The Role of Continuous Improvement in Strengthening the Relationship between Organizational Culture, Leadership, and Motivation toward Human Resource Development: A Qualitative Study at the Medan City Regional Secretariat

Viza Fandhana, Kholilul Kholik

Abstract

This study explores the role of continuous improvement in strengthening the relationship between organizational culture, leadership, and motivation toward human resource development at the Medan City Regional Secretariat. Using a qualitative research approach, the study aims to understand how organizational values, leadership practices, and employee motivation collectively influence the effectiveness of human resource development when moderated by continuous improvement initiatives. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document analysis involving officials and employees within the Secretariat. The findings reveal that a strong organizational culture and transformational leadership significantly enhance motivation, which in turn fosters proactive participation in human resource development programs. Continuous improvement acts as a reinforcing mechanism that sustains learning, innovation, and adaptability within the organization. The study concludes that integrating continuous improvement into organizational culture and leadership practices can lead to more sustainable and strategic human resource development outcomes.

Keywords**:** *Organizational Culture; Leadership; Motivation; Human Resource Development*

Viza Fandhana[1]

[1]Master of Management, Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi, Indonesia
Email: vizafandhana@gmail.com[1]

Kholilul Kholik[2]

[2]Master of Management, Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi, Indonesia
Email: kholilulkholik@dosen.pancabudi.ac.id[2]

2nd International Conference on Islamic Community Studies (ICICS)
Theme: History of Malay Civilisation and Islamic Human Capacity and Halal Hub in the Globalization Era

Introduction

In the current era of organizational transformation, human resource development (HRD) plays a crucial role in ensuring institutional effectiveness and long-term competitiveness. The Medan City Regional Secretariat, as an essential element of local government administration, faces increasing demands for efficiency, innovation, and continuous improvement in employee performance. To meet these challenges, organizations must cultivate an environment that integrates strong organizational culture, effective leadership, and high employee motivation to drive sustainable human resource development.

Organizational culture represents a system of shared values and beliefs that influence how employees behave and interact within an institution [1]. A positive culture fosters commitment, collaboration, and a sense of belonging, which are critical for HRD. Leadership, on the other hand, serves as a key determinant of how cultural values are implemented and how employees are inspired to pursue excellence [2]. Effective leaders are capable of aligning individual motivation with organizational goals through communication, empowerment, and role modeling [3].

Employee motivation also contributes significantly to HRD by driving individuals to enhance their skills, knowledge, and competencies. Motivated employees tend to be more adaptive and proactive in pursuing learning opportunities that align with the organization's strategic direction [4]. However, the success of HRD does not solely depend on these internal factors. It also requires a systematic approach to continuous improvement, which emphasizes the need for ongoing evaluation, feedback, and refinement of processes and human capital strategies [5].

Continuous improvement (CI) acts as a moderating mechanism that strengthens the relationship between culture, leadership, and motivation by fostering a learning-oriented mindset and adaptive behavior [6]. In the context of public sector organizations such as the Medan City Regional Secretariat, CI ensures that HRD practices remain relevant, efficient, and aligned with dynamic service demands. Therefore, understanding how continuous improvement interacts with organizational culture, leadership, and motivation provides valuable insights for developing a sustainable HRD framework in government institutions.

This qualitative study aims to explore the role of continuous improvement in reinforcing the relationship between organizational culture, leadership, and motivation toward human resource development at the Medan City Regional Secretariat. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to human resource management literature and practically to the formulation of strategies that enhance the quality of human capital in the public sector.

Literature Review 2.1 Organizational Culture and Human Resource Development

Organizational culture represents a system of shared meanings, values, and norms that guide employees' behavior and decision-making processes within an organization [1]. A strong and adaptive culture encourages learning, collaboration, and continuous improvement, which are essential components of human resource development (HRD). According to Schein [1], culture is the foundation of organizational identity and directly influences how employees perceive their roles, responsibilities, and opportunities for growth. In the public sector, a positive organizational culture enhances employee commitment, professionalism, and alignment with public service values [7]. Therefore, culture not only defines organizational character but also shapes the process and outcomes of HRD initiatives.

