International Review of Management and Marketing

ISSN: 2146-4405

available at http: www.econjournals.com

International Review of Management and Marketing, 2027, 17(1), 279-288.

Leadership Communication in Fostering Trust and Employee Proficiency among Public Sector Employees

Nur Izzaty Mohamad[1]*, Ishak Abd Rahman[2], Nurshahira Ibrahim[3], Najihah Mohammad Yusoff[4], Siti Marhamah Kamarul Arifain[5]

[1]School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, [2]Faculty of Economics and Management, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Selangor, Malaysia, [3]Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pahang, Kampus Jengka, Malaysia, [4]Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR University College, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, [5]Faculty of Technical and Vocational Education, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, Parit Raja, Malaysia.
*Email: nurizzatymohamad@gmail.com

Received: 06 June 2026 **Accepted:** 07 September 2026 **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.32479/irmm.24727

ABSTRACT

Effective leadership communication is widely recognized as a critical driver of organizational success, particularly in the public sector. This study examines the mediating role of trust in leadership between leadership communication and employee proficiency. Data were collected from 266 public sector employees using a structured survey questionnaire and subsequently analysed using SmartPLS to test the proposed hypotheses. Findings indicate that effective leadership communication positively influences trust in leadership, which in turn significantly increases employee proficiency. These results underscore the critical importance of communication as a strategic leadership tool for building trust, facilitating employee competence, and promoting organizational effectiveness. This study contributes to the literature by clarifying the mechanisms by which leadership communication influences employee outcomes, providing practical implications for leadership development in the public sector context, and highlighting areas for future research on trust-based leadership dynamics.

Keywords: Leadership Communication, Trust in Leadership, Employee Proficiency
JEL Classifications: M1, M0

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, global economic uncertainty has increased significantly, while the economic recovery process has not yet reached the expected level (Chen et al., 2025; Zhang and Chen, 2025). This situation has intensified risk factors across sectors, thus prompting organizations to be more cautious in making strategic decisions (Chen et al., 2025; Zhang and Chen, 2025). In this context, leadership communication has become increasingly critical, especially in conveying strategic clarity, managing uncertainty, and maintaining employee trust as organizations face an uncertain environment (Cakir and Adiguzel, 2020; Men et al., 2024). Leaders and human resource experts emphasize that meeting employee expectations and ensuring their commitment are critical aspects of improving organizational efficiency, especially in the face of a rapidly changing operational landscape (Zhang et al., 2025; Cakir and Adiguzel, 2020). Leaders' communication practices do not simply function as a medium for delivering information, but rather play a strategic role in shaping and maintaining the quality of working relationships within the organization (Heuss and Datta, 2023; Mphaluwa et al., 2025). The ability to establish open and honest communication can expand the leader's ability to identify real issues that exist within the team and understand challenges in the broader work context. In addition, leaders who have deep organizational working knowledge have an analytical advantage to interpret current issues based on past experience and practices

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(Heuss and Datta, 2023; Mphaluwa et al., 2025). This ability allows leaders to leverage organizational learning more meaningfully in discussions with employees, thus supporting more contextual and effective decision-making.

Over the past two decades, numerous studies have emphasized the role of communication as central to effective leadership and employee management (Liden et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Ongoing communication and interaction in the workplace is often considered sufficient once initial goals are achieved, especially when leadership behaviors focus on promoting the vision and securing short-term acceptance, often supported by the provision of additional resources (Henderson, 2015; Iddrisu, 2025). However, for long-term benefits, leadership communication practices need to go beyond goal achievement, focusing on maintaining employee well-being, nurturing working relationships, and maintaining quality standards in an ever-changing environment (Liden et al., 2025; Iddrisu, 2025). The key challenge is to identify and implement appropriate communication strategies that enable leaders and their employees to collectively create a work environment conducive to continued performance and organizational resilience.

There is a recent literature review that suggests that leaders' ability to practice effective leadership communication will influence employee proficiency (Cao and Le, 2024; Nazarian et al., 2024; Shrivastava et al., 2026). This early emphasis was not merely normative, but rather supported by growing empirical evidence across sectors. In this context, this finding is consistently supported by a systematic literature review by Martins et al. (2018), which showed a significant relationship between leaders' communication practices and employee proficiency, especially in high-risk work environments. Previous literature emphasizes that leadership effectiveness is highly dependent on leaders' ability to communicate clearly, accurately, and contextually in guiding and coordinating team actions. Although communication is not the only leadership competency required, it is recognized as one of the most critical elements that influences leaders' ability to shape employee behavior, make quick decisions, and ensure safety and service quality.

