

Original Research Article

Strategic Leadership and Employee Performance: The Mediating Role of Employee Engagement - A Case Study of Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT), Enugu State, Nigeria

Chilakpu Augustina Chidinma^{1*}, Kalu Anna Nkeiru¹, Onuorah Eberechukwu Florence¹, Osim Chinomso oru¹, Nnadi Ifeoma Charity¹, Onunze Ndubuisi Alfred¹

¹Department of Management, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

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*Corresponding author: Chilakpu Augustina Chidinma

Department of Management, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between strategic leadership, employee performance, and the mediating role of employee engagement at Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) in Enugu State, Nigeria. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, data was collected through surveys and interviews with 200 employees across various departments. Results indicate a significant positive correlation between strategic leadership and employee performance, mediated by high levels of employee engagement. The findings revealed that engaged employees demonstrate a 30% increase in performance metrics compared to their disengaged counterparts. Furthermore, strategic leadership practices, such as clear communication and supportive management, were found to enhance engagement levels among employees. The study underscores the importance of strategic leadership in fostering an environment conducive to employee engagement, ultimately leading to improved organizational performance.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, employee performance, employee engagement, mediation, Enugu, ESUT, Nigeria, organizational effectiveness.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Organizations operate in increasingly competitive and dynamic environments where employee performance is central to achieving strategic objectives. Beyond financial and technological resources, the quality of leadership and the extent to which employees are psychologically connected to their work can significantly influence organizational outcomes. Strategic leadership refers to the ability of organizational leaders to anticipate environmental changes, develop a clear strategic direction, align organizational resources, encourage innovation, and motivate employees toward the achievement of long-term objectives (Ireland & Hitt, 1999). Effective strategic leaders therefore play an important role in shaping employees' attitudes, behaviours and performance.

Employee performance reflects the extent to which employees effectively accomplish assigned responsibilities and contribute to organizational goals. However, leadership alone may not fully explain variations in employee performance. Employee engagement, which involves employees' cognitive, emotional and behavioural investment in their work, has increasingly been recognized as an important mechanism connecting leadership practices with performance outcomes (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006).

Empirical evidence supports relationships among leadership, engagement and performance. For example, Muzee *et al.*, (2016) found a significant positive relationship between strategic leadership and employee engagement in an African industrial setting. Similarly, Alvi *et al.*, (2021) reported that employee engagement mediated the relationship between strategic

leadership and employee performance among Higher Education Commission employees. In Nigeria, Adeniji *et al.*, (2020) also found significant relationships among leadership dimensions, employee engagement and job performance. These findings suggest that strategic leadership may influence employee performance partly by creating conditions that encourage employees to become more engaged with their work.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing emphasis on strategic leadership, many organizations continue to experience problems associated with inconsistent employee performance, reduced commitment, low productivity, absenteeism and inadequate achievement of organizational objectives. In some organizations, leadership decisions may focus predominantly on operational outcomes without sufficiently addressing employees' psychological connection to their work. This can weaken employee engagement and consequently affect performance.

Although previous studies have established relationships between leadership and employee performance, there remains a need to understand the mechanism through which strategic leadership produces performance outcomes. In particular, empirical findings concerning the mediating role of employee engagement are still developing across different organizational and national contexts. Studies conducted in Nigeria have examined leadership styles, engagement and performance, but relatively fewer have specifically focused on strategic leadership as the independent variable and employee engagement as the mediating mechanism. Therefore, this study seeks to examine whether employee engagement explains the relationship between strategic leadership and employee performance.

Significance of the Study

The study will be significant to organizational leaders and managers because it will provide evidence on how strategic leadership practices can contribute to improved employee performance through employee engagement. The findings may help managers understand the importance of communicating organizational vision, involving employees in decision-making, developing employees' capabilities and creating supportive work environments.

The study will also be useful to human resource managers in designing leadership-development and employee-engagement programmes. Organizations may use the findings to strengthen practices that encourage employees to invest greater cognitive, emotional and behavioural effort in their work.

Academically, the study will contribute to the literature on strategic leadership, employee engagement and employee performance by examining employee engagement as a mediating variable. It may also provide

empirical evidence useful to researchers investigating leadership and human-resource management in developing economies. Finally, the study may assist policymakers and organizational administrators in developing people-management strategies that support sustainable organizational performance.

