

Article

The Developmental Role of Human Capital in Leadership-Driven Performance: A Qualitative Systematic Literature Review of Mechanisms and Outcomes

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Abstract: This qualitative systematic literature review examines the developmental role of human capital in explaining how leadership influences organizational performance. The review synthesizes evidence on transformational and transactional leadership, human capital development, capability mobilization, and organizational outcomes. The findings indicate that transformational leadership primarily supports capability expansion through inspiration, intellectual stimulation, empowerment, and individualized development, whereas transactional leadership strengthens capability mobilization through goal clarity, contingent rewards, feedback, and performance reinforcement. Human capital development emerges as a critical developmental bridge and enabling condition that strengthens the translation of leadership behaviors into organizational performance. The review further demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is contingent on employee capability, organizational context, and performance requirements. Organizational outcomes extend beyond financial performance to include productivity, innovation, adaptability, engagement, and long-term competitiveness. The study concludes that sustainable leadership-driven performance requires the strategic integration of leadership practices with continuous human capital development.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership; Transactional Leadership; Human Capital Development; Organizational Performance; Qualitative Systematic Literature Review

1. Introduction

Organizational performance has become a multidimensional and strategically important outcome in contemporary management research, encompassing financial results, innovation, operational effectiveness, adaptability, employee development, and long-term competitiveness. Leadership is widely recognized as a critical organizational capability because leaders influence how employees interpret goals, allocate effort, develop competencies, and respond to changing environments. However, no single leadership style is universally effective across organizational contexts, employee characteristics, and performance objectives. Leadership effectiveness therefore depends on the organizational mechanisms through which leaders influence employee behavior and capabilities. Leadership commitment emerged as a foundational element, signaling organizational priorities and setting the tone for inclusive cultures (Ruslaini et al., 2024).

Transformational and transactional leadership have received substantial attention because they operate through different mechanisms. Transformational leadership emphasizes inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and a compelling organizational vision, encouraging employee commitment, learning, and contributions beyond formal expectations. Transactional leadership focuses on clarifying expectations, monitoring performance, and establishing exchanges between effort and rewards. Although distinct, both approaches can contribute positively to organizational effectiveness under appropriate conditions. Performance management systems are able to

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provide a framework to support various changes and drive innovation within a company culture (Sugiharti, T., 2022).

Empirical evidence supports the importance of examining their relative and complementary roles. Lowe et al. (1996) found that transformational leadership dimensions were significantly associated with leadership effectiveness and work-unit performance. Similarly, Abbas and Ali (2023) reported that both transformational and transactional leadership contributed to project success, although transformational leadership showed a stronger overall effect. Their findings also demonstrated that project characteristics and national cultural conditions influenced leadership-performance relationships. These results suggest that leadership effectiveness is not a simple direct relationship but depends on mediating and moderating organizational mechanisms.

Human capital represents one of the most important mechanisms in this relationship. It includes the knowledge, skills, experience, competencies, and productive capabilities embedded within employees. Investments in education, training, experience, and capability development can improve individual productivity and organizational performance. However, the strategic value of human capital depends not only on its accumulation but also on an organization's ability to continuously develop, mobilize, retain, and apply employee capabilities. A positive relationship between transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior human capital (Djap, W. et al., 2022).

Leadership plays a central role in human capital development by shaping access to learning, feedback, mentoring, empowerment, and performance support. Transformational leadership encourages creativity, intellectual stimulation, and individualized development, whereas transactional leadership supports capability development through clear standards, reinforcement, and rewards. Thus, human capital development represents an important pathway linking leadership to organizational performance.

Recent studies confirm the strategic relationship between human capital and performance. Purboyo et al. (2022) found that human capital capacity, knowledge, and skills significantly influence organizational performance in the hospitality sector. Their findings also indicate that innovative leadership can strengthen the contribution of human capital knowledge to performance, suggesting that leadership and human capital are interdependent organizational resources.

