

The Role of Leadership Style in Fostering Innovation Culture in Dubai Government Organisations

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Abstract: Leadership and Innovation have been two key areas of research over the last decade. Innovation is crucial in organisational survival and growth, and it is a force of change in today's competitive market. To be competitive in the global market, especially in the public sector, organisations must adopt innovative approaches to service delivery, governance and operational efficiency. Innovation is identified as a critical element for the success of an organisation. Effective leadership is essential in driving innovation within organisations, still the role of leadership style to foster innovation and encourage experimentation are still not fully understood. While considerable research has been conducted globally, studies examining the association between leadership style and innovation in the United Arab Emirates, particularly Dubai government organisations, is still rare. Accordingly, this study seeks to address the following research question: How do leadership styles foster a culture of innovation within Dubai government organisations? As a conceptual paper, this study adopts a synthesis approach, drawing on existing regional and global literature to develop a theoretical foundation, identify research gaps, and propose directions for future empirical study. The research aims to shed light on the vital role of leadership style in fostering a culture of innovation in Dubai government organisations, with specific focus on how leadership styles foster a culture that support experimentation, innovation, and continuous improvement. The research highlights innovation initiatives implemented by Dubai government organisations, examining how leadership has driven initiatives, for example the Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation, and the Dubai Future Accelerators to promote digital transformation, agile governance, and promote a culture of experimentation. The research addresses the persistent barriers to innovation commonly faced by Dubai government organisations, including bureaucratic inertia, rigid hierarchies, and resistance to change. In addition, the study offers practical recommendations to the public sector to help overcome the challenges through strategic leadership practises, capability building, and supportive policy frameworks. Finally, the underlying mechanisms and determinants of effective leadership style and its impact on innovation are critical to understand, as the existing literature tends to focus on leadership style practices, rather than its drivers. This research offers practical guidance for leaders to create a culture of innovation within the Dubai government organisations.

Keywords: Leadership styles, Innovation, Dubai government, Transformational leadership

1. Introduction

With the rapid economic development that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has witnessed in the past three decades, leadership is becoming an increasingly significant factor to the development and future of organisations (Kamali, 2018). Leadership plays a pivotal role in aligning organisational vision with long-term objectives, especially in the public sector, where leaders are responsible for leading change, fostering innovation, and improving performance (Bin Attan & Mahmood, 2019). Recently, innovation has become a central focus of government transformation globally, and the UAE taking a leading role in adopting innovation-led policies and practices (Alblooshi, 2018). Studies (Jia et al, 2018; Zheng et al, 2019) have confirmed that organisations should be informed of the impact of leadership style on fostering innovation culture. Dubai government organisations provide a wide range of services, including education, healthcare, transport, licensing, utilities and digital platforms. This creates a quasi-market environment, elevating citizen expectations and raising service delivery standards, making innovation a strategic necessity rather than an option. Aligned with the UAE's National Innovation Strategy, which mandates that government organisations dedicate specific budgets to innovation, Dubai has established itself as a regional and global leader in public sector innovation. Within this context, leadership plays a pivotal role in promoting organisational agility, fostering experimentation, and ensuring that public services remain citizen-centred, efficient, and internationally competitive. Currently, most government organisations in the United Arab Emirates focus on creativity. However, there is limited insight into the extent to which the leadership style used influences the development of innovation, and culture, within Dubai government organisations (Tafvelin et al, 2011; Agarwal & Gupta, 2021). Focusing on the UAE, particularly in Dubai government organisations, this study examines how different leadership styles influence the development of an innovative culture within Dubai government organisations. The present study is a conceptual paper, with the aim of identifying the role of leadership styles—such as transformational, transactional, and participative leadership—and their impact on fostering an innovative culture in Dubai government organisations. A conceptual approach has been employed as there is a notable scarcity of empirical studies in this context. This approach permits the integration and synthesis of existing international literature with the UAE public sector experience, facilitating the development of a theoretical foundation, highlighting gaps in

existing research, and providing directions for future empirical work. By using this method, the study provides a robust conceptual framework while highlighting the practical implications for leadership and innovation in Dubai government organisations. In addition, the study identifies the barriers to innovation in the public sector which influences the innovation outcomes and provides evidence-based recommendations to overcome these challenges. The underlying mechanisms and determinants of effective leadership style and its impact on innovation are crucial to understand, as the existing literature tends to focus on leadership style practices, rather than the drivers.

