Influence of Participative Leadership on Worker Performance in a Hybrid Social Enterprise

Okuhle Mtilwa, Stanley Fore and Jephita Matande
Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

mtilwaok@gmail.com
fores@cput.ac.za
matandej@cput.ac.za

Abstract: Growing interest in corporate governance has spurred curiosity in hybrid social enterprises (HSEs), especially in developing economies, as businesses increasingly focus on social responsibility and ethics. These initiatives compound employee responsibilities, often beyond their formal contractual obligations. Consequently, the success of these hybrid social responsibilities necessitates a leadership style that inspires employees. The social nature of HSEs informed the Social Exchange Theory (SET). Using a mixed research methodology, the study seeks to unpack two primary issues abductively: firstly, revealing the impact of participative leadership style on employee performance, and secondly, unravelling the specific aspects of this leadership style that affect performance within HSEs. The research employs a single case study design focused on a non-governmental organisation in Cape Town, South Africa. Respondents were purposively selected to ensure rich, insightful data and research quality. The target population was 60 team members from four departments. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire containing quantitative and qualitative (open-ended) questions. Thematic content analysis was used for the qualitative data related to the first objective (identifying aspects), while descriptive statistics analysed the quantitative data for the second objective (assessing impact). The results demonstrate a significant positive relationship between participative leadership style and employee performance. Key findings indicate that a leader's education level (skills and knowledge) and decision-making capability are crucial aspects promoting performance. In contrast, demographic factors such as the leader's age, gender, and race were found to have no significant effect. This study contributes to leadership theory by advancing debates and providing practical guidance for leaders in HSEs on designing leadership approaches that enhance employee performance.

Keywords: Leadership, Employees, Hybrid social enterprise, Participative leadership

1. Introduction and Background

Societal dynamics and the growing emphasis on corporate social responsibility (CSR) have significantly evolved business conditions, transforming many organisations into hybrid social enterprises. These entities blend profit-making objectives with social mission goals- hybrid social entrepreneurship. This hybrid nature places additional obligations and workload burdens on leaders and employees, often extending beyond traditional contractual duties. In such complex environments where employee performance can be jeopardised, the role of leadership is paramount (Alghizzawi et al., 2024). Leaders must adopt styles that foster active engagement and participation. Long-standing literature on leadership excellence points to participative (or democratic) leadership as the core of enhancing employee performance (Muhiuddin, 1993), primarily because it inspires joint innovation (Kumar et al., 2024). While many debates reinforce this general notion (Riza et al., 2025), there is a distinct lack of literature that unpacks explicitly *which aspects* of participative leadership account for improved employee performance.

The research problem stems from organisational dynamics that current leadership research fails to address succinctly. Specifically, integrating CSR—a traditionally non-profit initiative—into profit-driven organisations creates new complexities for leaders. A systematic review by Doherty et al. (2014) reveals that tensions can erupt in hybrid firms as employees are often incentivised by financial gains and profitability (Powell et al., 2019). These leaders succeed by striking a delicate balance between profit motives and social needs. While studies in contexts like hybrid social entrepreneurship among farmers indicate that participatory leadership boosts performance due to its inclusivity, they often remain silent on the stylistic elements invoking this improvement. These findings align with quantitative studies (e.g., Alhasnawi et al., 2023) showing that participatory leadership enhances performance in budgeting by promoting goal clarity and commitment. Previous work (Somech, 2003; Dolatabadi & Safa, 2010; Bortoluzzi et al., 2014) posits that a leader's behaviour and performance directly influence employee behaviour and performance. However, these studies are often narrowly focused and lack specificity regarding the participative leadership style (Abu Orabi et al., 2024), limiting their generalizability within the HSE context and the African setting. This research heeds previous calls, such as from Girma (2016), for a more comprehensive and extensive examination of this phenomenon.

