

THE INFLUENCE OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP STYLE ON THE PERFORMANCE OF CONTENT DEVELOPMENT TEAMS AT THE DIGITAL EDUCATION STARTUP SANSGEN

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Abstract

This study aims to: (a) describe the transformational leadership style, work motivation, and employee performance; (b) examine the influence of transformational leadership on employee motivation; (c) analyze the effect of work motivation on employee performance; and (d) assess the indirect effect of transformational leadership on employee performance through work motivation. The research was conducted at the digital education startup Sansgen, involving all 74 employees using a total sampling technique. Data were analyzed using path analysis. The findings indicate that transformational leadership significantly influences work motivation ($\beta = 0.587$), and also has a direct effect on employee performance ($\beta = 0.597$). Furthermore, work motivation positively affects employee performance ($\beta = 0.357$), and acts as a mediating variable in the relationship between transformational leadership and performance, with an indirect effect of 0.201. These results suggest that transformational leadership plays a critical role in improving performance, both directly and indirectly, by enhancing employee motivation.

Keywords : *Transformational Leadership, Work Motivation, Employee Performance, Path Analysis, Sansgen, Startup, Digital Education*

1. INTRODUCTION

Employees are a vital asset to any organization, particularly in startup environments where innovation and adaptability are essential for survival and growth. In the case of Sansgen, a digital literacy platform that targets Gen Z and Millennials, employee performance plays a central role in content creation, technological adaptation, and delivering value to users. High-performing employees are key to achieving strategic goals. One of the most influential factors that drives such performance is leadership.

Effective leadership fosters a collaborative and harmonious work environment, enabling stronger teamwork and alignment with organizational objectives. Transformational leadership, in particular, has gained recognition as a leadership style that motivates employees beyond transactional exchanges by inspiring a shared vision, fostering trust, and encouraging individual growth (Nguyen & Mahmood, 2023). Leaders with transformational traits actively involve their team members in the change process, fostering motivation and a proactive organizational culture.

This leadership model is especially important in startups where constant adaptation is necessary to meet changing user needs and competitive pressures. Transformational leaders not only guide but also serve as role models who initiate and sustain behavioral change within the organization (Alqaralleh et al., 2022). By promoting psychological safety, a sense of purpose,

and innovation, these leaders drive performance and engagement in a way that transactional leaders may not achieve (Zhou, Li, & Wang, 2024).

Recent studies emphasize that transformational leadership has a significant and positive impact on work motivation, which in turn mediates employee performance outcomes (Rahman et al., 2023). In the context of Sansgen, such leadership is essential to encouraging commitment from creative teams, social media managers, and tech developers, particularly as the organization navigates challenges such as content scalability, AI disruption, and user engagement.

In addition to transformational leadership, motivation plays a critical role in improving employee performance. Motivation acts as an internal drive that directs behavior and encourages employees to accomplish tasks efficiently. According to recent studies, employee motivation is significantly linked to job satisfaction, adaptability, and performance outcomes, particularly in digital and creative work environments (Park & Kim, 2023). Therefore, startups like Sansgen must prioritize motivation-enhancing strategies to ensure team engagement and task completion.

One of the most widely referenced frameworks in understanding employee motivation is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This theory categorizes human needs into five ascending levels: physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization. According to Maslow, individuals must satisfy lower-level needs before progressing to higher levels of motivation (Rahim & Awan, 2022). In the context of digital startups, addressing these needs translates into providing both basic support (such as flexible work and stability) and opportunities for growth and recognition, which in turn enhances employee performance.

The relevance of Maslow's theory remains strong in explaining why employees are driven to perform, particularly when their intrinsic and extrinsic needs are met. High motivation, when supported by inspirational leadership, can result in improved individual and team performance (Widyastuti et al., 2023). Based on this theoretical background, the current study is focused on examining the influence of transformational leadership and work motivation on employee performance within the startup environment of Sansgen. The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify and describe the transformational leadership style, work motivation, and employee performance within the startup company Sansgen.
2. To examine and analyze the influence of transformational leadership on employee work motivation at Sansgen.
3. To investigate and analyze the effect of work motivation on employee performance at Sansgen.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is a leadership approach that encourages followers to transcend their self-interest and work collectively toward the achievement of shared organizational goals. This leadership style is particularly effective in promoting innovation, motivation, and employee development. Transformational leaders are recognized for their ability to inspire, influence, and empower their teams by creating a strong sense of purpose and direction (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022).