Previous research has highlighted that trust acts as a critical factor mechanism in the relationship between leadership communication and employee outcomes, where trust-based relationships reinforce overall positive perceptions of the organization and the leader (Braun et al., 2013; Tabak and Hendy, 2016; Nazarian et al., 2024). High levels of trust enable the formation of balanced social exchanges, which in turn produce positive employee proficiency outcomes, including commitment and job performance (Soderberg and Romney, 2022; Rai and Koodamara, 2025). Although the current literature suggests a positive effect of leadership communication on employee proficiency, empirical evidence remains limited and inconsistent (Schaubroeck et al., 2011; Nazarian et al., 2024), indicating the need for further research to understand the mediating mechanisms that may influence this relationship (Soderberg and Romney, 2022; Rai and Koodamara, 2025). Trust in leadership plays an important role in fostering a motivated and productive workforce. However, this dynamic in the public sector context has yet to be comprehensively studied, indicating a significant knowledge gap in the current literature. This study aims to examine the effects of leadership communication on employee proficiency among public sector employees, with trust in leadership acting as a mediating variable. Specifically, the study model assesses whether the function of trust in leadership is able to act as a mediating variable in the relationship between leadership communication and employee proficiency.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Leadership Communication

In this organizational context, effective leadership communication plays a crucial role as a key mechanism for communicating expectations, aligning goals, and building trust-based working relationships. The term of communication refers to a set of conceptual frameworks that shape understanding of the communication process and how meaning is conveyed and interpreted in various contexts (Littlejohn, 1983). Etymologically, the term communicare in classical Latin means "to share with," "to share," "to make something publicly accessible," or "to discuss together," which emphasizes the nature of communication as an interactive and collective process (Glare, 1968). In line with this view, Rosengren (2000) asserts that communication is fundamentally a process of meaning creation, which involves questions about how individuals construct meaning psychologically, socially and culturally; how messages are understood at the cognitive level; and how ambiguities of meaning arise and are subsequently negotiated and resolved through interaction.

Leadership communication as a independent variable in the relationship between employee proficiency and trust in leadership is in line with Leader–Member Exchange (LMX). This theory explains interpersonal relationships and the process of social exchange that occurs between leaders and subordinates in a work environment, which is typically formed through informal and ongoing understanding (Wayne et al., 2002). LMX refers to the overall quality of the relationship between leaders and followers, which is formed through a series of repeated interactions and exchanges involving mutual trust, support, and commitment (Dienesch and Liden, 1986; Buengeler et al., 2020).

According to Scarduzio (2011) and Keyton (2017), leadership communication plays an important role in shaping proactive employee proficiency. It involves three main models, namely the transmission, manipulation and relational models. All three models show how the leader's communication style influences the understanding, emotions and behavioral responses of employees. The relational communication model has been found to be the most effective in influencing positive employee behavior because it emphasizes trust, two-way communication, empathy, accountability and psychological safety. Leaders who practice this model encourage involvement, open feedback, constructive conflict management and building mutual understanding, thus encouraging employee commitment and proactive behavior (Scarduzio, 2011; Keyton, 2017). On the other hand, the manipulation and transmission models tend to limit positive

behavioral change. The manipulation model creates uncertainty while the one-way transmission model produces compliance without real understanding or involvement of employees. Overall, this model supports that leadership communication not only conveys information, but also shapes employee attitudes, emotions and behavior, especially when communication based on relationships and trust is practiced.

Study by Cao and Le (2024), in the summer of 2019, empirical data were collected through a survey study involving 115 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hunan, Beijing and Guangdong provinces, China, with a total of 376 respondents. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to test the influence of transformational leadership, specifically leadership communication as an independent variable, and trust in leadership in shaping employee behavior. The findings showed that effective leadership communication, as a key element of transformational leadership, had a positive and significant effect on positive employee behavior. In addition, trust in leadership was found to play an important role in strengthening the relationship. The results also showed that exposure-based trust in leadership had a greater influence on employees' change ability than dependence-based trust in leadership. Specifically, these findings provide empirical evidence supporting the mediating role of trust in leadership in the relationship between leadership communication and employee behavior. Next, a study conducted by Nazarian et al. (2024) involved data collected from 128 hotels based on the number of employees to test the proposed hypothesis. These hotels were located in major cities in four different countries: the United Kingdom, the United States, India, and Iran. The findings showed that transformational leadership, specifically effective leadership communication, had a significant and positive relationship with trust in leadership. These findings emphasize that when leaders communicate information clearly, transparently, and openly, employees tend to build confidence and trust in their leaders, which is an important foundation for productive working relationships and organizational effectiveness This study proposes the following hypotheses:

- H_1: Leadership communication has a positive effect on employee proficiency
- H_2: Leadership communication has a positive effect on trust in leadership.

