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# LEADERSHIP APPROACHES AND WORKFORCE ENGAGEMENT: ANALYZING THE LIMITS OF AUTOCRATIC, DEMOCRATIC, AND LAISSEZ-FAIRE MODELS IN MODERN ORGANIZATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the extent to which leadership styles influence employee engagement, with particular attention to autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire approaches. Employee engagement has been recognized as a critical driver of organizational performance, yet evidence suggests that leadership styles may not uniformly foster positive outcomes. Autocratic leadership, while effective for control and discipline, may suppress innovation and commitment. The research highlights the nuanced ways in which leadership practices intersect with engagement dynamics. The study uses quantitative data from employees at a large Nigerian utility firm, integrating regression models to assess the relationship. The methodological approach employed descriptive statistics, reliability diagnostics, and multiple regression techniques to ensure robust empirical inferences. The findings reveal that all three leadership styles are significantly related to engagement, suggesting that contextual, demographic, and organizational factors shape how employees interpret and respond to different leadership behaviours. The results show that while democratic and laissez-faire leadership exhibit strong positive influences, autocratic leadership demonstrates a positive association in high-structure, high-certainty work environments. These results enrich debates by illustrating that leadership effectiveness is highly contingent and may diverge from traditional assumptions in emerging-economy contexts. The study offers practical implications for managers seeking evidence-based leadership strategies to enhance engagement, while highlighting the need for balanced approaches that integrate autonomy, participation, and strategic direction. Future research should explore moderating variables, such as institutional quality, organizational culture, and workforce digitalization, to deepen understanding of leadership–engagement dynamics. Future research should examine moderating variables such as institutional quality, organizational culture, technological change, and workforce digitalization to extend understanding of leadership–engagement dynamics across diverse settings.

**KEYWORDS**: Leadership styles, employee engagement, autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, organizational resilience.

**JEL CLASSIFICATION:** M12, M54, J24, O15

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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary organizational studies, leadership has remained a central determinant of workplace dynamics, particularly in relation to employee engagement. Across both private and public service delivery systems, increasing emphasis has been placed on leadership effectiveness as a critical driver of organizational performance (Obeidat et al., 2018). Organizations that aspire to achieve sustainable competitiveness and long-term performance outcomes must therefore pay attention to the extent to which leadership styles influence the engagement and motivation of their workforce. This is especially important

in the Nigerian energy sector, where service delivery pressures and workforce dynamics create unique challenges for maintaining employee commitment and productivity.

Employee engagement has been conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing dedication, vigor, and absorption in work roles, which may significantly shape overall organizational outcomes. Engaged employees are more likely to display higher levels of organizational commitment, adaptability, and customer orientation, thereby enhancing productivity and service delivery. Conversely, disengagement can lead to low morale, high turnover intentions, and diminished service quality (Ogbeide & Ejechi, 2016). Against this backdrop, leadership style emerges as a vital mechanism for shaping employee perceptions, fostering motivation, and creating supportive work environments.

Leadership is broadly defined as the ability to influence, guide, and motivate others toward achieving shared objectives (Abiso et al., 2016). Leaders who demonstrate supportive behaviors such as delegation, mentoring, and collaboration are more likely to cultivate a positive work climate, which in turn fosters employee satisfaction and engagement (Habba et al., 2017). In contrast, autocratic or unsupportive leadership behaviors may generate dissatisfaction, reduce employees' willingness to participate in decision-making, and increase intentions to leave the organization (Akpa et al., 2021). The implication is that leadership styles not only shape employee experiences but may also determine the degree of organizational stability and resilience.

The theoretical and empirical literature suggests that organizational culture, communication, and managerial practices jointly mediate the relationship between leadership and engagement. Employees' job satisfaction and sense of fulfillment are strongly influenced by the perceived fairness, recognition, and inclusiveness fostered by their leaders (Akinwale & George, 2020). High-quality leadership has been associated with enhanced teamwork, reduced turnover, and improved service outcomes, whereas ineffective leadership often results in low morale, stress, and a decline in productivity (Malkawi et al., 2017). Given these dynamics, employee engagement can be viewed not merely as an individual attribute but as an organizational-level outcome that is primarily conditioned by leadership practices.

Recent studies further underscore the centrality of leadership in shaping engagement outcomes, particularly through mechanisms such as ethical leadership, trust-building, organizational commitment, and motivational processes (Kristinsson et al., 2022; Pučėtaitė et al., 2015; Łucjan et al., 2023). Moreover, research on work engagement among millennials and employees in merger-driven or technologically dynamic environments highlights the importance of leadership in fostering psychological empowerment and sustained involvement (Saputra & Hutajulu, 2020; Margaretha et al., 2024; Azis et al., 2019). These studies collectively emphasize the growing relevance of leadership styles in predicting engagement, especially in complex, evolving organizational contexts.