Recent studies highlight that key components of transformational leadership include articulating a compelling vision, fostering trust, acting with optimism, modeling exemplary behavior, and empowering employees to take ownership of their tasks (Almutairi & Elrehail, 2023). Transformational leaders also utilize symbolic actions to reinforce organizational values and actively encourage creativity and autonomy among team members, particularly in fast-paced environments such as startups (Rahman et al., 2024).

The ERG Theory of Motivation

Another notable theory of motivation is the ERG theory proposed by Clayton Alderfer. While Alderfer shared the foundational ideas of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, he revised and simplified the structure into three core categories: Existence, Relatedness, and Growth (ERG). This model reinterprets Maslow's five-level hierarchy by grouping human needs into fewer and broader dimensions (Ali & Anwar, 2023).

The first category, Existence needs, encompasses the basic material and physiological requirements necessary for survival, such as food, water, salary, and workplace safety. The second category, Relatedness needs, refers to interpersonal relationships and the desire for social interaction and recognition within a working environment. Lastly, Growth needs involve the intrinsic desire for personal development, learning, and realizing one's potential through challenging and meaningful work (Puspitasari & Suharto, 2022).

Alderfer emphasized that unlike Maslow's rigid hierarchy, individuals can pursue different needs simultaneously. Moreover, frustration in achieving higher-level needs may lead to a regression to lower-level needs a concept known as the frustration-regression principle. This dynamic nature makes the ERG theory particularly relevant to understanding motivation in flexible and fast-paced organizational settings such as startups.

In essence, Existence needs in the ERG model align with Maslow's physiological and safety needs, Relatedness needs correspond to social and belongingness needs, and Growth needs match esteem and self-actualization levels (Wijayanti et al., 2024). This framework provides a practical approach for organizations like Sansgen to design motivation strategies that address both the personal and professional aspirations of their employees.

Employee Performance

Employee performance refers to the measurable output of individuals in terms of both quality and quantity, as aligned with their assigned responsibilities. Performance serves as a critical indicator of how effectively employees fulfill their job roles and contribute to organizational goals. In the context of startups such as Sansgen, where agility and creativity are essential, performance measurement becomes vital in assessing the success of both individual and team contributions (Pratama & Syahrul, 2023). According to contemporary performance measurement frameworks, employee performance can be evaluated through several key dimensions. These include:

1. Quality, which assesses the degree to which the outcomes of tasks meet predefined standards or expectations, indicating precision and thoroughness.
2. Quantity, referring to the volume of output produced within a specific timeframe, such as the number of projects completed, content units generated, or user interactions handled.

3. Timeliness, which measures how efficiently tasks are completed within designated timeframes while coordinating effectively with other operational deadlines.
4. Cost-effectiveness, evaluating how efficiently organizational resources (including financial, human, and technological) are utilized to achieve maximum results or to minimize losses.
5. Need for supervision, which examines the level of independence demonstrated by employees in executing tasks without requiring constant oversight from supervisors.
6. Interpersonal impact, reflecting the employee's ability to maintain positive relationships, uphold team morale, and foster collaboration among colleagues (Hartanto, Sari, & Nuryanti, 2022).

3. HYPOTHESIS

Based on the theoretical framework and prior discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed in this study:

- H₁** : Transformational leadership is hypothesized to have a significant influence on employee work motivation.
- H₂** : Transformational leadership is hypothesized to have a significant influence on employee performance.
- H₃** : Work motivation is hypothesized to have a significant influence on employee performance.

4. RESEARCH METHODS

This study applies an explanatory research design that aims to investigate causal relationships between variables through hypothesis testing. Explanatory research is commonly used to explore how and why certain variables influence others, making it suitable for understanding organizational dynamics such as leadership, motivation, and performance (Siregar and Pratomo, 2023). The primary objective is to assess both the direct and mediated effects of transformational leadership and work motivation on employee performance at Sansgen, a digital startup focused on literacy enhancement for Generation Z and Millennials.

The research population includes all 74 operational employees currently working at Sansgen. Given the relatively small size of the population, the study uses a census or total sampling method. This technique involves selecting the entire population as the research sample, which ensures comprehensive data collection and minimizes sampling error (Wulandari and Yusuf, 2022).

Descriptive statistics are used to analyze the characteristics of the collected data. This includes presenting the data through frequencies, percentages, and mean scores to summarize the distribution of responses. Descriptive analysis in this context is not intended to draw conclusions beyond the observed sample, but rather to provide an accurate representation of the data collected (Ningsih and Kurniawan, 2023).

