

# Leadership styles, employee engagement and satisfaction: Basis for development of leader-employee relationship framework for start-ups

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ISSN: 2243-7770  
Online ISSN: 2243-7789

Received: 30 July 2024

Revised: 25 August 2024

Accepted: 28 August 2024

OPEN ACCESS

Available Online: 1 September 2024

DOI: 10.5861/ijrsm.2024.1255

## ***Abstract***

This study investigated the impact of different types of leadership styles on the employees' job satisfaction and employee performance in companies in Hunan Province of China, and hence proposed a leadership framework that will aid managers in managing start-ups. This research was conducted using a descriptive research method. The researcher sought to gather data from the respondents using the quantitative survey questionnaire. The study respondents are 303 employees who are purposively selected from three (3) start-up companies in Hunan Province of China. Based on the study findings, the managers and supervisors of the start-up companies showed a high-level usage of directive, participative, and transformational leadership. The level of employee engagement is also high in personal growth and recognition, teamwork and collaboration, and communication, and the employees were highly satisfied with the work-life balance, benefits, and work conditions and safety in the selected companies. There was a statistically significant relationship between directive and the sub variables of employee engagement namely personal growth and recognition and communication; and between participative leadership and personal growth and recognition. There was also a statistically significant relationship between transformational leadership and the sub variables of job satisfaction namely work life balance and benefits, and a significant relationship between directive leadership and work life balance, and between participative leadership and job satisfaction. Significant relationships also exists between personal growth and recognition and the sub variables of job satisfaction namely work life balance and benefits; and between teamwork and collaboration and benefits. The study developed a framework towards the improvement of leader-employee relationships in start-up companies.

***Keywords:*** start-ups, leadership styles, employee satisfaction, leader-employee relationship, employee engagement

## **Leadership styles, employee engagement and satisfaction: Basis for development of leader-employee relationship framework for start-ups**

### **1. Introduction**

China is widely regarded as an economic powerhouse, with numerous well-known brands such as Huawei, Alibaba, and Shein originating in the country. Zhang (2021) investigated the corporate innovativeness and risk management of start-ups and discovered that the risk-aversion of small firms differed depending on the amount of innovation invested in the company as well as labor hiring. It also indicated that small businesses in China were more cautious when making financial decisions, emphasizing the importance of balancing the expansion of their businesses while also improving their structures. It has also been reported that start-ups frequently face uncertainties when pursuing novel strategies or innovating.

The leadership and management of an organization are critical to its success, and the same can be said for businesses and start-ups. According to Sandybayev (2019), entrepreneurial leadership refers to the use of one's personal power of influence on subordinates or employees, which is more effective than simply following a "managing" style for a start-up. The same author investigated the possibility of a link between entrepreneurial leadership and organizational performance outcomes. According to reports, leaders with entrepreneurial mindsets are more likely to improve and raise organizational performance. Job satisfaction is a major topic of study in job attitudes, according to a review written by Judge et al. (2020), because it is an important indicator for predicting or foreseeing important outcomes in businesses or companies. It was stated that job satisfaction is extremely important because employee satisfaction can lead to workers becoming champions, ambassadors, and even advocates for the organizations or companies for which they work. Another study by Loan (2020) discovered that job satisfaction has an overall positive relationship with organizational commitment and employee job performance. Employee engagement varies from person to person, and this is an important variable because it relates to employees' need and desire to participate in their work activities. This variable has a direct impact on employee performance, and Antony (2018) stated that organizations with more engaged employees outperform those with less engaged employees. Other factors, such as "improved productivity, lower employee turnover and attrition rates, lower absenteeism, increased loyalty and goodwill toward the organization, and positive word of mouth," have been mentioned as a result of having engaged employees.