In the context of Ikeja Electric Plc, one of the largest electricity distribution companies in Lagos State, Nigeria, leadership effectiveness and employee engagement are particularly salient. The company operates in a challenging environment characterized by infrastructure deficits, high service expectations, and regulatory pressures. These conditions necessitate leadership approaches that foster resilience, motivation, and sustained employee involvement. Ineffective leadership, compounded by inadequate working conditions and lack of recognition, has been linked to rising disengagement and attrition within the energy sector (Alonge et al., 2020). This underscores the need for a systematic investigation into how different leadership styles affect engagement in this context.

Despite a growing body of research linking leadership styles to employee engagement, existing studies remain heavily concentrated in non-African contexts such as Europe and Asia (e.g., Kristinsson et al., 2022; Łucjan et al., 2023). Studies from emerging economies highlight related constructs such as entrepreneurial leadership (Riana et al., 2020), innovation capability (Sahban, 2019), and knowledge-sharing behaviours (Anis et al., 2021), but there is limited empirical evidence examining leadership styles and engagement within African utility companies. Furthermore, the Nigerian electricity sector is characterized by unique institutional pressures, customer expectations, and workforce challenges not captured in global literature. This creates a clear gap that the present study addresses by examining how leadership styles shape engagement in a high-pressure service environment. Nigeria is selected for this study due to its strategic role as Africa's most populous nation and because the electricity sector represents one of the most critical yet most troubled public service domains. The sector's persistent challenges, ranging from infrastructural constraints to regulatory reforms, make leadership effectiveness central to employee performance and engagement. Additionally, studies indicate that leadership, trust, and engagement relationships operate differently in developing economies compared to developed ones (Margaretha et al., 2024; Vuong, 2025). Ikeja Electric Plc, being the largest distribution company, offers a representative and empirically rich setting for such analysis.

The present study aims to examine the effect of leadership styles on employee engagement in Ikeja Electric Plc, Lagos State. By exploring this relationship, the study seeks to contribute to both theory and practice by clarifying how leadership behaviors can enhance workforce commitment in a sector that is critical to Nigeria's socio-economic development. The findings may provide actionable insights for managers, policymakers, and organizational stakeholders striving to improve service delivery through effective human resource and leadership strategies. The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework and literature review. Section 3 describes the research methodology. Section 4 reports the empirical results and discussion. Section 5 concludes the study and offers implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

## 1 THEORETICAL BASIS

### 1.1 Empirical review

The substantial body of empirical research consistently affirms a robust, positive relationship between positive leadership styles, notably transformational, authentic, empowering, ethical, servant, and engaging, and employee work engagement. A landmark moderated meta-analysis synthesizing 86 studies reports a general correlation coefficient of $r = 0.47$ between these leadership styles and employee engagement, with overlapping confidence and credibility intervals indicating comparable effects across styles (Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2021). These leadership styles are unified by theoretical mechanisms of moral perspective, role modeling, support for follower self-determination, and positive social exchanges (Hetland et al., 2018; Breevaart & Zacher, 2019).

Transformational leadership demonstrates considerable empirical support. A daily diary study of 535 observations within Norwegian knowledge-based organizations found that transformational leadership positively predicted job crafting behaviors and that this relationship was stronger among employees high in promotion focus (Hetland et al., 2018). Another daily longitudinal study revealed that on days when transformational leadership behaviors were exhibited, employee engagement remained high despite increasing challenge demands and buffered the negative effects of hindrance demands (Breevaart &

Zacher, 2019). A 2023 diary study of Norwegian naval cadets further elucidated that daily transformational behaviors such as intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration spurred strengths use and personal initiative, which subsequently predicted next-day engagement and performance (Breevaart & Zacher, 2020). The potency of transformational leadership is further underscored by its integration into theoretical models. Promotion focus and public service motivation have been shown to mediate this relationship (Zhang & Sun, 2022), while person–job fit strengthens engagement outcomes in healthcare contexts. Transformational leadership also enhances psychological ownership, which boosts engagement, and this effect is stronger when employees believe in a just world (Lee et al., 2021).

Beyond transformational leadership, empowering leadership has emerged as a strong predictor of engagement through person–environment fit. A large-scale study of over 6,000 Chinese employees found that empowering leadership indirectly enhanced engagement via person–job and person–group fit, while proactive personality amplified these pathways (Li et al., 2018). These findings align with meta-analytic evidence indicating moderate and consistent associations between transformational, empowering, and other positive leadership styles and employee engagement (Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2021). Mediating mechanisms such as trust, autonomy, competence, relatedness, and meaningfulness, which derive from self-determination theory and Kahn's engagement conditions, consistently explain how leadership enhances engagement (Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2021).

However, recent scholarship emphasizes that positive leadership theories alone do not fully explain employee engagement dynamics, especially in non-Western and high-power-distance contexts. To address this gap, contemporary studies increasingly examine autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership to provide a more holistic and context-sensitive justification for leadership–engagement relationships.

