Conceptualizing Contemporary Leadership Styles as Predictors of Innovative Work Behaviour

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Abstract
This conceptual paper explores the impact of contemporary leadership styles—authentic, sustainable, digital, and empowering leadership—on Innovative Work Behaviour (IWB) within organizations, underpinned by Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory. Despite the acknowledged importance of leadership in fostering innovation, existing literature presents fragmented views on how these modern leadership paradigms collectively influence IWB. This study addresses this gap by proposing an integrative framework that hypothesizes direct positive relationships between each of these leadership styles and IWB. Drawing on LMX theory, the paper emphasizes the role of high-quality leader-follower relationships, characterized by trust, respect, and mutual obligation, as crucial mechanisms through which leaders can inspire and support employees' proactive engagement in generating, promoting, and implementing novel ideas. The proposed framework highlights how authentic leaders foster psychological safety, sustainable leaders align innovation with long-term goals, digital leaders leverage technology for agile transformation, and empowering leaders enhance autonomy and self-efficacy, all contributing to heightened IWB. The paper outlines a quantitative, cross-sectional methodology using PLS-SEM for future empirical validation. This research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of leadership's strategic role in enhancing organizational innovation capacity, offering valuable theoretical contributions and practical insights for fostering a culture of continuous improvement in dynamic work environments.
Keywords: Innovative Work Behaviour, Authentic Leadership, Sustainable Leadership, Digital Leadership, Empowering Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange Theory.

Introduction
In today's dynamic and knowledge-driven economy, innovation has become a cornerstone of organizational success and sustainability. While technological advancements, competitive

pressures, and globalization have accelerated the pace of change, it is the human element within organizations that often serves as the primary driver of innovation. Among the various forms of innovation, *Innovative Work Behaviour* (IWB) has emerged as a critical determinant of organizational agility and performance. IWB refers to the deliberate efforts by employees to generate, promote, and implement novel ideas aimed at enhancing individual, team, or organizational outcomes (Janssen, 2000; Scott & Bruce, 1994). It is distinct from creativity in that it encompasses not only idea generation but also active promotion and practical application of new solutions within a work context.

The significance of IWB lies in its capacity to transform employee creativity into tangible innovations that contribute to organizational competitiveness. Organizations that encourage innovative behaviours among their employees often experience improvements in service delivery, operational efficiency, product development, and customer satisfaction (Pieterse et al., 2010; Hammond et al., 2011). Particularly in sectors characterized by knowledge intensity and rapid technological change—such as the digital economy, education, healthcare, and business process outsourcing (BPO)—IWB is seen as indispensable. Employees who consistently engage in IWB not only enhance their individual performance but also contribute to broader organizational learning and adaptability (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010).

Given its value, scholars and practitioners alike have long been interested in identifying the antecedents of IWB. Numerous factors such as job autonomy, psychological safety, organizational culture, and human resource practices have been found to influence IWB (Yuan & Woodman, 2010; Ramamoorthy et al., 2005). However, one of the most consistently cited and potent enablers of innovative work behaviour is *leadership*. Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the environment in which innovation flourishes by inspiring, empowering, and supporting their followers. Yet, leadership is not monolithic; it manifests in various styles, each carrying distinct implications for employee attitudes and behaviours. In particular, contemporary leadership styles—such as authentic leadership, sustainable leadership, digital leadership, and empowering leadership—have gained traction in recent years for their relevance to the innovation discourse in the digital and sustainability-driven era (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Shin et al., 2023; Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

Despite the growing interest in these modern leadership paradigms, existing research presents a fragmented and sometimes contradictory picture of their influence on IWB. For instance, while authentic leadership is often associated with enhanced psychological safety and ethical conduct that can support innovation, some studies report no direct effect on IWB in certain organizational contexts (Rego et al., 2012). Similarly, sustainable leadership, with its long-term orientation and stakeholder focus, may align well with strategic innovation goals but may not always translate into day-to-day innovative behaviours among employees (Nguyen et al., 2020). Digital leadership is heralded for its role in navigating digital transformation, yet its effectiveness in fostering IWB depends on employees' digital fluency and organizational culture (El Sawy et al., 2016; Mihardjo et al., 2019). Empowering leadership, which emphasizes autonomy and trust, has shown positive associations with IWB but may also lead to inconsistent results when not balanced with clear direction and support (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014).

