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From Authentic Leadership to Employee Performance: A Sequential Mediation Model of Trust and Leader-Member Exchange in the Health Sector

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Abstract

During the past decade, authentic leadership has become a central topic for scholars. This study is the first to analyze how authentic leadership, trust, leader–member exchange (LMX), and individual performance are linked through a sequential mediation process with an employee-centered lens. Data were obtained from 320 personnel employed in Pakistan's health sector. Results demonstrated that authentic leadership significantly and positively affects individual performance, both directly and indirectly, via the mediating roles of trust and LMX. Moreover, findings revealed that authentic leaders cultivate an atmosphere of trust that strengthens employees' LMX relationships and ultimately enhances their performance. This investigation introduces new insights regarding the dual mediation mechanism while merging four key constructs into a unified framework. Theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and recommendations for future work are also presented.

Keywords: Authentic leadership, Trust, LMX, Individual performance, Leadership behavior, Health services

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Introduction

Scholars widely recognize that authentic leadership (AL) can enhance employee performance due to its foundation in positive psychological capacities [1]. Ribeiro *et al.* [2] emphasized that AL boosts subordinate outcomes, and several contemporary studies underscore how leadership approaches contribute to desirable work results [3, 4]. Likewise, Duarte *et al.* [5] and Semedo *et al.* [6] confirmed its value in shaping individual performance. Over recent years, AL has emerged as a dominant concept in organizational behavior studies [5, 7, 8]. Luthans and Avolio [9] described AL as a composition of positive psychological strengths and a supportive organizational setting that fosters heightened self-awareness and self-regulated positive conduct among leaders and their teams, ultimately encouraging personal growth.

Authentic leaders represent a moral and balanced leadership style that aligns values with actions and minimizes destructive traits such as arrogance and abusive supervision [10-12]. Consequently, such leaders nurture trust within teams [8, 13-15]. and improve leader–member exchange (LMX) quality [16, 17], leading to stronger job performance. AL has also been associated with improved work engagement [18], organizational commitment [19], and job satisfaction [20]. From an organizational perspective, individual performance supports sustainable growth and competitiveness. Consequently, numerous studies have examined what drives individual performance [21]. Among these factors, leadership behavior consistently emerges as a dominant predictor [5, 21, 22]. In service-oriented fields such as healthcare, leadership is particularly vital for success [23], as leaders shape employee attitudes, emotions, and service quality [24, 25].

The present research addresses the gap in previous empirical models that have not fully incorporated mediators and dependent variables—specifically, individual performance—within the AL framework [5]. To date, no empirical evidence has simultaneously examined AL, trust, and LMX in predicting performance outcomes. Thus, this work offers an early empirical

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contribution by linking these four essential constructs into a single sequential model: AL (independent), trust and LMX (mediators), and individual performance (dependent). Prior findings suggest that an absence of trust among employees hinders performance [26, 27]. Trust establishes a positive workplace climate and reflects faith, mutual expectations, and reliance among coworkers [14, 15, 28, 29]. AL promotes a supportive and ethical environment [1], which enhances feelings of trust among team members [13-15, 30]. As Gambetta [31] explained, trust involves the expectation that another person will act in ways that are beneficial—or at least not harmful—thereby encouraging cooperation.

In addition to trust, LMX serves as a second intermediary between AL and individual performance [5]. LMX represents the quality of leader–subordinate interactions [32-34], developed through reciprocal exchanges and mutual respect [33, 35]. Authentic leaders typically foster high-quality LMX by promoting flexibility, empathy, and collaboration [16, 36]. As such, the strength of LMX relationships may considerably influence how AL contributes to employee outcomes. Multiple studies indicate that high LMX quality benefits both individual and organizational performance [34, 36-38]. Therefore, LMX is considered an essential mediator in the AL–performance relationship, alongside trust.

This study provides several key contributions. First, it advances social exchange theory by empirically validating an underexplored linkage among AL, trust, LMX, and individual performance. Second, it demonstrates the sequential mediating role of trust and LMX between AL and performance. Finally, it enhances understanding of employee outcomes by emphasizing that trust and LMX, fostered by authentic leaders, generate positive emotional and motivational states that promote higher individual performance.