Furthermore, scant literature has sought to deconstruct the participative leadership-employee performance discourse to expose its precise impact (Pasricha et al., 2018). A significant contextual and geographical gap exists, as minimal research has examined this relationship within African HSEs. This under-research has restricted both theoretical understanding and practical mastery of the concepts, curtailing a contextualised appreciation of the phenomenon. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by employing a mixed research methodology to explore and explain the interplay between participative leadership style and employee performance in this context.

Inspired by recommendations from Akpoviroro et al. (2018) to move beyond predominantly quantitative methodologies, this study has a two-pronged aim:

1. To investigate the aspects of participative leadership style that impact employee performance.
2. To assess the impact of participative leadership style on employee performance using a mixed-methods approach.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

This research seeks to address the following objectives:

- To understand the contribution of participatory leadership style to employee performance.
- To examine the impact of participative leadership style on employee performance.

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

- What aspects of the participative leadership style contribute to employee performance?
- What is the impact of participatory leadership style on employee performance?

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Theoretical Framework: Social Exchange Theory

This research adopts the Social Exchange Theory (SET) to investigate its core questions. SET is based on social reciprocity, where employees consciously or subconsciously weigh the net benefits of their relationship with their leader. It hypothesises that "*when leaders demonstrate consideration for their employees' ideas and opinions, employees reciprocate with higher commitment and dedication to organisational goals*" (Alhasnawi et al., 2023: 4). The theory positions leaders as relationship drivers, emphasising mutual exchanges, reciprocity, and interdependencies (Akpoviroro et al., 2018; Di Domenico et al., 2009) that lead to social harmony (Ahn & Bessiere, 2022). This resonates deeply with the social/humane aspect inherent in HSEs.

The choice of SET is justified by its extensive and successful application in leadership studies. For instance, Alarifi & Adam (2023) anchored their study on participatory leadership's role in employee creative performance in SMEs on SET. This research concurs with Wang et al. (2022) that SET offers a robust explanation for participatory leadership phenomena. The theory also aligns well with the four key aspects of participative leadership style examined in this study (delegation, collective action, question asking, shared goals). Furthermore, given that hybrid social entrepreneurship is a budding concept and practice in Africa, SET provides a fitting lens for understanding the social exchanges.

3.2 Defining Leadership and Leadership Styles

Leadership has been defined in a multitude of ways. Nanjundeswaraswamy and Swamy (2014) define it as a social control mechanism where the leader seeks followers' voluntary cooperation and performance to attain organisational objectives. This definition interprets the leader-follower relationship as fundamentally social (Kumar et al., 2024), making it highly interpretable through the SET lens. Similarly, Yukl (2008) and DuBrin (2010) define leadership as the ability to inspire confidence and provide support in a way that motivates a follower's self-will to work towards set goals. A common thread in these definitions is that employee (and thus organisational) performance is predicated on appropriately selecting and applying a suitable leadership style. Ironically, few studies have examined the most appropriate style for the unique context of HSEs.

Leadership styles—the approach a leader adopts to achieve goals through employee effectiveness (Baron & Parent, 2015)—are equally significant to the performance discourse (Pereira et al., 2020). Research presents many styles and theories (Thahier et al., 2014; Vidal et al., 2017; Amanambu, 2024), sometimes used interchangeably. This study focuses on four styles within the leader's behaviour, ideology, and attitudes towards

followers (Luthans, 1977; Kaur et al., 2024): authoritarian, bureaucratic, laissez-faire, and participative/democratic.

Table 1: The four leadership styles

Leadership style	Leader-follower relationship
Authoritarian	Leader-centred and dominated. This command environment relies on a leader`s confidence and skills (Amanambu, 2024; Alghizzawi et al., 2024). It causes short-term success but long-term failure.
Bureaucratic	Policy-driven. Both the leader and followers are subservient to policy. This curtails creativity as policies impede innovation.
Laissez faire	Employee-dominated, as the leader is dormant. Lack of guidance compromises creativity and employee performance (Abu Orabi et al., 2024).
Participative	Active joint decision-making between the leader and followers. It builds trust, confidence (Li et al., 2018) and employee creativity (Salahuddin, 2010; Warrilow, 2012; Alghizzawi et al., 2024).

