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Consultative Leadership, Engagement, and Flexibility as Drivers of Productivity: Evidence from Pakistani Higher Education

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Abstract

Organizational change and growth occur as ongoing cycles within institutions, where sustaining optimal productivity remains vital. Among the core determinants of productivity, adaptability and participation hold primary importance. Effective leadership is essential to channel these elements productively. However, consultative leadership has been identified as the most conceptually suitable style in this regard. The framework was evaluated within higher education institutions in Pakistan. The study's findings verify the effectiveness of the proposed model, with detailed discussions highlighting its conceptual foundation and applied significance.

Keywords: Consultative leadership, Strategic vision, Positive leadership, Participation, Adaptability, Education, Performance

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Introduction

Positive psychology argues that specific human factors can substantially improve an individual's quality of life [1, 2]. These elements include strengths of character, leadership capacity, optimism, and constructive institutions [3]. Within organizations, leadership serves as a guiding mechanism that promotes employee motivation, accountability, and effectiveness, thereby improving overall performance [4]. Encouraging a healthy equilibrium between personal and professional commitments has been shown to enhance both employee engagement and workplace flexibility [5]. Research on consultation methods indicates a positive association between participatory consultation and stakeholder involvement [6].

Consultative leadership emphasizes collaborative decision-making, drawing upon the experience and expertise of others in developing strategies [7]. Through open communication, leaders gather insights from their teams, allowing them to make more balanced and actionable decisions [8]. This style prioritizes collective goal setting and informed decision-making, where leaders seek feedback to ensure effective and less effort-intensive outcomes [9]. In hierarchical societies such as those in Asia, this consultative approach holds special relevance [10]. It focuses on motivation and inspiration rather than authority, effectively enhancing strategic alignment and collaborative problem-solving [11].

Enhancing workforce adaptability involves refining internal systems, promoting teamwork, and developing a culture that encourages excellence. Within high-performance environments, behavior tends to be self-directed rather than controlled through external pressure [12]. Flexible employees contribute positively by being capable and willing to perform across multiple roles [13]. Rotational work arrangements, which build flexibility and broaden skill sets, also promote professional growth [5]. Engagement, development, and career advancement together foster this dynamic process [14].

Developing a supportive internal atmosphere is fundamental to ensuring stability and progress within organizations [15]. This goal can be achieved by cultivating collective intelligence and integrating leadership practices rooted in positive psychology



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with a strategic aim toward excellence [16]. Institutions must motivate their members to contribute at their highest capacity [17].

This research positions consultative leadership as a transformative leadership approach with proven effectiveness. The succeeding sections present a detailed literature review and theoretical background, followed by the study's methodology, results, and conclusions. The paper concludes with implications across social, theoretical, and practical dimensions.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Cultural and structural barriers often intensify through managerial systems that encourage hierarchical distance. Consequently, within Asian societies, employment flexibility remains a seldom-recognized organizational norm [18]. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has opened avenues for exploring such flexibility frameworks in the region [19]. Adaptability encourages active participation and reflects management's willingness to enhance growth and performance [20]. Such flexibility cultivates intrinsic motivation, responsible actions, and improved productivity. When assessing performance-oriented behavior, it should be interpreted through an integrated view of various motivational tendencies that influence individuals' complex psychological make-up [21, 22].

Organizational leadership draws its theoretical foundation from sociological role theory, applying these ideas to leader-subordinate relations. Group members form behavioral expectations toward a position holder, which are shaped by the organizational environment, status, personal attributes, and previous behaviors of that individual [23]. Consultative leadership represents the art of guiding others through influence rather than authority [24]. Meaningful consultation requires an assumption about who holds the most admirable characteristics [25]. Leaders must be informed, organized, and capable of sound judgment, especially in uncertain circumstances [16]. Their credibility depends on intellect, initiative, and ethical integrity. Emotional control, cognitive skills, and confidence are fundamental qualities of capable leadership [26].

An organization's capacity to articulate a vision, sustain a strategy, and act as a driver of employee development depends on the caliber of its leadership [27]. Within transformational leadership theory, coherent reasoning serves as a unifying force that connects ideas and actions. The intellectual rigor and strategic coherence of a leader's argument remain essential for effective leadership. Bass and colleagues included consultation as one of five central aspects within transformational leadership typologies [28]. A thorough understanding of others is crucial for constructive interaction and diversity management [29]. To fully leverage human capital (2022), leaders must recognize how followers gain knowledge and socialize. Once this understanding exists, leaders can foster shared values and desirable traits, inspiring motivation [30]. Team success requires alignment between the priorities of leaders and members. Disparities can obstruct this synergy, whereas consistent leadership behavior strengthens mutual trust and cooperation [31].