2.2. Trust in Leadership

Trust in leaders is a two-dimensional construct that includes cognitive and affective trust (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Lee and Mohd Rasdi, 2025). The cognitive dimension emphasizes the evaluation of the leader's competence, reliability, and ability to solve work-related problems. In this context, cognitive trust is expected to function as a key mediating variable between leadership communication and employee proficiency by allowing employees to evaluate the practical impact of leadership on their tasks (Massey et al., 2019; Lee and Mohd Rasdi, 2025). In contrast, affective trust emphasizes the emotional bond formed between leaders and employees through genuine concern, reciprocal interaction, and empathy. This dimension explains the mechanism by which effective leadership communication not only influences job performance, but also encourages positive behavior through the strengthening of interpersonal relationships (Schaubroeck et al., 2011; Massey et al., 2019).

The relationship between trust in leadership and employee proficiency is consistent with Social Exchange Theory (SET). This theory explains that social behaviour as a series of interdependent exchanges in which individuals seek to maximise rewards (e.g., support, recognition, and development opportunities) and minimise costs (e.g., effort, uncertainty, and risk) (Homans, 1958; Blau, 1964). Within organisational contexts, leadership–employee relationships are governed by norms of reciprocity, where trust in leadership becomes a critical mechanism sustaining long-term exchange relationships (Blau, 1964; Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). When employees perceive their leaders as competent, consistent, dependable, and fair, they are more willing to reciprocate through increased effort, learning engagement, and skill development, thereby enhancing employee proficiency. Interpersonal trust enables employees to evaluate the fairness and predictability of leadership actions, reducing uncertainty and encouraging the application and expansion of knowledge and competencies (Shapiro et al., 1992; Rempel et al., 1985). Furthermore, shared values and a sense of identity between leaders and employees strengthen trust, which facilitates knowledge sharing, confidence in decision-making, and continuous capability development.

A study by Spector et al. (2025) involved 140 hospital supervisors who were randomly assigned to either authentic leadership behavior training or a wait-list control group. Data collected from self-report (n = 190 for Time 3 and n = 182 for Time 4) showed that for employees who were new to their supervisors, there was a significant increase in leadership behavior and levels of trust in the supervisor. These findings suggest that trust in leadership plays an important role in improving their competence and skills (employee proficiency), as employees who trust their leaders' abilities, integrity, and support are more likely to accept guidance, apply learned skills, and consistently improve task performance. In other words, trust in leadership is a critical mechanism linking leadership influence with increased employee skills, competence, and productivity. Next, an online survey questionnaire was distributed to 496 bank employees from both the private and public sectors in Karnataka, India, with 453 complete responses received (Rai and Koodamara, 2025). The estimated time to complete the questionnaire was 10-12 min. Respondents comprised a variety of management positions, including Branch Managers, Deputy Branch Managers, Sales Managers, Assistant Managers, Probationary Officers, Management Trainees, and Deputy Sales Managers. The findings of the study indicate that there is a significant relationship between trust in leaders and normative commitment, which reflects employees' willingness to perform their responsibilities and duties with dedication. This relationship indicates that employees who trust their leaders tend to have higher motivation, discipline, and commitment to improve their professional competence and skills (employee proficiency). In other words, trust in leadership serves as a key catalyst that enables employees to obtain the autonomy, guidance, and support needed to improve performance, efficiency, and task mastery. Therefore, the study hypotheses are as follows:

- H_3: Trust in leadership has a positive effect on employee proficiency.

2.3. Leadership Communication, Trust in Leadership and Employee Proficiency

Trust in leadership as a mediating variable in the relationship between leadership communication and employee proficiency is in line with Leader–Member Exchange (LMX). This theory explains interpersonal relationships and the process of social exchange that occurs between leaders and subordinates in a work environment, which is typically formed through informal and ongoing understanding (Wayne et al., 2002). LMX refers to the overall quality of the relationship between leaders and followers, which is formed through a series of repeated interactions and exchanges involving mutual trust, support, and commitment (Dienesch and Liden, 1986; Buengeler et al., 2020). In line with Social Exchange Theory, LMX relationships develop when both parties present valuable resources, thus creating reciprocal obligations based on norms of fairness and trust (Blau, 1964). In this context, leadership communication plays a crucial role as a key mechanism that shapes and maintains the quality of LMX. Through clear, open, and ethical communication, leaders provide support, role expectations, and feedback that enable followers to understand their responsibilities and build trust in the leader's fairness and trustworthiness (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Bauer and Green (1996) explain that LMX relationships develop through three stages: role taking, role making, and mutual understanding formation. Throughout this process, consistent and transparent communication allows leaders to assess followers' potential, motivation, and capabilities, while followers develop trust in the leader's intentions and support. High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by high levels of trust, loyalty, and meaningful two-way interactions, which in turn motivate employees to reciprocate with greater effort, continuous learning, and improved performance. Authentic leaders, in particular, are able to develop high-quality LMX through long-term communication based on sincerity, fairness, and transparency, thus fostering followers' trust and commitment. The trust that results from LMX relationships allows employees to gain the autonomy, guidance, and support needed to improve their skills, competencies, and decision-making abilities, which ultimately contributes to increased employee proficiency. When leaders trust employees and provide encouragement and career investment, employees respond by increasing their task mastery and professional capabilities (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