3.3 Participative Leadership in Hybrid Social Enterprise

Participative leadership can manifest in two forms: direct and indirect. The former involves employees directly deciding, negotiating, and agreeing with the leader on their immediate tasks or environment. The latter refers to a collective bargaining approach using delegates to engage the leader (Dull, 2010). This style is an open engagement platform that diffuses traditional management hierarchies, placing leaders and followers on a more equal footing in decision-making (Wang et al., 2022). This inclusivity harnesses ideas from a broader range of participants, enriching ideation, though the leader typically retains ultimate decision-making authority.

Participative leaders provide a "bigger picture" or roadmap but avoid dictating tasks. Within this framework, employees are empowered to generate and share ideas. The leader offers input, support, and facilitation, fostering collaborative and complementary rather than competitive environments. A bibliometric analysis by Wang et al. (2022) confirms that many researchers defend the relevance of participative leadership, especially in HSEs. Cornelissen et al. (2021) found that leadership in a social business aids continual adaptation and helps members combine diverse aims and values into a common hybrid identity. Austin et al. (2006) qualify this by cautioning that adopting participative leadership should be sensitive to the HSE's specific growth stage.

3.3.1 Participative leader responsibilities

According to Akpoviroro et al. (2018), participatory leaders have the following responsibilities. Firstly, they communicate the broad picture, such as the company’s priorities and performance outcomes, as well as work units’ connections to the larger organisation. Secondly, the team collectively sets realistic goals, acceptable evaluation methods, and reward systems. Thirdly, talent development is promoted through task delegation. Fourthly, employees receive clear goals and support resources. Lastly, employees work in teams to design processes and accomplish tasks. This analogy does not depict any active role or contribution of followers.

3.3.2 Aspects of the participative leadership style

Extending Likert's (1961) seminal work, Akpoviroro et al. (2018) highlighted key aspects of participative leadership styles that form the foundational pillars for this research:

Delegation: The formal transfer of decision-making authority to lower levels. This engenders a sense of responsibility that compels creative thinking (Khassawneh & Elrehail, 2022) while ensuring employees enjoy the leader's presence and support (Windiana et al., 2024). It can sometimes be role-playing (stepping into the leader's shoes).

Collective action: Decision-making is preceded by a consultative process. For ease of administration, employees are grouped into teams assigned specific roles. This enhances peer-to-peer learning, bonding, problem-solving, and relationship building (Khassawneh & Elrehail, 2022).

Question Asking: Likert (1961) alluded to this as the "high standard principle." It stems from the goal clarity endeavour preoccupying participative leaders. Instructions must be clear to empower teams. This two-way process between leader and followers cultivates new ideas and promotes critical thinking (Li et al., 2018; Akpoviroro et al., 2018).

Shared Goals: Based on Likert's (1961) "decision-making principle," teams collaboratively set, cross-pollinate, and align goals (Akpoviroro et al., 2018). This cultivates a sense of belonging, trust, and ownership in employees

(Wang et al., 2022). The emphasis on the exchange of ideas, goals, and roles within these aspects further attests to the relevance of SET as a sound explanatory theory for this phenomenon.

3.4 Research Context and Setting

Hybrid social entrepreneurship is a growing phenomenon in Africa and South Africa. African organisations increasingly embrace the hybrid social enterprise model, hence the increasing need for a participative leadership style. (Akpoviroro et al., 2018). Some firms are relatively small community-based entities extending their traditional profit-making scope to providing fundamental needs in the education (skill development and literacy), health, and housing sectors. Their concentration is frequently on specific disadvantaged populations, such as children and youth, or assisting women or strengthening a particular neighbourhood. Many social enterprises in the country have improved the quality of their goods or services and developed business strategies over time (Karanda & Toledano, 2012).