Leader engagement establishes parameters for the scope and style of participatory decision-making across contexts. These may differ based on the situation, including available information, problem complexity, or subordinate disposition [32]. Among leadership models, consultative leadership exercises comparatively less formal power but invests heavily in integrating diverse experiences, capabilities, and insights. Although consultation demands time and logical reasoning, its rewards are substantial. Embedding consultation into managerial behavior promotes organizational flexibility. Individuals are inclined to follow leaders who demonstrate achievement and credibility. Even after extensive feedback, decisive leaders can still make sound final judgments. Leaders with a consultative mindset consider every stakeholder's viewpoint before finalizing choices [33]. Educational settings particularly benefit from cooperative and participatory methodologies [34]. When leaders perform their designated duties effectively, team members exhibit higher productivity [35, 36]. Role theory posits that expectations define each role; in this context, leadership roles are shaped by values that endorse specific behavioral orientations in the workplace [37].

Extensive scholarship highlights the depth and significance of leadership inquiry, emphasizing that consultative approaches yield positive outcomes within Asian environments. The preceding discussion underscores the relevance of consultative leadership and flexibility models for academic discourse in such cultural contexts.

Consultation requires the deliberate involvement of all participants and is facilitated through continuous dialogue [38]. While this process may simplify the nuanced dynamics of interpersonal communication, it nonetheless enhances engagement and shared governance [39]. Participatory strategies—though not flawless in resolving all developmental or social challenges—are shown to advance cooperative decision-making and reduce conflict likelihood [40]. Collaborative frameworks in sustainability initiatives promote mutual understanding and trust, enabling participants and communities to better absorb new knowledge. Consequently, these stakeholders become more supportive of organizational objectives and long-term decision execution [39].

The process of role episodes can be intricate, involving several individuals who exchange expectations dynamically within a shared relationship. Role theory explains how the structure and meaning of role communication affect how messages are perceived and interpreted [23]. When consultations occur with empathy, sensitivity to concerns, and transparent communication about intended actions, they contribute significantly to engagement-building and trust enhancement [41].

The studies discussed previously support the premise that consultation fosters employee engagement. A leadership approach grounded in consultative behavior strategically enhances engagement and organizational effectiveness.

Individual productivity and leadership are closely connected. In corporate settings, the total organizational output relies heavily on the collective performance of teams [42]. Consultative leadership tends to prevail within culturally diverse environments, where a leader's decisions exert a strong and enduring influence on organizational outcomes [43]. Modern scholarship consistently highlights the interdependency between leadership style and productivity [44, 45]. Lee emphasizes that a leader's capacity to motivate and inspire their team is essential for effective performance management, noting that transactional and transformational leaders affect motivation differently [46]. When leaders face uncertainty in decision-making, they should seek input from subordinates through a consultative approach [47].

Adapting to evolving workplace dynamics requires pragmatic consideration. This notion became increasingly relevant amid the shifting conditions introduced by COVID-19. Given that human psychological patterns resist abrupt behavioral changes, a balanced use of multiple management techniques can optimize performance outcomes [19]. Stable organizations typically experience predictable procedural changes in structured environments. In such cases, change becomes an integral operational process, while leadership perceptions of control over organizational success evolve over time. Strategic leadership promotes change through context-based mechanisms. Within the strategy practice pyramid, three key elements are recognized: (1) identifying those affected by the transformation, (2) clarifying the scope and direction of the change, and (3) determining appropriate strategic methodologies [48].

In pandemic-like circumstances, leadership naturally emerged as a function of experience and situational learning. Research comparing leaders' likability and competence shows that shared understanding often outweighs positional control [49]. Positive leadership psychology provides the most effective framework for organizational resilience during times of transition. It represents an intentional and optimistic behavior that contributes to mental well-being. Leaders with a positive strategic orientation aim to create organizational excellence through deeper commitment, prioritizing development and growth over cost efficiency [50-53]. When employees operate with a positive and mindful attitude, psychological engagement strengthens among individuals, groups, and institutions, leading to improved performance [54, 55].

