

Transformational Leadership, Knowledge Sharing, and Health Policy: A Qualitative Study in Organizational Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Introduction: Knowledge sharing is essential for organizational learning and public sector performance, yet hierarchical bureaucratic cultures often inhibit open knowledge exchange. Transformational leadership has been proposed as a critical social enabler, yet contextual qualitative evidence remains limited, particularly in Indonesian public-sector organizations.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design involving 20–25 participants from Indonesian public institutions. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails.

Results: The findings reveal that transformational leadership fosters sustainable knowledge-sharing practices through sequential socio-psychological mechanisms. Psychological safety emerged as the foundational condition, followed by the development of interpersonal trust and intrinsic motivation. These mechanisms institutionalized reciprocal norms that normalized voluntary knowledge exchange. However, hierarchical structures and power distance moderated the strength of these effects.

Conclusion: Transformational leadership enhances knowledge sharing indirectly by shaping relational climate rather than through formal authority. Leadership development integrated with cultural reform initiatives represents a strategic intervention to strengthen organizational learning and performance within the public sector and public health systems.

Keywords: Bureaucracy; Knowledge Management; Knowledge Sharing; Public Sector; Transformational Leadership.



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INTRODUCTION

Globally, organizations operate in a knowledge-based economy in which intangible assets, innovation capabilities, and collaborative learning determine long-term competitiveness (Adom et al., 2025). The acceleration of digital transformation, the integration of artificial intelligence, and cross-border collaboration have intensified the need for effective knowledge sharing (Al-Balushi et al., 2025). Despite substantial investment in information systems and knowledge management platforms, many organizations continue to face persistent barriers such as knowledge hoarding, silo mentality, and low interdepartmental trust. International evidence suggests that technological infrastructure alone is insufficient; leadership behavior plays a decisive role in shaping a culture of openness and collaborative exchange (Aman-Ullah et al., 2026).

At the national level, Indonesia is undergoing significant bureaucratic reform and digital governance transformation. National development agendas emphasize innovation, improvements in public service quality, and institutional effectiveness (Amin et al., 2025). However, structural hierarchy, high power distance, and formalistic administrative culture frequently inhibit horizontal communication and voluntary knowledge exchange within public institutions (Borja & Davidsen, 2025). Reports on bureaucratic performance reveal duplication of work, weak inter-unit coordination, and limited organizational learning. These systemic challenges highlight the urgency of leadership approaches that can transform organizational culture toward collaboration and the utilization of collective knowledge (Castiglione et al., 2024).

At the local organizational level, Indonesian public sector institutions often face practical constraints, including rigid chain-of-command structures, limited psychological safety, and perceived risks of expressing ideas or sharing expertise (Costello, 2025). Employees may withhold knowledge due to fear of criticism, loss of authority, or lack of recognition. In this context, transformational leadership through inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence may function as a social catalyst that reshapes norms of trust, reciprocity, and intrinsic engagement (Dabral et al., 2025). However, empirical understanding of how such leadership behaviors are experienced and interpreted by employees in Indonesian public organizations remains limited (Fang et al., 2026).

Prior empirical studies consistently demonstrate a positive statistical association between transformational leadership and knowledge sharing (Jahed & Abdekhoda, 2026). Most studies employing survey-based quantitative designs and structural equation modeling conclude that transformational leadership enhances knowledge-sharing intention through mediating variables such as trust, organizational commitment, and psychological safety (Jin et al., 2025). Nevertheless, several critical limitations persist. First, the dominance of cross-sectional quantitative approaches restricts insight into dynamic interaction processes and lived experiences. These studies often measure knowledge sharing as self-reported intention rather than actual behavior, thereby increasing susceptibility to common-method bias and social-desirability effects. Second, transformational leadership is frequently treated as a unidimensional construct, overlooking how specific dimensions may influence tacit versus explicit knowledge exchange differently.

Third, contextual and cultural contingencies remain under-theorized. In high power-distance environments such as Indonesia, leadership authority may simultaneously encourage compliance and suppress open dialogue. Some studies report strong positive effects, while others show weaker or mediated relationships, suggesting contextual moderation. Furthermore, inconsistencies exist regarding key mediating mechanisms: some studies emphasize trust, others psychological safety, or intrinsic motivation, without clarifying how these mechanisms emerge in daily organizational interactions. These inconsistencies indicate that statistical confirmation alone is insufficient. A deeper qualitative inquiry is required to unpack the relational, cultural, and psychological processes that connect transformational leadership behaviors to concrete knowledge-sharing practices.

