

Leadership and Motivation in Public Service: Understanding Civil Servant Performance through Workplace Realities in Medan Johor Sub-District Office

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Abstract

This study explores how leadership and work motivation shape the performance of civil servants within the context of public service in Indonesia. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research investigates the lived experiences of employees at the Medan Johor Sub-District Office to uncover the social, organizational, and leadership factors influencing their work behavior. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis, and then analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and meanings. The findings reveal that leadership style plays a pivotal role in shaping motivation, discipline, and a sense of responsibility among employees. Transformational and participative leadership practices were found to enhance intrinsic motivation and foster a supportive work environment that contributes to improved performance. Conversely, bureaucratic rigidity and limited feedback mechanisms often diminish motivation and creativity. This study contributes to public management literature by emphasizing that effective leadership in the civil service context should balance authority with empathy and empowerment. The implications highlight the need for leadership development programs and motivational strategies tailored to Indonesia's public sector culture.

Keywords: *Leadership, Work Motivation, Public Service, Employee Performance*

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Introduction

The performance of civil servants remains a critical concern in the effectiveness of public administration in developing countries, including Indonesia. Public organizations are expected to deliver high-quality services while operating within bureaucratic structures that often constrain flexibility and motivation. Employee performance is widely recognized as a key determinant of institutional success, particularly in local government offices that directly interact with citizens [1].

Leadership plays an essential role in shaping employee behavior, motivation, and commitment within the public sector. Effective leaders are capable of inspiring subordinates, creating trust, and encouraging innovation, even within rigid bureaucratic systems [2]. Transformational and participative leadership styles are particularly relevant in enhancing motivation and performance through empowerment and open communication [3].

Work motivation among civil servants is influenced by both intrinsic factors, such as personal values and achievement goals, and extrinsic factors, such as organizational support, recognition, and supervision [4]. However, many public institutions still face challenges in cultivating motivation due to hierarchical structures, limited incentives, and inadequate career development systems [5].

The work environment also significantly affects performance outcomes. A supportive, transparent, and collaborative environment enhances job satisfaction and productivity, while a poor environment can lead to disengagement and reduced accountability [6]. In Indonesian local government contexts, workplace realities often reflect a mix of formal authority, collective culture, and informal norms that shape how employees perceive leadership and motivation [7].

Understanding how leadership and motivation interact to influence performance is crucial for improving the effectiveness of public service delivery. Therefore, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of civil servants at the Medan Johor Sub-District Office to understand how leadership practices and workplace conditions shape their motivation and performance. By adopting a qualitative approach, this research seeks to uncover the deeper social and organizational dynamics that quantitative surveys may overlook.

Literature Review

2.1 Work Motivation in the Public Sector

Work motivation refers to the internal and external factors that stimulate employees to engage in goal-directed behavior [1]. In the public sector, motivation is not solely driven by financial incentives but also by the intrinsic desire to serve society and contribute to public welfare. According to Handoko [2], motivation in government institutions is often influenced by organizational culture, fairness, and recognition from leadership. Similarly, Robbins and Judge [3] emphasized that motivation arises from the alignment between individual needs and organizational goals.

Civil servants often face motivational challenges due to rigid bureaucratic systems, lack of autonomy, and limited performance-based rewards. Nevertheless, intrinsic motivation such as public service values, ethical commitment, and social contribution can sustain performance in such settings [4]. Therefore, understanding motivational patterns among civil servants is essential to improving efficiency and accountability in local governance.

2.2 Work Environment and Organizational Context

The work environment encompasses both physical and social conditions that affect employees' productivity, satisfaction, and well-being [5]. A conducive environment provides adequate facilities, clear communication, and supportive relationships among colleagues and supervisors. Sedarmayanti [6] argues that a healthy work environment strengthens discipline and reduces stress, leading to higher job performance.

In many Indonesian local government offices, the work environment is characterized by hierarchical communication and limited innovation. However, when leaders encourage

participation and foster open dialogue, employees tend to feel more valued and motivated to perform better. The cultural aspect also plays a role, where collectivism and respect for authority influence how employees perceive their work environment [7].

