# Transactional leadership in public sector organizations: A bibliometric analysis

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ABSTRACT

In rapidly changing and dynamic environments, transactional leadership plays an essential role in achieving long-term success in public sector organizations. This leadership style emphasizes setting clear priorities and managing tasks to ensure that individual efforts align with organizational goals. This study aims to review the literature on transactional leadership from the past thirty years (1993–2023) through a bibliometric analysis of authorship, citations, countries, and publication sources. A total of 95 articles from the Scopus database are analyzed using VOSviewer software. The results show that, at the individual level, transactional leadership positively impacts job satisfaction, psychological empowerment, and employee performance. At the organizational level, it consistently enhances organizational commitment, culture, innovation, and performance.

## 1. Introduction

Public sector organizations are government-owned entities that provide services for the welfare of citizens. These organizations typically prioritize social and economic objectives over profit-making (Besley and Ghatak, 2017; McHugh et al., 2013; Sinclair et al., 2014). However, they face a range of challenges that hinder their effectiveness and ability to deliver services (Kwon, 2021; Ostrom and Ostrom, 2019). Bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, coupled with slow decision-making processes, often lead to inefficiency (Miranda and Lerner, 2018; Moulick and Taylor, 2020) and delays in implementing necessary changes. Furthermore, resistance to change can obstruct the adoption of new technologies or modern management practices. Public sector organizations also operate within limited budgets (Miranda and Lerner, 2018; Voorn et al., 2019), which may result in inadequate resources for delivering essential public services (Grönroos, 2019). Transactional leadership, therefore, can be useful in managing public sector organizations (Jacobsen et al., 2022; Jacobsen and Salomonsen, 2021; Jensen et al., 2019; Kim and Oh, 2023). It relies on contingent rewards and sanctions to motivate employees (Nguyen et al., 2022) and emphasizes work standards through structured exchanges between leaders and followers to achieve specific goals. Additionally, research has found a positive relationship between transactional leadership, particularly through verbal rewards, and internal communication performance in public organizations (Jacobsen and Salomonsen, 2021).

Transactional leadership is characterized by three key components: (1) contingent reward—leaders set clear expectations and offer rewards (e.g., bonuses and promotions) for achieving specific performance objectives (Podsakoff et al., 2006); (2) active management by exception—leaders actively monitor performance and intervene when employees deviate from established standards (Antonakis et al., 2003); and (3) passive management by exception—leaders intervene only when significant problems arise and otherwise maintain the status quo (Antonakis and House, 2014). Transactional leadership helps ensure that resources are allocated effectively to meet established work standards and procedures. By focusing on short-term results, transactional leaders set clear goals, define performance metrics, and reward achievements (Abdelwahed et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2020; Young et al., 2021).

Whittington et al. (2009) found a positive and significant relationship between transactional leadership and employee outcomes such as performance, affective commitment, and

organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). However, Gellis (2001) noted that only the contingent reward aspect of transactional leadership is significantly correlated with effectiveness, satisfaction, and extra effort. In contrast, Aboramadan and Kundi (2020) reported that transactional leadership in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) has no significant effect on work-related outcomes like OCB and affective commitment. Similarly, Donkor and Zhou (2020) found no effect of transactional leadership on affective and normative commitment or employee performance in the public service sector. Moreover, transactional leadership in public sector organizations may encounter challenges such as employee silence, which can negatively affect job satisfaction and performance (Alarabiat and Eyupoglu, 2022). Based on these complexities and contradictory findings, this study aims to review the literature on transactional leadership in public sector organizations during the past three decades

from 1993 to 2023 and provide a visualization of authorship, citations, countries, and sources of publication using bibliometric analysis.

## 2. Methodology

This study reviews the literature on transactional leadership in public sector organizations over the past three decades (1993–2023) using the Scopus database. Scopus is a widely recognized and powerful database for bibliometric analysis (Sánchez et al., 2017), as it includes a vast collection of unique documents (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016). By searching for relevant English articles using the keywords 'transactional AND leadership AND in AND public AND organization,' 100 documents were identified. After excluding five unrelated references (Fig. 1), 95 articles were analyzed using VOSviewer software.
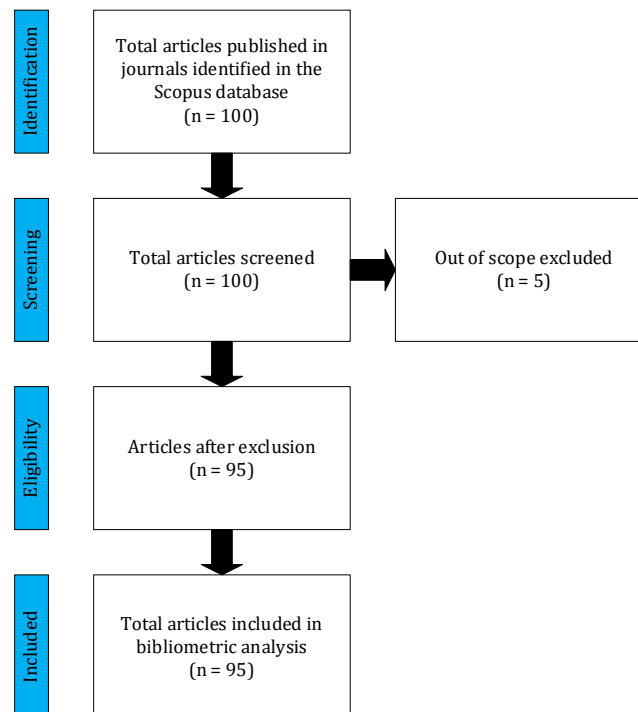