A study by Tabak and Hendy (2016) examined the role of trust as a mediator in the relationship between organizational support including perceived leader communication and work engagement. In a sample of 318 local government employees, the study findings provide empirical support, specifically, that trust in leadership is proven to be closely related to work engagement, and functions as a partial mediator in the relationship between organizational work engagement and perceived organizational support with individual work engagement. These findings have important implications for understanding the mechanism of how leadership communication can influence employee proficiency through trust in leadership. In other words, clear, transparent, and supportive leader communication builds trust in leadership, which in turn increases employee motivation, skills, and competence in performing their jobs. Therefore, trust in leadership plays a critical mediator in the relationship between leadership communication and improved employee performance and skills. Furthermore, study by Zhu et al. (2013), examines the role of cognitive and affective trust as mediators in the relationship between followers' perceptions of transformational leadership behavior and their performance. Based on data obtained from 318 supervisor–subordinate pairs in a manufacturing organization in mainland China, analysis using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) showed that affective trust functions as a full mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership and followers' performance. The performance outcomes examined include affective organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and job performance. The findings suggest that when followers develop emotional connections and deep trust in their leaders, they are more likely to demonstrate commitment, proactive behavior, and high job performance. Therefore, the study hypotheses are as follows:

- H_4: Trust in leadership as a mediating in relationship between leadership communication and employee proficiency.

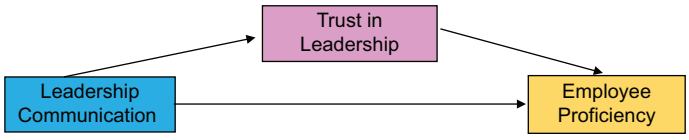
This study was developed based on relevant empirical evidence and theory to build a research framework. Figure 1 shows conceptual framework that leader communication serves as the independent variable, trust in leadership as the mediating variable, and employee proficiency as the dependent variable.

3. METHODS

3.1. Instrument

The survey questionnaire consisted of three main sections. Section A, leadership communication. Section B trust in leadership and Section C employee proficiency. The six item of leadership communication develop by Schneider (2018) and McAllister (1995). Leadership communication refers to the ability of leaders to effectively exchange messages through verbal, non-verbal, and symbolic interactions to build shared understanding, foster trust, and guide employee behavior and performance (Rosengren, 2000; Schneider et al., 2015). Next, the six item of trust in leadership develop by Lee and Mohd Rasdi (2025). Trust in leadership refers to the degree to which employees have confidence in the integrity, competence, and benevolence of their leaders or organization, which influences their attitudes and work behaviors (Lee and Mohd Rasdi, 2025). The five of employee proficiency develop by Shrivastava et al. (2026). Employee proficiency refers to employees' demonstrated level of competence and efficiency in executing work-related duties in accordance with organizational standards (Shrivastava et al., 2026). All 17 items were answered using a seven-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "Strongly Disagree/Dissatisfied" (1) to "Strongly Agree/Satisfied" (7). The seven-point scale was chosen because it provides a sufficient range of responses to capture the intensity of respondents' opinions or perceptions, as well as increasing the

Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework



reliability and accuracy of measuring psychological constructs (Hair et al., 2017).

3.2. Sample Size Determination and Data Collection

The determination of an appropriate sample size constituted an essential aspect of the research design for this cross-sectional study. The minimum required sample was estimated using the Raosoft Sample Size Calculator. Given a total employee population of approximately 860, the analysis indicated that a minimum of 266 respondents was necessary to achieve adequate statistical power and precision. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to obtain respondents' demographic information and to measure leadership communication, employee proficiency and trust in leadership. Measurement items were retained for analysis only if they satisfied the recommended outer loading threshold of 0.708 or above, as evaluated using SmartPLS software (Hair et al., 2017).

The unit of analysis consisted of employees currently employed within the organization under study. These individuals were considered appropriate respondents due to their direct exposure to organizational practices, leadership processes, and workplace dynamics, enabling them to provide informed and reliable responses aligned with the study objectives. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure coverage across departments, functional areas, job categories, and hierarchical levels. To enhance the quality and relevance of the data, participation was restricted to employees with a minimum organizational tenure of 5 years, thereby ensuring that respondents possessed sufficient experience and familiarity with the organizational context.