A large number of studies have found that a relationship exists between leadership styles and employee engagement and job satisfaction. For instance, In the work of Nazim et al. (2018), it was stated that there is a significant relationship between transformational and transactional leadership styles and job satisfaction, with the former causing higher employee satisfaction. Transformational leadership was positively related to job satisfaction for several reasons, including the fact that it initiates change in the workplace and further motivates employees. Another study, Ilham (2018), found that the leadership styles used in an organization had a positive influence or effect on employee performance. Aside from that, it was discovered that leadership styles had positive effects on job satisfaction, correlating with the findings of Nazim et al. (2018), as well as organizational culture. According to the data, deciding on a specific leadership style to implement is critical in determining employee performance and job satisfaction. In line with this, the current study aims to determine the impact of different types of leadership on the employees' job satisfaction and level of engagement. Although there has been many similar topics related to employee engagement, job satisfaction, and leadership styles, this is the first study to combine these three variables and study their relationship using respondents from Hunan Province of China.

**Objectives of the Study** - This study investigated the impact of different types of leadership styles on the employees' job satisfaction and employee performance in companies in Hunan Province of China, and hence propose a leadership framework that will aid managers in managing start-ups. Specifically, it aimed to determine the leadership styles of leaders in their company in terms of transformational; directive; and participative; assess

the employee engagement in terms of personal growth and recognition; teamwork and collaboration; and communication; describe the respondent employee job satisfaction in terms of: work life balance, benefits; and work conditions and safety; test the significant relationship in leadership styles, employee engagement, and employee job satisfaction and propose a framework to develop the leader-employee relationship in start-up companies.

## 2. Methods

**Research Design** - This research was conducted using a descriptive research method. The researcher sought to gather data from the respondents using the quantitative survey questionnaire method, and thus the descriptive design was more efficient for this data collection and analyses. According to Aggarwal et al. (2019), a descriptive study is one in which the distribution of one or more variables is described without regard for any causal or other hypothesis. Data from descriptive studies conducted in different populations or at different times within the same population may aid in identifying geographic variation and temporal changes in frequency. This may aid in the generation of hypotheses about the cause, which can then be tested using a more complex design (Aggarwal et al., 2019).

**Respondents of the Study** - This study investigated the impact of different types of leadership styles on the employees' job satisfaction for three (3) start-up companies in Hunan Province of China, and hence propose a leadership framework that will aid managers in managing start-ups. The study respondents are employees who are purposively selected from three (3) start-up companies in Hunan Province of China. For the purpose of confidentiality, the researcher has used alphabets to represent the company's names such as "Company A", "Company B", and "Company C". The company's total population of employees is 303, and to determine the sample, the researcher used the Rao soft calculator at a 5% margin of error, 95% confidence level, and 50% response distribution rate. In Company A, there's a total of 70 employees in the population. There were 62 employees in Company B, while, in Company C, there are 54 in the population, in Company D, there are 35 in the population, in Company E, there are 43 in the population, in Company F, there are 39 in the population. The total respondents' population is 303.

**Instruments of the Study** - The study collected data using survey questionnaire which was developed by the researcher based on the knowledge gathered from the literature review and theories. The survey questions are divided into four (4) parts: Part I Profile of the Respondents where the researcher collected the employee-respondents' profile in terms of their age, gender, income, and their years of experience. Part II is about Leadership Styles. This part of the study contains three (3) dimensions; democratic leadership, autocratic leadership, and laissez-faire leadership. Part III is about Employee Engagement. The employee engagement variable contains three (3) dimensions; organizational culture, teamwork and collaboration, and communication. Lastly is Part IV, the Employee Job Satisfaction. Similarly, there are three (3) variables used to measure the employee job satisfaction and this includes; work-life balance, benefits, and reward and recognition.

After the approval of the questionnaire, it was validated by the experts and conducted the pilot testing, the reliability was determined using the Cronbach's Alpha Index of Reliability to ensure the integrity, consistency, and reliability of the survey instrument. At least 20 employees were given copies of the approved draft and asked to provide responses to determine whether the questionnaire's contents are clear, concise, accurate, reliable, and understandable for content validation. After the instrument was approved for reproduction, the researcher created a final copy. Cronbach Alpha was calculated for the test questionnaire's reliability and validity after the pilot study was completed. The interpretation followed the rule of thumb of George and Mallery (2003). The leadership styles variable scored 0.89 which is a good assessment; the employee engagement was 0.76 which is acceptable; and the job satisfaction was 0.85 which is a good reliability rate.

