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From Motivation to Performance: Evaluating the Impacts of Democratic, Autocratic, and Laissez-Faire Leadership in Civil Associations

Maryam I. E. Al-Muhanna¹, Abu Elnasr E. Sobaih^{1, 2*}

¹Master of Business Administration, Management Department, College of Business Administration, King Faisal University, Al-Ahsa 31982, Saudi Arabia.

²Management Department, College of Business Administration, King Faisal University, Al-Ahsa 31982, Saudi Arabia.

*Corresponding author: Abu Elnasr E. Sobaih, asobaih@kfu.edu.sa

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Abstract: This research investigates the direct impact of the three leadership styles (democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire) on employee performance in nonprofit, civil associations and the indirect impact via employee motivation. Data collected via a structured, pretested, questionnaire from employees in civil associations in Al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia. SmartPLS 4 (PLS-SEM) was utilized to evaluate measurement and structural models. The results showed that democratic leadership is the most impactful style significantly driving both motivation and performance. Autocratic leadership exerts a positive significant effect on performance but not on motivation. Laissez-faire leadership influences motivation positively but has nonsignificant effect on performance. The results confirmed that employee motivation is a mediator in the link between leadership styles and employee performance. The study underscores the necessity for participative and supportive leadership practices in nonprofit organizations is largely driven by its ability to enhance employee motivation, which serves as the primary pathway to improved performance outcomes.

Keywords: leadership style; democratic leadership; autocratic leadership; laissez-faire leadership; motivation; performance; civil associations; Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Leadership is defined as the process of guiding and influencing group members toward common goals, where a leader's actions determine how individuals collaborate and complete tasks (Guterman, 2023). Win and Priyashantha (2016) defined leadership style as a set of behaviors employed by a leader to influence followers to achieve organizational objectives. This study focuses on Lewin et al., (1939) classic taxonomy of participatory leadership styles: autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire. Autocratic leadership centralizes decision-making authority in the leader, restricting follower input; democratic leadership encourages participation while maintaining the leader's accountability and laissez-faire leadership extensively delegates authority with minimal direct guidance (Guterman, 2023).

Nonprofit civil associations differ fundamentally from public or private sector organizations. While private firms are driven by financial profitability and public agencies by bureaucratic regulations, civil associations operate on mission-driven, altruistic mandates. They rely heavily on value alignment, lower compensation structures, and discretionary employee effort. Consequently, leadership effectiveness in civil society depends less on formal authority or monetary incentives and more on psychological contract fulfillment and intrinsic motivation. Recent empirical evidence (Dadić Fruk et al. 2026) from the non-profit sector demonstrates that employee performance is significantly

influenced by leadership practices and motivation strategies. Dadić Fruk et al. (2026) indicated that leadership strategies offering support, clear guidance, which enhance employee motivation and creativity, hence improve performance. Ullah et al. (2024) asserted that inadequate leadership practices could lower employees' work-related outcomes in NGOs. It was indicated that insufficient trust in leadership may result in employee disengagement and increased turnover rates. Aboramadan and Dahleez (2020) highlighted that leadership can impact employee satisfaction, effectiveness, favorable work attitudes and performance.

In the Saudi public sector, leadership styles collectively account for a considerable portion of variance in employee motivation, with paternalistic, transformational, and laissez-faire styles demonstrating notable positive effects (Altheeb, 2020). In nonprofit organizations, leadership has been shown to affect job outcomes. To illustrate, research on the NGO in Cambodia concluded that democratic and laissez-faire leadership styles have a positive relationship with the performance of employees (Leangseng et al., 2022). Conversely, authoritative leadership does not have a major attachment to employee performance (Leangseng et al., 2022). Research from the private sector in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia suggests that democratic leadership is more effective than autocratic and laissez-faire leadership and is substantially correlated with employee performance (Al-mutairi et al., 2023).

Despite the above discussed studies, research remains limited in its geographic and industry coverage, and it seldom treats civil associations as a distinct category as non-profit sector. Despite growing research on leadership and employee performance, significant deficiencies persist in Saudi nonprofit civil organizations, particularly amid the escalating demands of Vision 2030 and the need to maintain high performance (Ahmed & Arabi, 2025). An empirical gap persists because research infrequently distinguishes among civil associations, and data remain limited in scope, despite findings indicating a correlation between leadership styles and job performance in Saudi nonprofit environments (Leangseng et al., 2022). Furthermore, while previous research underscores the significance of motivation and demonstrates that leadership can influence both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors, there is a paucity of studies that explicitly investigate employee motivation as a mediating variable between leadership style and employee performance in nonprofit settings (Altheeb, 2020). This research addresses this gap by examining how specific leadership styles, authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire, affect employee performance in Saudi non-profit civil society organizations, using employee motivation as a mediating variable. The research questions are: what is the impact of leadership style on employee motivation and performance? Does employee motivation play a mediating role in the relationship between leadership style and employee performance?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Autocratic leadership, motivation and performance