A systematic purposive sampling procedure was employed. Clear inclusion criteria were first established, with organizational tenure serving as the primary eligibility requirement. Subsequently, in collaboration with the Human Resources department, eligible employees were identified using internal organizational records. This systematic identification process helped minimize selection errors and enhanced the accuracy of respondent selection. To further strengthen sample representativeness, participants were drawn from diverse organizational units and roles, while demographic diversity (e.g., gender, age, and job function) was also considered. Eligible employees were formally invited to participate in the survey.

The reliance on purposive sampling was necessitated by organizational constraints, as access to a complete employee sampling frame was restricted due to confidentiality and corporate sensitivity considerations. These limitations precluded the use of probability-based sampling techniques. Data collection was facilitated through printed questionnaires distributed and collected by designated Human Resources officers. This coordinated approach ensured orderly distribution and retrieval of questionnaires. All distributed questionnaires were completed and returned. Participation was voluntary, with no incentives or managerial pressure imposed, thereby adhering strictly to established ethical research principles.

The study adopted a cross-sectional design that integrated a comprehensive literature review, a pilot study, and a questionnaire survey to collect quantitative data. This approach supported systematic data collection while enhancing data accuracy, relevance, and quality, and reducing potential sources of bias. Consistent with the recommendations of Sekaran and Bougie (2016) and Brislin (1980), the questionnaire was developed based on established literature and subjected to a rigorous translation process. The instrument was translated into Malay and back-translated into English by bilingual academic experts in human resource management to ensure semantic equivalence and conceptual consistency. This back-translation procedure improved clarity, minimized misinterpretation, and enhanced the validity of responses across linguistically diverse participants.

3.3. Analysis of Tools and Techniques

The analysis commenced with preliminary data screening using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This initial stage was essential to assess data quality and suitability for further statistical analysis (Hair et al., 2017). Data screening procedures included the examination of missing values and the identification of potential outliers to reduce the influence of extreme or anomalous observations. These steps ensured that the dataset satisfied the underlying assumptions required for subsequent multivariate analysis and provided a sound basis for advanced modelling.

In the second stage, the data were analyzed using SmartPLS to test the proposed research model through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This technique allows for the simultaneous assessment of measurement and structural models and enables the estimation of both direct and indirect relationships among latent constructs. PLS-SEM is particularly appropriate for studies involving complex model structures, mediation effects, relatively small sample sizes, and data that may deviate from multivariate normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2017).

Although SPSS is well suited for descriptive statistics and preliminary diagnostics, it has limited capacity for estimating structural relationships among latent variables. In contrast, SmartPLS offers a robust framework for evaluating complex theoretical models; however, it requires thorough validation of the measurement model. Accordingly, construct reliability and validity were assessed using standard criteria, including outer loadings, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, and average variance extracted (AVE).

The combined use of SPSS and SmartPLS provided a systematic and complementary analytical approach. Preliminary data screening ensured data integrity, while PLS-SEM enabled rigorous model evaluation and hypothesis testing. This integrated strategy strengthened the robustness of the findings, enhanced analytical precision, and reduced the likelihood of bias or statistical error in the interpretation of results.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As shown Table 1, the majority of respondents were aged 40-45 years (31.2%), indicating that most participants were in the mid-career stage. In terms of gender, female respondents constituted the largest proportion of the sample (72.5%), compared to male

Table 1: Sample characteristics (n=266)

Profile	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	22-27 years	45	16.9
	28-33 years	52	19.5
	34-39 years	54	20.3
	40-45 years	83	31.2
	Above 46 years	32	12
Gender	Male	73	27.4
	Female	193	72.5
Marital status	Single	72	27.1
	Married	190	71.4
	Others	4	1.5
Services Status	Temporary/Part-time	7	2.63
	Contract	45	17.0
	Permanent	213	80.4
	Others	1	0.3
Salary	RM1000-RM1999	51	19.17
	RM2000-RM2999	87	32.7
	RM3000-RM3999	77	28.9
	RM4000-RM4999	26	9.8
	RM5000-RM6999	17	6.4
	RM7000 above	8	3.0

respondents (27.4%). With regard to marital status, the sample was predominantly married (71.4%), reflecting a stable family background among most respondents. In terms of employment status, permanent employees represented the majority of the respondents (80.4%), suggesting that most participants held stable and long-term positions within the organization. Concerning monthly income, the largest proportion of respondents earned between RM2,000 to RM2,999 (32.7%).

Table 2 shows all indicators had outer loadings that exceeded the suggested level of 0.708, showing substantial relationships between the items and their respective constructs. Furthermore, the AVE values for leadership communication (0.830), trust in leadership (0.822) and employee proficiency (0.897), meaning that all support the measuring model's convergent validity (Hair et al., 2017). The composite reliability scores for all constructs are above 0.80, indicating strong internal consistency. Overall, these findings show that the measuring items reliably and consistently capture their intended constructs, laying a solid platform for future structural model research. Furthermore, the study found that all contructs had satisfactory CR values: leadership communication (0.960), trust in leadership (0.957) and employee proficiency (0.971). These figures not only exceed the minimum acceptable level of 0.70, but also demonstrate unusually excellent internal consistency.