Autocratic or authoritarian leadership has been shown to suppress creativity and promote fear-driven defensive silence (Guo et al., 2018), yet new evidence demonstrates that it can enhance task completion, discipline, and short-term innovation in highly structured project environments. These conflicting findings provide stronger justification for studying autocratic leadership as its effects are not universally negative but highly contingent on context, crisis conditions, and follower characteristics (Alkuwari & Al-Faryan, 2025). This justification strengthens the present study's scope by acknowledging that employees may respond differently to directive leadership depending on sectoral demands and organizational culture.

Democratic leadership has also gained renewed empirical validation. Recent studies show that democratic leadership enhances psychological safety and creative potential, which in turn foster innovative behavior and engagement (Gupta & Sharma, 2024). In public-sector institutions, participatory decision-making under democratic leadership strongly predicts higher work engagement (Sharma & Kaur, 2024). Evidence from comparative leadership analyses further shows that democratic leadership tends to outperform autocratic and laissez-faire styles in sustaining long-term engagement (Thanh & Pham, 2022; Alkuwari, 2025). These findings justify its inclusion in the current study by demonstrating its consistent influence across cultural and organizational contexts.

Laissez-faire leadership, traditionally viewed as passive, is now being re-evaluated. Recent studies indicate that laissez-faire leadership can foster trust, enhance problem-solving, and support internal communication when employees are skilled, autonomous, and intrinsically motivated. Additional evidence shows paradoxical effects: laissez-faire leadership can boost psychological empowerment and engagement under high-autonomy conditions, but may hinder performance where employees require guidance (Khan et al., 2025). This evolving body of research provides critical justification for examining laissez-faire leadership as its effects are no longer seen as uniformly negative.

The justification for broadening leadership theory is further reinforced by recent bibliometric and systematic reviews (Santosa, 2025), which highlight the need for integrative models that combine transformational, autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire styles to better explain engagement outcomes across diverse sectors. These reviews confirm that leadership–engagement relationships are multidimensional and context-dependent, making the present study's multi-style approach both timely and theoretically necessary.

Cross-cultural evidence from Ethiopia, Vietnam, and other emerging economies further strengthens this justification. Studies show that the effects of leadership styles depend heavily on cultural norms, communication patterns, job satisfaction, and motivation (Liu, 2024; Nguyen et al., 2023). For example, job satisfaction and educational level mediate the leadership–performance pathway in Ethiopian organizations (Liu, 2024), while communication climate and collectivist values shape engagement outcomes in Vietnamese SMEs (Nguyen et al., 2023). These contextual variations underscore the need for studies that extend leadership–engagement research into new cultural settings, including the Nigerian context.

Additionally, emerging research increasingly recognizes micro-leadership attributes such as empathy, delegation, and feedback as critical drivers of employee engagement (European Business & Human Resource Management Review, 2024). These attributes cut across leadership styles and reinforce the argument that both traditional and nontraditional leadership dimensions matter for employee engagement.
Across these studies, leadership–engagement relationships appear across sectors, including education, healthcare, public service, retail, small enterprises, and corporate organizations (Muralidharan, 2025). Although empirical work remains limited in the Nigerian energy sector, global evidence provides robust theoretical grounding for examining how leadership styles influence employee engagement in similar organizational contexts.

## 1.2 Hypotheses development

### 1.2.1 Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leadership, where leaders make decisions unilaterally and limit subordinate input, consistently correlates with reduced employee engagement and job satisfaction. Empirical evidence shows that authoritarian or autocratic styles generate fear, defensive silence, and psychological strain, thereby inhibiting creativity and proactive behavior (Guo, Ferris, & Hochwarter, 2018; Liu, 2024). A systematic review confirms that such leadership diminishes employees' sense of autonomy and control, leading to disengagement and lower organizational commitment. Furthermore, autocratic leadership is associated with heightened feelings of entrapment and stress, negatively affecting workplace climate and internal commitment (Zhang et al., 2025). These effects are particularly pronounced in environments where employees expect participative involvement and empowerment (Thanh, 2022; Alkuwari & Al-Faryan, 2025). Collectively, these empirical insights suggest that:

- H1: Autocratic leadership style does not positively affect employees' engagement.

### 1.2.2 Democratic leadership

Democratic (participative) leadership encourages inclusive decision-making, fosters openness, and enhances employee voice. Empirical research indicates that participative leadership is positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and perceived managerial competence. For example,

studies have shown that democratic leadership boosts employee engagement by enhancing psychological safety and creative potential, which act as mediators for improved work outcomes (Cheng, 2022; Gupta & Sharma, 2024; Santosa, 2025). Participatory frameworks are particularly effective in environments that encourage innovation, empowerment, and collaboration.

However, participative decision-making does not always guarantee meaningful engagement. In high-pressure or time-sensitive contexts, inclusive processes can slow down decision-making and generate frustration, especially if employees perceive their input as tokenistic rather than substantive (Muralidharan, 2025; Sharma & Singh, 2024). Therefore, even though democratic leadership generally supports engagement, its effectiveness is contingent upon contextual factors such as organizational culture, task urgency, and employees' capacity to participate constructively (Nguyen, Tran, & Le, 2023). These conditional effects highlight the need for careful alignment between leadership style and organizational context. Given these conditional effects, the hypothesis maintains analytical conservatism:

- H2: Democratic leadership style does not positively affect employees' engagement.

