance scales, 186 valid responses were collected from GFVTC's academic, administrative, and technical staff, with correlation and multiple regression analysis applied for data processing. Core findings reveal that transactional leadership is the dominant leadership style perceived by GFVTC's administrative staff, and it exerts the strongest predictive effect on employees' task performance, alongside significant positive impacts on contextual and adaptive performance. This research extends leadership theory's application to Chinese higher vocational education contexts, offering evidence-based practical implications for leadership development and human resource management optimization in vocational colleges, while enriching cross-cultural leadership research in emerging economies.

Keywords: Leadership Style, Transactional Leadership, Employee Performance, Vocational Education, Task Performance, Contextual Performance, Adaptive Performance.

I. Introduction

In recent decades, higher vocational education (HVE) has become a core pillar of talent cultivation in China, undertaking the important mission of aligning educational output with industrial talent demands and boosting regional economic development. As a key vocational education institution in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, GFVTC plays a pivotal role in cultivating professional talents for the regional financial industry and promoting local economic transformation. However, like many domestic higher vocational colleges, GFVTC is confronted with persistent challenges in enhancing employee performance, particularly in the dimensions of teaching quality improvement, administrative efficiency optimization, and industry-university collaboration deepening. Addressing these challenges is essential for GFVTC to maintain institutional competitiveness and adapt to the evolving development requirements of the vocational education sector.

Leadership style has long been identified as a critical antecedent of organizational outcomes, exerting a profound influence on employee motivation, work productivity, and organizational commitment (Bass, 1990; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). Existing scholarly research has indicated that transformational leadership, characterized by vision articulation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, has a positive effect on employee engagement and job performance; in contrast, transactional leadership, which is based on a reward-punishment exchange mechanism, and laissez-faire leadership, featured by passive avoidance of leadership responsibilities, are often found to have weaker or even negative impacts on employee performance (Podsakoff et al., 2006; Skogstad et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the majority of existing studies on leadership style and employee performance are situated in Western cultural contexts or corporate organizational settings, with scarce empirical evidence from the context of higher vocational education in emerging economies such as China. Moreover, employee performance in existing research is often measured in a narrow manner, with excessive focus on task completion while neglecting contextual performance and adaptive performance—two dimensions that are particularly critical for employees in higher vocational colleges to adapt to the dynamic educational environment (Khan & Khan, 2022; Lu,2025).

To fill the aforementioned research gaps, this study takes GFVTC as the research object to explore the relationship between leadership style and multidimensional employee performance in the context of Chinese

higher vocational education. The findings of this study are expected to enrich cross-cultural leadership research, provide evidence-based insights for the educational management of vocational colleges, and further enhance the overall quality and core competitiveness of higher vocational education in Guangxi.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. To study leadership style in higher vocational colleges: A case study of GFVTC.
2. To examine the impact of leadership style on employee performance in higher vocational colleges: A case study of GFVTC.

1.2 Research Framework

The study's conceptual framework posits that leadership styles (independent variables: transformational, transactional, laissez-faire leadership) exert direct effects on employee performance (dependent variable: task, contextual/OCB, adaptive performance). The framework is theoretically guided by three core theories: (1) Bass's Transformational and Transactional Leadership Theories (1990) – to define and operationalize leadership style constructs; (2) Campbell's Model of Job Performance (1990) – to conceptualize employee performance as a three-dimensional construct; (3) Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967) – to contextualize the leadership-performance relationship by acknowledging situational factors (e.g., GFVTC's formalized organizational structure, vocational education task characteristics) that may moderate the effects.

