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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Designing a Strengths-Based Leadership Model at Payame Noor University with a Grounded Theory Strategy

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

Leadership is the cornerstone of all organizational achievements (Ly, 2024) and is recognized as a key component of organizational success (Klein, Wallis, & Cooke, 2013; Subramanian & Banihashemi, 2024). While diverse leadership styles have been proposed for effective organizational management (Van Jaarsveld, Mentz, & Ellis, 2019), traditional styles often fall short in today's fast-paced and complex world, limiting collaboration, creativity, and individual growth by applying a uniform approach that ignores individual differences among employees (Tang, 2019). Consequently, a shift in leadership style can significantly enhance organizational performance (Nguyen, Hang, Hiep, & Flynn, 2023). Research in positive psychology demonstrates that every individual possesses a unique set of strengths which, when identified and utilized, can lead to superior performance (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Meyers & van Woerkom, 2017; Wood et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2023). Engagement in activities aligned with one's strengths boosts performance, learning, and well-being (Harzer & Ruch, 2013, 2014; Pezirkianidis et al., 2023; Stavropoulou et al., 2024; Van Woerkom et al., 2016; Clifton & Nelson, 1995). Strengths-based interventions guide individuals toward meaningful and purposeful behaviors, fostering personal and organizational growth (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Stavropoulou et al., 2024; van Woerkom et al., 2022). Strengths-based leadership, defined as a unique style of positive leadership focusing on the strengths of both leaders and followers (Ding & Yu, 2020a), operates on the belief that focusing solely on weaknesses yields average performance, whereas leveraging individual capabilities leads to higher achievement (Soria, Werner, Roholt, & Capeder, 2019; Clifton & Harter, 2003). Such leaders experience greater autonomy, job satisfaction, and performance, positively influencing organizational culture (Linley, Woolston, & Biswas-Diener, 2009; Linley et al., 2011; Hubley, Gottlieb, & Durrant, 2022; Lavoie-Tremblay et al., 2024). They foster employee strengths and manage weaknesses constructively by redesigning jobs and creating supportive environments (Aguinis, Gottfredson, & Joo, 2012; Ge et al., 2024; van Woerkom et al., 2024), based on the premise that individuals are intrinsically motivated to flourish (Meyers & van Woerkom, 2017; Pezirkianidis et al., 2020), with their greatest growth potential lying in their strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Burkus, 2011; Clifton & Harter, 2003), leading to a greater sense of meaningfulness (Harzer & Ruch, 2013). Universities, given their specific mission, must regularly evaluate their performance. Identifying strengths through evaluation helps create effective strategies for planning and achieving strategic goals (Rashidi & Rashidi, 2022). Leadership in universities is complex and distinct, requiring specific skills and competencies due to diverse objectives, social responsibilities, and traditional values (Rahimzadeh Kalaleh et al., 2021). As key institutions for knowledge production and human capital development, universities need leaders who can adapt to their complex, dynamic structure, particularly in interactions with faculty and students (Hosseini, Enayati, & Niyaz Azari, 2024). Research indicates that the performance of large institutions like universities is intertwined with leadership skills, where leaders play a pioneering role in guiding success and organizational excellence (Rony et al., 2023; Young, 2023; Khadivi et al., 2025). Given

that an efficient and capable workforce is the most valuable resource of any university (Parasteh et al., 2023; Alimohammadi, Rezaei Zadeh, & Haqiqat Monfared, 2024), and university performance depends heavily on the capability of its staff, especially faculty members (Hofmeyr, 2023; Saki et al., 2024), identifying and implementing an appropriate leadership style is essential (Rony et al., 2023). This can be achieved through strengths-based leadership, which allocates tasks according to employees' capabilities, stimulates teamwork, and creates complementary competencies to mitigate the impact of weaknesses (Wang et al., 2023). Such leadership enhances job satisfaction, improves interpersonal relationships, and increases organizational effectiveness (Niemic, 2018).

The need for this approach is particularly critical at Payame Noor University (PNU), a vast institution characterized by geographical dispersion and structural complexity. PNU faces challenges including a distance education system that reduces teacher-student interaction and impacts teaching quality, an over-reliance on theoretical education neglecting practical skills, and increasing workload pressure on staff and faculty leading to potential burnout and turnover. These challenges necessitate capable, strategic leadership to guide and improve the university's educational and organizational conditions. Therefore, this study aims to identify the key components of strengths-based leadership within PNU's context and develop a model using the Grounded Theory strategy, addressing a significant research and organizational gap. The main research question is: What model explains strengths-based leadership at Payame Noor University?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using the Grounded Theory strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The participants were 15 experts from Payame Noor University, selected through purposive sampling. The criterion for determining the sample size was theoretical saturation, achieved by the eighth interview; however, fifteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to ensure data richness. Participants were selected based on their employment in managerial positions and/or membership in the academic faculty of management and behavioral sciences departments at PNU, ensuring deep experience and awareness of the research context.