3.5 Participative Leadership: Impact on Employee Performance

Embracing decision-making inclusivity encourages multidimensional views that stimulate optimising resources (material, human, intellectual), thereby boosting employee and organisational performance. Through an enhanced sense of responsibility and motivation, HSEs enjoy significant staff commitment. The long-run effects include improved employee skills, experience, exposure, and productivity (Akpoviroro et al., 2018). A high-trust, interactive working environment augments social capacity, catering to overall employee wellbeing—emotional, psychological, professional, and social needs (Alsubaie, 2021). This is particularly crucial in HSEs where employees often shoulder extra responsibilities; participative leadership can raise morale, foster innovation, and improve work-life quality (Khassawneh & Elrehail, 2022). Bass and Bass (2009) and Crane and Glozer (2014) argue that employees add value where they feel valued, especially in environments free from coercion.

Conversely, participative leadership can be time-consuming, particularly in its initial stages. Employees in HSEs might face two challenges: it's a relatively new phenomenon, and can constitute additional work. The extended decision-making and consensus-building process (Kaur et al., 2024) can sometimes affect employee motivation. Furthermore, the process is not always perfectly inclusive, as the majority view can prevail at the expense of the minority, potentially sparking divisions and resentments if not carefully managed. Its effectiveness is also vulnerable to cultural complexity (Muhiuddin, 1993).

3.6 Research Methodology

This abductive research is both exploratory (unearthing aspects of participative leadership) and explanatory (assessing their impact). An interpretivist approach was used for the first objective to derive value-laden, shared meanings from participants. A positivist paradigm (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006) was used to obtain value-free insights. Due to time constraints, a cross-sectional study was conducted.

A single case study research design was adopted to provide detailed, context-specific insight. Scholars like Baron and Parent (2015), Wang et al. (2022), and Alhasnawi et al. (2023) have emphasised that context is crucial in participative leadership research. The study population was all HSEs in South Africa, with the target population being all such entities in Cape Town. The absence of a definitive database made precise determination impossible.

Purposive sampling was used to select one HSE in Cape Town. The selection criteria required the entity to be constituted by employees and leaders with hybrid responsibilities (involved in both profit-making and CSR). The chosen entity had 60 staff across four departments (finance, clinical, production, and administration) who participated in both aspects of the enterprise. Other firms were excluded if they had distinct structures separating profit from social functions. This choice aligns with the single case study design (Kumar, 2012). While a multiple case study could have been considered given the small sample size (Jackson, 2003), a single case was chosen to extract deep, case-specific data and insights. The mixed-methods approach, where quantitative and qualitative data complement each other, also justifies focusing on a single, information-rich case for in-depth analysis.

The mixed research methodology was employed to address the two objectives. Quantitative methods gathered data on the impact of participative leadership, while qualitative methods gathered data on the specific aspects that lead to performance. Data was collected from mid-level leaders and general team members using a multifactor leadership questionnaire. This instrument had two sections: a quantitative section with closed-ended Likert-scale questions and a qualitative section with open-ended questions (Bazeley, 2018). This approach was adopted because most previous research is explanatory and does not delve into the specific aspects

influencing performance, directly addressing the identified research gap and following recommendations from Akpoviroro et al. (2018). A similar approach was used by Gil-Cordero et al. (2023) in a study on participative leadership in tourism.

Descriptive data analysis was conducted on the quantitative data to detect trends (Bazeley, 2018), while thematic content analysis was performed on the qualitative data to reveal key themes. Questionnaire data were coded into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis and conversion into illustrations, tables, graphs, and charts. Qualitative data was loaded into Atlas.TI software for coding, categorisation, and theme development.

To ensure research quality, several measures were taken. Confidentiality was maintained through respondent anonymity, and no biometric information was collected. Test-retest reliability assessment was conducted via a pilot study with 3 participants, confirming the research's reliability. Both construct and external validity were ensured by selecting a suitable case study and involving participants directly engaged in participative leadership. Informed consent was obtained from the case study authorities, and all respondents participated voluntarily after being informed of their rights and choices.