These discrepancies point to several key research problems. First, the literature lacks an integrative conceptual framework that simultaneously considers multiple contemporary leadership styles and their collective influence on IWB. Second, much of the empirical research has been context-specific and often ignores the interplay between leadership behaviours and organizational environments. Third, there is a need for greater conceptual clarity on how these leadership styles function as predictors of IWB and through what mechanisms they exert their influence. Moreover, little effort has been made to synthesize these constructs under a unifying theoretical lens that can guide future empirical testing.

In light of these gaps, the purpose of this conceptual article is to explore and theorize how contemporary leadership styles—namely, authentic, sustainable, digital, and empowering leadership—predict innovative work behaviour. Drawing on Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, this paper develops a holistic conceptual framework that explains the relational mechanisms linking leadership styles to IWB. By doing so, the article contributes to theory development in leadership and innovation studies and provides a foundation for future empirical validation. Ultimately, it seeks to offer scholars and practitioners a more nuanced understanding of how leadership can be leveraged as a strategic lever to enhance innovation capacity within organizations.

Literature Review
Underpinning Theory: Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX)
Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory offers a relational perspective on leadership by emphasizing the quality of social exchanges between leaders and followers. Originating from the Vertical Dyad Linkage model (Dansereau et al., 1975), LMX theory posits that leaders develop distinct relationships with each subordinate, ranging from high to low quality. High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by mutual trust, respect, and obligation, which enhance communication, resource access, and employee engagement (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Martin et al., 2018).

Such relationships foster psychological safety and motivation, enabling employees to reciprocate leader support through discretionary behaviours like innovative work behaviour (IWB) (Atwater & Carmeli, 2009; Volmer et al., 2012). High LMX is associated with increased autonomy, job satisfaction, and opportunities for creativity (Liao et al., 2018; Modliba et al., 2024). Leadership styles such as authentic, sustainable, empowering, and digital leadership have been linked to stronger LMX quality, subsequently enhancing IWB (Nguyen et al., 2023; Ogunja et al., 2024).

In organizations where innovation is crucial, high-quality LMX supports employee performance by improving boundary control and reducing work–nonwork conflict (Saraiva et al., 2025; Toscano et al., 2022). Moreover, digital engagement, facilitated by digital leadership and strong LMX, promotes innovative outcomes (Drummond et al., 2020; Erhan et al., 2022).

Innovative Work Behaviour
Innovative work behaviour is defined as the behaviour of an individual that is intended to intentionally create, introduce, and apply new ideas, processes, or products (Bos-Nehles and Veenendaal, 2019). Innovative work behaviour refers to the process of identifying, fostering, realizing, and implementing new ideas within an organization to improve performance at the

individual, team, and organizational levels (Farr, 1990; West, 2005). It involves not only the development and application of new technologies or strategies to enhance existing tasks but also plays a critical role in promoting sustainable growth within the organization. IWB involves three key stages as core components: idea generation, idea promotion, and idea implementation. Over time, innovative work behaviour has become a vital mechanism for achieving competitive advantage, improving managerial performance, and introducing new production methods (Gomes & Wojahn, 2017; Phong, Hui, & Son, 2018). There are many factors that can directly or indirectly influence employees' innovative work behaviour. Authentic leadership, for example, increases employee autonomy by granting greater control over decision-making and encouraging ownership of work, which enhances innovative work behaviour (Singh et al., 2023). Sustainable leadership, by aligning innovation with sustainability goals, ensures that innovations contribute to both organizational performance and societal or environmental well-being (Rokeach, He et al., 2024).