Autocratic leadership is characterized by centralized authority, top-down communication, close supervision, and strict compliance with hierarchical directives (Gutterman, 2023; Hadnot-Harris, 2021). Leangseng et al. (2022) found that the autocratic style had statistically nonsignificant effect on employee performance in a Cambodian NGO. Dadić Fruk et al. (2026) found that autocratic leadership is inversely correlated with employee motivation in nonprofit organizations. The same authors recommended that autocratic leadership should not be used as a dominant leadership approach in such contexts. They also noted that autocratic leadership is often linked to diminished job satisfaction, reduced commitment, and inferior performance. Autocratic leadership has

negative effect on organizational culture and retention compared to other styles (Win & Priyashantha, 2016). In the Saudi Arabian workplace, Altheeb (2020) determined that the autocratic leadership style did not substantially increase employee motivation. An empirical study of Malawian SMEs by Mphaluwa et al. (2025) found that autocratic leadership had positive and significant direct and indirect influence on employee performance, which was mediated by employee engagement. Altheeb's (2020) argued that leadership style might differentially impact employees' motivations based on the workplace environment and cultural values. Based on these studies, this research proposes:

H1: Autocratic leadership style has significant impact on employee motivation in civil associations.

H2: Autocratic leadership style has significant impact on employee performance in civil associations.

2.2. Democratic leadership, motivation and performance

Democratic leaders promote two-way communication, open consultation and shared decision-making (Guttermann, 2023, Sah 2025). Sah (2025) found a positive correlation between democratic leadership style and employee motivation, asserting that involving employees in the decision-making process enhances their motivation. Democratic leadership is opposed to the autocratic one based on sharing power and information with subordinates and regarding them as highly appreciated partners in the leadership process (Guttermann, 2023). Akparep et al. (2019) noted that democratic leadership was the most prevalent among employees at TumaKavi Development Association, a nonprofit in Ghana, and was positively correlated with organizational success. Leangseng et al. (2022) concluded that democratic leadership had a positive impact on employees' performance in nonprofit settings.

Both Aljohani (2021) and Mabrouk (2022) found that democratic leadership correlate with high or above-average employee performance, and that increasing awareness of democratic behaviors can further improve efficiency. Sah (2025) indicated that democratic leadership positively influences both employee motivation and performance. A qualitative study by Larik and Lashari (2022) underscores democratic leadership as "highly useful" for long-term employee performance, contending that although autocratic leadership can influence performance, democratic and participative styles are more advantageous for maintaining efficiency and motivation over time. Yuliyzar (2023) indicated that effective implementation of democratic leadership enhances employee motivation by fostering participation in problem-solving and decision-making; hence, stimulating excitement to attain organizational objectives. Mphaluwa et al. (2025) found that democratic leadership has a strong positive impact on employee engagement and performance in the Malawian SMEs private sector. Based on these studies, this research proposes:

H3: Democratic Leadership style has significant impact on employee motivation in civil associations.

H4: Democratic leadership style has significant impact on employee performance in civil associations.

2.3. Laissez-faire leadership, motivation and performance

Laissez-faire leadership grants followers' substantial autonomy with minimal non-interventionist oversight (Davis, 2020; Guttermann, 2023; Sah 2025). Akparep et al. (2019) found that laissez-faire leadership was the second most prevalent leadership style, following democratic leadership. Sah (2025) indicated that the laissez-faire leadership positively influences employee engagement and performance, as permitting employees autonomy can enhance both aspects. The findings of one Cambodian NGO (Leangseng et al. 2022) also reflect the

same idea, showing that laissez-faire leadership could positively correlate with employee performance. On the other hand, Altheeb (2020) found that laissez-faire leadership had a weak correlation with employee motivation inside the Saudi Arabian work environment. The study revealed that this leadership style had a minimal impact on improving employee motivation. Similarly, Davis (2020) found that laissez-faire leadership within a nonprofit organization in the Caribbean did not substantially predict job satisfaction among employees, and none of the styles of leadership (transformational, transactional, or laissez-faire) correlated significantly with job satisfaction. In Saudi situation, Alsadaan et al. (2025) noted that laissez-faire leadership increased nurses' intrinsic motivation significantly but also had a significant negative direct effect on task performance. Dadić Fruk et al. (2026) discovered in a nonprofit environment that laissez-faire leadership negatively correlates with employee motivation; Based on these studies, this research proposes:

H5: Laissez-Faire leadership style has significant impact on employee motivation in civil associations.