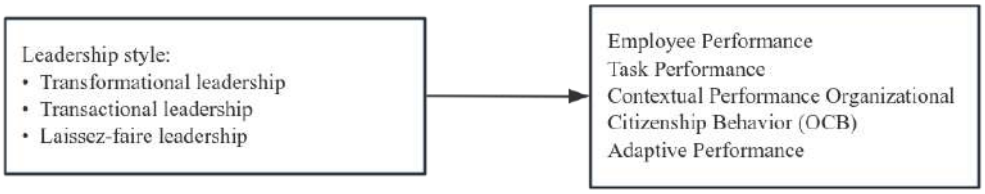

Figure 1. Research Framework

II. Literature Review

This chapter conducts a systematic review of the existing literature on the core variables of the study, namely leadership style and employee performance, by sorting out their conceptual connotations, theoretical foundations and empirical research results. It further clarifies the theoretical connections between the two variables, identifies the contradictions and deficiencies in existing research, and thus lays a theoretical foundation for the subsequent empirical research of this study.

2.1 Concept of Leadership Style

Leadership style refers to the consistent behavioral patterns adopted by leaders to influence, guide and manage subordinates in the process of achieving organizational goals (Bass, 1990). This study focuses on three classic leadership styles that are widely recognized in academic circles:

Transformational leadership: It is a leadership style in which leaders inspire and motivate followers through vision articulation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, and foster followers' intrinsic work motivation (Bass, 1990). In the context of higher vocational colleges, transformational leaders tend to formulate a shared development vision for integrating industry practices into curriculum design, and provide targeted support for faculty to carry out teaching reform and research innovation (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Transactional leadership: It is centered on a reciprocal exchange relationship between leaders and subordinates. Leaders clarify performance expectations for subordinates, and implement reward mechanisms (e.g., recognition, promotion) or punishment measures (e.g., reprimand, performance warning) according to whether subordinates meet the expectations (Bass, 1990). This style emphasizes task completion and compliance with organizational rules and procedures, and is often reflected in linking faculty performance evaluation with objective indicators such as student certification exam pass rates in vocational colleges (Podsakoff et al., 2006).

Laissez-faire leadership: It is defined as a passive or absent leadership style, in which leaders avoid making organizational decisions, neglect their leadership responsibilities, and provide minimal work guidance and performance feedback to subordinates (Skogstad et al., 2007). This "non-leadership" behavior often makes subordinates lack clear work direction, and thus has a negative impact on organizational performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

It should be noted that the three leadership styles are not mutually exclusive; in actual organizational management, leaders usually exhibit a combination of multiple leadership behaviors, with one style being the dominant one that guides their daily decision-making and interpersonal interaction.

2.2 Concept of Employee Performance

Employee performance is a multidimensional construct that encompasses the behavioral outcomes of employees that contribute directly or indirectly to the achievement of organizational goals (Campbell, 1990). Breaking away from the narrow measurement of employee performance in traditional research, this study defines employee performance from three interrelated dimensions in the context of higher vocational colleges:

Task performance: It refers to the core job-related behaviors that employees engage in to directly promote the operation and development of the organization, such as teaching delivery, administrative task completion and student internship supervision for faculty and staff in higher vocational colleges (Campbell, 1990). It is the basic requirement for employees to fulfill their job responsibilities and the core component of organizational performance.

Contextual performance (OCB): It refers to the voluntary and extra-role behaviors of employees that are not explicitly stipulated in job descriptions but are crucial for maintaining organizational operation order and improving team synergy (Williams & Anderson, 1991). In vocational colleges, such behaviors include participating in institutional management committees, assisting colleagues with heavy workloads, and promoting the college's reputation in industry-university cooperation activities.

Adaptive performance: It refers to employees' ability to adjust their work behaviors, professional skills and work methods in response to new or changing work demands (Campbell, 1990). In the context of higher vocational education, which is facing frequent curriculum reform and technological updating, adaptive performance is reflected in faculty modifying teaching methods to adapt to updated industrial technical standards and administrative staff adjusting work processes in response to new educational policies.