2. Leadership and Innovation

Leadership is increasingly important as the global business environment is more competitive (Jia et al, 2018). In today's dynamic and rapidly evolving environments, leadership plays a crucial role in shaping organisational strategies and fostering innovation (Scheepers & Storm, 2019). Leaders contribute to organisational success by fostering innovation and creativity, maintaining a results-driven focus, inspiring, and empowering employees to achieve their goals (Waite et al, 2014). Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the conditions that enable innovation to thrive within organisations (Fontana & Musa, 2017). Classic and contemporary leadership scholars emphasise these dimensions: Bennis (1989) highlighted the role of visionary leadership in shaping the future direction of organisations, arguing that leaders must not only articulate a compelling vision but also cultivate a culture that supports creativity and innovation. Kouzes and Posner (2012) focused on modelling behaviour and enabling others to act; Antonakis (2017) explored the impact of transformational leadership on organisational outcomes such as innovation capacity, adaptability, and long-term performance. Parker-Follett (1926) emphasised participatory leadership; and Alvesson (2016) discussed leadership as a social process that shapes organisational culture and innovation potential. In addition to these contributions, scholars in the field of public administration have emphasised the distinct leadership requirements of the public sector. For example, Van Wart (2013) recognised competencies such as strategic thinking, integrity, and collaboration as critical for public leaders to manage change and drive innovation efficiently. Hartley (2018) argued that leadership in the public sector requires balancing political accountability with creativity and risk-taking, making innovation both challenging and essential. Collectively, these perspectives demonstrate that leadership involves more than vision and influence, requiring leaders to navigate complex institutional environments, building capacity, and foster conditions that enable enduring innovation in both private and public sector organisations.

Effective leaders shape both the strategic direction and the organisational culture, both are crucial for fostering creativity, encouraging risk-taking, and promoting collaboration (Zheng et al, 2019). Leaders should be capable to inspire and motivate their followers by boosting their confidence, enabling them to meet organisational goals (DuBrin, 2015). Leadership involves influencing someone, or a group, to achieve a particular goal (Waite et al, 2014). Leadership is the exchange of ideas between leaders and their followers that collectively inspire and empower them to accomplish a shared vision or goal (Reed et al, 2019). According to (House et al, 2004), leadership is defined as the ability of a person to inspire, enable, or influence other individuals to work toward the success and effectiveness of an organisation. Innovation is vital for long-term organisational success, particularly in dynamic marketplaces (Wegner et al, 2021). There are numerous management scholars and practitioners whose main concern is innovation (Udwadia, 1990; Lin & Liu, 2012). Innovation plays an essential role in organisations, being a major driver of business growth and long-term survival (Waite et al, 2014). In addition, organisations are relying more on innovation to stay competitive and adapt to changes driven by rapid technological development (Jia et al, 2018). Innovation is defined as the process of generating and executing a novel concept (Demircioglu & Van der Wal, 2022). According to (Wegner et al, 2021), innovation is the process of bringing in new problem-solving concepts and putting it into practise, including the implementation of novel ideas, processes, products, and services. According to (Sorensen & Stuart, 2000), innovation is considered as one of the fundamental drivers of an organisation's output, and significantly impacts on the viability of the organisation, playing a crucial role in shaping demographic change. Thus, understanding how effective leadership can foster innovation is crucial for Dubai government organisations, as they strive to lead regional transformation, improve public service delivery, and enhance organisational agility.