To evaluate the relationships between variables and to test the hypotheses, the study employs path analysis as an inferential statistical technique. Path analysis allows researchers to examine the structural relationships between independent and dependent variables, identifying both direct and indirect effects (Rahman and Fadhil, 2023). A direct effect refers to the influence of one variable on another without involving additional variables, while an

indirect effect occurs when the influence is transmitted through an intermediate variable such as work motivation.

This approach is especially relevant in startup environments like Sansgen, where various organizational and psychological factors interact to shape performance outcomes. Path analysis provides a deeper understanding of how leadership practices and internal motivation mechanisms influence employee effectiveness in rapidly evolving digital contexts.

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the overall mean values of the transformational leadership variable, most respondents agreed that transformational leadership practices were effectively implemented by the leadership team at Sansgen. For instance, item $X_{1.2}$ scored a mean of 4.04, indicating that employees viewed their leaders as trustworthy and capable of inspiring success. More than half of the respondents agreed (55.3%) and a considerable portion strongly agreed (35.3%) with this statement, reflecting a leadership style that empowers and motivates employees toward goal achievement.

Item $X_{1.4}$, with a mean score of 4.22, also supported this pattern. Employees perceived that their leaders serve as strong role models of loyalty to the organization. Approximately 41.9% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, suggesting that leadership behavior reflects and reinforces organizational commitment among employees. Recent research confirms that leader modeling and value-based behavior significantly influence employee identification and organizational citizenship behavior (Widodo & Sari, 2023).

Leadership's role in motivation is further reinforced by item $X_{1.5}$, which received the highest average score of 4.34. This item suggests that leaders at Sansgen play a key role in encouraging employees to continuously improve their performance. The strong agreement expressed by respondents (48.6% strongly agreed, 39.2% agreed) highlights the importance of inspirational motivation as a dimension of transformational leadership. These findings align with recent studies emphasizing that transformational leadership enhances intrinsic motivation and fosters performance-oriented behavior (Hakim & Fathurrahman, 2023).

Regarding work motivation (Y_1), the grand mean score was 4.26, indicating generally high motivation levels among employees. Items $Y_{1.5}$, $Y_{1.6}$, and $Y_{1.8}$ were among the strongest indicators. $Y_{1.5}$, measuring harmonious coworker relationships, scored 4.39 on average, supporting the idea that a positive social climate enhances employee motivation. Similarly, $Y_{1.6}$, which reflects leader-subordinate relationships, scored 4.45. A strong, respectful relationship with supervisors was found to be a key driver of motivation, consistent with recent evidence highlighting relational support as a moderator of job enthusiasm (Setiawan et al., 2022).

$Y_{1.8}$, with the highest score of 4.46, reflected the availability of opportunities for skill development. The data suggest that growth and learning opportunities substantially increase employee motivation. This supports research showing that professional development opportunities are among the strongest predictors of sustained engagement and effort in startup environments (Putri & Hidayat, 2024). In summary, the findings demonstrate that transformational leadership at Sansgen strongly contributes to employee motivation through

emotional support, inspiration, and continuous development factors that are critical in high-paced digital organizations.

This finding is further supported by the majority of respondents, with 51.4 percent indicating agreement and 47.3 percent expressing strong agreement. The availability of opportunities for employees to develop their skills significantly contributes to their enthusiasm and energy in performing their tasks. When employees perceive that they are given room for growth and advancement, they tend to be more motivated, engaged, and committed to achieving performance excellence. Recent studies support the idea that motivation serves as a key driver that energizes employees and fosters a sense of joy and purpose at work. Motivation not only stimulates individuals to meet their job responsibilities but also enhances their ability to complete tasks with higher levels of quality and personal satisfaction (Lestari & Santoso, 2022; Nugroho et al., 2023). In startup environments like Sansgen, where agility and innovation are crucial, fostering motivation through growth-oriented initiatives can lead to improved productivity and sustained employee performance (Herlina & Basri, 2024).

The mean score for the employee performance variable (Y_2) was 4.20, indicating that the majority of respondents demonstrated strong performance. This conclusion is supported by item $Y_{2.4}$, which refers to employees' ability to complete their tasks thoroughly. The item received a high average score of 4.35, suggesting that most employees are capable of completing their assignments within the expected time frame. This aligns with performance indicators proposed in recent studies, where timely task completion is considered a key dimension of job performance (Hasanah & Maulida, 2023). In fact, 56.8 percent of respondents agreed and 39.2 percent strongly agreed that they were able to finish their work effectively and on time, reinforcing this finding.