Empirical literature indicates that consultative leadership reinforces relationships across cultures, enhancing employees' willingness to align with their leaders' directives. This reasoning supports another hypothesis: consultative leadership positively influences employee productivity.

Flexible work models are regarded as strategic management tools that enhance employee involvement and satisfaction [5]. During the pandemic, remote work became commonplace, and hybrid arrangements—splitting time between home and office—are expected to remain prevalent [18, 56]. Organizations now recognize the value of flexible schedules; remote work enhances autonomy and mental well-being, which in turn strengthens engagement and performance [19, 57]. Therefore, leaders should take a realistic stance toward hybrid work approaches and adopt flexible decision-making processes [58]. Although such models reduced in-person interaction, they empowered employees with greater independence. A combination of remote and face-to-face work represents a viable strategic direction for the future [56].

COVID-19 significantly transformed how individuals adapt to and interpret change [1, 2]. While remote work alone cannot fully reflect the nature of modern organizations, employees are increasingly adaptable, allowing for diverse work environments [19]. This shift has also altered workplace socialization and employees' psychological connection to their roles [59]. Gallup's findings show that providing greater flexibility in work schedules enhances enthusiasm, vigor, and engagement, leading to healthier and more productive employees [60]. Hence, the evidence reinforces the idea that flexible work arrangements significantly contribute to engagement and productivity.

Social cognition theories such as Bandura's suggest that group interaction fosters collective awareness and shared efficacy [14, 29, 61]. The reasonableness of beliefs depends on various elements, including speed and intensity of participation [62]. Employees often adopt consistent work habits and strategies that enhance performance outcomes. Time management and personality traits—both of leaders and followers—further influence engagement levels [63]. Individuals' assumptions about permanence affect their motivation, participation, and behavioral outcomes, all of which shape performance [64].

Research into team cognition and organizational culture has explored how values, norms, and leadership messaging shape behavior [65]. Organizational behavior literature also examines hidden social norms and their cultural effects [66, 67]. Productivity emerges from the interaction of individual capability, cognitive function, and cultural context, reflected in problem-solving, concentration, intuition, and decision-making [68-70]. A collaborative and unified organizational culture—marked by aligned values, structures, and missions—fosters synergy and cohesion [71, 72].

Sustainability represents a long-term organizational attribute that persists even through leadership transitions. Achieving it requires integration, negotiation, and conflict resolution competence. Leaders who understand company values, workplace culture, and regional differences are more capable of securing these outcomes [73].

In summary, the reviewed research provides strong support for the notion that once engagement occurs, it naturally leads to greater employee productivity. Accordingly, the conceptual model shown in **Figure 1** was developed after an extensive literature review to validate these relationships and theoretical assumptions.

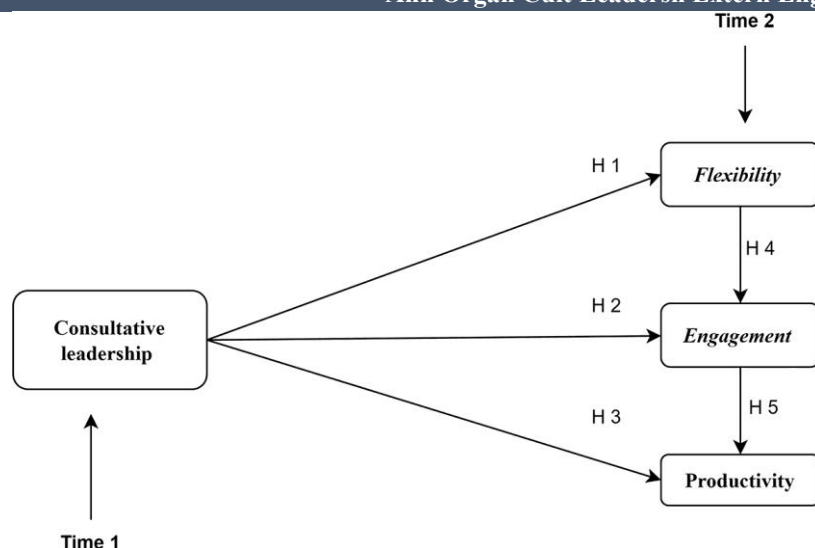


Figure 1. Causal Framework of the Research

Methods

Procedure and sampling

During August 2020, a self-administered Likert-type survey was distributed to individuals employed in Pakistan's public and private higher education institutions. To determine the sample size, the Slovin formula, previously applied in educational research, was utilized. A centralized point for the distribution and collection of the questionnaires was arranged under institutional management supervision, adhering to COVID-19 safety guidelines. Participants were provided with sealed envelopes containing printed survey forms. Using random sampling, 380 academic employees based in Islamabad were selected at a 5% margin of error to participate in the study.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + n \times (e)^2} \text{ since } n = \frac{7154}{1 + 7154 (0.05)^2}, n = 379 \quad (1)$$

