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Transactional Leadership, Organizational Learning, and Performance in Pakistani Smes: Evidence from an Unsupported Mediation Pathway

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ABSTRACT

In resource constrained small and medium sized firms (SMEs), the link between transactional leadership, organizational learning and firm performance is still unclear. This study aims to assess the role of organizational learning as a mediator between transactional leadership and organizational performance of SMEs in Pakistan. Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to analyze the cross-sectional questionnaire data obtained from 400 owners/managers from Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur and Larkana. The correlation between transactional leadership and organizational learning was positive with $\beta = 0.637$, $t = 19.718$, $p < 0.001$. The linear relationship between organizational learning and performance was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.063$, $p = 0.378$) and the same was observed for the linear association between transactional leadership and performance ($\beta = 0.062$, $p = 0.362$). Also, the indirect effect was not significant ($p = 0.383$). This result separates out learning-related organizational processes from evidence that they are correlated with current performance. Implementation capacity, innovation, and absorptive capacity are potential mechanisms of conversion that were not tested as pathways in the focal pathway. The study enhances understandings of the concept of transactional leadership in EESMEs and provides opportunities for future research that are longitudinal and capability-centered.

Introduction

Transactional leadership involves clearly stated performance expectations, contingent reinforcement, monitoring and corrective feedback. These practices can contribute to providing consistent operations in SMEs, where coordination is usually informal, and managerial resources are limited. The implications for the organizational outcomes, however, are not obvious: while clearer procedures might encourage learning, those acquired could not be used in ways that enhance the firm's performance. Recent research has already revealed learning outcomes of transactional and transformational leadership and also studies from Pakistan have shown that transactional leadership can be linked with learning outcomes of individual employees [1, 2].

Organizational learning refers to processes that lead to gaining experience, making sense of it, sharing it and storing it. The emerging literature on SMEs shows a growing connection between learning and innovation, network-based knowledge and customer responsiveness but this may require other capacities that connect learning to actions by the organization [3, 4]. Emerging

market SMEs may be faced with limited financial, technological and strategic capabilities. Research on innovation and capability development in emerging economies such as Pakistan, highlights the fact that conditions of innovation matter more than acquiring knowledge per se [5, 6].

Organizational learning is sometimes seen as a necessary intermediate link between leadership, and performance. This guess should be tested empirically. A leader can spur checkups, reviews and incremental improvements without necessarily fostering experimentation or reallocation of resources or market adaptations. Likewise, if there is a poor relationship between learning and performance at the time of learning, this does not prove that learning is worthless. It can be a result of the boundaries of measurement, the lagged effect, other factors that affect performance or model specification.

This article analyzes the transactional leadership–organizational learning performance pathway based on survey data of 400 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) owners and managers of four cities of Sindh, Pakistan. Its contribution is on the assessment of the entire proposed mediation and not the organizational effectiveness based on the presence of learning practices only. Special note is also made that statistical conclusions are not necessarily the same as interpretations of potential barriers to implementation, as these interpretations are still hypotheses to be tested.

Theory and Hypothesis Development

Organizational learning as a capability

Organizational learning means processes whereby experience and information are made available for use as organizational knowledge. Recent validation studies in Pakistan studied organizational learning capabilities and SME studies related the concepts of knowledge management and learning to digital and competitive responses [7, 8]. Learning capability must, however, be separated from a performance itself. Feedback is an internal feedback process; to make improvements with productivity, customer value, or innovation, relevant learning needs to impact decision making or routines.

Transactional leadership and organizational performance

Defining clear objectives, providing feedback and offering rewards to management based on outcomes can enhance task integration and accountability. These may prove important in companies that do not have well-developed formal systems, but market conditions and complementary capabilities also have an impact on how well the company performs. The research on the nonfinancial measures of absorptive capacity and organizational learning, and learning in SMEs as a continuous process, shows that performance cannot be achieved based only on one managerial practice [9, 10]. The expected coordination benefits of transactional leadership give grounds for the first hypothesis, the same is stated as follows:

H1: Organisational performance is positively related to transactional leadership.

Transactional leadership and organizational learning

Structured feedback loops can be developed in the context of transactional leadership. Objectives define benchmarks, monitoring reveals gaps, and corrective action provides for lesson documentation and sharing opportunities. These may be more targeted to improving the tuning of existing processes. Theories of open and strategic innovation, as well as ambidextrous learning, make the distinction between routine exploitation and exploration of new knowledge, but do not mean that these two processes can be reversed [11, 12]. If it is believed that transactional leadership is related to learning related practices, then the second hypothesis is presented:

H2:Transactional leadership has a positive relationship with Organizational Learning.