2.3 Leadership Style and Its Role in Public Organizations

Leadership style is one of the most critical factors influencing employee motivation and performance. Yukl [8] defines leadership as a process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it effectively. In the public sector, leadership effectiveness is linked to the ability to balance administrative control with empathy and empowerment.

Transformational leadership encourages followers to transcend their self-interest for the sake of organizational goals, fostering creativity and intrinsic motivation [9]. In contrast, transactional leadership focuses on supervision and rewards, which may sustain performance in structured environments but limit innovation [10]. Participative leadership—often observed in successful local government offices—empowers employees through involvement in decision-making, creating a sense of ownership and accountability [11].

2.4 Employee Performance in the Public Sector

Employee performance reflects how effectively employees accomplish their assigned duties and contribute to organizational objectives [12]. In government institutions, performance involves both service quality and administrative compliance. Kasmir [13] emphasizes that employee performance is determined by motivation, competence, work discipline, and leadership influence.

Qualitative studies in public administration have shown that civil servant performance is shaped by perceptions of fairness, communication transparency, and leader–employee relationships [14]. Therefore, examining these dimensions through a qualitative lens provides deeper insights into how leadership and motivation are experienced and interpreted by public employees.

2.5 Leadership Motivation Performance Linkage

The interrelationship among leadership, motivation, and performance has been widely discussed in organizational behavior literature. Effective leadership enhances motivation, which subsequently drives better performance outcomes [15]. In public institutions, this linkage is often mediated by factors such as organizational culture, work environment, and employee perceptions of justice [16].

However, few studies explore these dynamics qualitatively within Indonesian local government contexts. Thus, this research seeks to fill the gap by exploring how leadership practices and workplace realities influence motivation and performance among civil servants at the Medan Johor Sub-District Office.

Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to explore how leadership and work motivation shape employee performance within the context of local government administration. The qualitative design allows the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of workplace realities [1].

The choice of a qualitative approach is grounded in the assumption that leadership and motivation are socially constructed phenomena that cannot be fully captured through quantitative measurement. Instead, this study seeks to reveal the meanings behind civil servants' experiences and how leadership behaviors influence their motivation and performance in daily work situations [2].

3.2 Research Site and Context

The research was conducted at the Medan Johor Sub-District Office, located in the city of Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. This office represents a typical public administration unit in the Indonesian bureaucratic system, responsible for implementing local government policies and public services. The organizational structure consists of a sub-district head, section heads, and administrative staff who perform various governance, administrative, and service functions.

The site was selected purposively because it reflects common challenges in local governance, such as hierarchical leadership, limited resources, and varying levels of employee motivation and performance [3].

3.3 Participants and Sampling Technique

Participants in this study included 12 civil servants (ASN) from different functional positions within the office. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, in which participants were chosen based on their experience, tenure, and involvement in organizational operations [4].

Participants included the sub-district head, section chiefs, and administrative staff with a minimum of three years of service. This composition allowed for a diversity of perspectives from both managerial and operational levels.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through three main techniques:

1. In-depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture participants' insights about leadership styles, motivation, and their perceived impact on work performance. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was recorded with consent.
2. Participant Observation: The researcher observed daily work routines, meetings, and interactions among employees to understand behavioral patterns and workplace culture.
3. Document Analysis: Organizational documents such as performance reports, attendance records, and leadership guidelines were reviewed to triangulate the findings [5].

All data collection processes adhered to ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke [6]. The stages included:

1. Familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts.
2. Generation of initial codes.
3. Searching for patterns and themes related to leadership, motivation, and performance.
4. Reviewing themes for coherence.
5. Defining and naming the themes.
6. Producing the final report.

NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and categorizing data. The analysis sought to identify recurring meanings and relationships among variables as experienced by participants.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Validation

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed several validation strategies, including:

1. Triangulation: Combining interviews, observations, and document analysis to cross-check data sources.
2. Member Checking: Participants were given opportunities to review summaries of their interviews to confirm accuracy.