**Data Gathering Procedure** - After incorporating the suggestions and recommendations of the adviser, the approved final questionnaire was used by the researcher as a tool in data gathering. The questionnaire which was

subjected to a reliability test passed and the result was encoded. Prior to questionnaire administration, the researcher sent a formal letter to the managers of the companies to obtain authorization to administer the questionnaire to the research respondents of the respective organizations. Prior to sending the formal letter the researcher had established communication links with the study locales which were represented as Company A, Company B, and Company C. All respondents indicated willingness to participate in the study. After final approval for participation were obtained from the study locales, the questionnaire was sent to the employees of the company through emails.

**Ethical Considerations** - Ethical considerations was used in the conduct of the research work to ensure that all information gathered is used solely for research purposes in order to maintain the quality and integrity of the research. The researcher sought the consent of the employee-respondents via letter and communication to ensure that the target respondents are prepared to answer the research questions. It also protected the respondents' confidentiality and anonymity by not asking for their names while they completed the questionnaires. The researcher ensured that the respondents answer the questionnaires voluntarily and in accordance with their wishes. Finally, it ensured that none of the study's participants were hurt or harmed, and that their safety and security was a top priority.

**Data Analysis** - The following statistical techniques and procedures were used to analyze the study's primary data in order to analyze and interpret data obtained from respondents. SPSS 25.0 was used to perform all statistical computations. Weighted Mean. This was used in the study to calculate the average assessment of the respondents' responses in parts two, three, and four of the survey questionnaires, which were designed to uncover any relationship between leadership styles, employee engagement, and employee job satisfaction. Verbal Interpretation: This was used throughout the survey in conjunction with the weighted mean from the study's various tabular data presentations to indicate whether the results of each item or section equaled "High" or "Low" based on the variables being measured. Pearson Correlation Analysis. It employed the method of co-variance to assess the statistical relationship, or association, between two continuous variables. It also provided information on the magnitude of the association, or correlation, as well as the relationship's direction. Pearson Correlation Analysis was used in this study to investigate the relationship between leadership styles, employee engagement, and employee job satisfaction.

### 3. Results and discussions

**Table 1**

*Summary Table on Leadership Styles*

Key Result Areas	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Transformational	2.56	Agree	3
Directive	2.57	Agree	1.5
Participative	2.57	Agree	1.5
Grand Composite Mean	2.57	Agree	

*Legend: 3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree; 2.50-3.49=Agree; 1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree*

Table 1 shows the summary of assessment on the leadership styles used by the leaders of the companies. As gleaned from the table, the highest assessed indicator is directive and participative leadership with a composite mean of 2.57, this is followed by transformational leadership with a composite mean of 2.56. The respondents' assessment indicates a high level usage of directive, participative, and transformational leadership as the managers and supervisors of the selected companies.

Although participative leadership exhibits similar characteristics to that of a transformational leadership style, it does not receive the same positive results in benefiting businesses when assessed empirically. For instance, one example is the understudied unethical work behavior of employee time theft. Based on a study by Hu et al. (2022), employee time theft commonly occurs under participative leadership as employees are more likely to avoid working during supposed hours due to the freedom granted to them by supervisors. It is also

reported here that employees with lower conscientiousness are more likely to experience stronger effects of this type of leadership and employee time theft. This opens a discussion for possible areas to improve in this type of leadership for maximizing the potential and performance of employees for the growth and success of businesses. On another note, another study by Robert et al. (2021) had also reported that the higher the relational self-concept of subordinates, the more negative the effect of participative leadership was. This is due to the fact that these kinds of workers appreciated dyadic relationships and hence, this leadership style further negatively affected their affective organizational commitment.

**Table 2**

*Summary Table on Employee Engagement*

Key Result Areas	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Personal Growth and Recognition	2.58	Agree	2
Teamwork and Collaboration	2.60	Agree	1
Communication	2.57	Agree	3
Grand Composite Mean	2.58	Agree	

*Legend: 3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree; 2.50-3.49=Agree; 1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree*

Table 2 shows the assessment on the level of employee engagement of the employees in their various companies. As gleaned from the table, the highest assessed dimension is teamwork and collaboration with a composite mean of 2.60, this is followed by personal growth and recognition with a composite mean of 2.58, and communication with a composite mean of 2.57.