Respondents willing to participate were requested to return completed questionnaires during working hours. The time-lag approach [74] was applied to minimize common method bias and examine intergenerational variations. This approach, frequently used in education, psychology, and youth studies, allows for identifying temporal distinctions across constructs. Initially, participants completed surveys related to consultative leadership, followed one week later by a second questionnaire assessing productivity, adaptability, and employee engagement. Demographic data were gathered at both stages after obtaining informed consent. Prior to analysis, incomplete, missing, or outlier responses were excluded, ensuring independent and unbiased data handling by the researchers.

Participation levels were somewhat affected by situational factors, including pandemic-related restrictions and scheduling difficulties. Of the 250 surveys returned, 220 were fully usable for final analysis. For comparative assessment, an equal split of 110 responses was maintained between the public and private sectors.

The data were processed using SPSS and SmartPLS for structural equation modeling (SEM) and path analysis. Statistical measures, including factor and cross-loadings, model fit indicators, correlations, and path coefficients, were referenced from previous literature [75]. Prior research in Pakistan's educational environment indicates that empirical SEM techniques are valuable for such studies [76, 77]. The current investigation introduces consultative leadership as a progressive and meaningful concept for individuals in leadership roles, aligning with the ongoing shift toward transformational education [78].

Below **Table 1** provides the demographic summary of study participants. The data show that the majority of respondents were male employees possessing relevant professional experience.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Profile

Variable	Range	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative %
Age	below 30	53	24.091	24.091
	31–39	51	23.182	47.273
	40–49	82	37.273	84.545
	50–59	34	15.455	100
Gender	Male	144	65.455	65.455
	Female	76	34.545	100
Experience	<5 Yrs.	84	38.182	38.182

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Education	6–10 Yrs.	114	51.818	90
	11–15 Yrs.	22	10	100
	Graduation	117	53.182	53.182
	Masters'	95	43.182	96.364
	PhD	8	3.636	100

N=220, missing values=0

Measures

Drawing from a diverse range of studies on implicit and transformational leadership, a leadership assessment instrument was developed, integrating items inspired by previous research [28, 79]. The consultative leadership construct included four items, such as: “leaders should openly communicate intended changes” and “leaders must seek team input before implementing actions.” Participants were asked to specify the degree to which leaders consult, involve, or delegate in daily work contexts [24, 80, 81].

The employee engagement scale consisted of three statements, including: “I feel energetic while performing my job,” “My work holds significance and purpose,” and “I feel enthusiastic about my role.” These were adapted from prior research [82, 83].

To assess human resource flexibility, four items developed by Bhattacharya *et al.* [20] were used. Sample statements included: “We frequently revise our HR practices to meet changing work requirements” and “Our HR systems remain flexible as an integrated whole.”

Additional flexibility measures were drawn from Kock *et al.* [84], using items such as: “I can effectively manage work-related issues and challenges” and “I adapt to workplace changes more easily than peers.” Prior findings emphasize that both at the organizational and individual level, HR flexibility enhances strategic alignment, environmental responsiveness, and contributes to employee engagement and performance [5].

Results

Reliability refers to the accuracy of measurement procedures, whereas validity relates to the extent to which outcomes genuinely represent the intended construct. Factor loadings reveal the degree to which a variable explains its underlying component. Acceptable measurement thresholds are defined as cross-loadings $> .40$ [85], AVE $> .50$, and Composite Reliability (CR) and Cronbach’s alpha (CA) values exceeding $.70$ [86]. Factor loadings of ≥ 0.70 demonstrate adequate variance extraction through SEM [87].

