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Investigating Leadership Styles in Multiple Project Team Membership (MTM) Settings: Effects on Individual Work Performance

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Abstract

Leadership significantly impacts organisational performance, particularly in environments characterised by multiple team membership (MTM). This research explores the characteristics and effects of autocratic, democratic, transformational, and transactional leadership styles on individual work performance in MTM settings using a sample size of 200 participants from the UK. Using statistical and theoretical analysis, the study finds that autocratic leadership negatively affects performance, especially among experienced professionals, due to its conflict with their expectations for autonomy. In contrast, democratic and transformational leadership styles positively influence work performance, with democratic leadership showing a stronger effect on experienced professionals and transformational leadership benefiting inexperienced professionals. Transactional leadership also enhances performance but is particularly effective for experienced individuals. This research provides valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between leadership styles and work performance. The findings highlight the importance of tailoring leadership approaches to the experience levels of employees and underscore the relevance of integrating various leadership styles to enhance organisational effectiveness in complex project environments.

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1. Introduction

Leadership plays a pivotal role in organizational success and employee performance, serving as the ability to guide and inspire individuals to achieve shared goals [36dd]. Over time, leadership theories have evolved through four major areas: trait, behavioural, situational, and new leadership [10]. Early theories emphasized innate qualities like charisma, while later approaches focused on learned behaviours and adaptability to specific situations [10]. Modern leadership theories, including transformational and transactional leadership, address the complexities of globalization, rapid change, and technological innovation [5].

In recent years, organizational structures have shifted toward less hierarchical models, emphasizing teamwork and project-based work. Multiple Team Membership (MTM), where individuals work on several projects simultaneously, has only recently gained scholarly attention even though most projects have historically been managed concurrently [23]. Additionally, and despite its growing relevance, research on MTM has primarily focused on project management competencies, often neglecting the role of leadership styles in such settings.

The rationale for this research highlights the limited focus on leadership behaviours in MTM contexts, with previous studies addressing only a narrow range of leadership styles without measuring performance metrics [23].

Therefore, the study aims at examining how various leadership styles—autocratic, democratic, transformational, and transactional—affect an individual's performance in MTM settings. The study will measure the impact of these leadership styles on individual performance using four specific indicators: task completion, project deadlines, quality of work, and workload management [25]. By incorporating a broader spectrum of leadership styles and performance indicators, this study provides valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between leadership styles and work performance in MTM environments, contributing to both academic literature and practical applications in project management.

The next section of the paper reviews the literature on leadership styles, MTM, individual performance and concludes with the Research Framework. The paper then outlines the methodology, presents and discusses the findings, and concludes with limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Leadership Styles

Leadership is fundamentally a process of social influence through which individuals guide, motivate, and coordinate others toward the achievement of shared objectives [5]. It encompasses not only the articulation of vision and direction but also the cultivation of commitment and the capacity to adapt to evolving circumstances. Classic trait-based perspectives argued that leadership derives from inherent personal qualities—such as confidence, creativity, and cognitive acuity—while behavioural and contingency theories emphasize that effective leadership can be developed and is highly context-dependent [37], [41]. Contemporary scholarship recognizes that these dimensions are complementary: leaders benefit from certain dispositional traits but must also employ behaviours and styles suited to situational demands [22]. Consequently, four broad leadership styles have been foregrounded in organizational research—autocratic, democratic, transformational, and transactional—each representing distinct patterns of decision-making, influence tactics, and follower engagement [4].

Autocratic leadership centralizes authority in the leader's hands and prescribes unilateral decision-making without subordinate consultation. While this approach expedites action and clarifies accountability in high-stakes environments, it risks alienating followers if overused [14].

Democratic or participative leadership, by contrast, involves employees in deliberation and decision processes, leveraging their expertise to enhance problem-solving quality and foster ownership of outcomes [34]. Transactional leadership emphasizes contingent reward and management by exception, clarifying expectations and linking performance to specific reinforcements, a style that reliably promotes task completion in stable, structured settings [21]. Finally, transformational leadership transcends transactional exchanges by inspiring followers to exceed self-interest through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, thereby catalysing innovation and commitment to organizational transformation [5]. Understanding these styles and their relative merits is critical for tailoring leadership approaches to complex, multi-faceted work

environments.