Although quantitative evidence supports a positive relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge sharing, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative research that explains how employees in Indonesian public sector organizations interpret, internalize, and respond to transformational leadership behaviors. Existing literature rarely explores the micro-level interactional processes through which trust, psychological safety, and reciprocity are constructed in hierarchical bureaucratic settings. Moreover, limited research examines how socio-cultural norms, such as respect for authority, collectivism, and avoidance of conflict, shape the effectiveness of transformational leadership in fostering open knowledge exchange. Therefore, the primary research gap lies in the absence of contextualized qualitative evidence that reveals the mechanisms linking transformational leadership and actual knowledge-sharing behavior within Indonesian public institutions.

This study offers three principal contributions. First, it moves beyond correlational analysis by employing a qualitative design to uncover the experiential and relational mechanisms underlying the leadership–knowledge-sharing nexus. Second, it contextualizes transformational leadership within the Indonesian public sector's bureaucratic culture, thereby extending leadership theory to a high-power-distance institutional setting. Third, the study articulates a process-based model illustrating how transformational leadership behaviors cultivate psychological safety, strengthen interpersonal trust, stimulate intrinsic motivation, and ultimately normalize knowledge-sharing practices. By integrating leadership theory with grounded organizational narratives, this research refines the microfoundational understanding of knowledge management in public-sector environments. It contributes context-sensitive evidence to the global leadership literature.

This study aims to develop a contextualized understanding of how transformational leadership influences knowledge-sharing practices in Indonesian public-sector organizations. Specifically, the research seeks to explore how employees interpret transformational leadership behaviors in daily organizational interactions, to examine the psychological and relational mechanisms such as trust, psychological safety, and intrinsic motivation that mediate knowledge-sharing behavior, and to identify structural and cultural factors that either facilitate or constrain such practices in hierarchical bureaucratic settings. Based on this qualitative inquiry, the study advances the following research proposition: Transformational leadership promotes sustainable knowledge-sharing practices in Indonesian public sector organizations by fostering psychological safety, strengthening trust-based interpersonal relationships, and enhancing intrinsic motivation within bureaucratic structures.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore employees lived experiences regarding transformational leadership and knowledge-sharing practices within Indonesian public-sector organizations. A qualitative approach was selected to enable in-depth exploration of relational dynamics, contextual interpretations, and socio-cultural influences that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in selected Indonesian public sector institutions undergoing bureaucratic reform and digital transformation initiatives. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure variation in hierarchical position, tenure, and functional roles. Inclusion criteria required participants to have at least 2 years of organizational experience and direct interaction with immediate supervisors who held leadership responsibilities. A total of 20–25 participants were interviewed, with sampling continuing until data saturation was achieved.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. An interview guide was developed based on transformational leadership dimensions (idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) and key knowledge-sharing constructs (trust, psychological safety,

intrinsic motivation, and reciprocity). Interviews were conducted in a confidential setting, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were maintained to capture contextual and non-verbal cues.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Coding was conducted iteratively and inductively, supported by qualitative data management software. Analytical rigor was ensured through constant comparison, reflexive memoing, and peer debriefing to refine theme development.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure credibility, member checking was conducted by returning summarized interpretations to selected participants for validation. Transferability was enhanced through a thick description of the organizational context. Dependability and confirmability were supported by maintaining an audit trail documenting analytical decisions and reflexive notes. Triangulation was achieved by comparing interview data across hierarchical levels.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board. Participants provided informed consent before participation and were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. All data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings from in-depth interviews with participants at hierarchical levels across Indonesian public sector organizations. Data analysis generated several interrelated themes that explain how transformational leadership influences knowledge-sharing practices within bureaucratic settings. The themes reflect employees lived experiences and highlight the relational, psychological, and structural mechanisms through which leadership behaviors shape knowledge exchange. The findings indicate that transformational leadership does not directly trigger knowledge sharing; rather, it operates through mediating processes, such as fostering psychological safety, strengthening interpersonal trust, and stimulating intrinsic motivation. These mechanisms interact dynamically with organizational culture and hierarchical norms, shaping both tacit and explicit knowledge-sharing behaviors. The results are organized into major thematic categories, each supported by representative participant narratives to ensure analytical transparency and credibility.