4. Findings and Discussions

Sixty questionnaires were distributed, yielding a high response rate of 83%. According to Seo & Park (2018), a response rate above 50% enhances study quality as well as the SET.

4.1 Work Experience of the Respondents

Respondents were asked about their work experience to gain insight into respondents' exposure to leadership approaches. Respondents` work experience ranges from 1 to 16 years, with most having less than 5 years. The figure showed a significant and diverse work experience, indicating the quality of their responses.

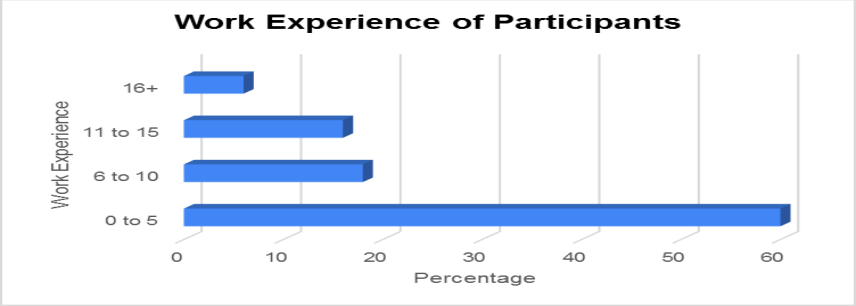


Figure 1: Respondents' work experience

4.2 Participative Leadership Aspects

4.2.1 Delegation

Respondents were asked about their role in decision-making in HSEs. About 86% indicated that they are active participants. This practice in the HSE is in tandem with Alghizzawi et al., (2024)The definition of participative leadership. Participants corroborated by stating, "*… we share our experiences, not just personal…*". This vindicates the application of the leadership style in the HSE.

Respondents were asked about mentorship and training programmes. The results showed that 100% of employees were mentored. Of these, 58% were formal while the rest were informal. This improves employee effectiveness, HSE success, and competitiveness (Ofobruku & Nwakoby, 2015; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007; Pereira et al., 2020). However, 42% informal mentorship demonstrates poor mentorship protocols in HSEs.

Three questions were asked to determine how leaders closely observe and support employees after delegation and intervene in poor performance. Figure 2 below shows the results.

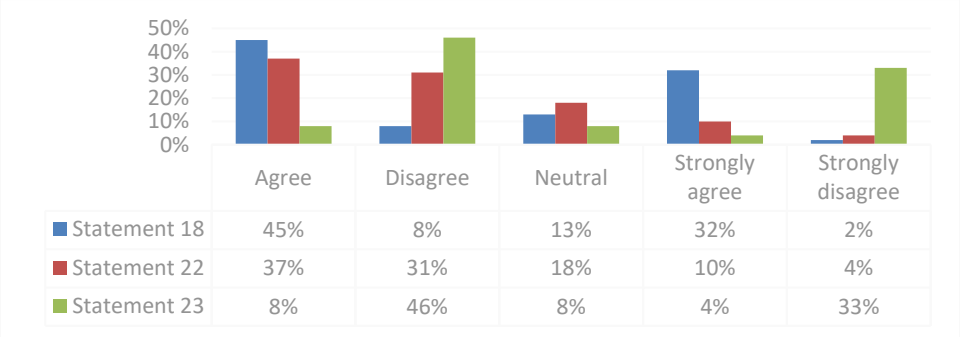


Figure 2: Employee support post delegation

Almost 77% either agree or strongly agree that they closely monitor employee performance. Further, 47% agreed they support subordinates. At the same time, 79% intervene to improve performance. This implies that employees in HSE are empowered to work without supervision, and assistance is offered when needed. Leaders barely intervene if all is well. Three questions corroborated this by investigating how HSE participative leaders perceive and treat employees. The findings are displayed in Figure 3 below.