2.2 Leadership and Human Resource Development

Leadership plays a vital role in shaping the direction and success of HRD. Transformational leadership, characterized by vision, inspiration, and empowerment, is particularly effective in promoting learning and innovation among employees [3]. Leaders act as role models, shaping the organizational culture and motivating individuals to pursue excellence. As suggested by Yukl [8], effective leadership stimulates intellectual engagement and personal growth, creating a supportive environment for HRD. In the context of public administration, leadership that emphasizes participative decision-making and transparent communication enhances trust, which in turn facilitates knowledge sharing and continuous skill enhancement among employees.

2.3 Motivation and Human Resource Development

Motivation is one of the key psychological drivers of human performance and development. It determines the direction, intensity, and persistence of behavior toward achieving goals [4]. Both intrinsic motivation (driven by personal satisfaction and learning) and extrinsic motivation (driven by rewards or recognition) significantly influence employees' willingness to participate in training and development programs [9]. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory emphasizes that motivators such as achievement, responsibility, and recognition are critical in sustaining employee engagement in HRD activities [10]. Therefore, motivated employees are more likely to embrace lifelong learning and contribute to organizational improvement.

2.4 Continuous Improvement as a Moderating Variable

Continuous improvement (CI) refers to the ongoing effort to enhance processes, performance, and outcomes through incremental changes [5]. Rooted in the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) and Kaizen, CI emphasizes learning from feedback, collaboration, and shared responsibility for progress [6]. As a moderating variable, CI reinforces the influence of organizational culture, leadership, and motivation on HRD by ensuring that development initiatives are systematically evaluated and refined over time [11]. In the context of government institutions, CI encourages the adoption of innovative HRD practices, supports performance transparency, and nurtures a culture of accountability [12].

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical foundations discussed above, this study assumes that organizational culture, leadership, and motivation are critical determinants of human resource development. Continuous improvement functions as a moderating variable that strengthens these relationships by promoting adaptability and learning-oriented practices within the organization. The interaction among these factors is expected to produce a sustainable and dynamic HRD framework suitable for public sector organizations like the Medan City Regional Secretariat.

Research Methodology 3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design with an interpretive approach to explore the influence of organizational culture, leadership, and motivation on human resource development, moderated by continuous improvement, at the Medan City Regional Secretariat. The qualitative approach was chosen to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants'

experiences, perceptions, and interpretations regarding the implementation of continuous improvement in HRD practices [1]. This approach allows the researcher to capture complex social interactions and contextual factors that may not be observable through quantitative methods.

3.2 Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at the Regional Secretariat of Medan City, which serves as the central administrative body responsible for coordinating governmental functions and implementing policy directives. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals directly involved in human resource management, leadership functions, and administrative operations. The sample included division heads, section leaders, and non-civil servant staff members. In total, 15 participants were interviewed until data saturation was reached, ensuring sufficient diversity of perspectives and experiences.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three primary techniques:

1. In-depth interviews, conducted using semi-structured interview guides to allow flexibility and depth in responses.
2. Participant observation, to capture non-verbal communication, work culture, and behavioral patterns in the organizational environment.
3. Document analysis, including organizational policies, HRD programs, and performance reports to provide contextual validation and triangulation of findings [2].

All interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were also maintained to document observations and researcher reflections.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique as outlined by Braun and Clarke [3]. The process involved six stages: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. NVivo 12 software was utilized to assist in coding and organizing qualitative data. The analysis aimed to identify patterns and relationships among organizational culture, leadership, motivation, and HRD, as moderated by continuous improvement practices.