Organizational learning and performance

Organizational learning can contribute to innovation when an organization acquires knowledge from the outside and translates the knowledge into products, processes and/or strategic decisions. The absorptive capacity theory and organization learning theory indicate that, the value of knowledge for performance is sometimes dependent on how the knowledge is integrated to the work of the organizations [13]. The literature on leadership, intellectual capital and innovation also focuses on various leadership avenues to consequences [14]. Learning - knowledge, therefore, should be correlated with performance of the organization, if learning knowledge is utilized appropriately, however correlation may vary depending on the context:

H3: There is a positive correlation between organizational learning and organizational performance.

The mediating role of organizational learning

A positive indirect link between transactional leadership and performance is possible, but is theoretical, as learning is promoted by the former and it is expected to lead to performance. But this claim needs to be explored in the light of the total indirect effect; an appreciable leadership–learning coefficient does not mean that mediation is present. Environmental dynamism may play a role in determining whether or not learning will lead to SME innovation, and the measurement of leadership constructs need some care [15, 16]. Evidence for SMEs shows that reliance on the mediation that may occur between different learning dimensions and performance could be incorrect and testing is important [17].

H4: The organizational learning has a positive mediation in the relationship between transactional leadership and organizational performance.

Method

Research design and setting

To investigate the association between leadership style, organizational learning and performance in SMEs in Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur and Larkanan in Sindh, Pakistan a quantitative, cross-sectional questionnaire design was used. The sampled businesses were said to be involved in manufacturing, services, retail/ trading and allied businesses. The available data are cross-sectional, perceptual and the proposed direction of relationships is only theoretical, and the temporal or causal ordering can be determined by this design.

Participants and data collection

A total of 400 responses were provided by SME owners and managers and found to be useful. A complete sampling frame of the eligible respondents was not available, and they had to have first-hand information about organizational practices, so the sampling used was purposive. Questionnaires were targeted and sent out, via SME networks, direct visits and referrals. It was noted that participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and academic use of the project was explained to the respondents. A pre-test for clarity on the questionnaire was carried out. Details of the fieldwork dates and invitation denominator, the response rate and the separate eligibility thresholds for individuals and the status of ethical review are not reported in the source document, and must therefore be confirmed from study records prior to submission.

Measures and source model

Five-point Likert-type questionnaire items were adapted from previous measures of organizational behavior and knowledge management. Transactional leadership, organizational learning, and organizational performance were determined using eight, six, and six items, respectively. The original study encompassed seven constructs that include transformational leadership, knowledge sharing, organizational justice, job satisfaction, among others. The pathway discussed in the present article is the one involving three constructs, but the results regarding the structure seem to be based on the larger model. However, the reported performance R2 should, therefore, not be interpreted as the explanatory power of the three variable model as re-estimated separately.

The questionnaire was embedded in a conceptual field of studies concerning measurement of leadership with the original Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, but later empirical studies emphasize the importance of testing dimensional specification [16]. The organizational learning capability instruments have been analysed also in a Pakistani educational context [7]. These studies provide measurement context but not evidence that the items used here are those from either publication. To support the measurement provenance, the full wording of the item(s), a source-to-item mapping, and any adaption of the items should be provided by the authors.

Table 1;Reported measurement characteristics of the larger seven-construct model

Construct	Items	Cronbach α	Composite reliability	AVE
Transformational leadership	8	0.851	0.855	0.628
Transactional leadership	8	0.858	0.864	0.502

Knowledge sharing	6	0.873	0.877	0.564
Organizational justice	6	0.808	0.811	0.522
Organizational learning	6	0.805	0.815	0.513
Job satisfaction	6	0.825	0.830	0.561
Organizational performance	6	0.892	0.895	0.654

Note. Values are reproduced from the source measurement table. The source narrative gives different alpha values for organizational learning and organizational performance; Table 1 should be reconciled against the original software output before publication. AVE = average variance extracted.

Statistical analysis

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was reported to do the measurement and structural assessment. The source analysis encompasses internal consistency of the models, as well as bootstrapped significance tests and standardised path descriptions, convergent and discriminant validity, structural collinearity, effect sizes, and explained variance. Different guidance is now current which advises the inclusion of full measurement diagnostics and the structure and uncertainty of all indirect effects [18, 19, 20, 21, 22]. The following manuscript lists the coefficient, t-statistics and p-values that are listed for the focal paths. Bootstrapping parameters and confidence intervals are not provided in the provided manuscript and so are not considered here.