2.2. Individual Work Performance

Individual work performance is a multifaceted construct that captures the discretionary behaviours through which employees contribute to organizational goals [25]. Rather than equating performance solely with outcomes, the prevailing view focuses on observable behaviours that drive results, divided into four interrelated dimensions namely task performance, contextual performance, adaptive performance, and counterproductive work behaviour.

Task performance refers to proficiency in executing core job responsibilities—such as accuracy, efficiency, and adherence to standards—which has long been the focal point of personnel selection and appraisal systems [11]. Contextual performance encompasses voluntary behaviours that support the organizational environment—such as helping colleagues, volunteering for extra assignments, and demonstrating organizational citizenship—that, while not formally required, enhance collective effectiveness [9], [3].

Adaptive performance addresses an individual's capacity to respond to changing work demands, learn new skills, and solve novel problems—capabilities that have become indispensable in dynamic, knowledge-intensive contexts [31]. Counterproductive work behaviour (CWB), by contrast, captures behaviours that undermine organizational objectives such as absenteeism, sabotage, or interpersonal conflict—and provides a counterpoint for understanding the full spectrum of “performance” [35]. Empirical research affirms that elevated levels of task and contextual performance correlate with positive organizational outcomes like customer satisfaction and profitability, while elevated CWB correlates with decreased morale and increased turnover [25]. Thus, fully capturing individual performance requires assessing not only the “what” of job outputs but also the “how” of work behaviours within complex organizational ecosystems.

2.3. Multiple Project Team Membership (MTM)

Multiple Project Team Membership (MTM) describes the phenomenon in which employees concurrently contribute to several project teams, each with distinct objectives, timelines, and stakeholder expectations [23]. Organizations increasingly adopt MTM to optimize resource utilisation and foster cross-functional collaboration in volatile markets. MTM can enrich employees' skill sets through diversified tasks, facilitate knowledge transfer across projects, and enhance organizational agility [28]. Yet, the fragmentation of attention and role ambiguity inherent in MTM can strain cognitive resources, induce stress, and erode the sustained focus necessary for deep task engagement [15].

Empirical investigations highlight that MTM's net effect on performance hinges on balancing these contrasting forces. When well-managed, MTM environments enable employees to leverage learning synergies across projects; poorly managed, they can precipitate overload, deadline conflicts, and diminished work quality [23]. Leadership within MTM settings must therefore reconcile the autonomy employees need to self-organize their multiple roles with the coordination mechanisms that align efforts toward collective goals. This balancing act situates MTM as a particularly instructive context for examining how different leadership styles modulate the interplay between individual behaviours and organizational performance.

2.4. Leadership Styles in MTM Contexts

Although robust links between leadership styles and performance have been established in single-team settings, MTM introduces unique complexities that can amplify or attenuate these effects. Autocratic leadership in MTM may streamline decision processes across projects by centralizing authority, reducing inter-team negotiation cost, and enabling rapid response to emergent issues. However, it also risks suppressing initiative when employees require autonomy to juggle varied tasks and may exacerbate bottlenecks if leaders become overwhelmed by multiple streams of decision requests [13]. Thus, autocracy may benefit short-term crisis management within a subset of projects but is likely unsustainable for routine MTM operations.

Democratic leadership can foster a shared understanding of goals and interdependencies across concurrent teams, leveraging participative forums to synchronize project timelines and resource allocations [34]. The inclusive

deliberations inherent in this style support the co-creation of solutions to cross-project challenges, enhancing contextual and adaptive performance by enabling employees to learn from peers. Yet, the time demands of consultation may conflict with rapid turnover pressures in MTM, suggesting that leaders must judiciously apply democratic processes to critical junctures rather than as a default mode [27].

Transformational leadership offers powerful levers for unifying diverse project objectives under an overarching vision, thereby elevating intrinsic motivation and empowering employees to transcend individual task barriers [5]. By exercising individualized consideration, transformational leaders can tailor support to employees' unique project portfolios, fostering resilience amid shifting priorities. Nonetheless, the emotional labour required to maintain high-engagement relationships with team members across multiple projects may contribute to leader burnout, particularly if follower readiness and competence vary significantly between assignments [27].