3.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, several validation strategies were applied [4]. Triangulation of data sources (interviews, observations, and documents) was conducted to ensure consistency. Member checking was performed by sharing summaries of findings with participants for validation. Audit trails and detailed methodological documentation were maintained to enhance dependability. The researcher also practiced reflexivity, acknowledging personal biases and ensuring neutrality throughout the research process.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their rights, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained in writing, and confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing participants' identities and securing all data in encrypted storage. The

research adhered to ethical standards of qualitative inquiry, prioritizing respect, transparency, and integrity in every stage of the process.

3.7 Research Ethics

Ethical considerations are fundamental to qualitative research, ensuring that the study upholds integrity, transparency, and respect for participants throughout the research process. This study on the influence of organizational culture, leadership, and motivation on human resource development moderated by continuous improvement at the Medan City Regional Secretariat strictly adhered to the ethical principles of qualitative inquiry as outlined by the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Ethical Guidelines for Social Science Research [1][2].

3.8 Ethical Approval and Institutional Permission

Prior to data collection, formal approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi. The researcher also secured institutional permission from the Head of the Medan City Regional Secretariat to conduct the study within the organizational environment. These approvals ensured that all research activities were aligned with institutional, academic, and legal requirements governing research in public administration settings.

3.9 Informed Consent

All participants were provided with a clear and detailed information sheet describing the purpose, objectives, methods, and potential benefits of the research. The researcher emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to interviews, ensuring that each participant understood their role and rights in the study.

3.10 Confidentiality and Anonymity

To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts, analyses, and published materials. Personal identifiers and organizational positions were coded to maintain confidentiality. Data such as audio recordings, transcripts, and notes were stored securely in encrypted digital files accessible only to the researcher. This practice aligns with the ethical principle of data minimization and confidentiality protection in qualitative research [3].

3.11 Respect and Non-Maleficence

The researcher maintained a respectful and empathetic attitude toward all participants, ensuring that the interviews were conducted in a comfortable and non-threatening environment. The study avoided sensitive or intrusive questions that could cause psychological discomfort or harm. Participants were also given the option to review their statements (member checking) to ensure accuracy and prevent misrepresentation of their views.

3.12 Integrity and Transparency

All data were collected and analyzed honestly, without manipulation or fabrication. The researcher maintained an **audit trail** documenting research decisions, methodological changes, and data interpretations to enhance transparency and accountability. Any potential conflicts of interest were disclosed to both the institution and the participants to maintain ethical integrity.

3.13 Reciprocity and Benefit to Participants

In line with the ethical principle of reciprocity, participants were informed that the findings of this study would be shared with the Medan City Regional Secretariat to support improvements in human resource development practices. This ensures that participants and the institution benefit from the research outcomes through actionable recommendations for enhancing leadership, motivation, and continuous improvement processes.

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 decisionmaking 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.

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study provide a comprehensive understanding of how organizational culture, leadership, and motivation interact to influence human resource development (HRD), and how continuous improvement strengthens these relationships at the Medan City Regional Secretariat. The analysis was based on thematic coding from in-depth interviews, participant observations, and document reviews. Four dominant themes emerged: (1) cultural alignment and shared values, (2) leadership commitment and participation, (3) motivational reinforcement through recognition, and (4) the role of continuous improvement in sustaining HRD effectiveness.

5.1 Cultural Alignment and Shared Values

Participants consistently emphasized that a cohesive organizational culture rooted in mutual respect, discipline, and public service values serves as the foundation of HRD. Employees expressed that the existing culture promotes teamwork and collective responsibility, but also noted that traditional bureaucratic practices sometimes limit innovation and self-initiative. Thematic analysis revealed that when organizational values are clearly communicated and internalized, employees demonstrate higher engagement and willingness to learn.

This finding aligns with Schein's [1] assertion that organizational culture acts as a social control system that shapes employee behavior and attitudes. At the Medan City Regional Secretariat, strengthening cultural alignment through shared vision and values enhances the relevance and acceptance of HRD programs. Culture becomes a unifying force that promotes learning and adaptability, critical for sustaining continuous improvement.