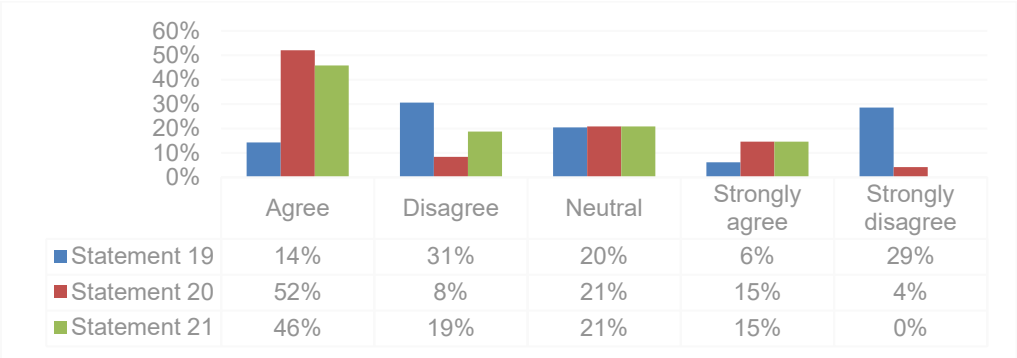
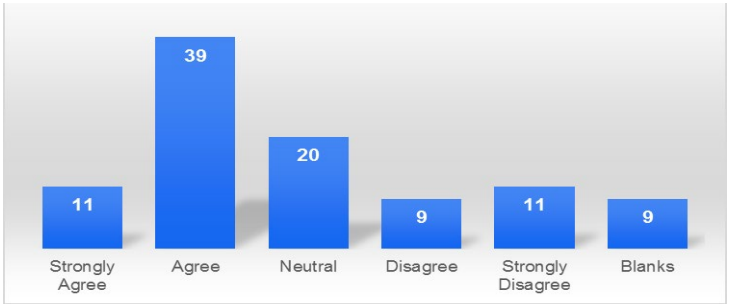


Figure 3: Leader perceptions of employees

About 60% perceive employees as committed and hardworking, while 67% agree they work with minimum supervision. Also, 50% agree that they feel empowered. This denotes that the staff is self-driven and capable.

4.2.2 Collective action

Questions were asked to assess the level of collective action in the HSE. Respondents` response to a question on leader-employee collaboration during execution is shown in Figure 4 below.



3.

Figure 4: Employee collaboration

Figure 4 above shows moderate collaboration between leaders and employees. This is low compared to collaboration in decision-making. This is possibly because employees feel confident and empowered early in the project, hence their independence. Further questions were asked to determine how employees feel about this level of autonomy. The responses are shown in Figure 5 below.

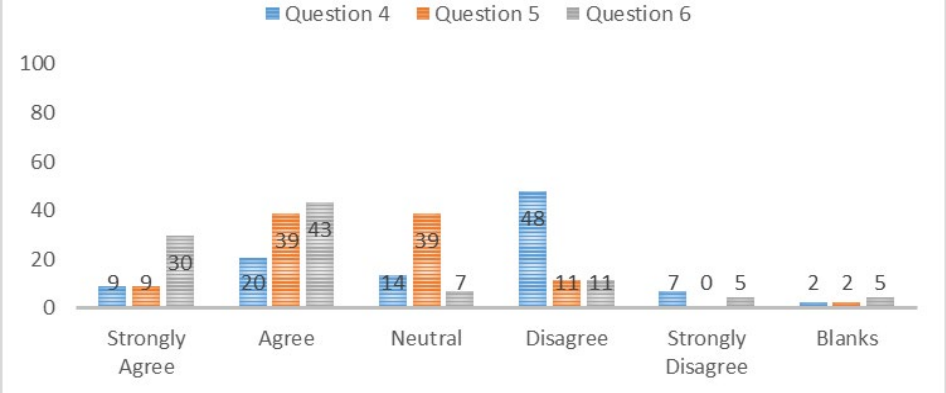


Figure 5: Employee perception of leadership style

The results show that the majority prefer participatory leadership to authoritarian leadership. Also, 73% (agree and strongly agree) to be involved in decision-making related to their tasks. Research participants indicated they dislike "*… being told what to do*". This shows that workers require clear direction early. This reduces the leader`s role during execution. Further questions examined the reward expectations for employees' extra responsibilities in HSEs. The results show that about 84% either agree or strongly agree that they expect a reward lest they feel exploited. This justifies a strong need for leaders to engage employees on their expectations, which may improve motivation and performance.