Erhan et al. (2022) have also suggested that employees' perceptions of digital leadership can significantly affect their innovative work behaviour. Tiwari et al. (2023) found that employees in Indian organizations who were empowered were more likely to take the initiative in suggesting process improvements and generating innovative solutions. Empowering leadership fosters a supportive environment within an organization by demonstrating trust in employees' capabilities, delegating decision-making power, and recognizing their contributions, all of which contribute to higher innovative work behaviour (Ahearne et al., 2005; Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014).

Authentic Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour
Authentic leadership (AL) is characterized by self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, relational transparency, and balanced processing (Walumbwa et al., 2008). These attributes cultivate trust, openness, and psychological safety in the workplace, which are essential conditions for fostering innovative work behaviour (IWB). IWB involves the intentional generation, promotion, and realization of new ideas aimed at improving organizational processes, products, or services (Janssen, 2000).

Authentic leaders encourage open communication and ethical behavior, promoting a work environment where employees feel psychologically safe to take risks and experiment with novel ideas (Edmondson, 1999). Avolio and Gardner (2005) emphasize that authentic leaders foster high-quality relationships that can lead to greater engagement and innovation. Employees under authentic leadership are more likely to express themselves freely and contribute creatively to problem-solving efforts.

Saxena and Sharma (2017) found a positive relationship between AL and IWB, especially when psychological empowerment mediates this relationship. Similarly, Rego et al. (2012) highlight that authentic leadership, supported by emotional intelligence, enhances employees' innovation. Singh et al. (2023) observed that authentic leadership indirectly contributes to IWB by promoting trust and job satisfaction. We therefore postulate that:-
H1: Authentic leadership is positively related to innovative work behaviour.

Sustainable Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour
Sustainable leadership (SL) integrates social, environmental, and economic goals into leadership practices, aiming for long-term organizational and societal well-being (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011). It promotes inclusivity, ethical behavior, collaboration, and employee development, all of which support conditions favorable for innovative work behaviour (Doppelt, 2017). Sustainable leaders often encourage a sense of purpose and shared responsibility, creating environments where employees are empowered to explore new ideas aligned with broader sustainability goals (Senge, 2008). This approach helps align individual creativity with collective long-term outcomes. According to Zeng et al. (2024), such environments enhance employee engagement and increase their willingness to innovate.

Empirical evidence supports this link. Niu and Liu (2022) found that sustainability-driven leadership practices promote organizational cultures conducive to knowledge sharing and risk-taking. Wu and Zhang (2023) also emphasize that SL enhances trust, collaboration, and openness to experimentation, thereby strengthening innovative behavior. Zhang and Zhao (2023) observed that employees under sustainable leaders show higher intrinsic motivation and creative involvement. Hence, the following hypothesis is put forth:-
H2: Sustainable leadership is positively related to innovative work behaviour.

Digital Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour
Digital leadership (DL) refers to the ability to leverage digital technologies and strategic thinking to drive innovation, agility, and transformation within organizations (Shin et al., 2023). As digital transformation becomes increasingly central to business success, DL plays a critical role in shaping a digital-ready culture that supports innovative work behaviour (Mihardjo & Sasmoko, 2019). Digital leaders possess the vision and technical competence to guide digital integration while fostering collaboration, transparency, and experimentation. Erhan et al. (2022) found that DL significantly influences employees' innovation by encouraging openness to technology and knowledge-sharing. DL also aligns with LMX theory by facilitating strong digital communication and engagement between leaders and employees (Benitez et al., 2022). Research by Borah et al. (2022) indicates that DL positively moderates the relationship between digital tools and innovation outcomes. Moreover, Zeike et al. (2019) suggest that digital leaders enhance employees' psychological well-being and creativity through a supportive digital culture.
However, some scholars caution that digital leadership alone may not suffice. Salam et al. (2023) argue that the effectiveness of DL depends on employee readiness and organizational maturity. Without adequate support or training, digital transformation may overwhelm employees and stifle creativity (Chen et al., 2020). Give the preceding discussion we postulate that:-
H3: Digital leadership is positively related to innovative work behaviour.