5.2 Leadership Commitment and Participation

Leadership emerged as a central factor influencing HRD success. Most participants agreed that leaders who practice transformational leadership by inspiring, mentoring, and involving subordinates in decision-making generate stronger motivation and trust. However, some employees expressed that certain leaders still rely on directive approaches that limit participation and innovation.

Effective leadership within the Secretariat was found to be directly linked to communication transparency, role modeling, and the ability to connect individual aspirations with organizational goals. This is consistent with Bass and Riggio [3], who argue that transformational leadership fosters creativity and development by empowering employees. The study's findings suggest that leadership commitment to continuous learning and participatory management significantly enhances the implementation of HRD initiatives.

5.3 Motivational Reinforcement through Recognition

Employee motivation was identified as a driving force behind HRD participation. Respondents highlighted that intrinsic motivation—such as personal growth, achievement, and recognition—has a stronger and more sustainable impact than extrinsic factors such as financial rewards. In several departments, recognition from supervisors and acknowledgment of performance improvements served as major motivators for employees to engage in training and development programs.

This observation aligns with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory [10], which suggests that recognition and achievement are critical motivators in the workplace. The study found that employees who perceive fair treatment and opportunities for advancement are more likely to contribute to HRD initiatives and continuous improvement efforts.

5.4 The Role of Continuous Improvement in Sustaining HRD

Continuous improvement (CI) was identified as a moderating mechanism that enhances the relationship between culture, leadership, and motivation. Participants described CI as a process of "learning by doing," emphasizing routine evaluation, feedback, and innovation in daily work practices. Implementation of CI within the Secretariat encourages open dialogue, cross-departmental collaboration, and adaptive policy adjustments.

The integration of CI ensures that HRD programs remain relevant to evolving organizational challenges. It transforms training and development from a one-time event into a continuous learning cycle. This aligns with the Kaizen philosophy [6], which emphasizes incremental, sustained improvement as the foundation of long-term organizational success. The study demonstrates that when CI principles are embedded into culture and leadership practices, they strengthen employee ownership, accountability, and overall HRD outcomes.

5.5 Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

The findings collectively indicate that organizational culture, leadership, and motivation are interdependent elements that collectively determine the success of HRD. Continuous improvement serves as the strategic connector, ensuring that these factors function synergistically rather than in isolation.

Theoretically, this research supports and extends the frameworks of Schein [1], Bass and Riggio [3], and Imai [6], emphasizing that effective HRD in the public sector requires both cultural transformation and systematic process improvement. It also contributes to the growing literature on public administration reform by demonstrating how CI principles—traditionally used in industrial contexts—can be effectively applied in bureaucratic environments to enhance learning and innovation.

5.6 Practical Implications

Practically, the study suggests that the Medan City Regional Secretariat should institutionalize continuous improvement practices across all departments through structured feedback mechanisms, regular performance reviews, and cross-functional learning forums. Leadership training programs should focus on developing transformational competencies, while HRD policies should emphasize recognition-based motivation and cultural alignment. These measures will collectively foster an adaptive, learning-oriented organizational environment capable of responding to complex public service demands.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the role of continuous improvement in strengthening the relationship between organizational culture, leadership, and motivation toward human resource development at the Medan City Regional Secretariat. The findings highlight that a strong organizational culture, characterized by shared values and mutual trust, fosters an environment conducive to employee learning and professional growth. Effective leadership particularly transformational and participatory styles plays a critical role in guiding employees toward organizational goals and cultivating intrinsic motivation for continuous self-development.

Employee motivation emerged as a key psychological driver that sustains engagement in human resource development (HRD) initiatives. Motivated employees are more likely to embrace organizational changes, participate in training programs, and contribute to innovation in public services. However, the study also found that these relationships become more robust and sustainable when moderated by continuous improvement practices. Continuous improvement provides the structural and cultural mechanisms necessary for learning, feedback, and adaptation, ensuring that HRD processes remain relevant to organizational needs and evolving public sector challenges.