To ensure research quality and trustworthiness, principles of credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability were adhered to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was enhanced through member checking (where findings were shared with participants for feedback) and peer review by qualitative methodology experts. Confirmability was achieved by meticulously documenting all stages of data coding, analysis, and interpretation, ensuring the process was traceable. The use of MAXQDA 2020 software aided in transparent and systematic analysis. Transferability was supported by providing detailed characteristics of the participants allowing readers to assess the potential for transferring findings to similar contexts. Dependability was ensured through accurate recording of the research process and methodical reporting. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interview protocol included open-ended questions developed based on the literature and research objectives, covering topics such as the concept of strengths-based leadership, causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were recorded with participant consent. Data analysis followed the systematic grounded theory procedure outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1992, 1998), involving three coding stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, facilitated by MAXQDA 2020.

Findings

The analysis of the interview data led to the extraction of 29 sub-codes. The core category emerging from the data was **Strengths-Based Leadership**, identified as the central phenomenon. The analysis resulted in a paradigm model consisting of six main categories and 29 subcategories:

- **Causal Conditions:** These are the factors that influence the emergence of strengths-based leadership. Ten causal conditions were identified: Training, Effective Communication, Talent Development, Autonomy, Organizational Trust, Motivation, Continuous Feedback, Spirit of Cooperation, Strengths-Based Mindset, and Personality Traits of leaders.
- **Contextual Conditions:** These are the general environmental factors that influence the strategies. Four contextual conditions were identified: Organizational Goals, Organizational Structure, Organizational Culture, and Organizational Environment.
- **Intervening Conditions:** These are specific conditions that can hinder or facilitate the strategies. Four intervening conditions were identified: Organizational Politicization, Organizational Crisis, Managerial Weakness, and Resistance to Change.
- **Phenomenon (Core Category): Strengths-Based Leadership.** This was characterized by five key dimensions: Focusing on Strengths, Empowering Employees, Creating Motivation

and Team Spirit, Strengthening Skills and Positive Attributes, and a tendency towards a Participative Leadership Style.

- **Strategies/Actions:** These are the actions taken by leaders in response to the phenomenon. Three core strategies were identified: Skills Enhancement, Evaluation (focused on strengths), and Team-Centricity.

- **Consequences:** These are the outcomes of implementing the strategies. Seven consequences were identified: Organizational Development, Creativity and Innovation, Job Satisfaction, Team Spirit, Dominance (influence based on expertise and acceptance), Organizational Performance, and Organizational Participation.

The axial coding process integrated these categories into a coherent paradigm model, illustrating the dynamic relationships. For instance, causal conditions like training foster the adoption of strengths-based leadership. Leaders then employ strategies like skills enhancement. The success of these strategies is affected by the organizational context (e.g., a supportive culture helps) and intervening conditions (e.g., resistance to change can hinder progress). The effective implementation of strategies leads to positive consequences like increased job satisfaction and organizational development. Selective coding yielded core propositions, such as: "Causal conditions influence the adoption of strengths-based leadership," and "The strategies of the strengths-based leadership model lead to positive organizational outcomes."

Conclusion and Discussion

This study successfully designed a contextualized model for strengths-based leadership at Payame Noor University. The findings indicate that strengths-based leadership, as a transformative approach centered on leveraging individual and collective capacities, can effectively address the specific challenges faced by PNU, such as geographical dispersion, workload pressure, and the need for improved educational quality. The model highlights that the implementation of this leadership style is not isolated but is driven by foundational causal conditions like continuous training, effective communication, and organizational trust. Leaders must actively pursue strategies focused on enhancing skills, implementing constructive evaluation systems, and fostering teamwork. However, the path is moderated by intervening conditions like resistance to change and organizational politicization, which require proactive management through transparent leadership and participatory change processes. The potential outcomes—ranging from improved job satisfaction and creativity to enhanced organizational performance—underscore the significant value of adopting this model. The findings align with previous national and international studies on the positive impacts of strengths-based and empowering leadership on performance, job engagement, and professional development (e.g., Pouralef, 2024; Doosti et al., 2024; Ghanbari & Mohammadi, 2023; van Woerkom et al., 2024; Wang & Ding, 2024). For successful implementation at PNU and similar educational institutions, the study proposes several recommendations based on the model's components:

This research contributes to the field by providing an empirically-grounded model tailored to the context of a large, decentralized university, moving beyond theoretical discussion to offer an actionable framework. Future research could conduct comparative studies in different organizational contexts, investigate the impact of this model on variables like stress reduction and psychological well-being, and explore the dynamics of leader-follower interactions within a strengths-based framework in greater depth.

KEY WORDS

Leadership Style, Strengths-Based Leadership, Grounded Theory, Payame Noor University.