Table 3 demonstrates that all constructs in the model match both the HTMT.85 requirements. Each concept met both the criterion of HTMT <0.85 (Clark and Watson, 1995; Kline, 2011), showing that the model had excellent discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015).

Table 4 summarises the variance in inflation factor (VIF) values and descriptive data for all examined constructs. The mean scores range from 4.454 to 5.245, indicating high to very high levels of leadership communication, trust in leadership and employee proficiency. In addition, VIF analysis was performed to determine

Table 2: Convergent validity analysis

Constructs/ Items	Outer loading	Composite reliability (CR)	Average variance extracted (AVE)	Cronbach's alpha
Leadership communication				
LPCN1	0.860	0.960	0.830	0.959
LPCN2	0.935			
LPCN3	0.932			
LPCN4	0.937			
LPCN5	0.918			
LPCN6	0.881			
Trust in leadership				
TTLP1	0.896	0.957	0.822	0.957
TTLP2	0.889			
TTLP3	0.928			
TTLP4	0.920			
TTLP5	0.890			
TTLP6	0.916			
Employee proficiency				
EEPY1	0.949	0.971	0.897	0.971
EEPY2	0.951			
EEPY3	0.949			
EEPY4	0.953			
EEPY5	0.933			

All values exceed threshold criteria (Loading >0.708, CR>0.8, AVE>0.5)

Table 3: Discriminant validity using HTMT analysis

Constructs	Leadership communication	Trust in leadership
Leadership communication		
Trust in leadership	0.853	
Employee proficiency	0.852	0.778

the presence of multicollinearity among the constructs in the model. All VIF values were less than the recommended cutoff value of 5.0, indicating that multicollinearity is not an issue and does not interfere with model parameter estimation (Hair et al., 2017). These findings corroborate the model's robustness and show that each construct contributes individually to explaining the variability among the variables.

According to Cohen (1992) standards, R^2 values of 0.26, 0.13, and 0.02 indicate substantial, moderate, and weak explanatory power, respectively. In this analysis, trust in leadership had a R^2 value of 0.701, suggesting substantial explanatory strength. Employee proficiency had a R^2 value of 0.675, indicating substantial predictive accuracy. Next, leadership communication demonstrates a large effect on trust in leadership ($f^2 = 0.351$), indicating that leadership communication is a substantial predictor of employees' trust levels. In addition, leadership communication exerts large effect on employee proficiency ($f^2 = .0302$), highlighting its dominant role in enhancing employee proficiency. On the other hand, employee proficiency, shows a small effect on trust in leadership ($f^2 = 0.050$), suggesting that while employee proficiency contributes to trust, its influence is relatively limited compared to leadership communication. Overall, the findings underscore the critical importance of leadership communication in shaping both trust in leadership and employee proficiency within the organizational context.

The bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples and a one-tailed significance test was employed to examine the statistical significance of the structural model parameters, as reported in Table 5. The direct effects analysis indicates that leadership communication has a positive and statistically significant effect on employee proficiency ($\beta = 0.639$, $t = 6.318$, $P < 0.000$), H1 supported. This finding suggests that effective leadership communication plays a crucial role in employee proficiency. In addition, leadership communication demonstrates a strong and statistically significant positive effect on trust in leadership ($\beta = 0.828$, $t = 4.503$, $P < 0.000$), H2 supported. This result highlights leadership communication as a key determinant in enhancing trust in leadership within the organization. Furthermore, the results show that trust in leadership has a positive and statistically significant effect on employee proficiency ($\beta = 0.221$, $t = 2.183$, $P = 0.022$), H3 supported. Overall, all hypothesized direct relationships in the structural model are supported, confirming the robustness of the proposed model and underscoring the central role of leadership communication in influencing both trust in leadership and employee proficiency.

Table 6 show the indirect effects analysis indicates that trust in leadership serves as a mediator in the relationship between leadership communication and employee proficiency. Specifically, the results reveal that leadership communication has a positive and statistically significant indirect effect on trust in leadership through employee proficiency ($\beta = 0.183$, $t = 2.109$, $P = 0.035$), H4 supported. This finding suggests that leadership communication enhances employee proficiency, which in turn contributes to higher levels of trust in leadership. The significant indirect effect confirms trust in leadership plays a meaningful mediating role in transmitting the influence of leadership communication to employee proficiency. Overall, the mediation results highlight the importance of trust in leadership as a key mechanism through which effective leadership communication fosters trust within the organization.