3. Peer Debriefing: Discussions with academic colleagues helped to minimize researcher bias and improve analytical rigor [7].
4. Audit Trail: All data and analytical decisions were documented systematically to maintain transparency and reliability [8].

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The research followed ethical guidelines by ensuring participants' anonymity and confidentiality. All respondents participated voluntarily, with the right to withdraw at any time. No identifying information was disclosed in the final report. Approval for the study was obtained from the institutional ethics committee prior to data collection.

3.8 Research Ethics

Ethical considerations are essential in qualitative research to ensure that the rights, dignity, and well-being of participants are respected throughout the research process. Given the sensitivity of exploring employee experiences within a governmental organization, this study strictly adhered to ethical research principles based on international standards of social science research ethics [1], [2].

3.9 Ethical Approval and Institutional Permission

Before data collection, the researcher obtained official approval from the institutional ethics review board and formal permission from the Medan Johor Sub-District Office. This step ensured that all research activities complied with the institution's administrative and ethical procedures [3]. The research purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures were explained clearly to organizational leaders and participants.

3.10 Informed Consent

All participants voluntarily participated in the study after receiving detailed information about its objectives, methods, and potential benefits or risks. Written informed consent was obtained prior to interviews and observations. Participants were assured that their decision to participate or withdraw at any stage would not affect their employment status or relationships within the organization [4].

The consent form included information about the study's purpose, data usage, recording permissions, and assurance that no identifiable personal or professional details would be disclosed in publications.

3.11 Anonymity and Confidentiality

To maintain participants' anonymity, pseudonyms were used in transcripts and the final report. Personal identifiers, such as names, job titles, or specific departmental information, were removed or generalized. All audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher [5].

Confidentiality was emphasized throughout the research, and data were used exclusively for academic purposes. Findings were reported in aggregate form to prevent attribution to individual participants.

3.12 Non-Maleficence and Respect

The principle of non-maleficence, meaning "do no harm," was strictly followed. The researcher ensured that questions were respectful and non-intrusive, especially when discussing leadership behavior or organizational issues. Efforts were made to avoid emotional discomfort or potential conflict within the workplace [6].

Furthermore, the study upheld respect for participants' time, opinions, and professional obligations. Interviews were scheduled flexibly to accommodate participants' working hours, and all discussions were conducted in a neutral, nonjudgmental manner.

3.13 Data Integrity and Transparency

Ethical rigor was also maintained in data handling and reporting. The researcher avoided manipulation or selective interpretation of qualitative evidence. Data analysis followed transparent coding procedures, and quotations were used accurately to represent participants' voices [7].

Member checking was employed, allowing participants to review summaries of their interview transcripts to ensure the authenticity of interpretations. This step reinforced both ethical accountability and analytical credibility.

3.14 Cultural Sensitivity

Given that the research was conducted in Indonesia, cultural and organizational hierarchies were acknowledged as important ethical considerations. The researcher demonstrated cultural sensitivity by respecting formal communication norms and bureaucratic etiquette during interactions with government officials [8]. This approach ensured that ethical values were integrated with local cultural expectations of respect and harmony (*rasa hormat* and *gotong royong*).

3.15 Ethical Dissemination of Findings

In reporting and disseminating the results, care was taken to ensure that no information could harm the reputation of individuals or the institution. The study's findings were presented in an academic and constructive manner, emphasizing learning and improvement rather than criticism [9].

Results

The study revealed several key themes related to leadership, work motivation, and employee performance among civil servants at the Medan Johor Sub-District Office.

4.1 Leadership Style and Workplace Dynamics

The analysis indicated that leadership style strongly influences the organizational climate and employee attitudes. Most respondents described their leaders as adopting a directive yet approachable approach. Leaders who communicated openly and involved staff in decision-making processes were seen as catalysts for teamwork and innovation. Conversely, overly bureaucratic supervision tended to suppress initiative and reduce enthusiasm. These findings align with Northouse (2021), who emphasizes that transformational leadership fosters engagement and performance in public institutions.