4.2.3 Question asking

Participative leadership also involves clarity of objectives by allowing questions. Respondents were asked about the leaders' knowledge level and ability to clarify issues. The results are shown in Figure 6 below.

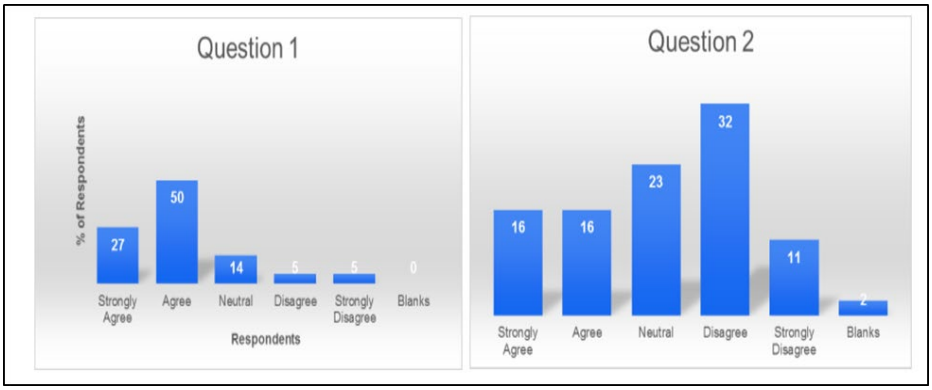


Figure 6: Leader`s knowledge and clarity

About 77% strongly agree that a leader must clarify the questions. However, they do not expect the leader to know everything. This indicates that employees see room for their contribution and actively participate. Also, leaders co-construct and define the project direction- an essential participative leadership trait.

4.2.4 Shared goals

Statement 8: A leader who consults with everyone is more powerful.

Statement 11: A leader must not consult on everything; otherwise, they become powerless.

Respondents were asked about the issue of shared goals between the leader and employees and whether leaders feel threatened by it. As shown in 7 below, three-quarters agreed that consultation is needful. Also, 52% believe that a leader who consults is strong. This is commendable as it confirms findings by Cornelissen et al. (2021).

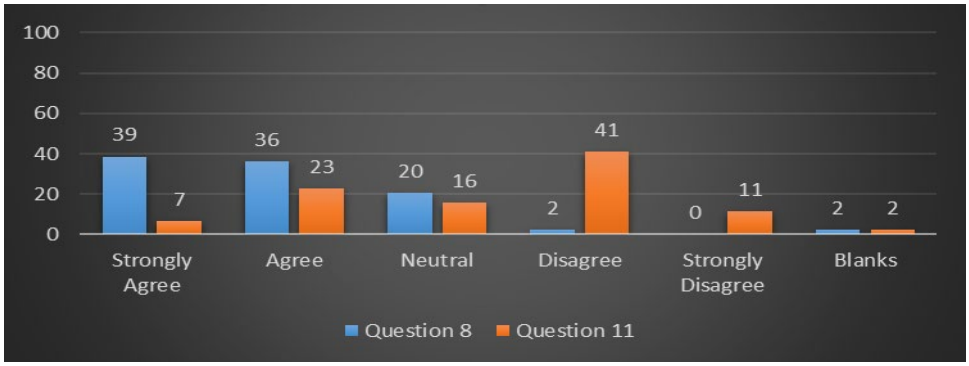


Figure 7: Leader`s strength through shared goals.

4.3 Impact on Employee Performance

Respondents were asked about the performance outcome of participative leadership. Figure 8 below shows the results.