Structure of the Study

The present research follows a systematic framework that begins with an abstract summarizing the main aspects of the investigation. This is followed by definitions of essential concepts employed in the study. A comprehensive introduction elaborates on the major study variables, followed by an updated review of relevant academic literature. The subsequent section outlines the research methodology applied in this project, followed by the presentation and evaluation of data gathered from 320 professionals employed in Pakistan's healthcare industry. The final section includes a summary of findings, a discussion of the study's strengths and limitations, and recommendations for subsequent research in related or extended areas.

Authentic Leadership and Individual Performance

Walumbwa *et al.* [39] described authentic leadership (AL) as "a behavioral pattern in leaders that utilizes and enhances positive psychological resources and a moral environment, cultivating self-awareness, an internal moral compass, objective information processing, and openness in relationships, thereby fostering personal growth." Authentic leaders are recognized for acting with fairness and genuineness rather than manipulation or favoritism [40]. The four defining components of authentic leadership include self-awareness, balanced information processing, relational transparency, and internalized moral perspective [39].

Gardner *et al.* [41] provided further clarification on these four constructs. Firstly, self-awareness refers to how both leaders and team members recognize their motives, intentions, and values, allowing them to express their goals in ways that align with others' expectations. Secondly, balanced information processing reflects the willingness of leaders and subordinates to objectively consider differing viewpoints, which supports mutual understanding and shared purpose. Thirdly, relational transparency promotes the open sharing of ideas and emotions, improving mutual appreciation between both sides. Lastly, an internalized moral perspective involves guiding principles such as fairness and respect, which reduce interpersonal conflicts and create a more ethical work climate.

Authentic leaders demonstrate positive psychological tendencies such as optimism, moral integrity, confidence, transparency, hope, and commitment to developing their employees [1, 2, 7, 14, 15, 41]. This form of leadership evolves progressively, as managers strengthen genuine and transparent relationships with their followers and improve their personal self-awareness [1]. Since its inception, AL has been associated with favorable psychological and behavioral outcomes [1, 39]. It has shown a meaningful impact on employees' positive work attitudes [5, 7, 42]. A meta-analysis by Zhang *et al.* [14, 15] highlights that AL significantly enhances employee engagement, empowerment, commitment, and thriving at work. Likewise, prior empirical work supports its beneficial influence on job satisfaction, creativity, and task accomplishment [43-46].

The behaviors and ethics of authentic leaders are grounded in strong moral values and supportive beliefs that enhance subordinates' performance [5, 7, 14, 15, 47]. Drawing from social exchange theory [48], employees who feel a sense of obligation toward ethical and supportive leaders tend to reciprocate through increased effort, resulting in higher performance levels [15, 17]. Furthermore, individuals working under authentic leaders often experience greater autonomy and self-efficacy, which further strengthen their performance outcomes [14, 15, 39].

Hypothesis H1: Authentic leadership is anticipated to exert a positive influence on individual work performance.

Mediating Role of Trust

Trust reflects an employee's belief, perception, and expectation that their organization and supervisors will behave with fairness, honesty, and respect [49]. It has been characterized as "the confidence one party places in the integrity and dependability of another" [50] and as "a readiness to accept vulnerability based on another's actions" [50]. When workers perceive their environment as confidential and psychologically safe, their trust levels rise, increasing openness and willingness to depend on others [51]. Within a social context, trust functions as a social–psychological construct that reflects the quality and character of the relationship between two individuals [52-54].

Different conceptualizations of trust exist in the literature [55], including affective–cognitive distinctions [56] and situational or dispositional orientations [57]. Barney and Hansen [58] described three trust intensities—weak, semi-strong, and strong. Earlier scholarship identified its main components as integrity, reliability, openness, competence, consistency, congruence, benevolence, transparency, and sound communication [59, 60].

Guided by social exchange theory [48], the present research interprets leader–employee relationships as reciprocal processes that influence work performance. Cropanzano and Mitchell [61] noted that this theory provides a major explanatory base for workplace attitudes and behaviors. It proposes that employees form exchange relationships shaped by previous interactions [48, 62, 63]. According to reciprocity norms [64, 65], individuals tend to return good or bad treatment in kind [66]. Within this framework, trust serves as the core condition enabling such exchanges [47].