Table 1. Summary of Major Themes and Subthemes

Major Theme	Subthemes	Description of Findings	Illustrative Mechanism
Psychological Safety	Open communication climate; Reduced fear of criticism; Leader approachability	Participants reported feeling safer expressing ideas and sharing expertise when leaders encouraged dialogue and tolerated mistakes.	Intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration foster open dialogue.
Interpersonal Trust	Leader integrity; Fair treatment; Consistent support	Trust emerged when leaders demonstrated ethical behavior, transparency, and reliability in decision-making.	Idealized influence strengthens relational trust.
Intrinsic Motivation	Meaningful work; Recognition; Inspirational vision	Employees were more willing to share knowledge when leaders articulated a compelling vision and acknowledged contributions.	Inspirational motivation enhances internal commitment.
Reciprocal Norms	Mutual assistance; Collective responsibility	Knowledge sharing became normalized when leaders modeled collaborative behavior and reinforced teamwork values.	Social modeling reinforces reciprocity.
Structural-Cultural Context	Hierarchical norms; Power distance; Bureaucratic procedures	Organizational hierarchy both constrained and shaped how	Leadership behaviors moderated structural rigidity.

knowledge-sharing behaviors were enacted.

The analysis revealed five major interrelated themes explaining how transformational leadership shapes knowledge-sharing practices within Indonesian public sector organizations: psychological safety, interpersonal trust, intrinsic motivation, reciprocal norms, and structural-cultural context. These themes emerged consistently across participants from different hierarchical levels.

Psychological safety was prominently evident in participants' narratives, which described an open communication climate and reduced fear of criticism. One participant noted,

"My supervisor encourages us to speak up, even if our ideas are different. We are not afraid of being blamed" (Participant 7).

Another emphasized that

"Mistakes are treated as learning opportunities, not as failures" (Participant 12).

Such experiences indicate that intellectual stimulation and supportive leadership behaviors foster safe spaces for dialogue and knowledge exchange. Interpersonal trust also emerged as a central mechanism. Participants highlighted the integrity and fairness of leaders as critical enablers of knowledge sharing. As expressed by Participant 4,

"When the leader keeps promises, we feel confident sharing our knowledge."

Similarly, consistent and equitable treatment strengthened employees' willingness to contribute ideas and expertise. Intrinsic motivation was reinforced through inspirational vision and recognition of contributions. Participants described feeling more committed to sharing knowledge when leaders articulated the broader meaning of their work.

"The leader explains why our work matters, so we want to contribute more,"

Participant 9 stated that, while another added that appreciation for even small contributions enhanced motivation to share. Reciprocal norms further normalized knowledge-sharing behavior. Mutual assistance became embedded in daily routines, as one participant explained,

"Knowledge sharing becomes natural because everyone helps each other" (Participant 3).

However, the structural-cultural context, particularly hierarchical norms and formal procedures, occasionally constrained openness, prompting some participants to express hesitation due to the bureaucratic structure. Data saturation was achieved after approximately 18–20 interviews, as no new themes or substantive variations emerged in the final interviews. Subsequent data collection primarily confirmed and reinforced the previously identified thematic categories, indicating analytical sufficiency.

The synthesis of findings supports a process-based conceptual model that explains how transformational leadership fosters sustainable knowledge-sharing practices within Indonesian public-sector organizations. Rather than exerting direct influence, transformational leadership operates through sequential and reinforcing socio-psychological mechanisms. First, transformational leadership behaviors, particularly intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration, cultivate psychological safety. When leaders encourage dialogue, tolerate

mistakes, and remain accessible, employees experience reduced fear of negative evaluation and increased willingness to share tacit and explicit knowledge.

Second, idealized influence strengthens interpersonal trust. Ethical consistency, fairness, and reliability enhance relational confidence, thereby reducing perceived risks associated with knowledge exchange in hierarchical environments. Third, inspirational motivation enhances intrinsic motivation. By articulating a meaningful collective vision and recognizing contributions, leaders transform knowledge sharing from a discretionary act into an internally valued commitment aligned with organizational purpose. Fourth, repeated leader modeling of collaborative behavior institutionalizes reciprocal norms. Over time, knowledge sharing becomes socially expected and embedded within team routines, although its intensity remains moderated by structural-cultural factors such as power distance and bureaucratic procedures.

P1: Transformational leadership positively influences knowledge sharing by fostering psychological safety within hierarchical organizational contexts.

P2: Transformational leadership strengthens interpersonal trust, which in turn enhances employees' willingness to share knowledge.

P3: Transformational leadership stimulates intrinsic motivation through inspirational vision and recognition, thereby increasing voluntary knowledge-sharing behavior.

