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Exploring the Influence of Strategic Leadership on Employee Performance in the Aviation Sector

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Abstract

This research investigates the relationship between strategic leadership and employee performance in the Turkish aviation sector. A comprehensive survey with 47 questions (excluding demographic data) was conducted, with 316 valid responses gathered from a sample of 350 employees working in various aviation companies. Statistical methods such as frequency analysis, reliability testing, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), t-tests, ANOVA, linear regression, and correlation were used to analyze the data at a 0.05 significance level. The results indicate that strategic leadership perceptions account for 43% of the variance in employee performance, highlighting a moderate positive relationship between the two variables. In addition, demographic factors such as gender and age affect how employees perceive leadership, indicating differences in leadership perceptions across different groups. This study contributes to the strategic leadership literature by providing unique insights into how leadership practices influence employee performance in the context of the aviation industry, underscoring the need for customized leadership approaches in this dynamic field.

Keywords: Employee performance, Strategic leadership, Aviation sector, Leadership perceptions, Organizational outcomes

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Introduction

Performance evaluation has been a central topic of discussion in human resources management, recognized as a critical component in measuring an organization's efficiency and effectiveness. Employee performance directly impacts organizational success, as the collective performance of individuals ultimately determines the overall performance of the organization. Therefore, evaluating employee performance is not only a vital indicator of an organization's operational efficiency but also a key measure of its success [1].

Within this context, leadership behavior is a crucial factor in enhancing employee performance. Leaders are responsible for guiding and motivating their teams to meet organizational goals, making their role integral to the organization's overall success. Effective leadership is essential for improving employee performance, as it remains one of the most influential variables in organizational effectiveness [2]. Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of leadership in employee performance, suggesting that leadership styles positively influence employee outcomes and, consequently, organizational performance [3, 4].

While much research has explored the connection between leadership styles and employee performance, there is limited focus on the specific role of strategic leadership, particularly in Turkey's aviation sector. Strategic leadership is a complex concept that integrates both visionary and practical elements, involving not only the planning and execution of long-term organizational objectives but also motivating employees to meet these objectives [5]. The strategic leader's role includes



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developing strategies that improve organizational performance and ensuring the organization remains adaptable in a rapidly changing business environment [6].

This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the impact of strategic leadership on employee performance within Turkey's aviation industry. Specifically, it will examine how aviation employees perceive strategic leadership and how these perceptions influence their performance. By contributing to the body of research on strategic leadership, particularly in the underexplored aviation sector, this research aims to provide insights that can help aviation organizations in Turkey develop effective leadership practices. These practices will, in turn, improve employee performance and enhance overall organizational outcomes.

Theoretical framework

Strategic leadership

Strategic leadership is a pivotal factor in the success of organizations, playing a crucial role in driving long-term success and ensuring alignment between organizational goals and operational actions [7]. This form of leadership focuses not only on creating long-term strategies but also on fostering a strategic mindset that guides the decision-making processes throughout the organization [8]. Strategic leadership goes beyond the formulation of a strategic plan—it involves continuous strategic thinking, enabling the organization to adapt to a dynamic business environment, allocate resources effectively, and maintain a clear focus on its mission, vision, and values [9].

A key benefit of strategic leadership is its positive influence on organizational performance. Strategic leaders are tasked with the responsibility of implementing and creating a strategic vision that drives the organization toward achieving its long-term objectives. This requires them to think and anticipate future trends, strategically, and make decisions that support organizational goals [8]. Liu and Cao [10] emphasize that strategic leadership enhances organizational performance by aligning resources, fostering innovation, and encouraging organizational learning. Additionally, strategic leaders foster an environment conducive to creativity and innovation, encouraging employees to propose new ideas and solutions to problems. Strategic leaders also demonstrate several essential qualities, such as the ability to think critically and analytically about complex situations and the capacity to communicate their vision effectively [9]. Effective communication ensures that employees, stakeholders, and customers are aligned with the organizational goals and understand the long-term vision. This builds trust and strengthens relationships within the organization, contributing to a positive organizational culture and enhanced performance.

Employee performance

Employee performance is one of the most critical aspects of organizational behavior and success [11]. It is typically defined as the degree to which an employee fulfills the responsibilities and duties of their role effectively [12]. Employee performance is essential not only because it determines the success of individual tasks but also because it impacts organizational success by affecting job satisfaction, retention, and promotional opportunities [13].