**Fig. 1:** Steps of screening documents

The quantitative assessment, such as the number of publications per year, citation analysis, and co-authorship to identify prominent journals and influential researchers, is conducted using VOSviewer software. VOSviewer is a powerful software tool used for visualizing and analyzing bibliometric networks to identify term clusters (van Eck and Waltman, 2014; Waltman et al., 2010). VOSviewer is widely used in research settings to analyze bibliometric data, identify research trends, and visually explore the landscape of scientific literature (van Eck and Waltman, 2010).

## 3. Results and discussion

This study uses VOSviewer software to create bibliometric maps that illustrate connections

between authors, journals, and keywords based on co-citation frequencies.

Based on the results, 95 selected papers have been published in 87 journals related to social sciences, business, economics, management, accounting, finance, art and humanities, and some multidisciplinary areas. Table 1 highlights the journals' impact based on total citations and the number of publications. The top five journals in transactional leadership research in the public sector are: Sustainability by MDPI, with 3 articles and 265,748 citations; SAGE Open by SAGE, with 4 articles and 7,390 citations; Public Administration Review by Wiley-Blackwell, with 3 articles and 4,258 citations; Public Management Review by Taylor and Francis, with 3 articles and 2,625 citations; and International Journal of Public Sector Management

by Emerald, with 2 articles and 512 citations. Notably, Sustainability is the most influential journal in this field.

Table 2 highlights the top five influential researchers in transactional leadership studies in the public sector, ranked based on their h-index and total citations. Meier, K.J. from Cardiff University leads with 11,799 citations and an h-index of 59. Andersen, L.B. from Aarhus Universitet ranks second with 2,394 citations and an h-index of 26. Following them are: An, S.H. from Texas Tech University with 192 citations and an h-index of 9; Ahmad, A. from Hailey College of Commerce with 76 citations and an h-index of 5; and Donkor, F. from Kumasi Technical University with 29 citations and an h-index of 3.

Fig. 2 illustrates the limited level of international research collaboration among scholars studying transactional leadership in the public sector. The results indicate frequent collaboration between Jensen, U.T. (Arizona State University, Downtown Phoenix Campus), Salomonsen, H.H., and Jacobsen, C.B. (both from Aarhus University). Their work suggests that transactional leadership in public organizations can be enhanced through qualification

and training programs. Additionally, Meier, K.J. (Cardiff University) and An, S.H. (Texas Tech University) also collaborate regularly. Their research emphasizes the impact of gender differences on transactional leadership behaviors in public sector settings. Moreover, Andersen, L.B. and Jakobsen, M.L.F. (Aarhus University) maintain a relatively consistent partnership. They argue that combining various leadership styles—such as transactional, transformational, and empowering leadership—can improve employee motivation and foster innovative behavior in public organizations.

Table 3 shows the top five countries involved in transactional leadership studies in the public sector. Aarhus Universitet (Denmark) leads with 6 papers and the highest number of publications (108,883) among the institutions. It is followed by Cardiff University (United Kingdom) with 4 papers and 99,487 publications; Universiteit Leiden (Netherlands) with 3 papers and 80,478 publications; Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh (Vietnam) with 2 papers and 12,530 publications; and Universiti Utara Malaysia (Malaysia) with 2 papers and 10,136 publications.

**Table 1:** Top 5 journals

| Rank | Journal | Paper | Total citation | Citation per publication |
|------|---------|-------|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Sustainability | 3 | 265,748 | 5.4 |
| 2 | SAGE open | 4 | 7,390 | 2.8 |
| 3 | Public Administration Review | 3 | 4,258 | 13.2 |
| 4 | Public Management Review | 3 | 2,625 | 9.0 |
| 5 | International Journal of Public Sector Management | 2 | 512 | 3.7 |