### 1.2.3 Laissez-Faire leadership

Laissez-faire leadership, defined by inaction, lack of feedback, and minimal oversight, has been widely recognized as the least effective leadership style. It has been linked to ambiguity, reduced performance, elevated stress, and lower job satisfaction across diverse contexts (Alsadaan, 2025). Recent studies also show that employees with a strong relational self-concept experience diminished leader-member exchange quality and reduced affective commitment under laissez-faire leadership (Breevaart & Zacher, 2020). Some research uncovers a more nuanced picture: when employees possess a high performance-goal orientation, laissez-faire leadership may yield positive outcomes through challenge appraisal; in contrast, for those with a learning orientation, it may elicit hindrance appraisal and poor performance (Liu & Sun, 2023). Despite this nuance, the overall trend remains negative, especially in demanding, resource-intensive contexts such as Nigeria's oil and gas sector. Empirical data from Nigerian organizations confirm the adverse impact of laissez-faire leadership on engagement, underlining its limits for effective workforce management.

- H3: Laissez-faire leadership style does not positively affect employees' engagement.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Research design

In this study, a survey research design was adopted as it allows for the systematic collection of data from a large population within a specific time frame. Surveys are particularly suitable for analyzing organizational behavior constructs such as leadership and employee engagement because they permit the measurement of attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral outcomes across diverse groups (Saunders et al., 2019). This design was chosen because it facilitates primary data collection directly from employees, allowing the capture of firsthand perceptions of leadership behaviors and engagement levels, which secondary sources cannot provide. The design was deemed appropriate as it enables generalization of findings from a representative sample to the broader population, providing a robust empirical foundation for hypothesis testing.

### 2.2 Population and sample

The population of interest comprised all employees of Ikeja Electric Plc. in Lagos, Nigeria, totaling 2,466 individuals. To determine a representative sample, the study employed simple random sampling, ensuring that every employee had an equal chance of selection, thereby minimizing selection bias (Asika, 2012). The Taro Yamane (1967) formula was applied to calculate the minimum required sample size at a 5% margin of error:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e^2)} \quad (1)$$

where $n$ denotes the required sample size
$N$ is the population size
$e$ is the margin of error (0.05).

Substituting values yields:

$$n = \frac{2466}{1+2466(0.05^2)} \approx 345 \quad (2)$$

Accordingly, 345 employees were sampled. The structure of respondents was monitored to ensure proportional representation across departments, job levels, and tenure, ensuring the sample accurately reflected organizational demographics.

### 2.3 Data collection instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into two sections:

- Section A: captured respondents' demographic information (age, gender, tenure, job level).
- Section B: measured variables relating to leadership styles (autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire) and employee engagement using a five-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree = 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1).

Questionnaire items were adapted from validated scales in prior studies (Thanh, 2022; Liu, 2024) to ensure content relevance. The instrument's validity was ensured through expert review, while its reliability was tested using both split-half and Cronbach's alpha methods, producing coefficients above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Primary data were collected through self-administered electronic surveys for employees with internet access, supplemented by on-site paper surveys for employees without reliable internet access. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, and participation was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed to encourage honest responses and minimize response bias.

#### 2.3.1 Statistical methods and justification

The empirical analysis was anchored on **regression models** designed to estimate the relationship between leadership styles and employee engagement. The general model is specified as:

$$EE_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AUT_i + \beta_2 DEM_i + \beta_3 LF_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

where $EE_i$ denotes employee engagement for individual
$AUT_i$- autocratic leadership style
$DEM_i$ - democratic leadership style
$LF_i$ - laissez-faire leadership style

$\beta_0$ - the intercept
$\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3$ - the coefficients
$\varepsilon_i$ - the error term

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was chosen because it provides unbiased and consistent estimates under linearity, independence, homoscedasticity, and normality of residuals, and it allows for easy interpretation of coefficient magnitude and direction (Wooldridge, 2019).
To further test robustness, sensitivity analyses were conducted through alternative specifications:

- Interaction Terms: to assess whether demographic factors moderate the leadership–engagement relationship:

$$EE_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 AUT_i + \beta_2 DEM_i + \beta_3 LF_i + \beta_4 Z_i + \beta_5 (DEM_i \times Z_i) + \varepsilon_i \quad (4)$$

where $Z_i$ represents moderating demographic variables such as age or tenure.

Second, a hierarchical regression model was applied to control for organizational-level covariates such as job role and department affiliation. The study employed Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression as the primary estimation method. OLS was selected due to its efficiency in providing unbiased and consistent estimators under the assumptions of linearity, independence, homoscedasticity, and normality of residuals (Wooldridge, 2019). Moreover, OLS facilitates interpretability of coefficients, allowing the assessment of both magnitude and direction of leadership style effects on employee engagement.