Human capital development may also moderate leadership effectiveness. Leadership may have limited long-term impact when employees lack the competencies to translate motivation into performance, while training investments may be ineffective without supportive leadership environments. This perspective is supported by Jimoh (2026), who found that transformational and transactional leadership positively influence organizational performance, with human capital development moderating both relationships.

The moderating role of human capital shifts attention from identifying the “best” leadership style toward understanding how leadership becomes effective. Transformational leadership can promote creativity and commitment, while transactional leadership provides clear expectations and rewards; however, both require employees to possess adequate knowledge and skills. Human capital development therefore strengthens employees’ capacity to convert leadership influence into organizational outcomes.

Despite these findings, the literature remains fragmented. Many studies examine leadership-performance relationships directly, while human capital, training, and competencies are often investigated separately. Recent reviews by Agazu et al. (2025) and Fitriyah et al. (2025) further emphasize the importance of mediating and moderating mechanisms, contextual factors, and sectoral conditions in explaining leadership effectiveness.

Accordingly, this qualitative systematic literature review examines human capital development as a strategic bridge between leadership and organizational performance. It synthesizes evidence on how transformational leadership promotes inspiration, empowerment, learning, and individualized development, while transactional leadership supports performance through goal clarity, feedback, reinforcement, and rewards. Ultimately, the study adopts a process-oriented perspective that focuses not only on whether leadership improves performance, but on how leadership creates developmental conditions that enable employees to acquire and apply the capabilities needed to achieve organizational objectives.

2. Literature Review

Organizational performance is a central outcome in management and leadership research because it reflects how managerial decisions, employee capabilities, and strategic resources are transformed into financial, operational, innovative, and behavioral results. Leadership is important in this process because it influences motivation, goal alignment, learning, collaboration, and capability utilization. However, leadership effectiveness varies across organizational contexts and depends on both leadership behaviors and available developmental resources.

Transformational and transactional leadership illustrate this complexity. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, whereas transactional leadership focuses on clear expectations, performance monitoring, and rewards. Lowe et al. (1996) found that transformational leadership predicted work-unit effectiveness, while Judge and Piccolo (2004) showed that both transformational leadership and contingent reward positively influenced leadership effectiveness. Wang et al. (2011) further demonstrated the positive effects of transformational leadership across individual, team, and organizational performance, although Abbas and Ali (2023) showed that these effects vary according to project characteristics, culture, and economic conditions. Thus, no leadership style is universally superior.

Human capital represents a key mechanism linking leadership and organizational performance. It includes employee knowledge, skills, competencies, experience, and productive capabilities, which can provide competitive advantage when they are valuable, difficult to imitate, and effectively integrated into organizational processes. Crook et al. (2011) found a significant positive relationship between human capital and firm performance, particularly when employee capabilities were firm-specific and difficult to transfer.

Human capital development should therefore be viewed strategically through training, learning, mentoring, skill enhancement, knowledge sharing, and capability building. Transformational leadership supports these processes through intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and inspiration, encouraging learning, creativity, innovation, and capability renewal. Wang et al. (2011) and Bao et al. (2025) showed that transformational leadership positively influences employee attitudes, behaviors, performance, and innovation through multiple developmental pathways.

Transactional leadership contributes differently by mobilizing existing capabilities through clear expectations, contingent rewards, feedback, and corrective actions. Judge and Piccolo (2004) found that contingent reward had a strong positive relationship with leadership effectiveness, while Young et al. (2021) suggested that transactional leadership can improve follower performance through leader-member exchange and psychological empowerment. Thus, transformational leadership mainly expands and renews capabilities, whereas transactional leadership directs and reinforces their application toward performance objectives.

A critical finding is that human capital can strengthen leadership-performance relationships. Leadership effectiveness depends partly on employees' knowledge, skills, and adaptive capacity. Jimoh (2026) provided direct evidence that both transformational and transactional leadership positively affect organizational performance and that human capital development moderates both relationships. Human capital provides the capabilities needed for performance, while leadership supplies direction, motivation, coordination, and developmental support.