Model fitness is indicated when $SRMR \leq 0.08$ and $NFI \geq 0.90$. In this study, $SRMR = 0.06$ falls within the acceptable boundary, while NFI values around 0.89 and above indicate a close fit. The summary of these statistical measures is presented in **Table 2**, confirming that the reliability and validity metrics meet the prescribed criteria.

Table 2. Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Validity Indicators

Construct	Item Code	Loading	CA (α)	rho_A	CR	AVE
Consultative Leadership	CNSLD1	0.849	0.852	0.857	0.900	0.693
	CNSLD2	0.850				
	CNSLD3	0.850				
	CNSLD4	0.779				
Engagement	ENG1	0.874	0.866	0.869	0.918	0.789
	ENG2	0.910				
	ENG3	0.880				
Flexibility	FHR1	0.862	0.875	0.891	0.915	0.730
	FHR2	0.899				
	FHR3	0.904				
	FHR4	0.742				
Productivity	PROD1	0.795	0.861	0.863	0.900	0.643
	PROD2	0.820				
	PROD3	0.823				
	PROD4	0.788				
	PROD5	0.783				
Fit Indices & Thresholds						
SRMR < 0.08 (0.068)						
NFI > 0.90 (0.890)						
CA (α) > 0.70						
rho_A > 0.70						
CR > 0.70						
AVE > 0.50						

Notes: CR = Composite Reliability | AVE = Average Variance Extracted | CA = Cronbach’s Alpha

Evidence of discriminant validity ensures distinctiveness between constructs. As shown in **Table 3**, the results comply with the threshold range proposed by Fornell & Larcker [88] and Gold *et al.* [89], i.e., values between $\geq .85$ and $\leq .90$.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity

#	Construct	1	2	3	4
1	Consultative Leadership	0.833			
2	Engagement	0.541	0.888		
3	Flexibility	0.493	0.519	0.854	
4	Productivity	0.667	0.548	0.405	0.802

Threshold $\leq .90$

Once model fit, validity, and reliability were established, path analysis was conducted to test hypotheses. Path analysis allows for more complex causal modeling than traditional regression. Based on the obtained results, the proposed theoretical model was found to be statistically sound. After confirming assumptions, hypothesis testing commenced, as summarized in **Table 4**, showing coefficients, t-values, and p-values.

Table 4. Path Analysis

Path	$\beta \pm \text{STDEV}$	T Statistics
Consultative Leadership \rightarrow Flexibility	0.493 ± 0.064	7.716***
Consultative Leadership \rightarrow Engagement	0.377 ± 0.069	5.492***
Consultative Leadership \rightarrow Productivity	0.523 ± 0.061	8.542***
Flexibility \rightarrow Engagement	0.333 ± 0.072	4.650***
Engagement \rightarrow Productivity	0.265 ± 0.069	3.822***

T-value ≥ 2.57 ($p < 0.001$) indicates statistical significance

Path analysis evaluates and compares multiple conceptual models to identify the best-fitting one. In this study, the first hypothesis proposed that consultative leadership positively influences managerial flexibility, supported by a path coefficient of 0.493, $t = 7.716$, $p < 0.001$.

The second hypothesis, asserting that consultative leadership enhances employee engagement, was validated with a coefficient of 0.377, $t = 5.492$, $p < 0.001$.

The third hypothesis suggested that consultative leadership drives productivity, confirmed with a coefficient of 0.523, $t = 8.542$, $p < 0.001$. This reveals a strong link between leadership consultation and employee performance outcomes.

The fourth hypothesis proposed that flexibility fosters engagement, supported by coefficients of 0.333, $t = 4.650$, and $p < 0.001$.

Finally, the fifth hypothesis posited that employee engagement promotes productivity, with a coefficient of 0.265, $t = 3.822$, $p < 0.001$. Although this link is positive, it appears weaker relative to other validated paths.

R-Square, F-Square, and Q-Square Analysis

The R-Square (R^2) statistic measures how effectively the independent variable(s) explain variations in the dependent variable(s). A predictive model is considered useful when its R^2 is below 0.1, indicating that it captures a portion of the variance in the dataset. For example, if a model's $R^2 = 0.5$, it accounts for 50% of the observed variation. In the context of organizational research, R^2 values of 0.75, 0.50, and 0.25 are typically interpreted as substantial, moderate, and weak, respectively [87].