A multitude of factors influences employee performance, with motivation being one of the most significant. Motivated employees are more likely to perform at higher levels and strive for excellence in their work. Motivation can be driven by various organizational strategies such as offering recognition for achievements, setting clear goals, and creating opportunities for career growth [12]. Additionally, job satisfaction significantly influences employee performance. Employees who are satisfied with their work environment, find their tasks meaningful, and have development opportunities are more likely to perform at high levels [14].

Organizational culture also plays a critical role in shaping employee performance. A positive organizational culture—one that values employee contributions, encourages collaboration, and fosters open communication—can lead to improved job satisfaction and enhanced performance. In contrast, a negative organizational culture characterized by mistrust and conflict can result in disengagement, leading to lower levels of employee performance [11, 15].

The design of the job itself is another key factor influencing performance. Jobs that are challenging, rewarding, and meaningful tend to result in higher motivation and better performance [16]. In contrast, monotonous, unchallenging roles often lead to disengagement and lower performance levels.

Lastly, leadership plays an essential role in promoting employee performance. Leaders who provide direction, support, and constructive feedback create an environment where employees feel motivated and valued. Effective leaders also foster a culture of collaboration, continuous learning, and innovation, which can further boost performance [17]. Through effective leadership, organizations can empower their employees to reach their full potential and drive organizational success.

In conclusion, strategic leadership and employee performance are deeply intertwined. The impact of strategic leadership on employee performance is crucial in ensuring that organizational goals are met, and employees are motivated and engaged to perform at their best. Leadership behaviors and strategies that align with employee needs, provide clarity of purpose, and create a supportive work environment are essential for achieving long-term organizational success.

The impact of strategic leadership on employee performance

The relationship between strategic leadership and employee performance has been an area of increasing interest in organizational studies. In the past, the influence of managerial decisions on business performance was seen as minimal [18]. However, as the importance of leadership evolved, it became apparent that leadership plays a central role in shaping the performance and success of both individuals and organizations as a whole [19]. Leadership is recognized as a key factor in driving organizational effectiveness, influencing not only employees' attitudes, behaviors, and performance but also aligning them with the broader strategic goals of the organization [20].

In the 1980s, the concept of strategic leadership emerged, shifting the focus from traditional managerial practices to long-term organizational vision and strategy [21, 22]. Strategic leadership is now recognized as an essential element for organizations seeking to thrive in the complex global market, as it offers a vision that guides both the organization's long-term objectives and the actions of employees toward achieving them [23]. Strategic leaders are expected to not only direct the organization's growth but also inspire their workforce, fostering an environment that encourages innovation and high performance.

Ireland and Hitt [18] emphasized that strategic leadership is crucial for organizations to remain competitive and achieve sustained success. This approach involves creating a strategic vision, fostering employee alignment with organizational goals, and continually adapting to changes in the business environment. Without a strong strategic leader, organizations face challenges in sustaining growth and meeting long-term goals. Strategic leadership, therefore, serves as the foundation for organizational resilience, guiding employee performance in a way that aligns with the company's broader vision and ensuring that resources are used effectively.

In conclusion, strategic leadership is instrumental in shaping the performance of employees. By providing clear direction, motivating the workforce, and fostering a culture of innovation and alignment with organizational goals, strategic leadership significantly impacts employee performance and contributes to overall organizational success. In the fast-paced, competitive business landscape, effective strategic leadership is essential for organizations aiming to achieve long-term growth and superior performance.

Materials and Methods

Research design and sampling

The study aimed to examine the impact of strategic leadership on employee performance by utilizing a questionnaire containing 47 questions, excluding demographic data. The participants were employees working in aviation companies accredited by Turkey's Directorate General of Civil Aviation. A total of 350 employees were invited to participate via email, using Google Forms to distribute the survey. Given the time and resource constraints, the research employed a convenience sampling method, which was considered appropriate for accessing participants within the aviation sector. After eliminating 21 incomplete or incorrect responses, the analysis was based on 316 valid entries. The sample size was deemed sufficient, as it met the criteria for generalizability based on Bartlett *et al.*'s [24] guidelines.

Data collection instruments

To capture data on both strategic leadership and employee performance, two primary scales were utilized, along with a demographic survey.

Demographic information

The demographic section of the questionnaire included questions on participants' age, gender, educational background, marital status, and years of experience in the aviation sector. This information was used to analyze how different groups perceive strategic leadership and performance.