This study examines the relationship between leadership communication, trust in leadership, and employee proficiency in the context of the public sector. In line with the study hypothesis, the empirical findings show that trust in leadership functions as a significant mediating variable in the relationship between leadership communication and employee proficiency. These findings indicate that leadership communication alone is not sufficient to improve employee competence if it is not translated into building trust in the leader. Therefore, trust in leadership emerges as a critical psychological and social mechanism that allows leaders' messages, instructions, and support to be fully utilized by employees in improving their task mastery and professional skills. From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the arguments of Social Exchange Theory and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory which assert that high-quality work relationships are built through interactions based on trust and reciprocity. In the context of the public sector characterized by hierarchical structures and formal procedures, clear, consistent, and transparent leadership communication plays a role in shaping perceptions of leaders' trustworthiness, fairness, and competence. These perceptions in turn increase employees' willingness to engage actively in learning, knowledge sharing, and complex task execution, thus increasing employee proficiency. The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies by Tabak and Hendy (2016) and Zhu et al. (2013), which emphasized the role of trust in leadership as an important mediating variable in the relationship between leadership communication and employee proficiency. This provides a new perspective by suggesting that the effectiveness of leadership communication lies not merely in the delivery of information or instructions, but also in its capacity to build trust, enabling employees to translate effective communication into greater work efficiency and improved performance. In practical terms, these findings suggest that public sector organizations need to give strategic emphasis to the development of leaders' communication competencies as part of their trust-building agenda. Leadership training programs

Table 4: VIF and descriptive constructs analysis

Constructs	VIF values			Mean	SD*
	Leadership communication	Trust in leadership	Employee proficiency		
Leadership communication		3.081	1.000	4.670	0.335
Trust in leadership				5.245	0.713
Employee proficiency		3.081		4.454	0.512

VIF values <5.0 indicate no serious collinearity issues, SD: Standard deviation

Table 5: Direct effects analysis

Construct	Original sample (O)	Standard deviation	T Statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P-values	Decision
H_1: Leadership Communication -> Employee Proficiency	0.639	0.630	6.318	0.000	Supported
H_2: Leadership Communication -> Trust in Leadership	0.828	0.034	4.503	0.000	Supported
H_3: Trust in Leadership ->Employee Proficiency	0.221	0.101	2.183	0.022	Supported

Table 6: Indirect effects analysis

Construct	Original sample (O)	Standard deviation	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P-values	Decision
H_4: Leadership Communication -> Trust in Leadership -> Employee Proficiency	0.183	0.087	2.109	0.035	Supported

that emphasize two-way communication, empathy, transparency, and consistency have the potential to increase employee trust, thereby strengthening the efficiency and professionalism of the public service. In an increasingly complex and dynamic work environment, the ability of leaders to communicate effectively and build trust is a determining factor in the success of public sector human capital development.

5. CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study makes several important theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions to the leadership development and human resource literature. First, this study extends the application of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory by demonstrating that leadership communication is a critical antecedent of trust in leadership and employee proficiency. While previous research has focused primarily on the direct influence of transformational leadership on employee attitudes and performance, these findings provide empirical evidence that communication quality represents a fundamental exchange mechanism through which leaders establish productive relationships with employees. The significant positive relationship between leadership communication and employee proficiency ($\beta = 0.639$, $P < 0.000$) suggests that effective communication functions not only as an information-sharing process but also as a strategic leadership behavior that facilitates employee skill development, increased efficiency, and task mastery.

Second, this study contributes to the growing trust literature by confirming that leadership communication significantly predicts trust in leadership ($\beta = 0.828$, $P < 0.000$). These findings reinforce the central assumption of LMX Theory that high-quality leader-member relationships are built on frequent, transparent, and supportive interactions. More importantly, the very strong effect size suggests that communication effectiveness is a dominant factor in shaping employees' perceptions of leader credibility, integrity, and trustworthiness. Thus, this study advances current understanding by placing leadership communication as a fundamental mechanism for trust formation in organizational environments.

Third, this study enriches Social Exchange Theory (SET) by showing that trust in leadership significantly influences employee proficiency ($\beta = 0.221$, $P < 0.022$). The findings indicate that employees who trust their leaders are more willing to reciprocate through greater commitment to learning, skill acquisition, and improved job performance. This supports SET's proposition that positive social exchanges between leaders and employees result in reciprocal behaviors that benefit individuals and organizations. Therefore, trust emerges as a critical psychological resource that transforms leadership influence into significant employee proficiency.

A further theoretical contribution show that mediating role of trust in leadership in the relationship between leadership communication and employee proficiency ($\beta = 0.183$, $t = 2.109$, $P = 0.035$). The mediation findings provide deeper insights into the underlying mechanisms by which leadership communication influences employee outcomes. Leadership communication also indirectly improves employee efficacy by fostering trust in leadership. Specifically, it explains why communication practices are effective: they foster trust, which in turn motivates employees to develop their capabilities and perform more effectively. Therefore, these findings provide empirical support for integrating LMX Theory and Social Exchange Theory into a single explanatory framework.