**Table 2:** 5 most influential researchers

| Rank | Author | Paper | Total citation | Scopus h-index | Active period | Affiliation | Country |
|------|--------|-------|----------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|---------|
| 1 | Meier, K.J. | 3 | 11,799 | 59 | 1994-2023 | Cardiff University | United Kingdom |
| 2 | Andersen, L.B. | 4 | 2,394 | 26 | 2001-2023 | Aarhus Universitet | Denmark |
| 3 | An, S.H. | 3 | 192 | 9 | 2017-2023 | Texas Tech University | United States |
| 4 | Ahmad, A. | 2 | 76 | 5 | 2015-2023 | Hailey College of Commerce | Pakistan |
| 5 | Donkor, F. | 3 | 29 | 3 | 2020-2023 | Kumasi Technical University | Ghana |

**Table 3:** Top 5 affiliations

| Rank | Institution | Country | Paper | Scopus document |
|------|-------------|---------|-------|-----------------|
| 1 | Aarhus Universitet | Denmark | 6 | 108,883 |
| 2 | Cardiff University | United Kingdom | 4 | 99,487 |
| 3 | Universiteit Leiden | Netherlands | 3 | 80,478 |
| 4 | Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh | Vietnam | 2 | 12,530 |
| 5 | Universiti Utara Malaysia | Malaysia | 2 | 10,136 |
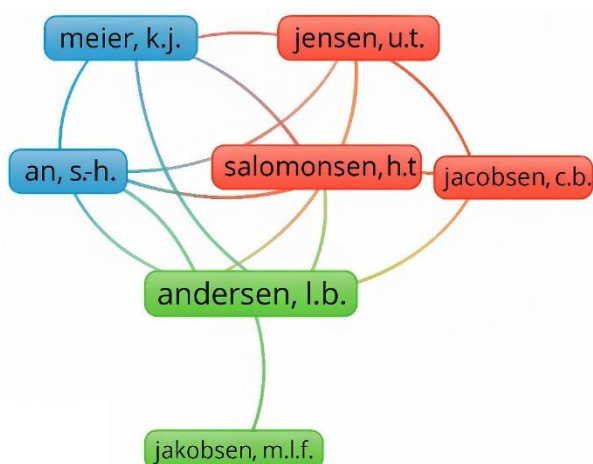


**Fig. 2:** Author collaboration

Table 4 shows the top five countries involved in transactional leadership studies in the public sector. The United States of America is the most active country, with 23 papers (21.85%), followed by the United Kingdom with 11 papers (10.45%), Malaysia with 8 papers (7.6%), Denmark with 7 papers (6.65%), and Australia with 6 papers (5.7%). The United States and the United Kingdom are the top two countries on the list. The results of the past 30 years in Fig. 3 reveal that transactional leadership, at the individual level, positively improves job satisfaction, psychological empowerment, and employee performance. Furthermore, at the organizational level, transactional leadership consistently promotes higher organizational commitment, organizational culture, organizational innovation, and organizational performance.

## 3.1. Transactional leadership on job satisfaction

Transactional leadership emphasizes setting clear goals and expectations for employees, providing rewards or punishments based on their performance. Employees who exhibit desired behaviors are rewarded, while those who fail to meet expectations face consequences. By providing clear instructions, transactional leaders help employees understand what is expected of them, which can boost their confidence in achieving their goals. Furthermore, transactional leaders often use contingent rewards, such as bonuses and promotions, to recognize high performance. Receiving rewards for their efforts can increase employees' job satisfaction (Alarabiat and Eyupoglu, 2022; Kim, 2019).

Additionally, transactional leaders typically offer recognition based on individual or team performance, fostering a culture focused on achievement and further enhancing job satisfaction.

## 3.2. Transactional leadership on organizational commitment

Transactional leadership is based on an exchange of rewards (e.g., salary increases, bonuses, and promotions) and punishments (e.g., reprimands, demotions) to motivate employees to achieve specific goals. Transactional leaders establish clear performance expectations and provide rewards when these are met (Antonakis et al., 2003). When employees believe their efforts will be acknowledged, they are more likely to feel committed to achieving the organization's goals in anticipation of these rewards (Harb et al., 2020).

Additionally, transactional leaders actively monitor employee performance and intervene when deviations from expected standards occur, addressing issues as they arise. This proactive approach can foster increased commitment (Qadir and Yeşiltaş, 2020), as employees may perceive their leader as genuinely invested in their success.

**Table 4:** Top 5 countries

| Country | Paper |
| --- | --- |
| United States | 23 |
| United Kingdom | 11 |
| Malaysia | 8 |
| Denmark | 7 |
| Australia | 6 |

## 3.3. Transactional leadership on employee performance

Transactional leadership focuses on maintaining the status quo and utilizing a system of rewards and punishments to motivate employees to achieve specific objectives. Transactional leaders use rewards to incentivize performance, which can be effective in motivating employees, especially those driven by extrinsic rewards (Abdelwahed et al., 2023; Makambe and Moeng, 2019; Udin, 2024). They actively monitor employee performance and hold individuals accountable for meeting established targets, ensuring that employees stay on track and maintain productivity (Lee et al., 2023). Additionally, transactional leaders uphold a clear chain of command and frequently conduct formal performance evaluations. These evaluations are used not only to assess performance but also to identify areas for improvement and align performance outcomes with appropriate rewards.