Interpretation of path estimates: Indication of statistical non-significance vs. lack of an effect of the population. Direction of the reported indirect coefficient needs to be checked and the indirect relationship is assessed from the reported bootstrap p value. In addition, methodological guidelines encourage the use of effect size and predictive assessment in addition to binary hypothesis decision [23, 24].

Results

Sample profile and descriptive statistics

There were 34 women and 366 men among the 400 respondents. The percentage of owners in the sample was 27% and 73% were managers. Total response showed that 46.3% younger than 30 years while 24.8% in between 31-40 years old. The sample thus mostly represents managerial attitudes and there is significant gender imbalance present. The value of means for the three focal variables were found to be above the scale midpoint of five (Table 2). While these summaries describe the respondents to the survey and they are not representative of all Pakistani SMEs, they should not be generalized to the population without qualification.

Table 2; Descriptive statistics for focal constructs

Construct	N	Mean	SD
Transactional leadership	400	4.0100	0.67571
Organizational learning	400	4.0446	0.64094
Organizational performance	400	3.7667	0.93025

Measurement assessment

The respective values for the three focal constructs' source tables are Cronbach's alpha of 0.858 (transactional leadership), 0.805 (organizational learning) and 0.892 (organizational performance); and composite reliability is 0.864, 0.815, and 0.895, respectively. Reported AVE values are 0.502, 0.513, and 0.654. These summaries are above the normal levels of internal consistency and

convergent validity [18, 19, 20]. The author(s) did not provide model loadings, estimates of HTMT, and other discriminant validity diagnostics and they are thus not independent of this research.

Direct and indirect relationships

The focal structural relations are summarized in the Table 3. Transactional Leadership significantly and positively predicted organizational learning (β = 0.637, t = 19.718, p< 0.001) which supported H2. H1 and H3 were not supported as there was no statistical significance in any direct association between transactional leadership and performance (β = 0.062, p = 0.362) nor between organizational learning and performance (β = −0.063, p = 0.378). The indirect pathway (organizational learning) was also not significant (p = 0.383) and therefore fails to support H4.

Table 3;Reported structural results for the focal pathway

Hypothesis / relationship	β (reported)	t	p	Decision
H1: TSL → OP	0.062	0.912	0.362	Not supported
H2: TSL → OL	0.637	19.718	<0.001	Supported
H3: OL → OP	−0.063	0.881	0.378	Not supported
H4: TSL → OL → OP	+0.040†	0.872	0.383	Not supported

Note. TSL = transactional leadership; OL = organizational learning; OP = organizational performance. †The source manuscript reports a positive indirect coefficient (+0.040), but 0.637 × (−0.063) ≈ −0.040. The sign must be checked against the original PLS-SEM specific-indirect-effects output. The reported significance decision is retained pending this verification.

The source analysis revealed that R2 = 0.406 for organizational learning and f2 = 0.683 for the relationship between transactional leadership and organizational learning. The reported learning–performance effect size was in contrast f^2 = 0.000. A larger model was reported that also incorporates other predictors for an organizational performance R2 of .315, which cannot be attributed to the three focal variables. These results suggest strong 1st stage association, and no evidence for a statistically supported learning mediated association to the performance at the specified model.

Discussion

The primary empirical pattern is "asymmetric. While the learning–performance association was not statistically significant, the direct (transactional leadership to organizational learning) association was statistically significant. This discovery suggests that a simple understanding of organizational learning as mechanism whereby managerial feedback generates better outcomes at the level of the firm is warranted. It doesn't really negate the significance of learning, but rather plainly that even a positive initial-stage association cannot create a performing impact.

The first possible interpretation has to do with nature of learning. While these methods (Monitoring, Contingent reinforcement and Corrective feedback) may seem to be more related to exploitative learning (learning to do things better), the focus on skills acquisition may also be an indicator of exploratory learning (new ways of doing things). There is existing work that distinguishes these forms, and their roles in innovation [11, 12]. In the current research, however, the exploitative and the exploratory learning have not been measured separately. With this background, a greater emphasis on procedural learning can be inferred, rather than it being a result of the reported coefficients.