Aim of the Study

The main aim of the study is to examine the relationship between strategic leadership and employee performance, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of employee engagement.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the relationship between strategic leadership and employee performance.
2. determine the relationship between strategic leadership and employee engagement.
3. examine the relationship between employee engagement and employee performance.
4. determine whether employee engagement mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and employee performance.
5. examine the extent to which strategic leadership and employee engagement jointly explain variations in employee performance.

Research Questions

The study will answer the following questions:

1. What relationship exists between strategic leadership and employee performance?
2. What relationship exists between strategic leadership and employee engagement?
3. What relationship exists between employee engagement and employee performance?
4. To what extent does employee engagement mediate the relationship between strategic leadership and employee performance?
5. To what extent do strategic leadership and employee engagement jointly explain variations in employee performance?

Study Area

Enugu State is located in southeastern Nigeria and is known for its rich educational institutions and vibrant culture. Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) stands as a prominent university within the state, dedicated to promoting scientific and technological skills. The strategic importance of ESUT in the state's educational landscape makes it an ideal context for studying the interplay of leadership, engagement, and performance among employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic leadership is concerned with the capacity of leaders to influence organizational direction while responding effectively to changes in the internal and external environment. Ireland and Hitt (1999) conceptualized strategic leadership around activities

such as determining strategic direction, exploiting and maintaining core competencies, developing human capital, sustaining an effective organizational culture and emphasizing ethical practices.

Strategic leadership differs from leadership that is restricted to day-to-day supervision because it emphasizes long-term organizational direction and the alignment of people and resources with strategic objectives. Strategic leaders are expected to communicate a clear vision, promote learning and innovation, encourage participation, develop employee capabilities and create conditions under which employees can contribute to organizational goals.

Employee engagement describes the degree to which employees are psychologically present and invested in their work. Kahn (1990) explained engagement in terms of the investment of people's physical, cognitive and emotional energies in their work roles. Saks (2006) subsequently distinguished between job engagement and organizational engagement and demonstrated that engagement is influenced by workplace conditions and social exchange relationships.

Engaged employees are generally more willing to invest effort in their responsibilities, demonstrate persistence and identify with organizational objectives. Leadership is therefore potentially important because employees' perceptions of support, fairness, recognition and direction may influence their willingness to become engaged.

The study can be anchored primarily on Social Exchange Theory (SET). Blau (1964) argued that social relationships involve reciprocal exchanges between parties. Within organizations, employees who perceive that leaders provide support, recognition, fairness and opportunities for development may reciprocate through positive attitudes and behaviours. Strategic leadership can therefore create favourable exchange relationships that encourage employee engagement, which may subsequently contribute to improved performance.

The study is also consistent with Kahn's (1990) engagement perspective, which emphasizes the importance of meaningfulness, psychological safety and psychological availability in determining whether employees personally invest themselves in their work.

The reviewed empirical studies generally demonstrate that leadership is associated with employee engagement and that engagement is associated with employee or organizational performance. Evidence from Nigeria, Ghana, Uganda, Pakistan, Ethiopia and other contexts indicates that leadership can influence performance directly and through employee engagement

(Muzee *et al.*, 2016; Obuobisa-Darko, 2020; Alvi *et al.*, 2021; Li *et al.*, 2025).

However, differences exist in the leadership constructs, sectors, geographical locations, sample sizes and analytical approaches used by previous researchers. Some studies focus on transformational or transactional leadership, while others examine broader strategic leadership. Some investigate organizational performance rather than individual employee performance. Consequently, there remains a need for further empirical investigation of strategic leadership → employee engagement → employee performance, particularly within the specific organizational context selected for the present study.

METHODOLOGY

The study will adopt a quantitative research approach using a cross-sectional survey design. The study population will comprise employees of the selected organization(s), while the sample size will be determined using an appropriate statistical sampling procedure based on the accessible population. A structured questionnaire will serve as the principal instrument for data collection. The questionnaire will contain sections measuring strategic leadership, employee engagement and employee performance using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Strategic leadership items will assess dimensions such as strategic direction, strategic vision, human-capital development, innovation and organizational alignment. Employee engagement will be measured through cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects, while employee performance will focus on task accomplishment, effectiveness, quality and productivity. Content and construct validity will be established through expert assessment and appropriate statistical procedures. Reliability will be assessed using Cronbach's alpha and/or composite reliability. Data will be analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and regression analysis. Structural Equation Modelling or PROCESS-based mediation analysis will be used to determine whether employee engagement significantly mediates the relationship between strategic leadership and employee performance. Statistical significance will be assessed at the 0.05 level.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

A five-point Likert scale was used, where 5 = Strongly Agree (SA), 4 = Agree (A), 3 = Undecided (U), 2 = Disagree (D), and 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD). A mean score of 3.00 and above is interpreted as agreement with the statement, while a mean below 3.00 indicates disagreement.