Transactional leadership provides clear performance standards and contingent rewards, which can be instrumental in aligning project-specific deliverables with organizational incentives in MTM environments (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). By specifying expectations and reinforcing compliance, transactional leaders reduce ambiguity and facilitate monitoring across diffuse teams. However, overly rigid reward structures may neglect emergent contributions—such as cross-project knowledge sharing—and risk demotivating employees when their extra-role efforts fail to yield commensurate recognition [35].

Together, these observations underscore that no single style universally optimizes individual performance in MTM settings. Instead, effective leadership likely involves a dynamic combination of styles, calibrated to the demands of specific projects and phases of work. Yet empirical research exploring these moderating effects in MTM remains limited: to date, studies have largely focused on charismatic or boundary-spanning leadership, leaving systematic comparisons of autocratic, democratic, transformational, and transactional approaches as an urgent avenue for inquiry [23].

2.5. Theoretical Framework

The research model (see Figure 1) examines the direct and significant impact of different leadership styles (independent variables) on the dependent variable of individual work performance of project management professionals (PMPs) within multiple team membership (MTM) settings. Given that individual work performance cannot be measured directly, it will be assessed through specific indicators: task completion, project deadlines, quality of work, and workload management. These indicators will collectively evaluate the overall influence of leadership styles on work performance.

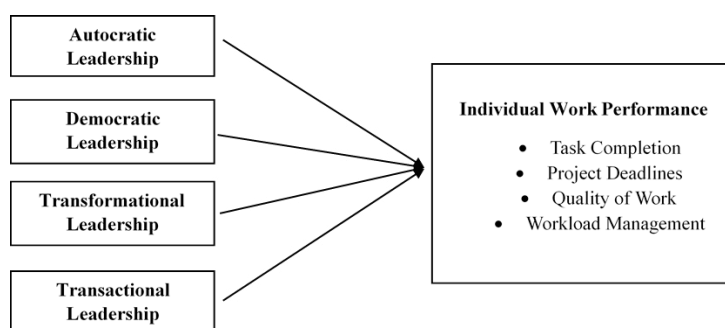


Fig. 1. Project managers leadership styles and individual work performance.

The hypotheses of the study are as follows:

1. Autocratic leadership would positively impact individual work performance in MTM settings
2. There will be a positive and significant relationship between democratic leadership and work performance of (PMPs) working on multiple projects.
3. Transformational leadership would positively impact individual work performance MTM settings
4. Transactional leadership positively impacts individual work performance across different levels of experience.

3. Research Methodology

This study followed the positivism orientation [13] and used quantitative methods to collect and analyze data for the study [36]. A structured questionnaire was used to measure key constructs. Twenty questions make up the questionnaire: four measure the traits or actions of each leadership style; transactional, democratic, autocratic, and transformational. The remaining four ask about an individual's performance at work. Autocratic Leadership was measured with 4 items sourced from [1], [13], [6], [20], [30]. The items for democratic leadership were adapted from [13], [6], [20], [30] and transformational leadership from [40], [2], [13], [12]. Similarly, transactional leadership items were adapted from [13], [38], [8]. Individual work performance was made up of four items derived from [13], [33], [7], and [26]. A five-point Likert scale [16], with 1 denoting "strongly disagree" and 5 denoting "strongly agree," was used to measure the responses. After piloting the questionnaire with eight participants to fine-tune it, the data was gathered over a month.

A total of 200 participants from the UK responded to the questionnaire correctly. Convenient sampling was used by randomly reaching out to 220 professionals within our network (e.g. LinkedIn groups, APM, and PMI networks). Two hundred and seven responses were obtained, but only 200 were usable after data cleaning and pre-processing, giving a valid response rate of 90.9%. The respondents were both experienced and inexperienced project management experts. Senior project managers, project management consultants, certified project managers, and project management trainers were among the experienced individuals occupying project management positions. Project management students, junior project managers, trainees or interns, prospective project managers, and entry-level project coordinators were among the inexperienced professionals.