Empowering Leadership and Innovative Work Behaviour
Empowering leadership (EL) encourages employees to take initiative, exercise autonomy, and participate in decision-making (Yun et al., 2006). Such empowerment builds self-efficacy, ownership, and responsibility, which are key drivers of innovative work behaviour (Spreitzer, 1996; Ahearne et al., 2005). EL creates a psychologically safe environment that supports experimentation and innovation. Amundsen and Martinsen (2014) noted that empowering leaders increase employee motivation and willingness to explore new solutions. Studies by

Tiwari et al. (2023) and Joo et al. (2023) found that EL positively influences creativity and innovation by enhancing engagement and trust.

Further, Furtner et al. (2016) equate EL with super-leadership, highlighting its potential to foster self-leadership and intrinsic motivation. Zerlinda et al. (2023) and Kusairi (2022) confirm EL's positive impact on IWB, especially when leaders recognize and value employee contributions. Nonetheless, some researchers caution against excessive autonomy. Li et al. (2023) suggest that without clear guidance, EL may result in role ambiguity or emotional exhaustion, reducing its effectiveness in promoting innovation. The following hypothesis thus emerges: -

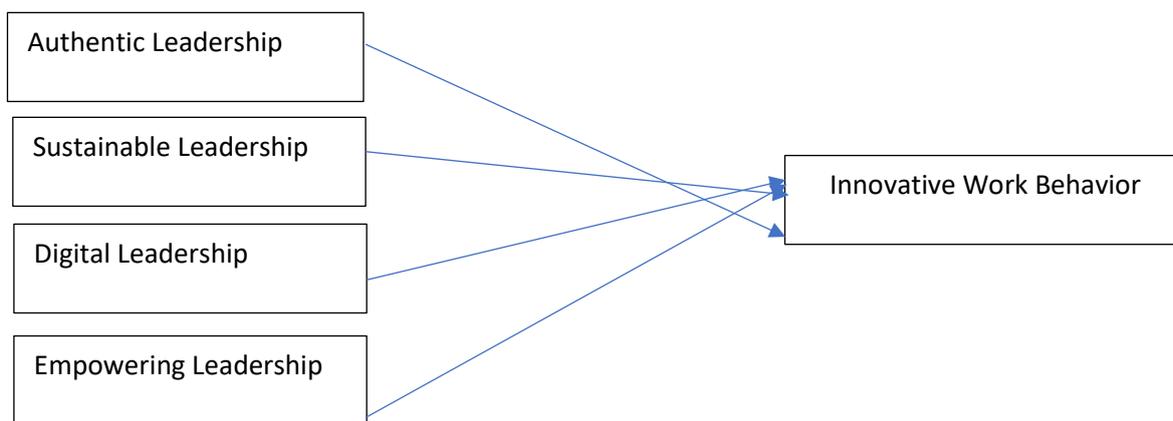**H4:** Empowering leadership is positively related to innovative work behaviour.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Methodology

As this study is a work in progress, the study is designed to be a quantitative, cross-sectional research designed to examine the relationship between contemporary leadership styles—authentic, sustainable, digital, and empowering leadership—and innovative work behaviour (IWB). As of now, data collection has not yet commenced, but the methodology has been clearly outlined to ensure validity, reliability, and replicability. The study is guided by a positivist research philosophy and employs a deductive reasoning approach to test the hypotheses developed in the earlier chapter. Given the objective to test the strength and direction of relationships between constructs, an explanatory research strategy is deemed appropriate.

The unit of analysis will be individual employees working in executive or mid-level positions across diverse industries. A purposive sampling method will be used to target respondents who have at least two years of work experience under their current supervisors, ensuring that participants are able to assess their leaders' styles effectively. The minimum sample size will be determined using G*Power software, based on a medium effect size of 0.15, power of 0.80, and a significance level of 0.05.