2.3 Theories of Leadership Style and Employee Performance

This study is grounded in four key theoretical frameworks, which provide a comprehensive theoretical basis for the definition, operationalization and empirical analysis of the research variables:

Bass's Transformational and Transactional Leadership Theory (1990): This theory clearly distinguishes between transformational leadership and transactional leadership, elaborates on their core behavioral characteristics and influence mechanisms on followers, and is the most important theoretical foundation for the measurement and analysis of leadership style in this study (Bass & Avolio, 1995).

Laissez-faire Leadership Theory: This theory conceptualizes laissez-faire leadership as the absence of active leadership behavior, and reveals its negative impact on subordinate job satisfaction, work engagement and organizational performance, supplementing the research on the three types of leadership styles in this study (Skogstad et al., 2007; Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Campbell's Multidimensional Job Performance Model (1990): This model breaks through the single-dimensional understanding of employee performance and defines it as a multidimensional construct including task performance, contextual performance and adaptive performance, which provides a theoretical basis for the comprehensive measurement of employee performance in this study.

Fiedler's Contingency Theory (1967): This theory holds that the effectiveness of leadership style depends on the matching degree with situational factors such as organizational culture, task structure and follower characteristics. It emphasizes the importance of examining the relationship between leadership style and employee performance in specific organizational contexts, and guides this study to explore the leadership-performance relationship in the unique context of Chinese higher vocational colleges.

III. Methodology

3.1 The Population / Sample Group

The target population of this study comprises 350 full-time employees at GFVTC (as of 2025), categorized into three functional groups based on core responsibilities:

Academic Staff (200 people): Teachers, instructors, and academic researchers engaged in teaching, curriculum development, and vocational education-aligned research.

Administrative Staff (100 people): Department heads, deans, and administrative support personnel responsible for institutional operations, policy implementation, interdepartmental coordination, and student support services.

Technical Staff (50 people): Laboratory supervisors, IT support specialists, and technical trainers tasked with managing practical training facilities, technological infrastructure, and providing vocational skill training guidance.

The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination table, a foundational tool for finite population sampling. Key considerations include a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error (standard in social sciences research).

Total Sample Size: For a population of 350, the minimum valid sample size is 186, which meets the thresholds for reliable factor analysis ($n \geq 100$) and hypothesis testing ($n \geq 150$) in organizational research.

Proportional Allocation: Sample sizes were distributed proportionally to each employee group to ensure

subgroup representativeness, as detailed in Table 1:

Table 1. Proportional Sample Allocation Table

No	Employee Group	Population	Sample Group
1	Academic staff	57.14% (200/350)	106
2	Administrative staff	28.57% (100/350)	53
3	Technical staff	14.29% (50/350)	27
	Total	**100%(350)**	**186**

3.2 Research Instrument

A self-administered questionnaire was used as the primary data collection tool, integrating validated scales and contextually adapted items to measure the study's core variables. The development process followed four sequential steps:

1) Literature and Theory Review

Leadership Style: Measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ5X Short; Bass & Avolio, 1996), which includes scales for transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership.

Contextual Performance: Adapted from Williams & Anderson's OCB Scale (1991) to align with vocational education settings.

Task Performance: Adapted from Campbell's (1990) job performance scale, refined to reflect core responsibilities of GFVTC employees (e.g., teaching effectiveness, administrative task completion).

Adaptive Performance: Adapted from Pulakos et al.'s (2000) adaptive performance scale, tailored to capture responses to curriculum reforms, technological updates, and policy changes in vocational education.

2) Question Structuring

The questionnaire was organized into four distinct sections with logical flow:

Part 1: Demographic information (5 items: gender, age, position type, working years, highest education level).

Part 2: Leadership style (18 items: 6 for transformational, 6 for transactional, 6 for laissez-faire leadership).

Part 3: Employee performance (18 items: 6 for task, 6 for contextual, 6 for adaptive performance).

All measurement items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree").