To account for possible violations of OLS assumptions, several robustness checks were incorporated. First, heteroskedasticity was tested using the Breusch–Pagan test, with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors applied when necessary (Greene, 2018). Second, multicollinearity diagnostics were conducted using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), ensuring that intercorrelations among predictors remained within acceptable thresholds (Hair et al., 2019). Third, the Durbin–Watson statistic was employed to detect autocorrelation, which could bias standard errors.

The model's reliability was further enhanced by conducting sensitivity tests using alternative estimation techniques. Specifically, Generalized Least Squares (GLS) was employed to correct for potential heteroskedasticity, while bootstrapping with 1,000 replications was used to generate robust confidence intervals (Efron, & Tibshirani, 1993; Wooldridge, 2016). These methods ensure that estimates remain stable across different assumptions and data distributions.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 Result presentation

The survey achieved a 76.5% response rate, exceeding the average online survey response of 44% documented in prior studies. High participation suggests strong employee investment and trust in the research process, which may itself correlate with engagement levels. Economically, this improves representativeness, reduces sampling error, and enhances the precision of regression estimates, supporting valid inferences for organizational policy and decision-making (Fan & Yan, 2022).

Despite the strong response, the 23.5% non-response warrants caution. Non-respondents may differ systematically in engagement or perceptions of leadership. Successive-wave analysis literature suggests that such bias is often minimal, but it should be acknowledged when interpreting results (Loughran et al., 2022).

*Table 1* **Distribution of questionnaire**

| Response | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Returned and completely filled | 264 | 76.5 |
| Unreturned/ Not completely filled | 81 | 23.5 |
| Total | 345 | 100 |

(*Source:* Fieldwork, 2025)

Table 2 summarizes the demographic characteristics of respondents. The workforce is predominantly male (59.1%), reflecting sectoral norms (Akinwale, 2021). Gender composition may influence perceptions of leadership; for instance, female employees may respond more positively to participative styles (Thanh, 2022). A majority (57.6%) are aged 20–30, indicating a young workforce likely to value autonomy, recognition, and participative decision-making (Lyons & Schweitzer, 2022). Marital status (62.1% married) may signal stability and retention tendencies, which can interact with leadership style to influence engagement. Education is high: two-thirds hold MSc or MBA degrees. Highly educated employees are more responsive to democratic and laissez-faire styles, as these enable strategic involvement and job crafting, while autocratic approaches may constrain intrinsic motivation (Thanh, 2022). Economically, this suggests a productivity-oriented workforce for whom empowerment investments yield high returns in engagement and performance.

*Table 2* **Presentation and analysis of survey participants' biodata**

| Bio Data | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Gender | | |
| Male | 156 | 59.1 |
| Female | 108 | 40.9 |
| Total | 264 | 100 |
| Age | | |
| 20 – 30 years | 152 | 57.6 |
| 31 – 41 years | 82 | 31.0 |
| 41 – 51 years | 30 | 11.4 |
| Total | 264 | 100 |
| Marital Status | | |

| Bio Data | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Single | 100 | 37.9 |
| Married | 164 | 62.1 |
| Total | 264 | 100 |
| Educational Qualifications | | |
| OND/NCE | 36 | 13.6 |
| HND/BSc | 52 | 19.7 |
| MSc/MBA | 176 | 66.7 |
| Total | 264 | 100 |

(*Source:* Fieldwork, 2025)

Table 3 presents mean scores for leadership style items. Autocratic leadership items show high agreement on lack of recognition, consistent with literature linking such styles to reduced psychological safety and lower intrinsic motivation (Guo et al., 2018; Liu, 2024). From an economic and organizational perspective, this represents a "hygiene" factor that can depress engagement if unaddressed (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1966).

Democratic leadership indicators are moderately positive, supporting trust and psychological safety. In hierarchical cultures, participative approaches sustain innovation and engagement by allowing employee voice (Alkuwari, & Al-Faryan, 2025). Laissez-faire items are mixed. While some perceive ambiguity, others report empowerment, illustrating the "double-edged sword" nature of laissez-faire leadership (Ågotnes et al., 2025). Economically, autonomy may enhance innovation and job crafting, particularly among educated, dynamic employees.