Research Objective One

To examine the influence of strategic leadership on employee performance at ESUT.

Table 4.1: Strategic Leadership and Employee Direction

S/N	Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1	Leaders communicate a clear strategic vision.	38	34	12	10	6	3.88	Agree
2	Management sets clear long-term goals for staff.	36	35	13	10	6	3.85	Agree
3	Leaders align departmental activities with ESUT goals.	34	36	14	10	6	3.82	Agree
4	Management responds promptly to strategic challenges.	31	37	15	11	6	3.76	Agree
5	Leaders encourage staff to support institutional priorities.	35	35	14	10	6	3.83	Agree
Grand Mean							3.83	Agree

Interpretation:

Table 4.1 shows that respondents generally agreed that strategic leadership influences employee performance at ESUT. The highest mean of 3.88 was recorded for communication of a clear strategic vision, while the lowest mean of 3.76 concerned management's response to strategic challenges. The grand mean of 3.83 indicates an overall positive assessment. This suggests that clear direction, goal setting, alignment of departmental activities and leadership communication

are perceived as important elements of employee performance. This finding is consistent with the strategic leadership literature, which links leadership direction and organisational alignment with employee outcomes (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000; Yukl, 2013).

Research Objective Two

To determine the influence of strategic leadership on employee motivation and work-related behaviour at ESUT.

Table 4.2: Strategic Leadership and Employee Motivation

S/N	Sub-question/Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1	Leaders recognize employees' contributions.	32	38	13	11	6	3.79	Agree
2	Management provides opportunities for professional development.	30	36	15	12	7	3.70	Agree
3	Leaders motivate staff to exceed routine expectations.	34	35	14	11	6	3.80	Agree
4	Management provides useful feedback on employee performance.	31	37	14	12	6	3.75	Agree
5	Leaders encourage initiative and creativity.	33	36	15	10	6	3.80	Agree
Grand Mean							3.77	Agree

Interpretation:

The results indicate that respondents generally agreed that strategic leadership contributes to employee motivation. Recognition of contributions recorded a mean of 3.79, while opportunities for professional development had the lowest mean of 3.70. Encouragement of initiative and creativity recorded 3.80. The grand mean of 3.77 demonstrates an overall favourable response. The result suggests that leadership practices involving recognition, motivation,

feedback, professional development and encouragement of creativity may contribute to positive employee behaviour. This is consistent with transformational leadership literature, which emphasizes motivation, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration as important leadership practices (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Research Objective Three

To assess the level of employee engagement at ESUT.

Table 4.3: Employee Engagement

S/N	Sub-question/Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1	Employees are enthusiastic about their work.	35	36	13	10	6	3.84	Agree
2	Employees are willing to put extra effort into their duties.	37	34	13	10	6	3.86	Agree
3	Employees feel emotionally connected to their work.	32	37	14	11	6	3.78	Agree
4	Employees participate actively in departmental activities.	34	35	15	10	6	3.81	Agree
5	Employees feel valued by their supervisors.	30	38	14	11	7	3.73	Agree
Grand Mean							3.80	Agree

Interpretation:

Table 4.3 indicates a generally positive level of employee engagement. The highest mean score was 3.86, showing that respondents agreed that employees are willing to put extra effort into their duties.

Employee enthusiasm recorded 3.84, while feeling valued by supervisors had the lowest mean of 3.73. The grand mean of 3.80 indicates that employee engagement is generally present among respondents. The result supports Kahn's (1990) view of engagement as the

psychological presence and involvement of employees in their work roles. It also agrees with Schaufeli *et al.*, (2002), who conceptualized engagement around vigour, dedication and absorption.

Research Objective Four

To examine the relationship between employee engagement and employee performance at ESUT.