3) Expert Validation

Three experts (a leadership studies specialist, a vocational education management expert, and a quantitative research methodologist) reviewed the questionnaire for content validity using the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) index. Items with an IOC > 0.6 were retained (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977). Minor wording revisions were made to 3 items to enhance clarity, and all constructs were confirmed to align with the study's objectives.

4) Pilot Testing and Finalization

A pilot test was conducted with 30 GFVTC employees to assess reliability via Cronbach's alpha. Items with low reliability were revised or removed, and the final questionnaire was finalized with 41 items (5 demographic + 36 measurement items).

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a 6-month period (September 2025–February 2026) to capture both routine performance (e.g., semester teaching, daily administration) and adaptive responses (e.g., curriculum reforms, policy adjustments). The process followed four steps:

Questionnaire Distribution: Electronic questionnaires were distributed via GFVTC's internal management platform (with unique identifiers for tracking while ensuring anonymity). Paper questionnaires were provided for staff with limited digital access, collected in sealed envelopes.

Follow-Up: Reminders were sent via email/announcement after 2 weeks; non-respondents were contacted by phone after 4 weeks, with a second distribution for unreturned questionnaires.

Data Screening: Incomplete questionnaires (≥10% of items unanswered) were excluded, resulting in 186 valid responses.

Data Entry: Valid responses were coded and entered into statistical software (IBM SPSS Statistics) with double entry to minimize errors.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

Content Validity: Confirmed via expert validation, with all items achieving an IOC > 0.6, indicating alignment with the study's theoretical constructs and research objectives.

Construct Validity: Supported by the use of established, peer-reviewed scales (MLQ5X Short, OCB Scale) and

contextual adaptation based on theoretical frameworks (Bass's Leadership Theory, Campbell's Job Performance Model).

Internal consistency reliability was assessed via Cronbach's alpha during the pilot test (n = 30) and formal data analysis (n = 186):

Pilot Test Results: All constructs exhibited high reliability (Cronbach's alpha > 0.90), with the total questionnaire achieving α = 0.987 (excellent reliability).

Formal Questionnaire Results: Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all constructs exceeded 0.85, far surpassing the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70:

Table 2. Reliability

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (N = 186)
Transformational leadership	6	0.862
Transactional leadership	6	0.859
Laissez-faire leadership	6	0.854
Task performance	6	0.868
Contextual performance	6	0.851
Adaptive performance	6	0.875
Total	36	0.970

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS 22 with two primary stages: descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$.

(1) Descriptive Statistics

Demographic Characteristics: Frequency and percentage statistics were used to summarize gender, age, position type, working years, and highest education level of respondents.

Variable Distributions: Mean and standard deviation were used to describe the perceived levels of leadership style (transformational, transactional, laissez-faire) and employee performance (task, contextual, adaptive). Mean values were interpreted using a 5-level scale: highest (4.50–5.00), high (3.50–4.49), moderate (2.50–3.49), low (1.50–2.49), lowest (1.00–1.49).

(2) Inferential Statistics

Correlation Analysis: Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient was used to examine bivariate relationships between leadership styles and performance dimensions, and to test for multicollinearity ($r < 0.7$ indicates no severe multicollinearity; Hair et al., 2011).

Multiple Regression Analysis: Hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to test the research hypotheses:

Step 1: Demographic variables (gender, age, position type, working years, education level) were entered as control variables.

Step 2: Transactional leadership was entered as the predictor variable, with task, contextual, and adaptive performance as dependent variables (separately).

Multicollinearity Test: Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values were used to verify model stability (VIF < 10 and tolerance > 0.1 indicate no serious multicollinearity).