Overall, the literature shows that transformational leadership supports innovation, adaptability, and developmental outcomes, while transactional leadership is valuable for performance alignment, structured expectations, and goal achievement (Lowe et al., 1996; Wang et al., 2011; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Young et al., 2021). Human capital remains a strategic resource, and leadership effectiveness is influenced by contextual conditions such as culture, economic circumstances, organizational systems, and workforce capabilities (Crook et al., 2011; Abbas & Ali, 2023; Jimoh, 2026).

Despite extensive research, leadership and human capital studies remain fragmented. A qualitative systematic literature review is therefore needed to explain the mechanisms connecting leadership with human capital development and organizational performance. This perspective positions human capital as an enabling, mediating, and moderating bridge through which leadership develops, mobilizes, and transforms employee capabilities into sustainable organizational performance.

3. Methods

This study employs a Qualitative Systematic Literature Review (QSLR) to develop an integrated understanding of how human capital development links leadership with organizational performance. This approach synthesizes concepts, mechanisms, processes, contextual conditions, and outcomes across diverse studies rather than estimating a single statistical effect (Porritt et al., 2024).

The review follows the JBI Manual for Evidence Synthesis and PRISMA 2020 and ENTREQ principles to ensure transparency in searching, selecting, appraising, extracting, and synthesizing evidence (Aromataris et al., 2024; Page et al., 2021; Tong et al., 2012). It addresses mechanisms linking leadership and human capital, the contributions of transformational and transactional leadership, the role of human capital in performance, organizational outcomes, and contextual factors.

Transformational leadership is examined through inspiration, intellectual stimulation, empowerment, and individualized support, while transactional leadership emphasizes goal clarity, rewards, feedback, monitoring, and reinforcement. Human capital development includes training, learning, mentoring, knowledge acquisition, competency enhancement, knowledge sharing, and capability renewal, which may strengthen the relationship between leadership and organizational performance (Jimoh, 2026).

A structured search strategy based on JBI guidance is applied using relevant databases and combinations of leadership, human capital, capability development, and organizational performance keywords (Aromataris et al., 2024). Eligible peer-reviewed studies provide relevant evidence on leadership, capability development, performance mechanisms, and organizational outcomes. Study selection follows PRISMA 2020 through identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion (Page et al., 2021).

Methodological quality is assessed using appropriate criteria, including the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for qualitative studies (Porritt et al., 2024). Data are systematically extracted to capture research context, leadership constructs, human capital dimensions, developmental mechanisms, organizational outcomes, contextual conditions, findings, and limitations (Aromataris et al., 2024).

The included studies are analyzed through thematic synthesis and interpretive meta-aggregation. The process identifies recurring mechanisms such as learning, training, empowerment, motivation, knowledge sharing, innovation, adaptability, and capability utilization, which are subsequently developed into descriptive and analytical themes (Porritt et al., 2024; Tong et al., 2012).

The final synthesis develops an integrated pathway: Leadership Behaviors → Human Capital Development Mechanisms → Capability Mobilization → Organizational Outcomes. Transformational and transactional leadership contribute through different developmental mechanisms, while human capital translates leadership influence into improved employee and organizational performance.

4. Results

The qualitative systematic literature review shows that the relationship between leadership and organizational performance is better understood as a developmental and capability-based process rather than a simple direct relationship. Leadership shapes motivation, learning, knowledge acquisition, skill development, empowerment, and capability utilization, making human capital a key mechanism through which leadership influences organizational outcomes.

The findings indicate that leadership provides direction and influence, human capital development strengthens employee capabilities, and organizational performance emerges from their interaction. This is supported by Jimoh (2025/2026), who found that transformational and transactional leadership positively affect organizational performance, while human capital development strengthens both relationships.

The synthesis identifies six major themes: leadership as a catalyst for human capital development; transformational leadership and capability expansion; transactional leadership and capability mobilization; human capital as a developmental bridge; human capital development as a moderating condition; and organizational outcomes from leadership-human capital interaction.