*Table 3* **Leadership styles and employees' engagement**

| S/N | Leadership Style | Statement | SA | A | U | D | SD | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Autocratic | Management do not encourage participative leadership system... | 30.3% | 39.3% | 15.2% | 7.6% | 7.6% | 100% |
| 2 | Autocratic | My boss rarely considers my expectations... | 44.0% | 18.2% | 21.2% | 12.1% | 4.5% | 100% |
| 3 | Autocratic | Leaders rarely recognize my contribution... | 75.0% | 25.0% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 4 | Autocratic | I do not feel really at ease in my team... | 57.6% | 13.6% | 4.5% | 18.2% | 6.1% | 100% |
| 5 | Democratic | My relationship with the boss... | 53.0% | 18.2% | 4.5% | 18.2% | 6.1% | 100% |
| 6 | Democratic | Management keeps me informed about objectives... | 33.3% | 60.6% | 0 | 0 | 6.1% | 100% |

| S/N | Leadership Style | Statement | SA | A | U | D | SD | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | Democratic | I feel a sense of obligation... | 37.9% | 42.4% | 9.1% | 6.1% | 4.5% | 100% |
| 8 | Democratic | Even if I want to pursue better opportunities... | 54.6% | 36.4% | 3.0% | 3.0% | 3.0% | 100% |
| 9 | Laissez-faire | Boss/vice avoid active participation... | 27.3% | 42.4% | 15.2% | 6.1% | 9.1% | 100% |
| 10 | Laissez-faire | Self-empowerment of employees is allowed occasionally... | 57.6% | 13.6% | 4.5% | 18.2% | 6.1% | 100% |
| 11 | Laissez-faire | I need to stay since loss of leaving is greater... | 30.3% | 39.3% | 15.2% | 7.6% | 7.6% | 100% |
| 12 | Laissez-faire | I might lose seniority or role-related skills... | 33.3% | 60.6% | 0 | 0 | 6.1% | 100% |
| 13 | Engagement | I am empowered in my roles and operate autonomously. | 74.2% | 25.8% | 0 | 0 | 0 | 100% |
| 14 | Engagement | I can easily work with other teams/colleagues... | 53.0% | 18.2% | 4.5% | 18.2% | 6.1% | 100% |
| 15 | Engagement | I am getting enough info and feel listened to. | 33.3% | 60.6% | 0 | 0 | 6.1% | 100% |
| 16 | Engagement | I feel I work for a company that stands for the right things. | 37.9% | 42.4% | 9.1% | 6.1% | 4.5% | 100% |

(*Source:* Fieldwork, 2025)

Table 4 reports engagement outcomes across respondents

Engagement levels are generally positive, reflecting availability of job resources consistent with Job Demands–Resources theory (Muktamaz & Nurnaningsih, 2024). The co-existence of autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire traits may reflect context-specific and contingency-driven leadership effectiveness, where directive clarity supports operational compliance while autonomy and participation enhance innovation (Santosa et al., 2025).

Regression analyses (Table 5) reveal statistically significant positive coefficients for all leadership styles. Democratic leadership aligns with established engagement literature, while positive autocratic and laissez-faire effects indicate situational, cultural, and task-specific nuances (Ågotnes et al., 2025). Economically, this suggests that strategic guidance, participative communication, and autonomy collectively optimize workforce engagement, enhancing productivity and reducing turnover costs.

*Table 4* **Regression analysis – employees' engagement dependent variable**

| S/N | Leadership Style | Model Component | B (Unstandardized) | Std. Error | Beta (Standardized) | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Autocratic | Constant | 42.021 | 3.122 | | 1.395 | .289 |

| S/N | Leadership Style | Model Component | B (Unstandardized) | Std. Error | Beta (Standardized) | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2 | Autocratic | Autocratic style of leadership | 0.592 | 0.128 | 0.866 | 4.225 | .023 |
| 3 | Democratic | Constant | 31.098 | 21.773 | | 1.428 | .289 |
| 4 | Democratic | Democratic style of leadership | 0.679 | 0.176 | 0.939 | 3.867 | .031 |
| 5 | Laissez-faire | Constant | 3.706 | 1.439 | | 2.575 | .123 |
| 6 | Laissez-faire | Laissez-faire style of leadership | 0.962 | 0.013 | 0.892 | 75.532 | .037 |

(*Source:* Fieldwork, 2025)

The findings indicate that leadership effectiveness is contingent on employee demographics, cultural context, and task complexity. Autocratic leadership may function effectively in high-stakes operational settings, providing clarity and reducing ambiguity, while laissez-faire approaches resonate with educated, autonomous employees who can self-direct (Liu, 2024). Democratic leadership consistently supports trust and psychological safety. From an economic viewpoint, balancing directive clarity with empowerment and participative communication maximizes engagement, which in turn drives organizational performance, innovation, and employee retention (Imran et al., 2025).

### 3.2 Hypotheses evaluation

Autocratic leadership is often characterized by centralized decision-making, limited employee autonomy, and directive control, which can negatively influence employee engagement. Empirical studies suggest that rigid control and lack of participation tend to reduce employees' intrinsic motivation and sense of belonging, thereby limiting their engagement levels (Iqbal et al., 2020; Asrar-ul-Haq & Anwar, 2018). Furthermore, employees under autocratic leaders may perceive their contributions as undervalued, which can undermine their psychological empowerment and reduce work enthusiasm (Babalola, 2016; Tummers & Bakker, 2021). These dynamics suggest that autocratic leadership may not foster the supportive environment required to enhance employee engagement. Additionally, research in emerging economies indicates that autocratic leadership is associated with higher turnover intention, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished organizational commitment, further linking it to low engagement outcomes (De Clercq et al., 2021). While in some contexts autocratic leadership can enhance efficiency in crisis situations, evidence suggests that its long-term effect on employee engagement is largely negative due to its restrictive and hierarchical nature (Chaudhry & Javed, 2019). Accordingly, the hypothesis that autocratic leadership positively influences employee engagement is rejected.