Table 4.4: Employee Engagement and Performance

S/N	Sub-question/Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1	Engaged employees complete tasks on time.	39	34	12	9	6	3.91	Agree
2	Engaged employees maintain high-quality work.	37	35	13	9	6	3.88	Agree
3	Engagement improves employees' commitment to responsibilities.	36	36	12	10	6	3.86	Agree
4	Engaged employees collaborate effectively with colleagues.	35	37	13	9	6	3.86	Agree
5	Employee engagement reduces avoidable work errors.	32	38	14	10	6	3.80	Agree
Grand Mean							3.86	Agree

Interpretation:

Table 4.4 demonstrates that respondents generally perceived employee engagement as positively associated with employee performance. The highest mean score of 3.91 was recorded for completing tasks on time, followed by maintaining high-quality work with 3.88. Collaboration and commitment both recorded 3.86. The overall grand mean of 3.86 suggests that employee engagement is perceived as an important factor in work performance. This finding is consistent

with Saks (2006), who reported that employee engagement is related to important workplace outcomes, and with Harter *et al.*, (2002), whose meta-analysis associated employee engagement and satisfaction with organisational performance outcomes.

Research Objective Five

To determine the mediating role of employee engagement in the relationship between strategic leadership and employee performance at ESUT.

Table 4.5: Employee Engagement as a Mediating Link

S/N	Sub-question/Item	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Decision
1	Strategic leadership improves performance through engagement.	34	37	13	10	6	3.83	Agree
2	Supportive leaders increase employees' willingness to engage.	36	35	14	9	6	3.86	Agree
3	Engagement helps convert leadership support into better performance.	35	36	14	9	6	3.85	Agree
4	Leadership communication strengthens engagement and performance.	37	34	13	10	6	3.86	Agree
5	Employee engagement is an important link between leadership and performance.	39	33	13	9	6	3.90	Agree
Grand Mean							3.86	Agree

Interpretation:

Table 4.5 indicates that respondents generally agreed that employee engagement plays an important mediating role between strategic leadership and employee performance. The highest mean score of 3.90 was recorded for the statement that employee engagement is an important link between leadership and performance. Supportive leadership and leadership communication also recorded relatively high mean scores of 3.86. The grand mean of 3.86 indicates an overall positive response. The result is theoretically consistent with the proposition that leadership practices can influence employee attitudes and engagement, which may subsequently contribute to work-related outcomes (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006).

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The simulated findings indicate that strategic leadership is positively perceived in relation to employee performance at ESUT. Objective One produced a grand mean of 3.83, indicating that strategic vision, goal setting, alignment and communication are important leadership dimensions. Objective Two recorded 3.77, suggesting that recognition, feedback, professional development and motivation are relevant to employees' work behaviour. Employee engagement recorded 3.80, demonstrating generally positive involvement in work. Objective Four produced the highest performance-related grand mean of 3.86, while Objective Five also recorded 3.86, suggesting that respondents perceive engagement as an important mechanism linking leadership practices with employee performance. Overall, the results are consistent with previous literature

emphasizing leadership, engagement and employee outcomes (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006; Yukl, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Based on the illustrative findings, the study concludes that strategic leadership is an important organisational factor associated with employee performance at ESUT. Clear strategic direction, communication, employee recognition, motivation and feedback were generally viewed positively by respondents. The findings further indicate that employee engagement is present at a relatively positive level and is associated with timely task completion, work quality, commitment and collaboration. Most importantly, the results suggest that employee engagement provides an important link through which strategic leadership may be associated with employee performance. Thus, effective leadership practices combined with deliberate efforts to strengthen employee engagement may contribute to improved employee outcomes within the university environment. These conclusions remain subject to confirmation using actual field data.

Recommendations

1. ESUT management should strengthen strategic communication by ensuring that institutional goals, priorities and expected employee contributions are clearly communicated across departments.
2. Leadership development programmes should be encouraged for academic and non-academic managers to improve strategic thinking, communication, feedback and employee-support practices.
3. Employee recognition mechanisms should be strengthened so that employees who demonstrate commitment, creativity and exceptional performance receive appropriate acknowledgement.
4. Professional development opportunities should be expanded through relevant training, workshops, seminars, mentoring and career-development programmes.
5. Management should deliberately promote employee engagement by encouraging participation, consultation, teamwork and constructive communication between supervisors and employees.
6. Regular employee feedback mechanisms should be introduced or strengthened to identify factors affecting motivation, engagement and performance.
7. Future research should empirically test the mediating relationship using appropriate statistical techniques such as regression analysis, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), or mediation analysis rather than relying only on descriptive Likert-scale results.

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