In terms of methodological robustness, the measurement model has achieved analytical standards of validity and reliability. From a practical perspective, these findings highlight the strategic importance of communication competence among organizational leaders. Organizations should invest in leadership development programs that emphasize communication clarity, transparency, active listening, constructive feedback, and open dialogue. Such interventions can strengthen employee trust in leadership and, in turn, improve workforce competence. Human resource practitioners should also recognize that technical training alone may not be sufficient to improve employee competence if the trusting relationship between leaders and employees remains weak.

Furthermore, organizations seeking sustainable performance improvements should incorporate trust-building initiatives into their leadership development strategies. Leaders who consistently communicate organizational goals, provide timely feedback, and demonstrate concern for employee well-being are more likely to establish trusting relationships that encourage employees to engage in continuous learning and professional development. This is particularly relevant in contemporary organizational environments characterized by rapid technological change, uncertainty, and increasing demands for workforce adaptability.

Finally, this study offers policy implications for public and private sector organizations seeking to strengthen human capital development. Organizational policymakers and decision makers should view leadership communication not simply as a management competency but as a strategic organizational capability that contributes directly and indirectly to employee competency through the trust-building process. By fostering a communication-rich, trust-based work environment, organizations can create conditions that support continuous competency development, improved employee performance, and long-term organizational sustainability.

6. CONCLUSION, LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides strong empirical evidence that leadership communication plays a strategic role in improving employee proficiency in the public sector, particularly through the intermediary mechanism of trust in leadership. In line with the study hypothesis, the findings show that the ability of leaders to communicate clearly, consistently and meaningfully not only directly influences employee proficiency, but also builds trust that in turn strengthens the ability of employees to perform tasks more effectively. Conceptually, this study extends the existing literature

by emphasizing that trust in leadership is not just a impact of effective leadership communication but is a core construct that explains how leadership communication translates into increased employee proficiency. In a public sector context characterized by bureaucratic structures, accountability pressures and a shift towards more flexible work arrangements, trust in leaders is an essential prerequisite for ensuring that employees remain competent, responsive and resilient. From a practical perspective, these findings emphasize the need for public sector organizations to invest in developing leadership communication capabilities that focus on building trust, including transparency, fairness, reliability and sensitivity to employee needs. Without the element of trust, communication initiatives have the potential to become mechanical and less effective in driving employee performance. Overall, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of leadership communication in shaping the behavioral outcomes and competence of public sector employees. By placing trust in leadership as the key mediator, this study provides a significant theoretical and empirical foundation for the development of more effective, relevant and sustainable communication leadership models in the face of the increasingly complex and dynamic landscape of public organizations.

Although this study provides a meaningful empirical contribution to the understanding of the relationship between leadership communication, trust in leadership, and employee proficiency in the public sector, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the study findings. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability of this study to make strong causal inferences. The relationships identified reflect associations at a single point in time and do not allow for a clear determination of the direction of cause and effect. Therefore, it remains unclear whether leadership communication directly drives increased employee proficiency through trust building, or whether more proficient employees tend to evaluate communication and leadership more positively. Second, this study model focuses on a limited set of variables and does not account for other organizational and psychological factors that could potentially influence the relationship under study. Variables such as perceived organizational support, psychological empowerment, learning orientation, or organizational justice climate may function as significant mediators or moderators, and the absence of these variables may limit a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms linking leadership communication to employee proficiency. Third, although the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) approach via SmartPLS is suitable for analyzing complex models and medium-sized samples, this method does not fully capture the influence of contextual factors and broader organizational structures. Aspects such as organizational culture, bureaucratic constraints specific to the public sector, and other leadership style variations that exist in government organizations are not explicitly modeled, which may affect the effectiveness of leadership communication and the formation of employee trust.

Finally, the limited sample size and scope of 266 public sector employees limit the generalizability of the study findings. Thus, these findings should be interpreted with caution and may not be directly applicable to the private sector, multinational organizations, or different cultural contexts without further empirical validation. Accordingly, future research is recommended to use longitudinal or experimental designs to strengthen causal inferences and trace changes in employee trust and competence over time. Further studies should also involve more diverse samples spanning the private sector, industries, and multinational organizations, as well as taking into account demographic and organizational characteristics. In addition, future research should examine specific dimensions of leadership communication, such as feedback quality, motivational strategies, emotional support, and skill development, to further elucidate how targeted leadership communication practices can foster employee proficiency. Incorporating additional mediating and moderating variables, including psychological empowerment, learning orientation, and organizational culture, also has the potential to enrich understanding of the complex mechanisms linking leadership communication to employee performance and inform the development of more effective leadership interventions.

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