H6: Laissez-Faire leadership style has significant impact on employee performance in civil associations.

2.4. Employee motivation and performance

Employee motivation is a key determinant of enhancing performance, as motivated individuals are more likely to invest effort, maintain commitment, and facilitate the attainment of corporate objectives (Mohamed et al., 2025). Motivation is characterized as a psychological process that creates direction, tenacity, and goal-oriented conduct. Muogbo (2013) describes it as an individual strength that enhances performance and guides employees towards the attainment of certain objectives (Mohamed et al., 2025).

Riyanto et al. (2021) found in their research on IT personnel that work motivation positively influences employee performance. Their findings suggest that motivated employees are more inclined to be engaged, imaginative, and proficient in attaining targeted work outcomes. The study highlighted that fostering employee motivation can enhance performance and facilitate the attainment of organizational objectives. In the nonprofit context, Ndukw and Ofondu (2018) highlighted that motivation serves as a mechanism for nonprofit organizations to attain their objectives, including enhanced employee performance. In a study of local non-governmental organizations in Mogadishu, Mohamed et al. (2025) found that both financial incentives, including salary, bonuses, and compensation, and non-financial incentives, such as enhanced working conditions, recognition, and opportunities for personal development, significantly improve employee performance. Based on these studies, this research proposes:

H7. Employee motivation has a significant impact on employee performance in civil associations.

2.5. Leadership style, motivation and performance

Guterresa (2020) noted that motivation mediated the relationship between leadership styles and employee performance, indicating that motivation is crucial in elucidating how leadership affects performance outcomes. Dadić Fruk et al. (2026) highlighted motivation as a crucial mechanism connecting leadership styles to employee performance in nonprofit businesses. Aboramadan and Dahleez (2020) found that leadership styles and work outcomes in nonprofit companies are mutually linked, with work engagement acting as a crucial mediator. Altheeb (2020) demonstrated that a significant proportion of the variance in employees' motivation can be explained by leadership style, which, in turn, affects performance. The research emphasized that motivation is regarded as an explanatory factor that clarifies how and why various leadership styles influence

job outcomes.

Ahmad and Fachrur (2025) found that motivation partially mediates the relationship between leadership styles (democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire) and performance. Ekhsan and Setiawan (2021) also demonstrated that motivation is an effective mediating variable in the relationship between leadership and employee performance. In addition, the study by Navarez et al. (2024) on the relationship between transformational leadership, motivation, and performance among secondary school teachers in the Philippines found a partial mediating effect of motivation, indicating that the overall effect of leadership on performance was 39.4%. Athapaththu and Rebecca (2025) also found mediating roles for work motivation and organizational citizenship behavior in the relationships among leadership style, work environment, and employee performance. Taken together, these theoretical and empirical findings imply that motivation is a mediator between leadership styles and performance (**Figure1**). Based on these studies, this research proposes:

H8. Employee motivation mediates the relationship between autocratic leadership style and employee performance in civil associations.

H9. Employee motivation mediates the relationship between democratic leadership style and employee performance in civil associations.

H10. Employee motivation mediates the relationship between laissez-faire leadership style and employee performance in civil associations.

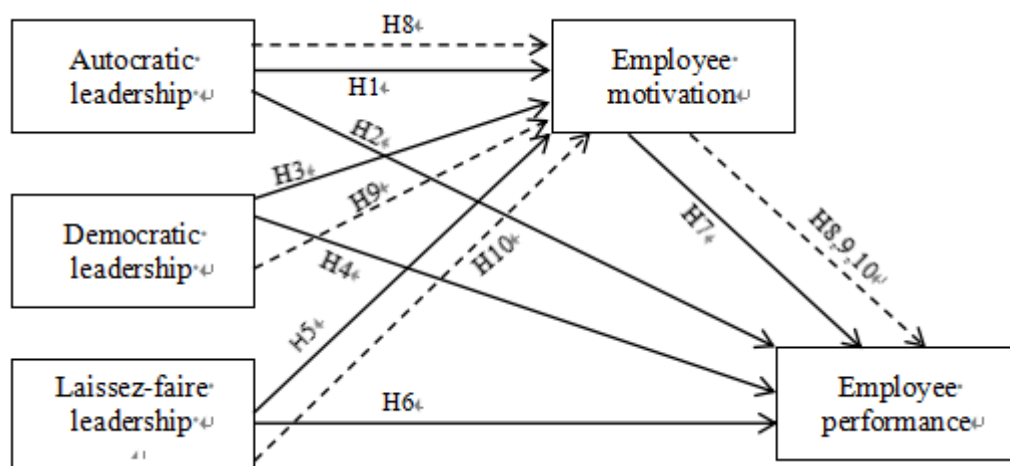


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

Source: Adapted from the literature review.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and instrument