Authentic leadership (AL) can therefore influence performance through trust. Authentic leaders involve their teams in decision-making and demonstrate consistency between speech and behavior, which enhances dependability and faith in them [1, 14, 15]. They establish transparent, ethical environments that nurture respect and psychological safety [17, 18]. Subordinates, in response, display stronger motivation and higher output [14, 15]. Empirical evidence also supports the mediating function of trust between AL and favorable work outcomes such as commitment and engagement [13, 30, 67]. Thus, developing trust is a critical feature of effective leadership, consistent with the tenets of social exchange theory [48], and contributes significantly to employee efficiency [30].

Hypothesis H2: Trust serves as a significant mediator in the relationship between authentic leadership and individual performance.

Mediating Role of LMX

Leader–member exchange (LMX) refers to the interpersonal relationship and reciprocal interactions between supervisors and their subordinates—typically informal and evolving over time within organizational settings [34, 35]. It captures the overall strength and quality of the connection between the two parties [68]. LMX is understood to arise through repeated exchanges and social interactions [37, 69]. Rooted in social exchange theory [48, 64], such exchanges form when one actor provides valued contributions that encourage reciprocal actions. Accordingly, LMX embodies mutual exchanges of support, effort, and resources between followers and leaders [33, 35].

When one participant consistently offers positive input, the exchange quality strengthens [69]. Bauer and Green [70] outlined three developmental stages of LMX: (1) Role taking, where leaders evaluate subordinates' skills and motivation; (2) Role making, in which roles are negotiated and clarified; and (3) Role routinization, when a stable, reciprocal partnership is established. High-quality exchanges generate a sense of obligation in subordinates, motivating greater effort and superior job performance [34, 71].

Authentic leaders cultivate a transparent and supportive atmosphere that assists employees during demanding periods and enhances fairness in interactions. Over time, they build durable, loyalty-based relationships characterized by sincerity and mutual faith [46]. Such trust-driven associations are strengthened through quality LMX connections [72]. Leaders depend on employees for cooperation, while employees rely on leaders for encouragement, professional advancement, and emotional support [33]. These interactions foster autonomy and competence among followers [73].

Research consistently shows that AL contributes to the development of high-quality LMX, which subsequently affects individual performance. The relationship between AL and employee outcomes is frequently indirect, operating through the mediation of LMX [16, 46, 74]. For instance, LMX has been found to mediate the effects of AL on creativity, innovative behavior, and employee voice [16, 46, 74]. On this basis, the present study anticipates that AL enhances employee performance by strengthening LMX.

Hypothesis H3: Leader–member exchange acts as a significant mediator between authentic leadership and individual performance.

Sequential Mediating Role of Trust and LMX

Previous findings indicate that authentic leadership (AL) can indirectly enhance employee performance through the sequential effects of trust and leader–member exchange (LMX). Studies suggest that AL cultivates employee trust because of its transparent, ethical, and supportive nature [14, 15]. This sense of trust encourages workers to invest more energy and dedication into their tasks [5]. When a work environment fosters high levels of trust [8, 14, 15], employees demonstrate greater job involvement, stronger organizational loyalty, and increased satisfaction [18, 47, 49], ultimately contributing to better organizational outcomes [8]. Therefore, trust among followers serves as a foundation for establishing high-quality exchanges with leaders [46].

Likewise, when employees experience effective LMX, they tend to display improved psychological stability, more positive attitudes, and favorable workplace behaviors [5, 16, 34, 46]. Empirical evidence has confirmed the relationship between AL and trust [13-15], as well as between AL and LMX [14, 15, 17]. Other researchers have also shown that LMX quality significantly contributes to subordinate performance [37, 46, 75]. In line with social exchange theory, mutual trust in high-quality exchanges encourages employees to reciprocate with constructive attitudes and desirable behaviors (e.g., Andersen *et al.* [52]; Blau [48]).

Authentic leaders are distinct because they integrate personal, team, and organizational needs with ethical awareness and consistency. They maintain moral principles and show resilience when advocating for their subordinates' independence and goal achievement [76]. Such conduct helps to build trust and foster high-quality LMX [5, 14-16]. In return, this environment of mutual respect and confidence motivates employees to behave positively and contribute effectively to organizational performance [14, 15, 17, 52].

This research assumes that authentic leadership enhances employee performance through the sequential pathway of trust and LMX. The link between AL and performance is conceptualized as operating through these two mediating variables. Specifically, AL increases employees' trust, which in turn promotes stronger LMX quality between leaders and subordinates. These strengthened relationships motivate followers to work harder toward common organizational goals, resulting in higher individual performance. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is presented:

Hypothesis H4: Trust and LMX function as sequential mediators in the association between authentic leadership and individual performance.