3. Innovation Initiatives in Dubai Government Organisations

Innovation is a critical driver of organisational growth and long-term sustainability, serving as a key factor in maintaining competitive advantage. Innovation can enable organisations to differentiate themselves from competitors, positioning them as industry leaders which can enhance their market share and improve their reputation (Waite et al, 2014). Organisations are increasingly drawing on innovation to answer fast-technological development (Jia et al, 2018). The UAE aims to enhance the innovative culture among employees, particularly

within Dubai's government organisations, through several initiatives (Alosani & Al-Dhaafri, 2023). Dubai government is actively fostering innovation across multiple sectors, aiming to become a global leader in this area (Moonesar et al, 2019). The ability to develop new products and services has prompted Dubai government organisations to actively pursue global excellence and surprise the world with its iconic construction innovations (Alosani & Al-Dhaafri, 2023). Over the past decade, Dubai government has introduced numerous ambitious initiatives, embedding innovation within its public sector, with the aim of transforming traditional bureaucratic systems into more agile, and future-ready organisations (Chigova, 2021). This is reflected in various initiatives, for example the Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation, the Mohammed Bin Rashid Innovation Fund, and the adoption of advanced technologies into government services. The Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation (MBRCGI) was established in 2014. Its aims are to establish an integrated system of modern tools to adopt innovation within government organisations and deliver innovative services to the public (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Aligned with the goals of Vision 2031 "We the UAE", MBRCGI is dedicated to unlocking the individual's potential and enhancing the UAE's status as a leading hub for innovation (Chigova, 2021). In addition, MBRCGI plays a crucial role in the achievement of the UAE's Centennial 2071 goals by building a strong innovation ecosystem, and continuously evolving the governmental work, to position the UAE government as one of the most innovative governments in the world (Krzyszowski, 2020). MBRCGI is also committed to driving continuous renewal of the UAE Government by embedding innovation into their daily practices. It also serves as the main catalyst for government work and offering the platforms that enable innovation. The mission of MBRCGI is to build and leverage innovation intelligence in order to significantly enhance the government effectiveness (Moonesar et al, 2019). The Mohammed Bin Rashid Innovation Fund is another key initiative. The fund offers financial and advisory support to innovative ideas and startups, strengthening the ecosystem that cultivates creative solutions with commercial and societal impact (Alblooshi, 2018). The One Million Arab Coders initiative has upskilled thousands of government employees and young individuals in digital and coding competencies, aligning their workforce capabilities with technological advancement (One Million Arab Coders, 2022). Additionally, the Dubai Future Accelerators, launched under the Dubai Future Foundation, facilitates direct collaboration between international startups and government entities to co-develop and test innovative solutions for public service challenges. These e programs reflect a broader move toward experimental governance, agility, and public-private innovation partnerships (Dubai Future Foundation, 2023). Collectively, these initiatives demonstrate the government's commitment to cultivating an innovation-friendly culture, enhancing digital transformation, and positioning Dubai as a global hub for public sector innovation.

4. Leadership Styles Fostering Innovative Cultures

Leadership styles have received significant attention in academic literature (Avolio & Bass 2004) and can be defined as patterns of emphases, indexed by the intensity of particular leadership behaviour, which a leader places on different leadership situations (Andersen, 2008). Leadership significantly affects decision-making processes, communication expectations, employee motivation, and the overall work environment (Northouse, 2018). Scholars have sought to identify leadership styles that are suited for promoting innovation in their efforts to understand the link between leadership and innovation (Jia et al, 2018). While some researchers argue that supportive, participative, democratic, visionary, and collaborative leadership styles are effective in fostering innovation (Zheng et al, 2019). While others claim that transformational leadership is the most effective style for promoting innovation (Bin Attan & Mahmood, 2019). Numerous leadership styles have been recognized as conducive to enabling an innovative culture within organisations (Jia et al, 2018). Transformational leaders are people who elevate subordinates, and themselves, to a higher level of inspiration and morals (Bass, 2008). This leadership style encourages subordinates to rise above their self-interest, to attain organisational goals beyond stated expectations (Bass, 1985). In environments that require high levels of employee creativity, transformational leadership proves effective by intellectually stimulating critical thinking among workers (Costa et al, 2023). According to Liao et al (2017), transformational leaders influence the implementation of innovation by helping followers recognize its value and offering the necessary support. A cultivated environment motivates individuals to perform at their best, embedding innovation into the organisation's culture. In addition, they create an environment where individuals feel inspired to contribute their best, fostering a culture where innovation is encouraged, thereby embedding innovation into the organisation's culture. Transformational leadership is strongly linked to fostering innovation, mainly through its focus on visionary thinking, intellectual stimulation and inspirational motivation (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Participative leadership supports innovation by engaging employees in decision-making processes and building a culture of collaboration and trust (Kim, 2002). In contrast, transaction leadership, while effective for maintaining accountability, can hinder innovation because