This study adopted a quantitative causal research design. The quantitative research method is suitable for the present study because of its capacity to gather and analyze numerical data using a structured questionnaire. It allows us to test hypotheses about the relationship between different variables. The data for this study was collected by means of a structured questionnaire which is based on existing literature on constructs related to leadership, motivation and performance. The questionnaire had two parts. The first section covers demographic data, including variables such as gender, age, level of education, and monthly salary. The second section includes the research items. All items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). The scale items were all drawn from earlier research. The employee performance scale (4 items) was adopted from Rounds et al. (1987) and Win and Priyashantha (2016). The leadership style scale (13 items evaluating

autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire styles) was adapted from Lewin et al. (1939). Finally, the employee motivation scale (14 items) was adapted from Standage et al. (2003) and modified to fit the context of civil associations. The employee motivation of 14 items was adapted to fit with work in civil associations. The instrument underwent back-translation (English–Arabic–English) by bilingual scholars to guarantee semantic equivalence. Content validity was reviewed by three organizational behavior professors. A pilot study ($n = 30$) confirmed scale readability and operational feasibility.

3.2. Population and Sample

The population for this research is comprised employees of civil organizations in Al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia. Given the specialized characteristics of the target population, A convenience sampling approach was utilized due to organizational access parameters. Data was collected between March and May 2026 via self-administered questionnaire distributed through official civil association channels. Out of 420 distributed surveys, 335 were returned, and 312 complete, valid responses were retained (74.2% usable response rate). Non-response bias was evaluated by comparing early (first 50%) and late (last 50%) respondents across demographic variables using independent t -tests; no significant differences were observed ($p > .05$). The sample size for this study is deemed to be adequate for PLS-SEM analysis. The sample size is large enough to undertake mediation analysis and bootstrapping within the PLS-SEM analysis method suggested by Hair and Alamer (2022).

The sample shows a relatively balanced gender representation with a slightly higher participation rate from female employees (54.02%) compared to male employees (45.98%) (**Table1**). The workforce in these civil associations is predominantly young to middle-aged. The largest segment belongs to the 21–30 age group (35.37%), followed closely by those aged 41–50 (25.72%) and 31–40 (25.08%). Older employees (51 and above) account for the smallest share at 13.83%. The respondents are highly educated, with an overwhelming majority holding a bachelor's degree (61.41%) or a master's degree and above (16.72%). Combined, nearly 78% of the civil association workforce has completed higher education. More than half of the respondents (51.45%) earn less than 5,000 SR per month. However, a distinct 21.86% earn over 10,000 SR.

Table 1. The sample demographic

Demographic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	168	54.02%
	Male	143	45.98%
Age	21–30 years	110	35.37%
	31–40 years	78	25.08%
	41–50 years	80	25.72%
	51 years and above	43	13.83%
Education Level	High school	36	11.58%
	Diploma	32	10.29%
	Bachelor's degree	191	61.41%
	Master's degree and above	52	16.72%
Monthly Income	Less than 5,000 SR	160	51.45%
	5,001–7,500 SR	55	17.68%
	7,501–10,000 SR	28	9.00%
	Over 10,000 SR	68	21.86%

Source: Empirical survey data.

4. Results

Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS 4 (Hair & Alamer, 2022).

4.1. Common Method Bias (CMB)

Given the nature of the data collection tool as single-source, cross-sectional design, CMB was assessed. This included several procedures, e.g. Harman's single-factor test accounted for 38.4% of the variance (< 50% cutoff). Full collinearity VIF assessments yielded construct VIFs between 1.84 and 3.12 (< 3.3 threshold), confirming CMB is not a threat.

4.2. Measurement Model Assessment & Model Refinement

In accordance with Hair and Alamer (2022), indicator loadings, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity were evaluated. Indicator's reliability was examined using standardized outer loadings. Loadings should exceed .70, although values between .60 and .70 may be acceptable in exploratory research (Hair & Alamer, 2022) (Table 2).

Table 2. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct/ indicators	Cronbach's α	CR (ρ_c)	AVE
Autocratic	.712	.828	.518
Democratic	.896	.925	.716
Laissez-Faire	.811	.870	.580
Motivation	.966	.969	.693
Performance	.929	.949	.824

Source: Empirical survey data.

Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha (α) and composite reliability (ρ_c), while convergent validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Values of α and composite reliability above .70 indicate acceptable reliability, and AVE values above .50 indicate adequate convergent validity (Hair & Alamer, 2022). As Table 2 shows Cronbach's alpha (conservative lower bound of reliability); CR (ρ_c) = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Thresholds: $\alpha \geq .70$, CR $\geq .70$, AVE $\geq .50$ (Hair & Alamer 2022) (Table 2).

Discriminant validity was assessed using three complementary criteria: (i) the Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) (Table 3), which is the most conservative approach in PLS-SEM; (ii) the Fornell–Larcker criterion; and (iii) examination of cross-loadings. HTMT values below .90 indicate adequate discriminant validity for conceptually similar constructs; the conservative threshold is .85 (Henseler et al., 2015). To empirically substantiate construct distinctiveness given the elevated HTMT ratios among participative leadership behaviors and motivation, HTMT bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was executed to derive 90% bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) confidence intervals. None of the upper confidence limits for the construct pairs included 1.00 (e.g., Democratic–Laissez-Faire 90% CI = [0.941, 0.992]; Laissez-Faire–Motivation 90% CI = [0.895, 0.978]), providing statistical evidence of discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2015). Furthermore, a series of model comparison tests was conducted evaluating the baseline 5-factor measurement model against constrained alternative models (merging Democratic and Laissez-Faire into a single leadership factor, as well as a single-factor model). The baseline 5-factor model demonstrated significantly superior model fit ($\Delta\chi^2(4) = 142.85, p < .001$; $\Delta AIC = 1245.3$ vs. 1388.1), empirically confirming that the

operationalized constructs represent distinct latent dimensions despite sharing high structural variance in nonprofit contexts.

Table 3. Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) of Correlations

Construct	Autocratic	Democratic	Laissez-Faire	Motivation	Performance
Autocratic	—				
Democratic	.808	—			
Laissez-Faire	.757	.989*	—		
Motivation	.654	.937*	.941*	—	
Performance	.627	.756	.705	.744	—

Source: Empirical survey data.

4.3. Structural Model Assessment and Model Refinement

After establishing satisfactory measurement properties, the structural model was evaluated to examine the hypothesized relationships among leadership styles, employee motivation, and employee performance. Evaluation included collinearity (VIF), coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), path coefficients with bootstrap-based significance testing, and mediation effects. Variance inflation factor (VIF) values for all structural paths were examined. $VIF < 5.00$ indicates absence of problematic collinearity (Hair & Alamer 2022). Leadership styles explain 80.9% ($R^2 = .809$) of the variance in Motivation (substantial) and 55.6% ($R^2 = .556$) of the variance in Performance.

The standardized path coefficients (β) represent the strength and direction of the hypothesized relationships. Statistical significance was assessed through bootstrapping with 5,000 re-samples (two-tailed), following the procedure recommended by Hair & Alamer (2022) (Table 4).

Table 4. Direct Effects –Path Coefficients with Bootstrap Significance

Hyp.	Path	β	T-statistic	p-value	Decision
H1	Autocratic → Motivation	.025	0.482	.630 n.s.	Not supported
H2	Autocratic → Performance	.232	3.745	< .001***	Supported
H3	Democratic → Motivation	.561	8.412	< .001***	Supported
H4	Democratic → Performance	.189	2.918	.004**	Supported
H5	Laissez-Faire → Motivation	.352	5.207	< .001***	Supported
H6	Laissez-Faire → Performance	−.125	1.612	.107 n.s.	Not supported
H7	Motivation → Performance	.500	7.638	< .001***	Supported

Note: ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; n.s. = not significant at $\alpha = .05$. Source: Empirical survey data.

Democratic leadership has the strongest direct influence on employee motivation ($\beta = .561$, $p < .001$). Employee motivation, in turn, has a strong positive effect on employee performance ($\beta = .500$, $p < .001$). Autocratic leadership shows statistically significant positive direct effect on performance ($\beta = .232$, $p < .001$), but its effect on motivation is negligible and non-significant ($\beta = .025$, $p = .630$). This pattern suggests that directive control in the sampled civil associations may push short-term task output without raising the underlying motivational state. Laissez-faire leadership has a significant positive effect on motivation ($\beta = .352$, $p < .001$) but a small, non-significant negative effect on performance ($\beta = −.125$, $p = .107$), producing the mixed structural pattern reported in Table 4.

Mediation was tested by bootstrapping the specific indirect effects of each leadership style on performance through employee motivation, following Hair and Alamer (2022). A significant indirect effect ($p < .05$) indicates mediation; the direct path determines whether the mediation is full, partial, or complementary/competitive (Table 5).