Key Gaps and Contributions of the Study

There remains a notable research gap as no empirical work has explored the combined mediating effects of trust and LMX between authentic leadership and employee performance. This study extends existing knowledge by identifying factors that influence individual performance among hospital employees and deepening the understanding of AL's role in healthcare institutions. The findings reveal that authentic leadership significantly enhances employees' performance and that this link is strengthened by the presence of trust. Moreover, the results demonstrate that LMX further reinforces this effect. The principal contribution of this research lies in confirming that both trust and LMX jointly act as sequential mediators in the relationship between AL and employee performance in hospital settings.

The Conceptual Model

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed framework, depicting how authentic leadership influences individual performance through the sequential mediation of trust and LMX [5, 16, 46].

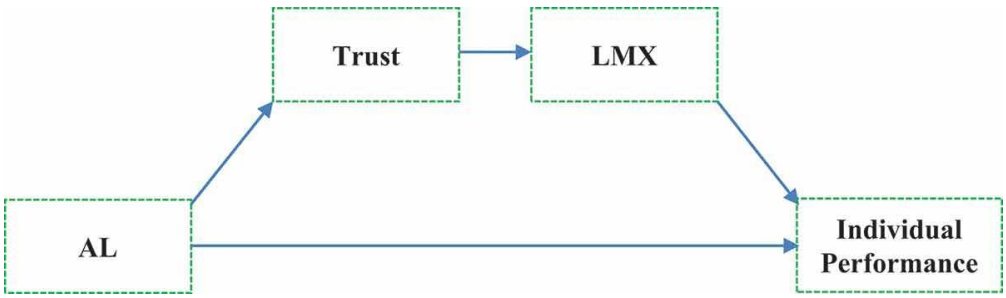

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Sample and procedures

A quantitative approach was used to obtain data for the conceptual model. The survey targeted health professionals working in hospitals located in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, Pakistan. Respondents were selected based on a minimum of two years of

professional experience. The study utilized a simple cross-sectional design, which enables data collection from a wide participant pool and allows meaningful comparison of responses.
Out of 377 questionnaires distributed, 320 valid responses were returned, resulting in an 85% response rate. The demographic information of respondents is summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Demographic Statistics

Demographics	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	178	56
	Female	142	44
Age	20–25	33	10
	26-30	49	15
	31–35	56	18
	36-40	69	22
	41–45	39	12
	46-50	43	13
	51 & above	31	10
Experience	1–5	73	23
	6-10	91	28
	11–15	64	20
	16–20	53	17
	Above 20	39	12
Qualification	Undergraduate	86	27
	Graduation	168	53
	Master & above	66	21

Data analysis was performed using Smart PLS software. Within social sciences, structural equation modeling (SEM) is considered an advanced and reliable statistical tool for testing causal relationships [77]. In this study, path analysis was employed to examine causal relationships between variables. Using the Maximum Likelihood Estimation (MLE) method, model fit indices and path coefficients were evaluated. Participants rated all survey items on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”).

AL – Independent Variable

To evaluate Authentic Leadership (AL) perceptions, this study adopted the instrument introduced by Walumbwa *et al.* [39], which has been widely utilized in earlier research. The same scale was applied here to capture AL attributes among hospital staff. It encompasses four essential elements: self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing. Comprising 16 items, one example reads, “Seeks feedback to improve interactions with others.” The internal consistency for this scale was determined as Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.85$, which is above the standard reliability level of 0.7.

Trust – Mediating Variable

A seven-item measure developed by Koohang *et al.* [59] was used to examine the sense of trust among hospital professionals. A representative statement from this tool is “Compassion and empathy demonstrated by a leader build trust among people.” The scale achieved a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.79, indicating an acceptable reliability score (> 0.7).

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) – Mediating Variable

The next mediator, Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), was assessed using the Graen and Uhl-Bien [33] seven-item instrument. An example item is “My leader understands my working difficulties and needs.” The tool demonstrated high internal consistency with $\alpha = 0.90$, which exceeds the acceptable benchmark of 0.7.

Individual Performance – Dependent Variable

To evaluate individual performance, this study used the Staples *et al.* [78] instrument. A sample statement reads, “I’m an efficient worker.” The calculated Cronbach’s alpha for this construct was 0.86, confirming strong reliability.