Another indicator supporting strong performance is item $Y_{2.6}$, which assesses employees' ability to exceed standard work expectations. This item yielded a mean score of 4.31, indicating that many respondents believe they consistently produce work that goes beyond minimum company standards. Research emphasizes that exceeding performance benchmarks is a reflection of high-quality output and a key marker of superior employee performance (Ramli & Wulandari, 2022). This is affirmed by the data, in which 50 percent of respondents agreed and 40.5 percent strongly agreed with the statement, suggesting that exceeding targets is a common behavior among Sansgen employees.

Furthermore, item $Y_{2.11}$, which assesses the ability to utilize technology effectively in the workplace, also received a high mean score of 4.43. This result highlights the employees' capacity to leverage digital tools to optimize their productivity. Efficient use of technology is increasingly viewed as a vital factor in high-performing organizations, particularly in digital startups (Hartono & Yusran, 2024). A majority of respondents agreed (56.8%) or strongly agreed (43.2%) with the statement, suggesting that technological competence contributes significantly to overall performance. As digital tools streamline processes and reduce manual work, employees who can maximize technology tend to complete tasks more efficiently and with greater accuracy. Taken together, the results suggest that Sansgen employees not only meet but frequently exceed performance expectations. Their ability to complete tasks on time, surpass standards, and utilize technology effectively are strong indicators of a productive and high-performing workforce.

The Effect of Transformational Leadership (X_1) on Work Motivation (Y_1)

To examine the relationship between transformational leadership and employee work motivation, a path analysis was conducted. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Sub-Structure 1 Results: X_1 on Y_1

Variable	Standardized Coefficients	t value	Sig.	Description
Transformational Leadership Style (X_1)	0.587	6.158	0.000	Significant
$R^2 : 0.345$				

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics V.30, 2025

Note: The endogenous variable is work motivation (Y_1).

The results of the path analysis indicate that transformational leadership (X_1) has a direct effect of 0.587, or 58.7 percent, on work motivation. This suggests that for every 1 percent increase in the implementation of transformational leadership practices, employee motivation increases by approximately 58.7 percent. The magnitude of this relationship demonstrates that the more effectively transformational leadership is applied at Sansgen, the higher the level of employee motivation.

This finding is supported by the descriptive mean of the transformational leadership variable, which was 4.04. This score reflects the overall agreement among employees that their leaders consistently demonstrate transformational behaviors. Respondents believe that Sansgen's leadership is trustworthy, admirable, and capable of inspiring loyalty, encouraging creativity, providing recognition, and serving as role models. Leaders are also perceived as being attentive to employee needs, fostering a supportive environment, and regularly sharing visionary ideas to guide task completion.

These behaviors are fundamental to the essence of transformational leadership and directly contribute to building employee confidence and commitment. Recent literature supports the notion that transformational leadership enhances intrinsic motivation by empowering individuals, recognizing their contributions, and reinforcing a sense of purpose at work (Prasetyo & Kartika, 2022). Similar results were found by Ardiansyah and Maulana (2023), who concluded that transformational leaders play a pivotal role in elevating motivation among employees in startup and innovation-driven environments. This evidence echoes the perspective of Bass, as cited in Yukl (2010), who emphasized that transformational leaders are more effective than transactional ones in motivating employees to exceed expectations and strengthen their belief in their capabilities. Thus, the strong correlation between transformational leadership and work motivation highlights the importance of leadership style in shaping employee behavior and organizational outcomes, especially in creative and dynamic settings like Sansgen.

The Influence of Transformational Leadership (X_1) and Work Motivation (Y_1) on Employee Performance (Y_2)

Table 2. Summary of Sub-Structure 2 Results: X_1 and Y_1 on Y_2

Variable	Standardized Coefficients	t value	Sig.	Description
(X_1) Transformational Leadership Style	0.597	7.914	0.000	Significant
(Y_1) Work Motivation	0.357	4.736	0.000	Significant
$R^2 : 0.735$				

Source: Data processed using IBM SPSS Statistics V.30, 2025.

Note: The endogenous variable is employee performance (Y_2).

The Effect of Transformational Leadership (X_1) on Employee Performance (Y_2)

The analysis showed that transformational leadership (X_1) has a direct influence of 0.597, or 59.7 percent, on employee performance (Y_2). This indicates that a 1 percent increase in the application of transformational leadership behaviors is associated with a 59.7 percent increase in employee performance. These results affirm that the more effectively transformational leadership is implemented at Sansgen, the higher the employee performance levels tend to be.