Table 5. Specific Indirect Effects –Bootstrap Significance

Hyp.	Indirect Path	β (indirect)	T-statistic	p-value	Mediation
H8	Democratic → Motivation → Performance	.281	5.832	< .001***	Partial (complementary)
H9	Autocratic → Motivation → Performance	.013	0.471	.637 n.s.	No mediation
H10	Laissez-Faire → Motivation → Performance	.176	4.188	< .001***	Full (direct path n.s.)

Source: Empirical survey data.

The observation of complementary partial mediation effect in the democratic leadership path means that the style works through two channels – direct and indirect –with the latter channel involving the motivational process. The lack of any mediation effect in the Autocratic leadership path indicates that the impact of this leadership style on performance does not depend on motivation, whereas full mediation effect in the Laissez-Faire leadership path means that this style only influences performance through motivating employees. Total effects combine the direct and indirect influences of each leadership style on performance (Table 6).

Table 6. Total Effects on Employee Performance

Leadership Style	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Total Effect
Democratic	.189**	.281***	.470***
Autocratic	.232***	.013 n.s.	.245***
Laissez-Faire	−.125 n.s.	.176***	.051 n.s.

Note: ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; n.s. = not significant. Source: Empirical survey data.

Democratic leadership has the strongest total impact on performance ($\beta_{\text{total}} = .470$), driven almost entirely by its indirect pathway through motivation ($\beta_{\text{indirect}} = .281$) (Figure 2). Autocratic leadership shows a moderate total effect (.245), operating almost exclusively through its direct path. Laissez-faire leadership has a statistically non-significant total effect (.051) on performance because its positive indirect pathway (.176) is offset by a negative direct path (−.125).

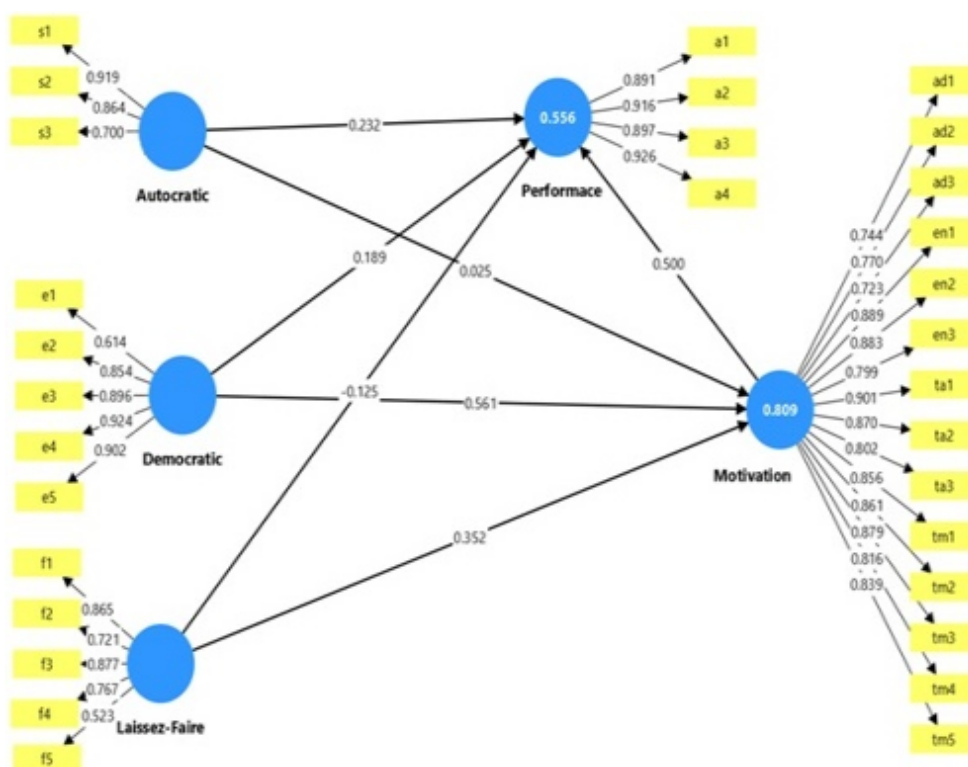


Figure 2. Structural model.

Source: Empirical survey data.

5. Discussion

The findings showed that leadership styles have a significant impact on the performance of employees in non-profit organizations in Al-Ahsa, with significant differences in the degree and nature of the effect. Democratic leadership had a significant positive impact on performance, stressing the need for participative, supportive and consultative leadership practices. These findings are in line with past studies that democratic leadership positively affects employee performance by creating a favorable work environment and involving employees in decision-making processes. Aljohani (2021) noted that effective leadership in organizational contexts in Saudi Arabia is positively linked to improved individual performance. This finding concur with Mabrouk (2022) and Sah (2025) that democratic leadership positively impacts job effectiveness in organizational contexts. This finding also align with Akparep et al. (2019), who indicated that democratic leadership was the predominant leadership style in nonprofit organizations and was positively correlated with organizational success. Leangseng et al. (2022) similarly found that democratic leadership significantly enhances staff performance in a Cambodian NGO.