Results

Every structural equation framework involves measurement and structural components. The structural model was previously constructed, and its validity and reliability depend on how accurately the measurement model performs [79].

Measurement Model

The study first confirmed the soundness of the measurement model by evaluating both the validity and the reliability of the proposed variables. Internal consistency was tested through composite reliability (CR) and Cronbach's alpha (α). As shown in **Table 2**, all variables presented values above 0.7, meeting accepted criteria [80, 81].
For convergent validity (CV), individual item loadings were assessed, all exceeding 0.7 [82]. The average variance extracted (AVE) results were all above 0.5, demonstrating adequate CV [81, 82].
To establish discriminant validity, the heterotrait–monotrait (HTMT) ratio was computed; all construct pairs yielded ratios under 0.85, as detailed in **Table 2** [83]. The means, standard deviations (SDs), and correlation values of all constructs are reported in **Table 3**, showing significant outcomes at the 0.01 (two-tailed) level.

Table 2. Reliability and Validity

S#	Variables	Min. loading	Alpha	CR	AVE	HTMT ratio		
						1	2	3
1	AL	0.760	0.851	0.874	0.652			
2	Trust	0.709	0.795	0.818	0.541	0.603		
3	LMX	0.734	0.901	0.805	0.682	0.684	0.714	
4	IP	0.792	0.868	0.731	0.702	0.632	0.701	0.598

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

S#	Variables	M	SD	Correlation		
				1	2	3
1	AL	3.014	0.731			
2	Trust	3.415	0.724	0.609**		
3	LMX	3.243	0.774	0.645**	0.690**	
4	IP	3.041	0.784	0.703**	0.659**	0.713**

Note: ** indicates correlation significance at 0.01 (two-tailed).

Both direct and mediated relationships among constructs were analyzed using the structural model summarized in **Table 4**.

- H1: The influence of AL on individual performance was supported ($\beta = 0.421$; $p < 0.001$).
- H2: The mediating role of trust between AL and performance was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.498$; $p < 0.001$).
- H3: The mediation effect of LMX was also confirmed ($\beta = 0.641$; $p < 0.001$).
- H4: The sequential mediation via trust and LMX in the AL–performance pathway was validated ($\beta = 0.398$; $p < 0.001$; **Figures 1 and 2**).

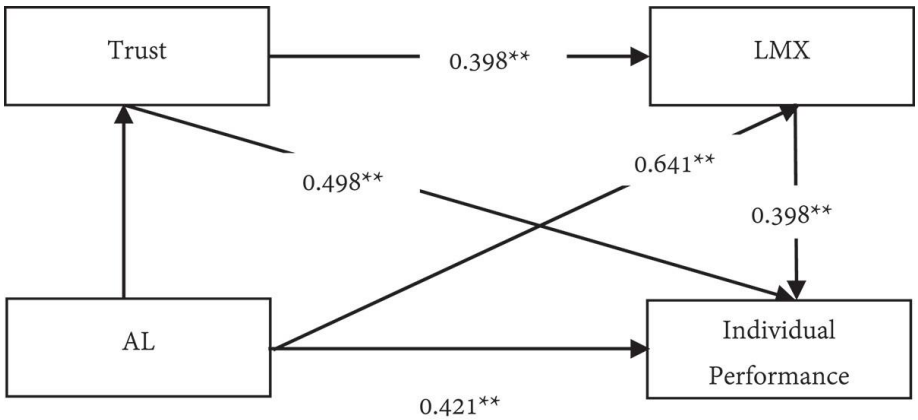

Figure 2. Structural Model

Table 4. Structural Model

Association	Coefficient	SE	t-test	p-value
AL → Individual performance	0.421	0.025	19.110	0.000
AL → Trust → Individual performance	0.498	0.034	22.004	0.000
AL → LMX → Individual performance	0.641	0.031	16.318	0.000

AL → Trust → LMX → Individual performance	0.398	0.029	7.254	0.000

Conclusion

For healthcare organizations, maintaining high employee performance is critical to achieving operational efficiency and ensuring patient satisfaction through effective service delivery. This study was designed to identify the key drivers that shape individual performance in hospital environments, enriching existing literature on the topic.