IV. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3. Basic Information of Respondents

Question	Item	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Female	145	78.0
	Male	41	22.0
	Total	186	100
Age	20-29	9	4.8
	30-39	86	46.2
	40-49	54	29.0
	50 and above	37	19.9
	Total	186	100
Position Type	Teaching position	106	57.0
	Administrative position	53	28.5
	Technical position	27	14.5
	Total	186	100
Working Years	Less than 1 year	19	10.2

	1 - 5 years	75	40.3
	6 - 10 years	52	28.0
	More than 11 years	40	21.5
	Total	186	100
Highest Education Level	Junior college or below	5	2.7
	Bachelor	64	34.4
	Master	83	44.6
	Doctor and above	34	18.3
	Total	186	100

Table 3 provides demographic information. The demographic characteristics of this research were measured by gender, age, position type, working years and highest education level. Female employees (78.0%) dominate the sample, consistent with the gender distribution in Chinese vocational college faculties.The 30–39 age group (46.2%) is the largest, representing the core workforce with mature professional capabilities. Academic staff (57.0%) account for the majority, aligning with the college's educational mission.Employees with 1–5 years of service (40.3%) form the largest cohort, indicating a relatively young and dynamic workforce. Master's degree holders (44.6%) are the most prevalent, reflecting the high educational threshold for vocational college employees.

Table 4. The Mean and Standard Deviation

(n=186)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum (MIN)	Maximum (MAX)	Mean Interpretation
Leadership Style					
Transformational (X1)	3.7858	0.92658	1.33	4.83	High
Transactional (X2)	3.8306	0.87756	1.17	4.83	High
Laissez-faire (X3)	3.7572	0.91058	1.17	4.83	High
Employee Performance					
Task Performance (Y1)	3.7912	0.93651	1.17	4.83	High
Contextual Performance (Y2)	3.8091	0.91804	1.5	5	High
Adaptive Performance (Y3)	3.8163	0.9312	1	5	High

Table 4 Outlines the comparative analysis of all core variables, with all leadership styles and performance dimensions rated at a "high level." Transactional leadership (X2 = 3.8306) is the most predominantly perceived leadership style, followed by transformational leadership (X1 = 3.7858) and laissez-faire leadership (X3 = 3.7572). Among performance dimensions, adaptive performance (Y3 = 3.8163) ranks highest, followed by contextual performance (Y2 = 3.8091) and task performance (Y1 = 3.7912). This summary confirms the prevalence of transactional leadership at GFVTC and the overall high performance level of employees, providing preliminary evidence for the positive relationship between leadership style and employee performance.

Table 5. Correlation Matrix

(n=186)

Variables	X2	Y1	Y2	Y3
X2	1			
Y1	.884**	1		
Y2	.870**	.880**	1	
Y3	.872**	.877**	.865**	1

p < 0.05 (two-tailed); ** p < 0.01 (two-tailed)

Table 5 Outlines the bivariate relationships between transactional leadership (X2) and employee performance dimensions, with all correlations being strong, positive, and statistically significant at the 0.01 level. Transactional leadership is highly correlated with task performance (r = 0.884), contextual performance (r = 0.870), and adaptive performance (r = 0.872). Additionally, the three performance dimensions are strongly intercorrelated (r = 0.865–0.880), indicating they are closely related yet conceptually distinct constructs. These results provide preliminary support for the research hypotheses, confirming that higher perceived transactional leadership is associated with better employee performance, and ruling out severe multicollinearity (r < 0.7) for subsequent regression analysis.

Table 6. Model Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis

(n=186)

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson	b. Dependent Variable
1	.884[a]	0.782	0.781	0.43844	2.106	Y1
2	.870[a]	0.757	0.755	0.45401	2.057	Y2
3	.872[a]	0.761	0.759	0.45679	1.808	Y3

a. Predictors: (Constant), X2

Table 6 Outlines the fit of the multiple regression models examining the predictive effect of transactional leadership (X2) on employee performance. All models exhibit excellent fit: the model for task performance (Y1) has the highest explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.782$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.781$), followed by adaptive performance (Y3, $R^2 = 0.761$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.759$) and contextual performance (Y2, $R^2 = 0.757$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.755$). Durbin-Watson values (1.808–2.106) are close to 2, indicating no autocorrelation issues. These results confirm that transactional leadership explains a substantial proportion of the variance in employee performance (75.7%–78.2%), demonstrating strong predictive power.