The respondents' assessment indicates a high level of employee engagement as to personal growth and recognition, teamwork and collaboration, and communication in the selected companies. The engagement of employees may vary from individual to individual and this is an important variable as it relates to the need and desire of employees to take part in their work activities. This variable has a direct impact on employee performance and Antony (2018) had mentioned that organizations with more engaged employees actually perform better. From having engaged employees, it was also mentioned that other factors, such as “ enhanced productivity, less employee turnover and attrition rates, less absenteeism, enhanced loyalty and goodwill towards the organization, and positive word of mouth” are all present and occurring for a certain organization. Barreiro et al. (2020) had also mentioned in a study that employees who feel greater happiness, have the ability to influence others, who motivate themselves, and experience emotional regulation have a higher tendency to engage in their work.

**Table 3**

*Summary Table on Employee Job Satisfaction*

Key Result Areas	Composite Mean	VI	Rank
Work Life Balance	2.54	Agree	2
Benefits	2.53	Agree	3
Work Conditions and Safety	2.55	Agree	1
Grand Composite Mean	2.54	Agree	

*Legend: 3.50-4.00=Strongly Agree; 2.50-3.49=Agree; 1.50-2.49=Disagree; 1.00-1.49=Strongly Disagree*

Table 3 shows the assessment on the level of job satisfaction of the employees in their various companies. As gleaned from the table, the highest assessed dimension is work conditions and safety with a composite mean of 2.55, this is followed by work-life balance with a composite mean of 2.54, and benefits with a composite mean of 2.53 which all suggests that the respondents agree that they are satisfied with the work-life balance, work conditions and safety, and benefits they receive from their companies.

The respondents' assessment indicates a high level of job satisfaction as to personal work-life balance, benefits, and work conditions and safety in the selected companies. Based on a review written by Judge et al. (2020), job satisfaction is a major topic of study in job attitudes as it is an important indicator for predicting or foreseeing important outcomes in businesses or companies. It was mentioned that job satisfaction is extremely

important as the satisfaction of employees can lead to workers becoming champions, ambassadors, and even advocates to their organizations or companies that they work for. Another study by Loan (2020) also found that job satisfaction has an overall positive relationship with the organizational commitment and job performance of employees. Here, it was also seen that job satisfaction had a mediating effect on these two latter variables as the strength of the relationship between them declined when job satisfaction was added in the analysis.

As seen in table 4, the computed rho-values ranging from 0.022 to 0.068 indicate a very weak direct relationship between transformational and employee engagement. It shows that there was no statistically significant relationship between transformational and employee engagement since the obtained p-values were greater than 0.01. The computed rho-values ranging from 0.083 to 0.212 indicate a very weak to weak direct relationship between directive and employee engagement. It shows that there was a statistically significant relationship between directive and the sub variables of employee engagement namely personal growth and recognition and communication since the obtained p-values were less than 0.01.

**Table 4***Relationship Between Leadership Styles and Employee Engagement*

Variables	rho	p-value	Interpretation
<b>Transformational</b>			
Personal Growth and Recognition	0.068	0.238	Not Significant
Teamwork and Collaboration	0.036	0.530	Not Significant
Communication	0.022	0.704	Not Significant
<b>Directive</b>			
Personal Growth and Recognition	0.159**	0.005	Significant
Teamwork and Collaboration	0.083	0.149	Not Significant
Communication	0.212**	0.000	Highly Significant
<b>Participative</b>			
Personal Growth and Recognition	0.117*	0.041	Not Significant
Teamwork and Collaboration	0.072	0.209	Not Significant
Communication	-0.111	0.055	Not Significant

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level/\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

The computed rho-values ranging from 0.072 to 0.117 indicate a very weak direct relationship between participative and the sub variables of employee engagement namely personal growth and recognition and teamwork and collaboration. While the computed rho-value of -0.111 indicates a very weak indirect relationship between participative and communication. There was a statistically significant relationship between participative and personal growth and recognition because the obtained p-value was less than 0.05.