Leadership creates conditions for employees to develop and utilize valuable capabilities through learning opportunities, developmental support, feedback, motivation, and knowledge application. Jiang et al. (2012) showed that skill-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing

practices influence organizational outcomes through human capital and employee motivation. Similarly, Crook et al. (2011) found that human capital positively contributes to firm performance, particularly when employee capabilities are firm-specific and difficult to imitate.

Transformational leadership primarily expands human capabilities through vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Wang et al. (2011) found positive relationships between transformational leadership and individual, team, and organizational performance, particularly cooperation, initiative, and adaptability. This leadership style promotes learning, creativity, empowerment, and capability renewal, although its effectiveness depends on employees having sufficient competencies to translate motivation into performance.

In contrast, transactional leadership primarily mobilizes and aligns existing capabilities through goal clarification, contingent rewards, performance monitoring, and feedback. Judge and Piccolo (2004) found that contingent reward leadership has a substantial positive relationship with leadership effectiveness and may outperform transformational leadership for certain outcomes. Thus, transformational leadership mainly expands capabilities, whereas transactional leadership directs those capabilities toward specific performance objectives.

A central finding is that human capital functions as a developmental bridge between leadership and organizational performance. Leadership provides motivation, direction, and support, while human capital supplies the knowledge and competencies needed to transform these influences into effective action. Consistent with Crook et al. (2011) and Jiang et al. (2012), human capital development through training, learning, mentoring, knowledge acquisition, skill enhancement, and capability renewal supports the pathway: Leadership Influence → Human Capital Development → Capability Application → Organizational Performance.

Human capital development also moderates leadership effectiveness. Jimoh (2025/2026) found that it strengthens the effects of both transformational and transactional leadership on organizational performance. Capability readiness enables employees to transform inspiration into innovation and adaptability, while performance readiness helps employees meet clear goals and expectations. Therefore, human capital determines the extent to which leadership influence produces actual performance.

The interaction between leadership and human capital generates outcomes beyond financial performance. At the employee level, it improves competence, motivation, engagement, empowerment, and individual performance; at the team level, it supports collaboration, knowledge sharing, and collective effectiveness. At the organizational level, it contributes to productivity, innovation, operational effectiveness, adaptability, competitiveness, sustainability, and financial performance.

The review also shows that no single leadership style is universally superior. Judge and Piccolo (2004) and Wang et al. (2011) demonstrate that leadership effectiveness depends on desired outcomes and organizational conditions. Transformational leadership is particularly relevant for innovation, adaptability, and team effectiveness, whereas transactional leadership is more suitable for task performance, efficiency, and goal attainment.

Overall, the findings describe four interconnected stages: (1) Leadership Activation, (2) Human Capital Development, (3) Capability Mobilization, and (4) Organizational Outcomes. The integrated pathway is therefore: Leadership Behaviors → Human Capital Development → Capability Mobilization → Organizational Performance. Human capital also acts as an enabling condition that strengthens the relationship between leadership and performance.

Leadership driven performance is fundamentally a human capital development process. Effective leadership not only motivates employees but also creates conditions for them to acquire, strengthen, mobilize, and apply valuable capabilities. Sustainable organizational performance therefore depends on the strategic integration of effective leadership practices and continuous human capital development.

5. Discussion

The findings of this qualitative systematic literature review indicate that leadership-driven organizational performance is fundamentally a developmental process in which leadership shapes the creation, mobilization, and application of human capital. Rather than supporting a simple direct-effect relationship between leadership style and performance, the evidence suggests that leadership effectiveness depends on employees' knowledge, skills, competencies, motivation, and adaptive capacity. Jimoh (2025) provides direct support for this interpretation by showing that transformational and transactional leadership positively

influence organizational performance and that human capital development strengthens both relationships.

A major finding is that leadership acts as a catalyst for human capital development. Leaders influence the conditions through which employees learn, acquire competencies, share knowledge, and apply capabilities. Jiang et al. (2012) demonstrated that skill-, motivation-, and opportunity-enhancing practices influence organizational outcomes through human capital and employee motivation. Accordingly, organizational performance is strengthened when leadership practices are combined with systematic investments in employee capability development.