it focuses on rules, routine and risk aversion (Fernandez & Rainey, 2017). Adaptive and servant leadership approaches support innovation by encouraging flexibility, responsiveness and dedication to public service values (Choi & Chandler, 2015). Overall, leadership that empowers and motivates employees plays a vital role in driving innovation within the often complex and bureaucratic context of the public sector (Van Wart, 2013). According to the study conducted by Kamali (2023) through qualitative interviews with senior Emirati leaders, the research revealed that the dominant leadership style in the context of Dubai's government organisations is transformational leadership style, a style that also promotes innovation. Kamali emphasizes the importance of developing transformational leadership, which has become a critical enabler of innovation within Dubai government organisations and can help in meeting future challenges and support the UAE's goals for innovation. In addition, in the context of Dubai government organisations, leadership is particularly influential, as rigid bureaucratic structures and formal hierarchies can either limit or support innovation depending on how they are managed. Therefore, examining the relationship between leadership style and innovation is essential to understand how government organisations can adapt, and change in line with national development objectives (Alsalami, Bosbary & Abdullah, 2014). Consequently, leaders play a crucial role in managing and guiding the complex innovation process within a constantly evolving environment (Demircioglu & Van der Wal, 2022). Leaders are responsible for establishing a work environment, which could either foster or stifle innovation (Jia et al, 2018).

5. Addressing Barriers to Innovation in the Public Sector

In a rapidly changing environment, the necessity to introduce innovation is becoming increasingly critical within organisations (Kozioł-Nadolna, & Beyer, 2021). Innovation has been recognized in the private sector as a source of growth and competitive advantage, while in the public sector it has been comparatively limited due to different factors (Hansen, 2014). These include rigid bureaucratic structures and hierarchies that slow decision-making, risk aversion and a low tolerance for failure given the high level of public scrutiny, and limited financial and human resources that restrict flexibility (De Vries et al, 2016). A lot of studies argued that (Kozioł-Nadolna & Beyer, 2021; Kozioł-Nadolna, 2020) there are many factors that inhibit innovation in the public sector. It is essential to address the barriers to innovation, and identify the obstacles to introducing innovation (Cinar, Trott & Simms, 2019). The barriers in the public sector not only hinder the process of innovation, but organisations must also possess the ability to recognize the barriers and to implement appropriate management tools to address them (Raipa & Giedraityte, 2014). Literature review shows a growing scholarly interest in exploring the barriers to innovation within public sector organisations, for example, a study conducted by (Kozioł-Nadolna, & Beyer, 2021) declared that the barriers to innovation identified by managers were classified as internal and external. Within the internal barriers, there were encompassed organisational constraints, communication challenges, human resource limitations, poor management, and financial obstacles. In contrast, only one external barrier was recognized. The absence of a governmental policy framework that supports innovations in public sector organisations. In addition, another study (Cankar & Petkovsek, 2013) argued that the primary barrier to innovation in the public sector is the lack of relevant skills, followed by restricted access to the external financial resources, and an inadequate knowledge base. In the context of the Dubai government, there are numerous initiatives and strategies that were launched to accelerate innovation, for example the Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation which aims to establish an integrated system of modern tools, to adopt innovation with government organisations, and deliver innovative services to the public (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). Yet, bureaucratic rigidities continue to inhabit innovation at operational level within public sector entities. These rigidities comprise hierarchical decision-making, inflexible procedures, and centralized authority, which hinder creativity and delay the adoption of innovative solutions (Jaskyte, 2022). Resistance to change is one of the most pervasive barriers to innovation within Dubai government organisations, some entities continue to demonstrate resistance to adopt new technologies, digital tools or processes (Fernandez & Rainey, 2017). Furthermore, Taneva, et al (2016) declared that resistance to change is another barrier as employees are reluctant to embrace changes, due to several different reasons for example age, job insecurity and poor skills. To effectively overcome these barriers, the role of leadership style is crucial for dismantling bureaucratic inertia and cultivating a culture where innovation is not only accepted, but expected (Jaskyte, 2022). Recent studies highlight that transformational leadership significantly enhance innovation in public sector entities by building trust, employee engagement, and willingness to explore novel approaches (Liao et al, 2017). Thus, fostering transformational leadership across all level of Dubai government organisations is important to effectively enhance innovation, and to empower the employees in order to navigate beyond bureaucratic boundaries.