P4: The relationship between transformational leadership and knowledge sharing is reinforced by reciprocal norms but moderated by structural-cultural characteristics of bureaucratic organizations. Together, these propositions form an integrated explanatory framework that positions transformational leadership as a catalyst for relational and motivational mechanisms that collectively embed sustainable knowledge-sharing practices.

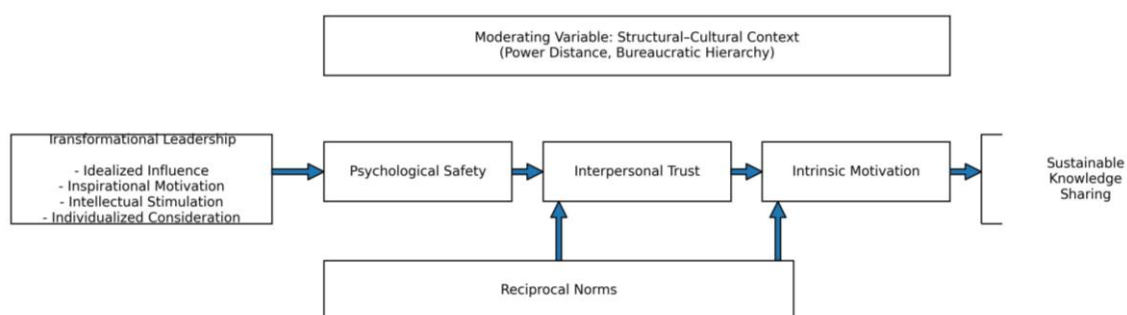


Figure 1. Conceptual Propositions

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to develop a contextualized understanding of how transformational leadership fosters knowledge-sharing practices in Indonesian public-sector organizations. The findings demonstrate that transformational leadership does not exert a direct mechanical effect on knowledge sharing; rather, it operates through sequential socio-psychological mechanisms. Psychological safety emerged as the foundational enabling condition, followed by the development of interpersonal trust, the activation of intrinsic motivation, and the institutionalization of reciprocal norms. Together, these mechanisms formed a process-based pathway leading to sustainable knowledge-sharing practices. However, structural-cultural characteristics, particularly hierarchical bureaucracy and power distance, moderated the intensity and expression of these mechanisms.

The results suggest that leadership influence in bureaucratic public institutions is relational and normative rather than purely structural. Transformational leadership reshapes the social climate by reducing perceived interpersonal risk and reinforcing collective purpose, thereby normalizing knowledge exchange behaviors.

The findings can be interpreted through several theoretical lenses. First, Social Exchange Theory provides a robust explanation for the emergence of knowledge-sharing behaviors. Transformational leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, and support generate relational

obligations among employees (Kyambade & Namatovu, 2025). In return, employees share expertise and information. Trust thus functions as a relational currency that lowers the perceived cost of knowledge exchange (Löfflad-Bürkin et al., 2025). Second, Psychological Safety Theory explains how intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration reduce fear of negative evaluation. In hierarchical bureaucratic systems, employees often avoid voicing ideas due to reputational risk. Transformational leadership mitigates this risk by legitimizing inquiry, experimentation, and constructive dissent (Majumdarr et al., 2025).

Third, Self-Determination Theory illuminates the role of intrinsic motivation. Inspirational motivation enhances employees' sense of meaning, competence, and relatedness, three fundamental psychological needs (Martínez Falcó et al., 2025). When these needs are satisfied, knowledge sharing becomes an internally regulated behavior rather than a compliance-driven one. Finally, institutional theory helps contextualize the moderating effect of bureaucratic structure. Organizational norms and formal hierarchies shape behavioral expectations (Muzakki et al., 2026). Transformational leadership appears capable of partially buffering rigid structures, yet it cannot eliminate institutional constraints (Ndandani et al., 2026). Globally, quantitative research has consistently identified a positive association between transformational leadership and knowledge sharing across private-sector and multinational contexts. Studies conducted in Europe and North America emphasize the mediating roles of trust and organizational commitment. Similarly, research in East Asian settings highlights psychological safety as a critical determinant (Ngoc Huynh et al., 2024).

The present study converges with these findings in confirming the importance of relational and motivational mechanisms. However, it diverges in its demonstration of the pronounced moderating influence of bureaucratic hierarchy (Nguyen, 2025). While private-sector studies often report relatively direct leadership effects, this research reveals that, in public-sector contexts, structural rigidity significantly shapes behavioral translation. Regionally, studies in Southeast Asia suggest that high power-distance cultures may inhibit open communication (Saulnier & Masiye, 2025). The current findings partially confirm this pattern but also demonstrate that transformational leadership can mitigate hierarchical barriers by modeling openness and fairness. Thus, leadership effectiveness appears culturally contingent yet not culturally deterministic (Suprpto et al., 2024).