Autocratic leadership significantly influences performance, but it does not have any impact on motivation. This implies that although autocratic leadership leads to positive outcomes in terms of performance, it may not increase employees' involvement in work. This is consistent with Hadnot-Harris (2021), who argued that autocratic leadership is effective in increasing performance in the short run but has detrimental effects on morale and satisfaction. This result partially corroborates Mphaluwa et al. (2025), who identified a beneficial influence of autocratic leadership on staff performance in resource-constrained SMEs, wherein a defined hierarchy and guidance may enhance job execution. However, it contradicts the findings of Leangseng et al. (2022), who determined that autocratic leadership exerted a minimal and statistically insignificant negative impact on performance within a Cambodian NGO, as well as those of Dadić Fruk et al. (2026), who identified a negative correlation between

autocratic leadership and employee motivation in nonprofit organizations. This disparity can be attributed to the notion that autocratic leadership may bolster performance via control, structure, and explicit directives; however, it does not inherently augment employees' psychological drive or sense of engagement.

Laissez-faire leadership had no significant effect on performance, implying that the absence of guidance and organization can impair task completion. This is consistent with Dastane (2020) and Leangseng et al. (2022), who noted that laissez-faire leadership may be ineffective in an organized environment where there is a need for guidance. This finding aligns largely with Davis (2020), who determined that laissez-faire leadership did not significantly forecast job satisfaction inside a nonprofit organization. However, it contradicts Sah (2025), who discovered that laissez-faire leadership favorably impacted employee engagement and performance by providing employees with autonomy. This disparity can be elucidated by the notion that autonomy enhances motivation and performance solely when underpinned by explicit objectives, feedback, and accountability.

The findings showed that the leadership approach that influences employees' motivational levels to a greater degree is democratic leadership, meaning that participation of employees in the decision-making process makes them feel more committed and part of the organization. It is supported by the situational leadership theory presented by Hersey and Blanchard in 1969, according to which supportive leadership styles result in increased maturity and motivation of employees. This finding aligns with Yuliyzar (2023), who asserted that democratic leadership fosters employee engagement by promoting involvement in problem-solving and decision-making. It also corroborates Larik and Lashari (2022), who asserted that democratic and participative leadership styles are more effective in sustaining long-term employee motivation and performance compared to authoritarian leadership. Altheeb (2020) found that leadership style has a direct impact on the motivational levels of Saudi workers, especially when it implies communicating and supporting employees.

Autocratic leadership proved to be ineffective in terms of influencing motivation, implying the leader's inability to engage subordinates psychologically. At the same time, the effects of laissez-faire leadership have been proven to be positive for employee motivation but do not improve employee productivity. The discovery about autocratic leadership aligns with Altheeb (2020), who determined that authoritarian leadership did not substantially enhance employee motivation. The beneficial impact of laissez-faire leadership on motivation somewhat corroborates Sah (2025), who found that autonomy could elevate employee involvement and motivation. Nonetheless, its ineffectiveness on performance indicates that autonomy alone may be inadequate to enhance productivity without leadership that provides direction, feedback, and coordination. This finding supports the conclusion made by Alsadaan et al. (2025) regarding the important mediating role played by intrinsic motivation in the leadership-performance relationship. It also partially corroborates Alsadaan et al. (2025), noted that laissez-faire leadership may enhance intrinsic motivation, despite its intricate impacts on task performance. This suggests that leadership may affect performance indirectly via motivation rather than solely through direct oversight or regulation.

It has been found that employee motivation serves as a mediator in the leadership-performance relationship. More specifically, it has been found that there is an influence of democratic leadership style on the performance of employees directly as well as indirectly by way of motivation, showing the existence of partial complementary mediation. Such findings are supported by Ahmad & Fachrur (2025) who established that motivation enhances the

connection between leadership and performance. Similarly, Navarez et al. (2024) also found that motivation acts as the mediating mechanism that helps to enhance the impact of leadership on performance. This finding corroborates the research of Athapaththu and Rebecca (2025), which identified work motivation as a mediating factor in the interaction among leadership style, work environment, and employee performance. Consequently, motivation can be regarded as a fundamental conduit via which leadership techniques are converted into tangible employee performance. However, it has been found that there is no mediation in the autocratic leadership-performance relationship. On the other hand, it has been observed that there is complete mediation in the case of laissez-faire leadership where it impacts performance through motivation. The lack of mediation in the autocratic leadership-performance connection aligns with Altheeb (2020), who found that authoritarian leadership did not substantially improve employee motivation. This also corroborates the findings of Dadić Fruk et al. (2026), who demonstrated that autocratic leadership adversely affects motivation in nonprofit contexts. Autocratic leadership may influence performance via direct control and explicit directives rather than through motivation. The complete mediation observed in the laissez-faire leadership-performance relationship somewhat corroborates Dadić Fruk et al. (2026), who indicated that laissez-faire leadership may affect performance via mediating processes rather than through a direct effect.