Transformational leadership is particularly important for capability expansion and renewal. Through intellectual stimulation, inspiration, empowerment, and individualized support, transformational leaders encourage creativity, learning, and contributions beyond formal job requirements. Wang et al. (2011) found positive relationships between transformational leadership and individual, team, and organizational performance, especially contextual performance. Similarly, Piccolo and Colquitt (2006) showed that transformational leadership influences performance through job characteristics, intrinsic motivation, and goal commitment. These findings suggest that transformational leadership is more effective when employee motivation is supported by sufficient knowledge and skills.

Transactional leadership, however, should not be viewed as merely a weaker alternative. Judge and Piccolo (2004) found that contingent reward leadership had a substantial positive relationship with effectiveness and could outperform transformational leadership for certain outcomes. Transactional leadership therefore contributes to capability mobilization by clarifying goals, reinforcing desired behavior, providing feedback, and aligning employee efforts with performance expectations. Abbas and Ali (2023) further found that transformational leadership had a stronger overall effect on project success, although contextual factors such as project characteristics and national culture influenced both leadership-performance relationships. These findings challenge the assumption that one leadership style is universally superior.

A central conclusion of the review is that human capital functions as a developmental bridge between leadership and organizational performance. Leadership provides direction, inspiration, and reinforcement, whereas human capital provides the knowledge and capabilities required to transform leadership influence into productive outcomes. Crook et al. (2011) found that human capital positively contributes to firm performance, particularly when employee capabilities are firm-specific and difficult to imitate. Jimoh (2025) further demonstrated that human capital development moderates both transformational and transactional leadership-performance relationships. Therefore, leadership effectiveness depends partly on the developmental capacity of the workforce.

The findings also emphasize the importance of contextual conditions. Leadership and human capital do not generate identical outcomes across organizations, cultures, occupations, or environmental conditions. Recent cross-cultural and longitudinal meta-analytic evidence shows that transformational leadership can positively influence task performance, citizenship behavior, and innovation, but the magnitude of these effects varies across cultural and occupational contexts. Human capital development should therefore be understood as a context-sensitive resource rather than a universally standardized mechanism.

The review also distinguishes between capability development and capability utilization. Transformational leadership primarily supports the expansion and renewal of employee capabilities, whereas transactional leadership facilitates their structured application through performance clarity, rewards, monitoring, and feedback. This interpretation is consistent with DeRue et al. (2011), who emphasized that leadership effectiveness involves the interaction of task-oriented, relational, and change-oriented behaviors. The findings therefore suggest that organizations may benefit from combining developmental and performance-oriented leadership behaviors according to workforce capabilities and organizational requirements.

The outcomes of leadership-human capital interaction extend beyond financial performance. The reviewed evidence links this interaction with productivity, innovation, adaptability, employee engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, knowledge sharing, and long-term sustainability. Recent systematic reviews further suggest that transformational and authentic leadership can strengthen motivation, trust, psychological capital, engagement, and retention, particularly among younger employees. These findings demonstrate that leadership effectiveness may depend on workforce characteristics and developmental expectations.

Overall, the comparison of eight previous studies reveals a coherent pattern. Jimoh (2025) provides direct evidence for the moderating role of human capital development; Crook et al. (2011) demonstrate the strategic performance value of human capital; Jiang et al. (2012) identify human capital as a mechanism linking organizational practices with performance; Wang et al. (2011) establish the multi-level effects of transformational leadership; Judge and Piccolo (2004) confirm the effectiveness of both transformational and contingent reward leadership; Piccolo and Colquitt (2006) explain transformational leadership through motivational mechanisms; Abbas and Ali (2023) demonstrate contextual differences; and recent systematic and meta-analytic studies confirm variations across cultural, occupational, and workforce settings.