To ensure the relevance of participants to the study, specific inclusion criteria were applied. Experienced professionals were required to have actively managed or contributed to multiple projects simultaneously (i.e., involved in an MTM context), and must have held a leadership, supervisory, or coordination role in at least one project team. Inexperienced professionals were required to have been exposed to multiple projects or teams through entry-level roles, internships, training programs, or academic project work, and were ideally involved in academic or training environments that simulate working across more than one project simultaneously. Furthermore, to reduce common method bias in the responses, the questions for the two groups were randomised, whilst observing the standard research protocols such as informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and free will to withdraw from the study without any repercussions. In addition, the Harman one-factor test for common-method bias was carried out on the data which yielded an initial single factor variance of 57.9%, more than the recommended threshold of 50%. Item reduction was then applied to the data, and after several iterations, a total variance explained by a single item was reduced to 47.5%, which is below 50% and therefore acceptable [24].

The sample size of 200 and the diverse respondents with spectrum of experiences and perspectives [19], provided sufficient data for analysis. Using deductive reasoning [17], the hypotheses for the study are tested with the help of SPSS software package using regression analysis feature [42]. The data was analysed by comparing two groups of respondents – those with and without experience in managing or working on multiple projects.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the 200 responses shows 91 (45.5%) respondents had experience managing or working on multiple projects, while around 109 (54.5%) did not. A test of reliability of the key constructs revealed Cronbach's alpha values above the recommended 0.7 [18] for autocratic leadership (0.808), democratic leadership (0.866), transformational leadership (0.822), transactional leadership (0.866), and individual work performance (0.944). This indicates that generally the data for the study was fitting and internally consistent across the items and the variables, and appropriate for regression analysis.

Using regression analysis [42], the relationship between work performance and a set of leadership styles was investigated. The test of the regression model for fitness confirmed the significance of the model in establishing a relationship between leadership styles and work performance for both experienced and inexperienced PMPs. The model R^2 was 0.831 with model test results of $F_{(4, 85)} = 104.62$, $p=0.001$ for experienced group. This means that about 83.1% of the work performance of experienced project managers can be explained by their leadership style. In addition, the model was significant ($p<0.05$) in predicting the relationship between leadership style and work

performance of the PMPs. A similar result was obtained for inexperienced project managers with an R^2 of 0.731 and a regression model test of significance results of $F_{(4, 103)} = 69.82$, $p=0.001$. Thus, 73.1% of the variations in the work performance of inexperienced project managers can be explained by the leadership style in their project teams. Also, the regression model was significant in establishing a formal relationship between leadership and work performance of inexperienced project managers.

The results reveal a negative relationship between autocratic leadership and individual work performance across both experienced and inexperienced PMPs. For experienced PMPs, a regression coefficient of $\beta = -0.174$ with a $p=0.030$ was observed. This suggests that for every one-unit display of autocratic leadership, the work performance of experienced professionals decreases by approximately 0.174 units. These individuals, who often value their expertise and expect meaningful involvement, may feel demotivated under autocratic leadership, where their input is disregarded [39]. This aligns with Vroom's Expectancy Theory, which suggests that employees' motivation and performance will suffer if their efforts are undervalued [39]. For inexperienced PMPs, the relationship between autocratic leadership and work performance was negative but not significant ($\beta = -0.745$, $p= 0.001$). In this case, inexperienced PMPs might not yet possess the same level of expertise or expectation for involvement, making them less sensitive to the negative effects of autocratic leadership [39]. Given these results, the hypothesis that autocratic leadership would positively impact individual work performance in MTM settings is rejected, as the overall trend shows a decline in performance under this leadership style.

On democratic leadership, a positive impact on individual work performance for both experienced ($\beta = 0.239$, $p=0.024$) and inexperienced PMPs ($\beta = 0.118$, $p=0.081$) was observed. For the experienced ones, the result aligns with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which identifies factors such as recognition and meaningful involvement as central elements of democratic leadership which can enhance job satisfaction and performance [29]. Conversely, for inexperienced PMPs, the result still indicates a trend towards improved performance under democratic leadership although it is not significant. The positive trend may be attributed to the increased engagement and motivation fostered by democratic leadership, which involves employees in decision-making [36]. For inexperienced PMPs, the benefits of democratic leadership might not yet be fully realized due to their limited experience. Therefore, to better leverage democratic leadership, initiatives such as encouraging proactive behaviour and providing further training and development could be beneficial [13]. Overall, the significant positive effect for experienced PMPs and the improving trend for inexperienced ones collectively affirms that democratic leadership generally enhances individual work performance.