The research was guided by four objectives:

1. To determine the direct influence of authentic leadership on employees' individual performance.
2. To explore whether trust mediates the connection between AL and individual performance, in accordance with social exchange theory.
3. To examine the mediating effect of LMX in this same relationship.
4. To assess the combined sequential mediation of trust and LMX on the relationship between AL and individual performance.

The outcomes associated with all research aims verified that Authentic Leadership (AL) is significantly related to individual performance. The constructive features of AL—such as transparency, resilience, optimism, ethical standards, motivation, hope, and a forward-thinking approach—play a decisive role in fostering followers' work effectiveness [14-17, 72]. These findings are consistent with prior literature identifying AL as a major determinant of individual performance [2, 5, 84].

In addition to this direct connection, the current analysis evaluated trust as a mediating construct between AL and individual performance. As predicted, trust exerted a positive mediation effect, thus confirming Hypothesis 2. This supports earlier evidence suggesting that employees' performance improves under authentic leaders who cultivate trust within their teams [2, 30, 85].

Drawing on social exchange theory, it can be inferred that employees' attitudes and behavior reflect their leader's conduct. When subordinates perceive fair treatment and transparency from their leaders, they respond with stronger commitment, engagement, and better performance [14, 15, 48, 86].

Authentic leaders exemplify integrity, honesty, moral purpose, and credibility, which strengthen employees' expectations and willingness to cooperate for collective benefit [24]. Therefore, when leadership authenticity is evident, followers naturally develop trust, resulting in enhanced job performance.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) significantly strengthens individual performance in the presence of AL. Effective communication and mutual understanding between leaders and subordinates are fundamental to achieving desirable outcomes in healthcare institutions. Prior studies have also emphasized the key mediating influence of LMX on the connection between AL and positive employee behaviors [16, 87].

Lastly, this research identified that trust and LMX jointly function as sequential mediators linking AL with individual performance.

Practical Implications

The outcomes of this investigation carry several practical insights. First, the results establish that authentic leadership exerts a significant positive influence on employee performance. Consequently, leaders in healthcare organizations should act as ethical role models who inspire and guide their employees to improve performance levels.

Second, management should focus on creating a trust-driven organizational atmosphere. Trust can be cultivated by demonstrating authenticity, expressing genuine care, maintaining openness, and ensuring clarity in communication [14, 15, 30, 39, 88].

Third, organizational heads must recognize the pivotal role of LMX in improving employee outcomes. Therefore, leadership programs should emphasize collaboration, relational development, and mutual respect.

Finally, the healthcare industry must appreciate that trust and LMX together contribute to forming a more engaged and productive workforce capable of delivering high-quality outcomes.

Theoretical Implications

This study extends theoretical understanding in multiple ways. Employing social exchange theory, it identifies trust and LMX as dual and sequential mediators through which authentic leadership influences individual performance. The framework developed here provides a holistic explanation for how AL impacts employee outcomes.

Previous works have generally examined these variables in isolation, focusing on a single mediator [89, 90] or discussing them separately without integrating them into a unified theoretical structure [5, 74]. This research, however, presents a consolidated model that demonstrates both independent and combined mediation effects of trust and LMX on the AL–performance relationship.

Empirical evidence confirmed that leaders' authenticity is significantly linked to individual performance, particularly through trust-based mediation. These findings are consistent with earlier studies suggesting that AL influences follower outcomes primarily via indirect pathways [2, 5, 16].
In summary, the present work contributes a comprehensive understanding of the mediating mechanisms—trust and LMX—that explain how AL enhances individual performance.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

Although this study contributes meaningful insights, several limitations should be acknowledged before generalizing its findings.
First, due to the cross-sectional nature of the research design, the ability to infer causation is restricted. Future investigations should employ longitudinal or experimental approaches to validate temporal relationships.
Second, the current research is confined to the healthcare sector, which limits its applicability to other industries or cultural contexts. Subsequent studies should examine similar variables across different sectors and diverse environments.
Third, participant characteristics such as gender, professional experience, and age were not explored as control factors; these should be incorporated in future analyses to uncover potential variations.
Fourth, this study only examined trust and LMX as mediators. Future research may incorporate additional variables like psychological safety, empowerment, job engagement, or value congruence to broaden the theoretical scope.
Finally, upcoming research could assess potential moderators such as ethical infrastructure, organizational virtuousness, and policy frameworks to provide deeper insight into the contextual conditions that shape the AL–performance connection.

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