6. Conclusion

The research identifies the critical role of leadership styles, and the impact in fostering an innovation-oriented culture in Dubai government organisations. Despite the robust global research and interest in the varied the leadership styles of leaders within organisations, there is still a notable lack of research addressing the barriers and enablers of innovation in the context of the UAE, particularly in Dubai government organisations. Previous research has often focused on examining the role of innovation in the workplace (Halpern, 2010; Forsman, 2011), their research has rarely examined the role of leadership styles, and the impact of fostering an innovative culture in Dubai government organisations. The rationale for focusing on Dubai lies in its strategic ambition to position itself as a global hub for government innovation, exemplified through initiatives such as the Mohammed Bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation. Drawing on a conceptual research approach, this study synthesised insights from global leadership and innovation literature with the particular context of Dubai government organisations. Transformational leadership emerges as particularly effective in promoting creativity, experimentation, and organisational agility. These insights echo the arguments scholars such as Bennis (1989), Kouzes and Posner (2012), and Antonakis (2017), while also highlighting the relative scarcity of empirical research examining these dynamics within the public sector. This study makes an important contribution to both theory and practice. Conceptually, it offers a foundation for understanding how leadership styles can shape innovation outcomes in the Dubai government organisations. The study is essential because it provides an impetus for managers, HR professionals and policymakers by demonstrating that transformational leadership style plays a vital role in enabling innovation. The research offers a roadmap for government leaders to drive innovation effectively and lead their organisations toward success. Also, this study brings valuable insights for both managers and policymakers, highlighting that adopting transformational leadership styles can significantly strengthen innovation within organisations. Additionally, human Resource managers, in particular, should recognise the impact of leadership on cultivating an innovative culture and align policies and strategies accordingly. Developing targeted programs and initiatives will help embed innovation within Dubai government organisations while ensuring consistency, sustainability, and measurable impact. As a conceptual paper, the study is subject to certain limitations, notably the lack of empirical testing. Future studies should therefore employ interviews, surveys, or case studies to empirically validate the proposed relationships and extend the analysis across various government sectors and emirates for comparative perspectives. Through such efforts, researchers can help bridge the gap between theory and practise, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how leadership fosters innovation within the UAE and beyond.

Ethics Declaration: The present research study relies solely on secondary sources and publicly available literature. As no human participants, personal data, or experimental interventions were involved, formal ethical approval was not required.

AI Declaration: Generative AI tools (ChatGPT) were used only in a limited manner to assist with paraphrasing and idea generation during the writing process. No AI tools were involved in producing the core analysis, arguments, or conclusions. The author takes full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and final content of the paper.

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