The second interpretation is in the sense of convertibility. Learning can yield valuable information and use can be constrained either by availability of resources or by managerial and absorptive capacity and innovation capability. This may be studied in context with some complementary conditions such as studies on SME learning, knowledge transfer, and innovation [4, 9, 13]. However, implementation, absorptive capacity and digital readiness were not assessed as additional mediators and moderators in the focal mediation analysis. Their claims to roles thus should have to be conditional, identified as priorities for future research.

The third, time and measurement. The benefits in terms of knowledge acquired can take months or years to translate into process adaptation and / or business benefits. Such a sequence may not be reflected in an ad hoc questionnaire, especially if performance is assimilated as a global perception of the managers. Equivalence or an absence of effects cannot be demonstrated from the results

of the null-hypothesis significance tests. Demanding assessments, such as confidence intervals, statistical power and temporal ordering would be able to assess if the second stage relationship is small or merely imprecisely estimated.

Theoretical Implications

The study makes a distinction between transactional leadership being linked to learning processes and to evidence of organizational learning. Future theoretical models should selectively identify which organizational learning practices are formed, which organizational knowledge is utilized, and what conditions are associated with learning that may impact organizational outcomes before assuming a leadership impact is a natural consequence of organizational learning. This formulation is more akin to capability views of learning which sees learning as only part of value creation [3, 4]. The results also depict the following methodological point: Mediation cannot be inferred from a statistically significant antecedent–mediator path. Even though there was a large leadership–learning coefficient found in this sample, the indirect pathway did not reach significance. Greater theorization of mediators for knowledge acquisition and knowledge utilization, as well as conditional testing of the implementation capacity, external networks and environmental dynamism. Environmental dynamism is a possible boundary condition as illustrated by recent research in the field of SME's in emerging markets [28].

Managerial Implications

It is important to keep useful transactional behaviours such as setting the expectation, providing prompt feedback and owning corrective action and that should be managed by the manager. They should differentiate though if these activities are just lesson learning/evidence or if they result in decisions of action. In a practical learning review the problem, proposed change, person(s) responsible, resources needed, when it will be implemented, and what the operational indicator is such as error rates, cycle time, customer response, adoption of a changed procedure etc. should be specified. If resources are limited, experiments on a small scale, combined with prioritizing improvements that can be achieved may be useful for SMEs to link organizational feedback to action. The effectiveness of these suggestions has not been assessed in this survey, but is based on literature and the perceived and statistical gap. To also regard them as interventions that are tested in the model, and not as improvements that the model has proven.

Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of limitations on the study. Firstly, the sample was composed of male managers and purposive sample in four cities of Sindh makes it less representative. Second, it is a self-reported measurement that is done simultaneously, which prevents causal explanation and could lead to a common-source bias. Third, the overall model consisted of seven constructs, with only a subset of the structural estimates reported here; there is no independently estimated model with three constructs and output of all structural estimates. Therefore, it is not possible to assess model specific R^2 coefficients or the effect of the other predictors from this report.

Fourth, not all of the methodological information necessary to make an evaluation is provided in the supplied text, such as the fieldwork dates, the scale items and adaptation decisions, the indicators and loadings, or the HTMT values or the bootstrap resampling settings, the confidence intervals, an a priori calculation/power calculation, or documentation of ethical oversight. Also contained in the source is a discrepancy in signs for the indirect effect, and competing reliability numbers – these will have to be resolved from the records of the primary analysis. NONE: No values have been created to replace the originals in this revision.Multi-wave (longitudinal) designs could be employed in future research to be able to distinguish leadership, learning, knowledge application, and performance over time. It should make a distinction between exploratory and exploitative learning, directly assess a firms' capabilities to implement and provide information about variations across sectors, firm sizes, maturity of a firm's digital adoption, and environmental dynamism [15, 28]. When possible, objective operational results would measure in tandem with manager's perceptions. If the operational procedures and data are available to perform predictive assessment with PLSpredict/CVPAT, it can be used to determine if the model provides a real and practical solution for prediction or not [25, 26, 27].

Conclusion

Transactional leadership positively correlated with organizational learning in this sample of SMEs of Pakistan, while the hypothesized relationship of learning with the organizational performance was not statistically significant. It implies that participants in researchers' development of learning-related routines need not demonstrate a performance return. Whether this discrepancy is due to the lack of implementation capability, innovation, absorptive capacity or due to lagged effects is an empirical question. Temporally resolved measurements and reporting of transparent models should be studied in the future.

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