Transformational leadership was found to have a positive impact on individual work performance for both experienced ($\beta = 0.084$, $p=0.310$) and inexperienced ($\beta = 0.588$ with a $p= 0.001$) PMPs. While both effects are positive, the impact is significant for inexperienced PMPs. This significance may be attributed to the greater motivational effect of transformational leadership on individuals who are still developing their skills and confidence [38]. These findings align with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, as transformational leadership addresses intrinsic motivators for both experienced and inexperienced PMPs by providing an unobstructed vision, recognition, and opportunities for personal development, leading to improved performance [29]. Additionally, the results also align with Vroom's Expectancy Theory, which emphasizes that employees are motivated when they believe their efforts will lead to desirable outcomes [39]. Transformational leadership enhances employees' expectations by setting clear goals and recognizing achievements, thus improving their motivation and performance [38]. Overall, these findings support the hypothesis that transformational leadership positively affects individual work performance.

The results on transactional leadership revealed a significant impact on individual work performance, although it was positive for experienced ($\beta = 0.477$ with a $p=0.001$) and negative for inexperienced ($\beta = -0.221$ with a $p= 0.005$) PMPs. This suggests that transactional leadership effectively enhances work performance for experienced PMPs. This finding aligns with [4]'s theory of transactional leadership, which emphasizes the importance of clear expectations and rewards for performance [32]. According to [32], transactional leaders motivate employees through a system of rewards and penalties based on performance [32]. This approach emphasises the value of clarity and consistency that transactional leadership provides. By setting clear goals and providing immediate feedback, transactional leaders can effectively boost the performance of their project teams [32]. For inexperienced PMPs, the negative impact suggests those with less experience do not benefit from the structure and guidance offered by transactional leadership. Overall, transactional leadership style affects individual work performance differently across distinct levels of experience.

5. Conclusion

The primary aims of this research were to explore the behaviours associated with autocratic, democratic, transformational, and transactional leadership in MTM environments and to investigate how these leadership styles impact individual work performance. The focus was on key indicators such as task completion, project deadlines, quality of work, and workload management.

The data underscores the varied impact of different leadership styles on individual work performance in MTM settings, depending on the experience levels of PMPs. Autocratic leadership showed a significant negative effect on performance for both experienced and inexperienced PMPs. Democratic leadership positively influenced performance for the experienced PMPs, though the effect was positive but insignificant for the inexperienced group. Transformational leadership had a strong positive effect on performance for inexperienced PMPs but not for experienced professionals. Transactional leadership boosted performance for the experienced PMPs while it affected work performance negatively for inexperienced PMPs. These results highlight the importance of tailoring leadership approaches to the experience levels of team members to maximize performance outcomes.

While the study offers valuable insights, several limitations were acknowledged. The study's sample size, although adequate, may not fully capture the diversity of MTM settings, particularly across different geographical regions. The reliance on self-reported data for assessing leadership styles and performance metrics can introduce bias, potentially affecting the accuracy of the findings. In addition, the study's focus on four primary leadership styles may overlook other relevant approaches, and it does not fully account for contextual factors (e.g. organizational culture or team dynamics) that could influence leadership effectiveness [23].

To address these limitations, future research should consider expanding the sample to include a more diverse range of geographical locations. Further studies could also explore additional leadership styles or hybrid approaches and employ longitudinal designs to assess the long-term effects of leadership on work performance.

The implications of the results for practitioners are to invest in training programs that emphasise democratic, transformational, and transactional leadership practices and to adapt leadership styles based on PMPs' experience levels, as shown by the varying impacts of the leadership styles. Also, implementing regular feedback mechanisms can help ensure that leadership practices are responsive and effective in addressing needs and preferences.

Appendix A.

[Click here for the Survey Instrument.](#)

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