**Fig. 3:** Network visualization of transactional leadership

## 3.4. Transactional leadership on psychological empowerment

Transactional leadership emphasizes the exchange relationship between leaders and employees to ensure that tasks are accomplished efficiently. By utilizing rewards, punishments, and clear instructions, transactional leaders motivate employees to achieve specific goals. They set clear expectations and offer rewards for meeting defined performance targets (Naidu and Van der Walt, 2005). When leaders provide meaningful rewards and recognition, employees are more likely to feel empowered and motivated (Ambad et al., 2021;

Mufti et al., 2020). Additionally, effective transactional leaders often delegate tasks and grant employees a degree of control (Jacobsen and Bøgh Andersen, 2017), fostering psychological empowerment. Transactional leaders also provide constructive feedback, particularly through the management-by-exception approach, helping employees enhance their skills and competence.

### 3.5. Transactional leadership on organizational performance

Transactional leaders set clear goals and performance targets for their employees, offering rewards and recognition for achieving these objectives. This incentive structure motivates employees to perform well and strive to meet their targets, which can lead to increased effort and commitment. In addition to motivating employees, transactional leaders focus on enhancing efficiency and task completion, optimizing workflows to improve overall productivity and performance. They actively monitor employee performance through contingent rewards (Jacobsen and Bøgh Andersen, 2017) and management-by-exception (Young et al., 2021), ensuring that any deviations from expected performance are promptly addressed.

### 3.6. Transactional leadership on organizational culture

Transactional leaders manage and motivate employees through a system of rewards and punishments, creating an achievement-oriented culture where employees are recognized for their accomplishments (Kızıloğlu, 2021). Employees are rewarded for meeting specific performance targets, while those who fail to meet expectations may face disciplinary actions. Transactional leaders often reinforce a hierarchical organizational structure (Jamali et al., 2022), with decision-making concentrated at the top. This structure can foster a culture in which employees are expected to follow orders without questioning authority (Koranteng et al., 2022). Furthermore, transactional leaders retain significant control over decision-making, limiting employees' opportunities to take ownership of their work. As a result, this can create a culture of dependency on the leader's guidance rather than encouraging employee autonomy.

### 3.7. Transactional leadership on organizational innovation

Transactional leadership emphasizes the exchange of benefits for the completion of specific tasks, where well-defined roles and extrinsic motivation drive employees to achieve goals. These rewards can be linked to innovative efforts, encouraging employees to generate creative ideas, solutions, and improvements (Suhana et al., 2019). By offering valuable rewards for successful

innovative contributions, transactional leaders can motivate employees to enhance the organization's overall innovation and competitiveness (Prasad and Junni, 2016).

### 4. Conclusion and recommendation

Over the past 30 years, research has shown that transactional leadership has a positive influence on job satisfaction, psychological empowerment, and individual employee performance. At the organizational level, it consistently improves commitment, culture, innovation, and overall performance. Therefore, transactional leadership can be a useful strategy for enhancing leadership effectiveness in the public sector.

Public sector leaders and policymakers can benefit from adopting methods that emphasize clear expectations, structured feedback, and reinforcement of desired behaviors. First, leadership training should be a priority to help public sector leaders apply transactional leadership effectively. These training programs should teach how to set clear goals, provide consistent feedback, and use rewards and consequences to support high performance. Such an approach can lead to greater job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity among employees.

Second, public sector leaders should implement systems to recognize and reward staff who meet or exceed performance goals. Rewards might include promotions, financial incentives, or public praise. This kind of recognition can help build a motivated work culture, encouraging employees to stay productive and engaged, which in turn strengthens organizational performance.

Finally, policymakers should develop frameworks that focus on measurable results. These frameworks can help leaders set clear performance targets and deliver concrete outcomes. Leaders should also offer continuous support, sufficient resources, and opportunities for professional development to improve organizational commitment, culture, and long-term success.

Recent studies suggest that the link between transactional leadership and innovation has not been studied as much as other leadership styles, such as transformational leadership. Transactional leadership is usually examined in terms of performance and task achievement rather than innovation. Therefore, its direct role in promoting innovation is still not fully understood.

However, transactional leadership can still support innovation in indirect ways. By maintaining a stable work environment, transactional leaders can help employees feel secure enough to take calculated risks and try new ideas. Researchers should continue improving theoretical models to better understand how different leadership styles, including transactional leadership, contribute to innovation. By combining different leadership approaches, organizations can find a balance between stability

and innovation, which supports creativity and ongoing improvement.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

## Conflict of interest

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