5.1. Implications of the study

This study enhances the literature on leadership styles, employee motivation, and performance by investigating these links within underexplored industry and country, particularly civil association in Al-Ahsa. The results offer empirical evidence that leadership styles affect performance both directly and indirectly via employee motivation; hence, establishing motivation as a crucial mediating factor in this relationship. Moreover, the findings align with overarching leadership theories that highlight the significance of participative and contextually aware leadership approaches in enhancing job outcomes. The study indicates that employee motivation is not solely a result of leadership but a critical explanatory factor through which leadership styles influence employee performance in mission-driven nonprofit companies.

These findings have numerous practical implications for leaders of civil associations in Al-Ahsa. The beneficial impact of democratic leadership on employee performance indicates that leaders of civil associations ought to embrace participative, supportive, and consultative approaches by engaging employees in decision-making, fostering idea exchange, and recognizing their contributions to the organization's mission. The results underscore the significance of employee motivation in improving performance. Civil associations should not depend exclusively on administrative oversight and job distribution; instead, they must cultivate an inspiring work atmosphere through acknowledgment, significant duties, advancement prospects, and efficient communication. Third, autocratic leadership may be suitable in circumstances requiring rapid decision-making, strict discipline, or unambiguous guidance. Nevertheless, it should not be embraced as the primary leadership style, as excessive control may diminish employees' motivation, inventiveness, and long-term commitment. Fourth, laissez-faire leadership must be implemented wisely. While autonomy may enhance motivation, a lack of supervision, feedback, and accountability might reduce performance. Consequently, leaders must balance autonomy with explicit expectations, consistent follow-up, and constructive criticism. The findings highlight the significance of leadership development within civil associations. Considering the constrained resources, diverse tasks, and mission-oriented character of nonprofit organizations,

leaders ought to cultivate a work environment that incorporates engagement, acknowledgment, transparency, and assistance to improve employee motivation and performance.

6. Conclusion, limitations and future research

This study investigated the impact of democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles on employee performance in Saudi Arabian civil associations, emphasizing the mediating role of employee motivation. Democratic leadership proved to have a powerful impact on both employee motivation and employee performance, which means that such leadership styles as participation, encouragement, and inclusivity play an important role in enhancing employees' sense of involvement, responsibility, and commitment to organizational goals. Conversely, autocratic leadership displayed an interesting pattern, where there was a significant effect on performance yet no significant effect on motivation. This means that directive leadership could play a crucial role in enabling tasks to be completed but does not have the ability to motivate employees. This indicates that authoritarian leadership may facilitate immediate job completion, although it may be less effective in fostering intrinsic drive or sustaining long-term employee engagement. On the other hand, laissez-faire leadership played a role in motivating workers, although it did not display consistency in its impact on performance. This means that too much autonomy on the part of employees might result in poor organizational performance unless it is accompanied by clear expectations, regular feedback, and accountability.

Motivation was validated as the main driver for employee performance and the major mediator in this case. It is clear from the findings that motivation partially mediated the effect of democratic leadership on performance, completely mediated the effect of laissez-faire leadership on performance, and did not mediate autocratic leadership on performance. These findings affirm that motivation is not solely a result of leadership but a crucial explanatory mechanism via which leadership styles can affect employee performance. The study suggests that democratic leadership is the most appropriate leadership style for civic groups, as it improves employee motivation and performance. The findings underscore the necessity for nonprofit leaders to equilibrate participation, structure, autonomy, and motivation to enhance organizational success.

This study was conducted on specific region and small sample size using a self-reporting questionnaire from employee in civil association in AlAhsa, Saudi Arabia. Future research could address the shortcomings noted above by employing longitudinal studies that examine changes over time. Future research could build on the current work by examining other mediating or moderating factors, including job satisfaction, organizational culture, and employee engagement. It could also conduct analyses across various geographic areas or industries. Also, given the diversity of leadership styles, examining contemporary approaches, such as transformational, servant, and ethical leadership, among employees in the nonprofit sector would be interesting. Future study could benefit from employing qualitative or mixed-method approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, to obtain a more profound understanding of employees' perceptions of leadership practices and motivational elements within civil associations.

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