Strategic leadership assessment

To evaluate the perceptions of strategic leadership, the study used the strategic leadership questionnaire (SLQ), initially developed by Pisapia [25] and translated into Turkish by Çoban [26]. The SLQ measures five leadership dimensions: managerial, ethical, political, transformational, and relational leadership. It consists of 35 items and employs a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.95, indicating a high level of reliability.

Employee performance evaluation

Employee performance was assessed using a 12-item scale developed by Choo [27], which relies on self-evaluation. Participants rated their performance using a five-point Likert scale, where responses ranged from (1) unsatisfactory to (5) excellent. Choo's scale showed a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.86$) between self-ratings and supervisor evaluations, supporting the validity of self-assessment. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for this scale was reported as 0.85 by Ceylan and Ulutürk [28]. This scale has been widely used in studies by various authors, including Poznanski and Bline [29] and Erkuş and Günlü [30].

Research hypotheses and model

Based on the existing literature on strategic leadership and employee performance, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Strategic leadership perceptions have a positive linear relationship with employee performance.

H2: Strategic leadership is a significant determinant of employee performance.

H3: Employee perceptions of strategic leadership and performance vary based on demographic variables.

A research model was designed to illustrate the interrelationship between strategic leadership and employee performance, as outlined in **Figure 1**. This model serves as the foundation for testing the hypothesized relationships and exploring how demographic factors may influence these perceptions.

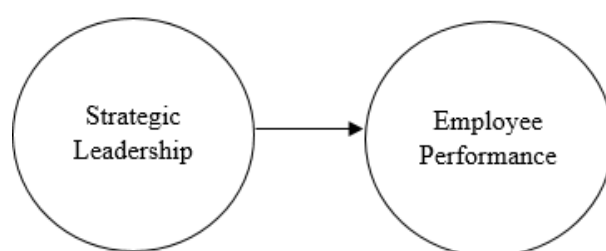


Figure 1. Research model

Data analysis

The data was processed using SPSS version 20.0, employing various statistical techniques including exploratory factor analysis (EFA), correlation analysis, regression analysis, t-tests, and ANOVA. A significance level of $P < 0.05$ was established for the study.

Results and Discussion

Demographic details of the 316 participants, including gender, age, marital status, educational background, and work experience, are presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Demographic variables

Variables	Frequency	Per. (%)	Variables	Frequency	Per. (%)
Gender			Educational status		
Men	206	65.2	Primary and high school	101	31.9
Women	110	34.8	Associate degree	132	41.8
Age (years)			Undergraduate-postgraduate	83	26.3
18-34	220	69.6	Work experience		
35-50	69	21.8	Less than 1 year	94	29.7
51 and over	27	8.5	1-5 years	151	47.8
Marital status			≥ 6 years	71	22.5
Married	125	39.6	Total		
Single	191	60.4	316	100	

Reliability analysis

According to **Table 2**, the observations in each scale are suitable for performing exploratory factor analysis.

Table 2. Reliability statistics

Groups	Cronbach's alpha	N of items
1. Strategic leadership	0.947	35
2. Employee performance	0.855	12

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

The results of the KMO and Bartlett test revealed a significance value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 threshold, and a KMO coefficient of 0.843, which is well above the 0.5 threshold. These results indicate that the observed variables are adequately correlated, making EFA a suitable method for factor analysis. The analysis revealed two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, explaining 68.957% of the variance, which is considered statistically significant as it exceeds the 50% threshold.

Based on the EFA, the variables were grouped into two factors, aligning with the original SLQ (35 items) and EP (12 items) groups, confirming the consistency of the results with the observed variables.

Correlation analysis

The correlation analysis results are provided below to explore the relationship between employee performance and strategic leadership.

Table 3. Correlation between strategic leadership and employee performance

		1	2
1. Strategic leadership	Correlation coefficient	1	0.654**
2. Employee performance			1

Table 3 indicates a 65% correlation between employee performance, and strategic leadership confirming the acceptance of the first hypothesis (H1). This suggests a moderate positive linear relationship between employee performance and strategic leadership.

Regression analysis

In line with the research framework, a regression analysis was performed to evaluate the impact of strategic leadership on employee performance.