Convergence with global findings likely reflects the universal psychological mechanisms underlying leadership influence, trust formation, motivation enhancement, and risk reduction, which are not culturally exclusive processes (Turoń, 2025). However, divergence arises from institutional and cultural embeddedness. Indonesian public sector organizations operate within formalized administrative systems where procedural compliance often supersedes collaborative innovation (Villeneuve et al., 2026). Therefore, while transformational leadership generates enabling conditions, structural inertia may slow behavioral change. The divergence underscores the importance of contextualized leadership research rather than assuming cross-context equivalence of effects (Watego et al., 2025).

Although this study was situated within public sector organizations broadly, its implications are particularly relevant to public health governance and health service management (Whitney & Tucker, 2026). Effective knowledge sharing among health administrators, hospital managers, and frontline professionals is essential for implementing evidence-based policies, improving service quality, and responding to crises. Transformational leadership training programs within public health institutions may enhance organizational learning capacity (Woods et al., 2025). By fostering psychological safety, leaders can encourage reporting of medical errors, innovation in service delivery, and collaborative problem-solving. Strengthening trust and intrinsic motivation may reduce siloed practices between health departments and improve intersectoral coordination. Policymakers should therefore integrate leadership development into bureaucratic reform initiatives. Structural reforms alone, such as digitalization, will not optimize knowledge exchange without parallel cultural transformation.

This study offers several strengths. First, the qualitative design provides in-depth contextual insight into relational and psychological mechanisms often overlooked in survey-based

research. Second, inclusion of participants across hierarchical levels enhances analytical richness. Third, the study advances a process-based conceptual model grounded in empirical narratives. However, limitations must be acknowledged. The findings are context-specific and may not be generalizable beyond Indonesian public sector settings. Data relied on self-reported experiences, which may be influenced by recall bias. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of interviews limits examination of longitudinal change. Future studies should employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs to test the proposed conceptual model empirically. Quantitative validation of the mediating mechanisms of psychological safety, trust, and intrinsic motivation would strengthen causal inference. Comparative cross-national research could examine how varying levels of power distance moderate leadership effectiveness. Further investigation within specific public health institutions, such as hospitals or regional health offices, would deepen sectoral relevance. Experimental or intervention-based research evaluating transformational leadership training programs could provide practical evidence for policy implementation. Overall, advancing context-sensitive leadership research is essential for strengthening knowledge management and organizational performance within the public sector and public health systems.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to examine how transformational leadership influences knowledge-sharing practices in Indonesian public-sector organizations and to identify the mechanisms underlying this relationship. The findings demonstrate that transformational leadership promotes sustainable knowledge sharing indirectly by cultivating psychological safety, strengthening interpersonal trust, and enhancing intrinsic motivation. These relational and psychological conditions reduce perceived interpersonal risk and encourage voluntary knowledge exchange across hierarchical levels. However, the effectiveness of this process is moderated by structural and cultural characteristics, particularly bureaucratic hierarchy and power distance. The study confirms that leadership behavior functions as a critical social enabler of organizational learning. Transformational leaders who model integrity, articulate a meaningful vision, encourage open dialogue, and recognize contributions create a collaborative climate in which knowledge sharing becomes normalized rather than incidental.

Based on these findings, public sector and public health institutions should institutionalize transformational leadership development within bureaucratic reform agendas. Policies should establish safe communication mechanisms, incorporate recognition systems that reward collaborative behavior, and align digital transformation initiatives with cultural interventions that strengthen trust and reciprocity. Strengthening transformational leadership capacity is a strategic, evidence-based intervention to enhance knowledge integration, service quality, and organizational performance in public institutions.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social research. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before data collection. All participants received clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their rights as research participants. Informed consent was obtained before interviews were conducted. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained by removing identifying information from transcripts and reports. All data were securely stored and used exclusively for academic purposes.

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Authors' contributions

Suprpto conceived and designed the study, developed the research framework, conducted data collection and analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted and revised the manuscript. **Nawir Rahman** contributed to the study design refinement, assisted in data analysis and interpretation, provided critical revisions to the manuscript for important intellectual content, and supported methodological validation.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

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