Taken together, the findings support the proposition that human capital development is a strategic conversion mechanism through which leadership influence becomes organizational performance. Leadership provides direction and developmental energy, human capital creates capability readiness, and capability mobilization transforms knowledge and skills into productive outcomes.

The review therefore shifts attention from asking which leadership style is superior to examining how leadership behaviors interact with human capital development under specific organizational conditions. Transformational leadership is particularly valuable for capability expansion, innovation, and adaptation, whereas transactional leadership is useful for performance alignment and the structured mobilization of capabilities. Human capital development strengthens both pathways by increasing employee readiness and capacity.

Sustainable organizational performance depends on the strategic integration of leadership and continuous human capital development. Organizations should therefore avoid treating leadership development and employee development as separate activities. Instead, leadership systems should simultaneously promote learning, skill renewal, knowledge application, empowerment, feedback, and performance alignment. Such integration can improve current performance while developing the adaptive and innovative capabilities necessary for long-term competitiveness.

6. Conclusions

This qualitative systematic literature review examined how human capital development explains the relationship between leadership and organizational performance. The findings show that leadership-driven performance is not a simple direct effect but a developmental process in which leadership influences employee motivation, learning, capability development, knowledge utilization, and the application of human capital.

Transformational and transactional leadership operate through complementary mechanisms. Transformational leadership expands capabilities through vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, empowerment, creativity, and individualized development, supporting innovation and adaptability. In contrast, transactional leadership mobilizes capabilities through clear expectations, contingent rewards, feedback, and behavioral reinforcement, supporting efficiency, task execution, and goal attainment.

Human capital development functions as a bridge between leadership and organizational performance. Leadership provides direction and motivation, while employees require adequate knowledge, skills, competencies, and adaptive capabilities to convert leadership influence into productive outcomes. Continuous training, learning, mentoring, and capability enhancement therefore strengthen employee readiness and leadership effectiveness.

The review also indicates that no leadership style is universally superior. Effectiveness depends on organizational goals, employee characteristics, capability levels, task complexity, and environmental conditions. Organizations may therefore benefit from combining developmental and performance-oriented leadership behaviors.

The integrated mechanism can be summarized as: Leadership Behaviors → Human Capital Development → Capability Mobilization → Organizational Performance, with human capital development strengthening the relationship between leadership and performance. Overall, sustainable organizational performance requires the strategic integration of effective leadership, continuous learning, skill development, knowledge sharing, empowerment, feedback, and capability utilization to support long-term competitiveness and sustainability.

7. Limitation

Despite its theoretical and practical contributions, this qualitative systematic literature review has several limitations. First, relevant studies may have been excluded because of database selection, search terms, publication types, language restrictions, or differences in terminology related to leadership, human capital, and organizational performance.

Second, conceptual and methodological heterogeneity complicates comparison across studies. Leadership, human capital development, and organizational performance are defined and measured differently, limiting the generalizability of findings. In addition, differences in industries, countries, organizational contexts, workforce characteristics, and environmental conditions mean that the results cannot be considered universally applicable.

Third, the review is influenced by limitations in the original studies, including sampling issues, self-reported data, cross-sectional designs, common-method bias, and limited causal inference. The qualitative approach also provides conceptual understanding but cannot determine the relative strength of mechanisms such as capability development, motivation, empowerment, and knowledge sharing.

Fourth, the review primarily focuses on transformational and transactional leadership and gives limited attention to other approaches, such as servant, authentic, ethical, digital, and empowering leadership. Potential negative consequences, including employee overload, excessive performance pressure, and unequal access to development opportunities, are also not fully explored.

Future research should therefore apply longitudinal, multi-level, cross-cultural, and industry-specific designs and examine additional mediators and moderators, such as organizational culture, psychological empowerment, knowledge management, digital capability, employee engagement, technological readiness, and environmental dynamism. Quantitative meta-analyses could further estimate the relative effects of leadership, human capital development, and their interaction.

Overall, the study's main contribution is the proposition that human capital development serves as a strategic mechanism through which leadership influence is converted into organizational performance.

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