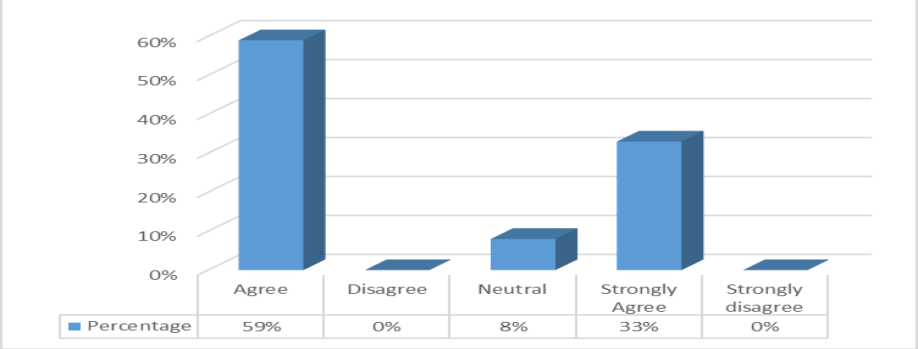


Figure 9: Employee performance.

59% and 33% agree and strongly agree that leadership improves employee performance. Further, 71% and 77% agree that it enhances employee reasoning and understanding, respectively.

Furthermore, qualitative questions sought to criticise the participative leadership style. Table 2 illustrates the results.

Table 2: Participative leadership style and employee performance.

Positive	**Negative**
Employees feel heard and supported.	Despite collective responsibility, the executive holds the leader accountable for failure.
Helps employees understand the task at hand.	Team members' differences and problems with each other lengthen the consultative process.
Expands and enhances the leader-subordinate relationship.	An urgent decision cannot be made without upsetting team members, even if a business opportunity arises.
Organisational productivity is boosted.	Engagements with less skilled employees may not yield meaningful outcomes.
Helps employees recognise their self-worth.	The Decision-making process can take longer as it relies on every team member.
Encourages teamwork and workplace collaboration.	Some team members get frustrated as the strong team members take on most of the responsibilities and become completely overwhelmed.
Builds employee decision-making confidence	Not every employee is a team player.
Employee empowerment through employee capacity building.	
Employees' work responsibility is enhanced.	

These findings support Khassawneh & Elrehail (2022) and Windiana et al. (2024), who observed that employee confidence boost is one key benefit of participative style.

5. Limitations and Future Research

This study is cross-sectional due to time constraints, yet it acknowledges that the relationship between participative leadership and employee performance might be better understood through a longitudinal design. Future studies could measure changes in performance levels over time. The research also acknowledges that the sample size, sufficient for this deep case analysis, could be larger for greater generalizability. Future research could add value by conducting multiple case studies across different HSEs to generate broader insights. While SET was a robust theoretical framework for this study, other theories, like Social Learning Theory, could investigate aspects such as what team members learn from leaders and each other through mentorship and training, adding further nuance to the debate.

6. Conclusions

This research successfully investigated the aspects of participative leadership that contribute to employee performance and evaluated its overall impact within a hybrid social enterprise. Using social exchange theory and a mixed-methods methodology, data were collected via questionnaire and analysed using MS Excel and Atlas. ti. The findings indicate that work integration within and between teams/departments promotes performance through collaborative experiences for problem-solving. Thus, collective action is a key aspect driving high performance. Further, employee consultation, mentorship, and training unite teams to work towards collectively determined goals. The quantitative and qualitative results strongly corroborate each other, confirming a positive impact of participative leadership on performance. These findings reinforce debates on participative leadership style and its effect on employee performance. In addition, practitioners in hybrid social enterprises, specifically leaders, find it helpful to guide them in improving employee performance. A few limitations of the research were cited due to its cross-sectional nature. Some suggestions for the future include longitudinal and adopting a multi-case study research design to improve the sample size and generalisability.

Ethical Declaration: The paper is derived from a master's research at a local University. The Ethical Committee from the University issued a certificate of clearance granting permission for the study to be undertaken.

AI Declaration: Grammarly and DeepSeek were only used to edit the paper's language and compile the reference list in Harvard style.

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