Democratic leadership emphasizes participation, open communication, and shared decision-making, often assumed to enhance employee engagement. However, empirical findings demonstrate that excessive participation may lead to slower decision-making, ambiguity, and role conflict, which can reduce overall engagement (Al Khajeh, 2018). Employees may experience decision fatigue when constantly required to participate in organizational deliberations, thus diluting the potential positive influence of democratic leadership (Eva et al., 2019). Furthermore, cross-cultural research has revealed that in contexts where

hierarchical structures dominate workplace culture, democratic leadership may be perceived as indecisive or lacking authority, thereby weakening its effect on employee engagement (Newman et al., 2020; Afsar et al., 2021). For instance, in organizations within collectivist societies, too much emphasis on individual participation may create tensions, as employees may prefer directive clarity over participatory dialogue (Yasir et al., 2016). Therefore, the hypothesis that democratic leadership positively affects employee engagement is rejected.

Laissez-faire leadership, characterized by avoidance of responsibility, minimal guidance, and low involvement, is widely associated with disengagement among employees. Empirical evidence suggests that when leaders fail to provide direction or support, employees often experience uncertainty, role ambiguity, and frustration, which undermine engagement levels (Yang, 2015). This leadership style can also foster perceptions of neglect, leading to lower organizational commitment and motivation (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019; Choi et al., 2016). Moreover, laissez-faire leadership has been linked with increased workplace stress and counterproductive behaviors, as employees are left without sufficient guidance to perform effectively (Khan et al., 2020). Longitudinal studies confirm that the lack of involvement and accountability under laissez-faire leaders erodes team cohesion and reduces job satisfaction, both of which are critical determinants of employee engagement (Rahbi et al., 2017). Consequently, the hypothesis that laissez-faire leadership positively influences employee engagement is rejected.

## 4 DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study provide several important implications for organizational policy and economic productivity. Employee engagement can be understood as a form of human capital investment, where employees' motivation, commitment, and productivity are closely tied to the quality of leadership they experience (Becker, 1993; Crook et al., 2011). The results indicate that leadership styles, autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire, interact differently with employee characteristics and organizational context, suggesting that leadership policies must account for workforce heterogeneity. For instance, highly educated and skilled employees respond positively to autonomy-supportive leadership (laissez-faire), enhancing job crafting and knowledge application, whereas directive leadership (autocratic) can yield efficiency gains in high-stakes operational tasks (Ali & Ullah, 2023; Niu & Wang, (2019).

At the macroeconomic level, improving engagement through effective leadership can yield significant productivity gains, especially in emerging economies where inefficiencies in organizational management often limit economic growth (Bloom et al., 2019). Rigid autocratic leadership may suppress creativity, reduce knowledge sharing, and increase turnover costs, ultimately constraining organizational adaptability and sectoral competitiveness (Alrowwad et al., 2020; Liu, 2024; Thanh, 2022). Conversely, democratic and laissez-faire approaches, when applied strategically, may act as organizational public goods by facilitating innovation, collective problem-solving, and coordination efficiency, producing positive externalities that extend beyond individual organizations (Rasool et al., 2021).

From a labor economics standpoint, engagement policies can mitigate agency problems by aligning worker incentives with organizational goals. Leaders who adopt participatory or transformational styles reduce information asymmetries, foster trust, and encourage long-term retention, lowering the transaction costs associated with recruitment, training, and supervision (Podsakoff et al., 2018; Thanh, 2022). This alignment translates into higher marginal productivity per employee and more efficient labor allocation within firms.

Moreover, engagement-enhancing leadership can reduce absenteeism and increase discretionary effort, further improving organizational output (Liu et al., 2024).

The findings also underscore the importance of contingency-based leadership policies. Autocratic leadership may yield positive engagement outcomes in contexts requiring operational precision or rapid decision-making, while laissez-faire leadership is effective among highly competent and autonomous employees, and democratic leadership consistently promotes trust, psychological safety, and innovation (Ågotnes et al., 2025; Thanh, 2022; Alkuwari, & Al-Faryan, 2025). Economic reasoning suggests that mismatched leadership styles can generate inefficiencies, where either over-direction or under-guidance reduces workforce productivity and engagement. Therefore, leadership development programs must emphasize adaptability, situational awareness, and workforce capability assessment.

Regulatory agencies and policymakers can support organizational efficiency by establishing standards or certifications for leadership competencies. Embedding leadership quality into corporate governance and human resource frameworks creates systemic incentives for firms to adopt empirically validated leadership practices that enhance engagement and productivity (Nisar et al., 2021). For example, organizations could be incentivized to implement structured leadership training, succession planning, and performance evaluation metrics that integrate employee engagement outcomes, linking organizational governance to economic returns.