Data will be collected using a structured online questionnaire consisting of validated measurement items adapted from prior studies. Each leadership construct and IWB will be measured using multi-item Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire will also include basic demographic questions. Data analysis will be

conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with the SmartPLS 4.0 software. The analysis will involve assessment of the measurement model (reliability and validity) and structural model (hypothesis testing via path coefficients, R^2, and effect size f^2). Ethical clearance will be sought before data collection, with emphasis on informed consent, voluntary participation, and respondent anonymity.

Potential Implications

This research aims to enrich the theoretical understanding of the relationship between leadership styles and innovative work behaviour (IWB). It contributes to the literature by extending the leadership–IWB framework through the integration of multiple contemporary leadership styles, namely authentic, sustainable, digital, and empowering leadership. In doing so, it addresses gaps and inconsistencies observed in prior research, particularly those related to contextual influences on leadership effectiveness and employee innovation outcomes.

The study adopts Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory as its underpinning framework, offering a nuanced perspective on how the quality of leader–follower relationships—developed through ongoing social exchanges involving both tangible and intangible resources—shapes innovation in the workplace. The research specifically engages with multiple dimensions of LMX, including its quality, psychological, and relational climate dimensions, to better explain the mechanisms through which leadership can influence IWB. By aligning its constructs with the core tenets of LMX theory, this study emphasizes the importance of interaction quality and mutual trust between leaders and subordinates. As supported by previous literature (e.g., Liao et al., 2018; Mulligan et al., 2021), high-quality LMX relationships have been shown to foster creativity and innovative behaviour. This study builds upon such evidence by examining how various leadership styles may act as catalysts for enhancing IWB through the lens of LMX, thus offering a more integrated and multifaceted view of leadership influence in organizational settings.

This study offers valuable practical insights for organizations seeking to enhance innovation capacity through effective leadership. In an era characterized by rapid technological advancement and shifting workforce dynamics, fostering innovative work behaviour among employees has become essential for sustaining competitive advantage and responding effectively to external disruptions. The findings of this research are expected to assist organizations in identifying and promoting leadership styles that are most conducive to stimulating innovation. By understanding the varying impacts of authentic, sustainable, digital, and empowering leadership, practitioners and decision-makers can tailor their leadership development, recruitment, and training strategies accordingly. This ensures that leaders not only support but actively drive a culture of innovation and continuous improvement.

Moreover, the study highlights the importance of creating work environments where trust, autonomy, and engagement are prioritized; conditions that are closely linked to innovative behaviour. Organizations can leverage these insights to implement leadership practices that foster stronger leader–follower relationships and encourage proactive, creative contributions from employees across all levels.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper highlights the critical role of contemporary leadership styles in fostering innovative work behavior (IWB) within organizations, drawing upon Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory as an underpinning framework. The paper addresses existing gaps in the literature by proposing an integrative model that considers authentic, sustainable, digital, and empowering leadership as direct predictors of IWB. By leveraging LMX theory, the study emphasizes how high-quality leader-follower relationships, characterized by mutual trust and support, are essential for promoting employee engagement and discretionary behaviors such as innovation. The proposed hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H4) suggest a positive relationship between each of these leadership styles and IWB, providing a foundation for future empirical validation and offering a more nuanced understanding of how leadership can strategically enhance organizational innovation capacity.

Future research should empirically test the proposed conceptual framework using the outlined quantitative, cross-sectional design and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This will help validate the hypothesized relationships and explore the mediating role of LMX quality in greater detail. Further studies could also investigate the contextual factors and boundary conditions that might influence the effectiveness of these leadership styles on IWB, moving beyond the context-specific nature of much current research. Additionally, qualitative or mixed-methods approaches could provide richer insights into the mechanisms through which these leadership styles impact IWB, offering a deeper understanding of employee perceptions and experiences. Longitudinal studies would also be beneficial to observe the evolution of these relationships over time, providing insights into the long-term impact of contemporary leadership on sustained innovation within dynamic organizational environments.

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