4.2 Motivation as a Driver of Work Discipline and Commitment

Employees expressed that motivation is primarily intrinsic, stemming from public service values and personal satisfaction in serving citizens. However, the lack of recognition, limited career progression, and uneven workload distribution often weakened their motivation. When leaders provided appreciation and constructive feedback, motivation increased significantly. This confirms findings by Deci and Ryan (2020), who state that autonomy and acknowledgment enhance intrinsic motivation within organizations.

4.3 Work Environment as a Mediating Context

The **physical and social work environment** also emerged as a mediating factor between leadership and performance. Supportive facilities, clear communication, and collegial relationships improved task effectiveness. However, limited infrastructure, excessive administrative workload, and unclear role distribution created stress and reduced productivity. These results are consistent with Robbins and Judge (2019), who assert that a healthy work environment promotes satisfaction and performance continuity.

4.4 Leadership as a Mediating Influence

Leadership behavior served as a mediating variable that strengthened or weakened the relationship between motivation and performance. Transformational leadership encouraged employees to align their personal goals with institutional objectives, while transactional leadership often focused narrowly on compliance. The research found that empathetic and empowering leadership styles were the most effective in sustaining motivation and improving work outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2018).

4.5 Overall Impact on Civil Servant Performance

Overall, employee performance was found to be a function of both motivational strength and the leadership atmosphere. Civil servants demonstrated high commitment when they perceived their leaders as role models and facilitators of professional growth. The study highlights that leadership reform, continuous motivation programs, and improved communication channels can enhance public sector performance in the local government context.

Conclusion

This study concludes that leadership and work motivation are interdependent factors that significantly influence the performance of civil servants in the public sector. The qualitative findings reveal that effective leadership particularly transformational and participative styles creates a conducive work atmosphere that enhances motivation, strengthens teamwork, and fosters accountability among employees. Conversely, hierarchical or bureaucratic leadership tends to weaken intrinsic motivation and limit creativity in problem-solving.

Work motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, plays a pivotal role in shaping employee discipline, responsibility, and service quality. Civil servants who perceive their work as meaningful and are supported by appreciative leadership demonstrate higher levels of performance and commitment. The work environment in both physical and social dimensions further mediates these relationships by providing the structural and emotional conditions that enable optimal performance.

The study implies that improving public service performance requires strategic leadership development, continuous motivation programs, and structural reforms that promote transparency, collaboration, and recognition. Strengthening leadership capacity at the sub-district level will not only improve employee morale but also enhance the quality of governance and public trust.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen leadership effectiveness, motivation, and performance among civil servants in local government institutions, particularly within the Medan Johor Sub-District Office.

6.1 Leadership Development Programs

Public institutions should implement leadership capacity-building programs that emphasize empathy, communication, and participatory decision-making. Training modules should integrate transformational leadership principles, focusing on motivation, empowerment, and collaboration (Bass & Riggio, 2018). Such initiatives will enable leaders to act not merely as supervisors but as mentors who guide and inspire their subordinates.

6.2 Strengthening Motivation Systems

The government should design comprehensive motivation frameworks that combine intrinsic and extrinsic incentives. Recognition systems, fair performance appraisal, and transparent career advancement pathways can enhance morale and reduce turnover intention. According to Deci and Ryan (2020), acknowledging employee contributions sustains internal motivation and long-term engagement.

6.3 Improving the Work Environment

Investment in workplace infrastructure and digital facilities is crucial to improve efficiency and reduce work-related stress. A supportive physical environment and an open communication culture will encourage collaboration, creativity, and mutual respect among employees (Robbins & Judge, 2019).

6.4 Encouraging Participative Leadership Culture

Institutional reform efforts should promote participative governance, where leaders and staff collaboratively develop solutions for operational challenges. This approach builds trust and accountability, aligning organizational objectives with employee aspirations (Northouse, 2021).

6.5 Policy Implications for Public Sector Reform

At a policy level, local governments should adopt leadership evaluation systems that prioritize performance-based assessment and emotional intelligence. Continuous leadership coaching and feedback loops can sustain improvement in both leadership behavior and organizational performance outcomes.

In summary, the study's implications underscore that leadership transformation, when aligned with motivational and environmental support, can elevate civil servant performance and reinforce public trust in government institutions.

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