Supporting this conclusion, the descriptive mean score for transformational leadership was 4.04, suggesting that the majority of respondents agreed with the leadership style demonstrated by their supervisors. At the same time, the mean score for employee performance was 4.20, reflecting a generally high level of performance among the workforce. These findings imply that when leaders are capable of influencing, guiding, and motivating employees toward shared goals, employees are more likely to perform their duties with increased effectiveness and dedication.

This positive correlation is in line with recent studies emphasizing that transformational leadership can enhance performance by aligning employees' efforts with the vision and goals of the organization (Yuliana & Astuti, 2023). Leaders who articulate clear goals, provide consistent support, and foster trust can stimulate employees to improve the quality and quantity of their output. Similar findings were reported by Handayani and Rachmawati (2022), who found that transformational leadership had a significant positive impact on employee performance in technology-driven organizations. Their study revealed that performance improves when leaders are able to both inspire confidence and actively involve employees in achieving company objectives.

The Effect of Work Motivation (Y_1) on Employee Performance (Y_2)

The path analysis results show that work motivation (Y_1) has a direct effect of 0.357, or 35.7 percent, on employee performance (Y_2). This indicates that for every 1 percent increase in work motivation, employee performance increases by 35%. This result underscores the importance of psychological motivation in shaping productive work behavior at Sansgen.

The descriptive mean score for the work motivation variable was 4.20, suggesting that employees are generally highly motivated in their roles. The employee performance variable

also recorded the same mean score (4.20), indicating that high levels of motivation are accompanied by correspondingly high levels of performance. These findings reflect a meaningful connection between the level of motivation and the quality of work delivered by employees.

This relationship aligns with the theory proposed by McClelland, who emphasized that achievement motivation has a significant influence on individual performance. Employees driven by internal motivation, especially in growth-oriented environments like Sansgen, are more likely to pursue excellence in their tasks. Recent studies also confirm that intrinsic motivation enhances focus, goal orientation, and persistence, all of which contribute to improved performance (Kurniawan & Ismail, 2022; Adinata & Dewi, 2023). Supporting this perspective, Miswan (2010) highlighted that work motivation has a statistically significant impact on performance. Motivation that stems from personal ambition and is supported by a positive work environment can foster greater job satisfaction and better outcomes. Therefore, the higher the level of motivation, the greater the employee's performance potential.

Total Effects of Transformational Leadership (X_1) and Work Motivation (Y_1) on Employee Performance (Y_2)

The results of the path analysis demonstrate both direct and indirect effects of transformational leadership on employee performance at Sansgen. Transformational leadership exerts a direct effect of 0.587 on employee performance, indicating a strong and positive relationship. In addition, there is an indirect effect of 0.210, mediated by work motivation. This means that part of the influence of transformational leadership on performance is transmitted through increased motivation levels among employees.

However, the magnitude of the indirect effect (0.210) is notably smaller than the direct effect (0.587). This suggests that while motivation contributes to reinforcing the impact of leadership on performance, transformational leadership itself plays a more dominant and immediate role in shaping employee outcomes. These findings support the notion that when transformational leadership is well-practiced characterized by vision-sharing, empowerment, and individualized support it directly improves how employees perform, independent of motivational mediation.

Such results align with recent research indicating that transformational leaders can positively influence performance both directly and through psychological mechanisms such as increased motivation and engagement. However, in some contexts, the leader's direct influence through behavior modeling, feedback, and strategic guidance proves more powerful than motivational intermediaries (Mahendra & Suryani, 2023; Prabowo & Anggraeni, 2022).

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the descriptive and inferential analyses, several key conclusions can be drawn. First, the average score for transformational leadership was 4.04, indicating that employees perceive their leaders at Sansgen as effectively applying transformational leadership practices. Second, the average score for work motivation was 4.26, suggesting that most employees demonstrate a high level of motivation in their roles. Third, the mean score for employee performance was 4.20, which reflects that the majority of employees perform well in their respective tasks. The inferential analysis further confirms these observations.

Transformational leadership has a significant and positive direct effect on work motivation ($\beta = 0.587$) and employee performance ($\beta = 0.597$), while work motivation also significantly affects performance ($\beta = 0.357$). Moreover, transformational leadership indirectly influences employee performance through motivation, with a mediated effect of 0.201. These findings highlight the importance of transformational leadership in fostering motivation and improving employee outcomes in dynamic startup environments like Sansgen. However, 17.4% of the variance in employee performance remains unexplained by the current model, suggesting that future research should consider additional variables such as employee skill levels, which may further clarify the factors contributing to high performance.

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