Table 4. Regression between strategic leadership and employee performance

Dependent variable	R ²	Independent variable	B	Beta	t	P-value
Employee Performance	0.428	Strategic Leadership	0.228	0.654	15.316	0.000

Based on the linear regression results presented in **Table 4**, it was determined that the independent variables of strategic leadership have a statistically significant effect ($P < 0.001$) on the dependent variable, employee performance. The R^2 value of 0.428 indicates that strategic leadership explains 43% of the variation in employee performance. This means that 43% of employees' perceptions of their performance are influenced by their perceptions of strategic leadership. Therefore, the second hypothesis (H2) is supported.

The analysis of demographic variables is summarized below:

- *Age*: The differences in employees' perceptions based on age were analyzed using the ANOVA test. The results showed significant differences in both strategic leadership perceptions ($F = 5.021$, $P < 0.05$) and employee performance perceptions ($F = 2.281$, $P < 0.05$). Specifically, the highest average perception of strategic leadership was found among employees aged 51 years and older, while the lowest was observed among employees aged 35-50 years.
- *Gender*: The t-test results revealed no significant difference in strategic leadership perceptions ($t = 4.402$, $P > 0.05$), but a significant difference was found in employee performance perceptions ($t = 2.732$, $P > 0.05$). It was observed that male employees had higher strategic leadership perceptions compared to female employees, although both groups had similar perceptions of employee performance.

These results show that age and gender significantly affect employees' perceptions of strategic leadership and employee performance, with age influencing strategic leadership perceptions more notably and gender showing a difference in strategic leadership but not in performance perceptions.

- *Marital status*: The t-test results for marital status revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in employees' perceptions of strategic leadership ($t = 2.598$, $P < 0.05$). However, no significant difference was found in employee performance perceptions ($t = 1.596$, $P > 0.05$). It was noted that single employees had higher perceptions of strategic leadership compared to married employees.
- *Educational level*: Anova test results indicated a statistically significant difference in employees' perceptions of strategic leadership based on their educational level ($F = 3.483$, $P < 0.05$), but no significant difference was found for employee performance perceptions ($F = 1.710$, $P > 0.05$). Employees with undergraduate and postgraduate education had higher perceptions of strategic leadership, while those with primary or high school education had lower average perceptions compared to other education levels.

- *Work experience:* The analysis of work experience revealed that there was no statistically significant difference in employees' perceptions of strategic leadership ($F=0.018$, $P>0.05$) or employee performance ($F=0.383$, $P>0.05$). These results suggest that work experience does not have a significant impact on how employees perceive strategic leadership or their performance.

Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the connection between employee performance and strategic leadership within aviation companies in Turkey. The results revealed a statistically significant relationship between these two factors, with a moderate correlation, suggesting that strategic leadership plays an essential role in influencing employee performance. Both the 1st and 2nd hypotheses were confirmed, while the third hypothesis was partially validated, as differences in strategic leadership perceptions were observed across demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, and education.

These findings are in line with prior research, which has emphasized the positive impact of strategic leadership on employee performance. Zia-ud-Din *et al.* [31] suggested that strategic leadership strengthens the relationship between employees and management, ultimately enhancing employee performance. Similarly, Setiawan and Yuniarsih [32] indicated that strategic leaders impact employee performance by providing clear direction, motivation, and communication. Akça [33] and Alvi *et al.* [34] further confirmed the positive influence of strategic leadership on employee performance and productivity.

This research contributes to the existing literature on strategic leadership by examining its effect on employee performance in the Turkish aviation sector. The findings underline the importance of strong strategic leadership practices in enhancing employee performance and overall organizational success. These results are particularly valuable for aviation companies in Turkey, as they demonstrate how effective leadership practices can lead to improved outcomes.

Limitations of the research

This study has several limitations. These include constraints in terms of resources and time, employee hesitation to engage in surveys within the aviation industry, and a limited sample size. The study also faced challenges due to the non-random selection of the institution used as the research sample and the inability to reach all employees. Additionally, individual performance evaluations were subject to some degree of subjectivity, which may have influenced the findings. Another limitation is the lack of consensus in the literature regarding the conceptualization of strategic leadership.

Future research directions

Several potential directions for future research can be drawn from the results of this study. Further studies could focus on the sub-dimensions of strategic leadership and their specific effects on employee performance. Research could also examine the impact of strategic leadership on senior employees to explore whether their experiences differ. Expanding the sample size and including additional organizations within the aviation industry could improve the accuracy and generalizability of the results. Furthermore, similar studies could be conducted in other industries, including banking, healthcare, tourism, and education, to assess the broader implications of strategic leadership on employee performance across various sectors.

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