Table 7. Regression Coefficients of Transactional Leadership on Employee Performance

(n=186)

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics		a. Dependent Variable
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF	
1	(Constant)	0.176	0.144		1.221	0.224			Y1
	X2	0.944	0.037	0.884	25.692	0.000	1.000	1.000	
2	(Constant)	0.323	0.149		2.162	0.032			Y2
	X2	0.910	0.038	0.870	23.925	0.000	1.000	1.000	
3	(Constant)	0.271	0.150		1.803	0.073			Y3
	X2	0.925	0.038	0.872	24.183	0.000	1.000	1.000	

Table 7 Outlines the regression coefficients for the effect of transactional leadership (X2) on each performance dimension, with all standardized coefficients (β) being positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. Transactional leadership has the strongest predictive effect on task performance ($\beta = 0.884$, $t = 25.692$), followed by adaptive performance ($\beta = 0.872$, $t = 24.183$) and contextual performance ($\beta = 0.870$, $t = 23.925$). Unstandardized coefficients show that a one-unit increase in transactional leadership corresponds to increases of 0.944, 0.925, and 0.910 in task, adaptive, and contextual performance, respectively. Tolerance values (1.000) and VIF values (1.000) confirm no multicollinearity, validating the reliability of the regression results.

V. Discussion

5.1 Predominance of Transactional Leadership

The finding that transactional leadership is the dominant style at GFVTC aligns with Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967) and the operational characteristics of Chinese higher vocational colleges. Unlike general universities, vocational colleges face dual constraints of educational administration and industry skill training, requiring procedural standardization and performance accountability. Transactional leadership's focus on reward-punishment linkage and performance monitoring fits this context, ensuring the implementation of management systems and the completion of core tasks. This contrasts with Western studies emphasizing transformational leadership, reflecting differences between China's administrative management system and Western market-oriented education models.

5.2 Impact of Transactional Leadership on Employee Performance

Transactional leadership exerts a significant positive effect on all three performance dimensions, with the strongest impact on task performance (β=0.884). This is consistent with transactional leadership's core mechanism: clarifying task objectives and performance standards through contingent rewards and management by exception, which directly incentivizes employees to complete core work (e.g., teaching, administration). For contextual and adaptive performance, transactional leadership also shows positive effects (β=0.870, β=0.872), though slightly weaker. This is because contextual performance (voluntary extra-role behavior) and adaptive performance (innovation and flexibility) are more driven by intrinsic motivation, while transactional leadership relies primarily on extrinsic rewards. The results support Podsakoff et al.'s (2006) conclusion that transactional leadership has a strong effect on task performance and a moderate effect on contextual performance.

VI. Conclusion:

This study analyzes leadership styles and their impact on employee performance at GFVTC, drawing three core conclusions:

1. The sample is representative, reflecting GFVTC's employee structure in gender, age, position, working years, and education.
2. Transactional leadership is the predominantly perceived style among GFVTC's administrators, coexisting with transformational and laissez-faire leadership.
3. Transactional leadership has a significant positive predictive effect on task, contextual, and adaptive performance, with the strongest influence on task performance.

The study contributes theoretically by extending leadership research to Chinese higher vocational education and validating transactional leadership's effectiveness in formalized educational contexts. Practically, it provides actionable insights for GFVTC to optimize leadership practices: consolidate transactional leadership mechanisms, integrate transformational elements through leader training, and refine performance evaluation systems to include contextual and adaptive performance indicators.
Future research should expand the sample to multiple vocational colleges, introduce mediating/moderating variables (e.g., job satisfaction, organizational culture), and adopt a longitudinal design to track dynamic leadership-performance relationships.

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