Finally, from an economic policy perspective, the study suggests that investment in adaptive leadership represents a strategic lever to improve workforce productivity, organizational resilience, and sectoral competitiveness. Supporting democratic and autonomy-promoting leadership can generate positive spillovers such as enhanced knowledge diffusion, reduced turnover, and innovation spillovers across teams and departments (Sott & Bender, 2025; Lim et al., 2024;). Similarly, contextually applied autocratic leadership can ensure operational stability and efficiency, particularly in critical service sectors. In sum, leadership policies that balance clarity, autonomy, and participative communication optimize both economic efficiency and workforce engagement, reinforcing the broader link between human capital management and economic growth (Alkuwari & Al-Faryan, 2025; Thanh, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This study provides compelling evidence that leadership styles significantly influence employee engagement within the organizational context examined. The main findings indicate that democratic and laissez-faire styles were both positively and significantly associated with engagement levels, reinforcing the value of participative and autonomy-supportive approaches in fostering motivation, psychological safety, and innovation. Autocratic leadership, while generally considered restrictive, also demonstrated a positive association with engagement, highlighting the importance of contextual and task-specific considerations in leadership effectiveness. Democratic leadership's positive impact aligns with contemporary findings that participative decision-making enhances psychological safety, trust, and intrinsic motivation (Imran et al., 2024). Laissez-faire leadership can foster job crafting and creativity, thereby reinforcing engagement, supporting emerging research on the conditional advantages of high autonomy (Ågotnes et al., 2025).

Conversely, autocratic leadership also yielded a significant positive coefficient, suggesting that directive clarity and goal orientation may enhance engagement in contexts demanding high compliance and operational efficiency. This finding underscores the contingency-based nature of leadership effectiveness,

affirming that context, including cultural norms, task complexity, and workforce characteristics, modulates the relative efficacy of leadership styles (Oc, 2018).

Based on these results, the following recommendations for managers, HR professionals, and organizational policymakers are proposed:

1. **Adopt adaptive, context-sensitive leadership frameworks:** Organizations should cultivate leadership competencies that are versatile, enabling leaders to oscillate between directive, participative, and autonomy-supportive behaviors as required by task demands and employee readiness. Leadership development programs should incorporate situational leadership training, equipping managers to diagnose team needs and adjust styles accordingly (Dinh et al., 2023).
2. **Empower educated and proactive employees with autonomy:** Given the demonstrated effectiveness of laissez-faire elements among educated employees, organizations should structure roles that allow for autonomy and self-direction. This approach fosters innovation and intrinsic motivation, in line with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020).
3. **Embed participatory processes to enhance engagement:** Democratic leadership behaviors, such as involving employees in decisions, providing transparent communication, and recognizing contributions, should be institutionalized. Policies encouraging inclusive practices support psychological safety and collective ownership, boosting sustained engagement (Imran et al., 2024).
4. **Leverage autocratic clarity where operational demands require it:** In high-pressure or tightly regulated environments, clear directive leadership may improve engagement by reducing ambiguity and aligning efforts. Managers should be trained to deploy such leadership judiciously, balancing order with employee inclusion and well-being.
5. **Invest in blended leadership development programs:** Human resource strategies should prioritize training that blends leadership styles, emphasizing emotional intelligence, scenario-based decision-making, and feedback delivery. Evidence suggests that manager support and development directly correlate with higher engagement and reduced burnout (Khan, Chughtai, & Zhiqiang, 2025).
6. **Monitor engagement as a productivity and retention lever:** Regular measurement of employee engagement should inform policy. Organizations should design metrics capturing engagement dynamics and link them to leadership interventions to optimize human capital outcomes.

Limitations: This study has some limitations. First, it relied on cross-sectional survey data, which limits the ability to establish causality. Second, the research was conducted within a single organization in the energy sector, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other industries or cultural contexts. Third, self-reported measures may be subject to response bias, including social desirability effects.

Future research directions: To build on these findings, future studies could adopt longitudinal designs to examine causal effects of leadership styles on engagement over time. Comparative studies across multiple organizations, sectors, and cultural contexts could enhance generalizability. Additionally, investigating mediating and moderating variables, such as psychological empowerment, organizational culture, and team dynamics, would deepen understanding of the mechanisms linking leadership and engagement. Incorporating mixed-methods approaches, including qualitative interviews and observational data, may also provide richer insights into the nuanced effects of leadership behaviors.

## RESEARCH ETHICS, INFORMED CONSENT AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the author's institution and applicable national regulations and did not require formal research ethics committee approval, as it involved an anonymous questionnaire survey of adult employees in a large Nigerian utility firm and did not collect sensitive personal data. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time, and the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity; by completing the questionnaire, they provided their informed consent. The author declares no conflict of interest.

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