In applied modeling, multiple external or contextual factors can influence a single construct within the conceptual framework. The F-Square (f^2) statistic reflects the change in R-Square when an exogenous variable is excluded from the model (**Table 5**). The effect size (f^2) denotes the degree of impact: ≥ 0.02 is considered small, ≥ 0.15 is medium, and ≥ 0.35 represents a large effect [90]. In this study, consultative leadership demonstrated a modest impact on engagement, while its influence on flexibility and productivity was considerably stronger.

The Q-Square (Q^2) statistic measures predictive relevance, indicating whether a model has forecasting capability. A Q^2 value greater than zero signifies predictive accuracy [91]. This value also assesses the model's ability to reconstruct endogenous variable estimates. Positive Q^2 scores confirm that the proposed model effectively predicts and replicates empirical data patterns.

Table 5. Effect Size

#	Latent Variable	Q^2	R^2	f^2	2	3	4
1	Consultative Leadership			0.173	0.322	0.382	
2	Engagement	0.289	0.377	0.135		0.098	
3	Flexibility	0.169	0.243				
4	Productivity	0.307	0.494				

$Q^2 = (1 - \text{SSE} / \text{SSO})$

Discussion

Consultative leaders operate under the assumption that their teams possess the competence and expertise needed for high-quality work. Although such leaders retain final decision-making authority, they emphasize listening to team input first [11]. Organizational change rarely follows a continuous path—it evolves through sequential connections and disconnections. Leadership legitimacy, therefore, is subject to ongoing evaluation by influential internal groups. In dynamic contexts, strategic transformation unfolds through multiple micro-level actions undertaken by leadership members [92].

Creating an effective strategic leadership constellation becomes complex when disparities or friction exist between the executive and strategic leadership layers. This complexity intensifies as organizational needs evolve and barriers to leadership transitions decrease [93]. The practice of strategic consultation—used as a diagnostic and systemic intervention—serves as a pragmatic approach to uncovering complex corporate dynamics quickly and cost-effectively [94].

Notably, disparities in employee engagement often stem from differences in perceived job autonomy, regardless of generational or age factors [95]. Sustained flexibility and engagement—fostered by patient, process-oriented leaders—can gradually improve workforce productivity [96, 97].

From a symbolic interactionism perspective, consultative leadership plays a central role in constructing shared meaning. Continuous group interaction allows members to define and negotiate roles within the collective framework [6]. Such engagement not only strengthens interpersonal relations but also stimulates innovation through open expression and collaboration [98].

Conclusion

Given that Asian cultures often emphasize hierarchy and authority, transformational and consultative leadership frameworks hold strong potential for research and application. In Pakistan, however, relatively few studies explore such leadership traditions. As scholarship expands, organizational policies and practices can be reshaped accordingly. Since organizations are composed of multiple interacting entities, consultation serves as a unifying mechanism that enhances productivity through engagement and adaptability.

Theoretical and practical implications

Leadership roles require balancing positional authority with functional agility. Consequently, the consultation process can be intricate, demanding that leaders discern the optimal degree of flexibility based on situational urgency. Social exchange processes—both tangible and intangible—enable relationship-building across organizational networks. Intentional consultation in leadership can effectively link flexibility, engagement, and productivity, though this integration may be gradual and effort-intensive.

In the Pakistani context, transformational education reform has become increasingly relevant [78]. Furthermore, the consultative concept aligns closely with the Islamic principle of Shura, which emphasizes collective decision-making [99]. In Islamic societies, consultation fosters legitimacy and trust, strengthening leader–follower relationships. When individuals engage with consultative leaders, they tend to exhibit higher adaptability, social responsiveness, and participation, ultimately driving productivity.

On a broader level, this leadership model underscores how social interaction promotes cooperation, compromise, and civility among employees, families, and communities. As a secular leadership approach, consultative intent remains applicable across diverse theoretical and organizational contexts.

Limitations and future directions

This study's design carries several limitations, including demographic imbalances, sample size constraints, and potential methodological bias. Future research should replicate and expand this framework across various sectors to strengthen generalizability.

Subsequent inquiries could explore leader–member exchange (LMX) mechanisms as mediators in social relationship development and network formation. Reciprocity—the foundation of social exchange—encourages individuals to uphold obligations in exchange for continued mutual benefit. Over time, such reciprocal practices may cultivate social systems governed by shared norms, motivating individuals to balance personal and collective interests. Initially, these expectations are not formal constraints but evolve into normative structures that sustain group cohesion and productivity.

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