Overall, the integration of continuous improvement into organizational culture and leadership practices enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of HRD. It transforms the workplace into a dynamic learning environment that values reflection, innovation, and shared responsibility. From a practical perspective, the study suggests that public institutions should institutionalize continuous improvement as part of their strategic HRD framework to enhance employee competence and organizational performance.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to the understanding of how cultural, leadership, and motivational dynamics interact within a continuous improvement framework in the public sector. Future research is encouraged to expand this study using a mixed-method approach or comparative analysis across multiple government institutions to further validate and generalize the findings.

References

[1] E. H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 5th ed. San Francisco, CA: JosseyBass, 2017.
[2] J. P. Kotter, *Leading Change*, Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2012.
[3] B. M. Bass and R. E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, 3rd ed. New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2019.
[4] S. P. Robbins and T. A. Judge, *Organizational Behavior*, 18th ed. London, UK: Pearson Education, 2019.
[5] J. Oakland, *Total Quality Management and Operational Excellence: Text with Cases*, 5th ed. London, UK: Routledge, 2014.
[6] M. Imai, *Kaizen: The Key to Japan's Competitive Success*, New York, NY: McGrawHill, 2012.
[7] C. Handy, *Understanding Organizations*, 4th ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019.
[8] G. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 9th ed. Boston, MA: Pearson, 2019.
[9] R. L. Daft, *Management*, 14th ed. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning, 2020.
[10] F. Herzberg, *The Motivation to Work*, New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

[11] J. Bessant and J. Francis, “Developing Continuous Improvement Capability,” *International Journal of Operations & Production Management*, vol. 19, no. 11, pp. 1106–1119, 2018.
[12] W. E. Deming, *Out of the Crisis*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019.
[13] N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 5th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018.
[14] J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018.
[15] V. Braun and V. Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 77–101, 2006.
[16] Y. S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985.
[17] American Psychological Association (APA), *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*, Washington, D.C.: APA, 2017.
[18] Social Research Association (SRA), *Ethical Guidelines for Social Research*, London, UK: SRA, 2021.
[19] Rahayu, S. (2023). Modul Manajemen Sumber Daya Manusia. Medan: Universitas Pembangunan Panca Budi.
[20] Rahayu, S. (2018). Pengaruh motivasi dan disiplin terhadap prestasi kerja karyawan di PT. Langkat Nusantara Kepong Kabupaten Langkat. JUMANT, 9(1), 115–132.
[21] Rahayu, Sri. "Pengaruh Kualitas Sumber Daya Manusia Terhadap Kinerja Karyawan Pada Koperasi Unit Desa di Lau Gumba Brastagi Sumatera Utara." Jurnal Manajemen Tools 12, no. 1 (2020): 51.
[22] Rahayu, S. (2020). The Effect of Transformational Leadership on Work Discipline and Employee Performance. International Journal for Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field, 6(2), 250-253.
[23] Kholik, K., Sudirman, I., & Arifin, Y. (2022). The Role of Leadership on Sustainable Improvement in Improving Product Quality in The Division of PT. North Sumatra Coal Inalum. *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences (IJHESS)*, *4*(1), 48-56.
[24] Kholik, K., & Yusri, M. (2025). Challenges of Human Resource Management Towards Optimizing Public Service Performance in Realizing Sustainable Development at the Population and Civil Registration Service of Medan City. *International Journal of Health, Economics, and Social Sciences (IJHESS)*, *7*(1), 449-454.
[25] Kholik, K. (2018, October). Effect of Self-Eficacy and Locus of Control on Small and Medium Entertainment Small Scale: Kholilul Kholik. In *International Conference of ASEAN Prespective and Policy (ICAP)* (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 214-225).