The relationship existing between leadership styles and the job satisfaction experienced by employees is a widely studied topic. For instance, in the work of Nazim et al. (2018), it was mentioned that there is a significant relationship between transformational and transactional leadership styles and job satisfaction, with the former causing a higher satisfaction in employees. Some reasons why transformational leadership was positively correlated to job satisfaction are that this leadership style initiates change in the workplace and as well as further motivates employees. Another study by Ilham (2018) also stated that the leadership styles implemented in an organization had a positive influence or effect on the performance of employees. Aside from this, it was also found that leadership styles also had positive impacts on job satisfaction, supplementing the results of Nazim et al. (2018), and on organizational culture too. This data indicates that considering a particular leadership style to implement is crucial in determining the performance and job satisfaction of employees.

As seen in the table 5, the computed rho-values ranging from 0.047 to 0.241 indicate a very weak to weak relationship among the sub variables of leadership styles and job satisfaction. There was a statistically significant relationship between transformational and the sub variables of job satisfaction namely work life balance and benefits because the obtained p-values were less the 0.01.

**Table 5**

*Relationship Between Leadership Styles and Job Satisfaction*

Variables	rho	p-value	Interpretation
<b>Transformational</b>			
Work Life Balance	0.160**	0.005	Significant
Benefits	0.149**	0.010	Significant
Work Conditions and Safety	0.047	0.418	Not Significant
<b>Directive</b>			
Work Life Balance	0.117*	0.042	Significant
Benefits	0.107	0.064	Not Significant
Work Conditions and Safety	0.077	0.183	Not Significant
<b>Participative</b>			
Work Life Balance	0.127*	0.028	Significant
Benefits	0.142*	0.013	Significant
Work Conditions and Safety	0.241**	0.000	Highly Significant

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level/\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

There was a statistically significant relationship between directive and work life balance because the obtained p-value was less than 0.05. There was a statistically significant relationship between participative and job satisfaction because the obtained p-values were less than 0.01/0.05. Mufti et al. (2020) also found that transactional leadership styles have a direct positive relationship on job satisfaction, indicating that leadership is critical to the success of a business or company. Yao et al. (2018) further found that leadership styles also have a positive effect on the intention of employees to stay in their workplace, due to this variable’s strong correlation with job satisfaction. Lastly, Paais et al. (2020) had found that the job satisfaction of employees is also affected by other variables aside from leadership, which are motivation and work culture to be specific. These results are important as they reflect the need to improve not only the leadership style used, but as well as the motivation and culture of an organization for job satisfaction to improve and ultimately, boost employee performance too. Pancasila et al. (2020) supports this with similar data, although with leadership styles having a greater impact on job satisfaction compared to motivation. It was also mentioned here that job satisfaction has the greatest influence or impact on the performance of employees.

Purwanto et al. (2020) reviewed transformational leadership in order to analyze if this is indeed elitist and anti-democratic. The review showed that transformational leadership has a positive and significant effect on the performance or outcomes of educational institutions. Furthermore, it was observed here that despite some articles arguing that this form of leadership expresses elitist and anti-democratic behaviors, transformational leadership does not do so. In fact, it was mentioned here that this focuses on empowering employees to inspire, make use of their capabilities and power, and encourage individual thinking and judgment. This was then also explained to help and boost worker participation, creating an environment where new ideas are supported. Transformational leaders are also ideal as they allow workers to be flexible and independent while encouraging them to take risks and maintaining relationships where communication is the most valuable aspect.

This data is then further supplemented by a study by Top et al. (2020) on how transformational leadership affects employee performance in Iraq. It was found here that this form of leadership is positively linked with employee performance. More specifically, it was the varying dimensions of this that significantly impacted performance, like the inspirational motivation and the consideration that employees would feel and receive from facilitators or company leaders. This then means that by promoting a work environment where employees are cared for can more likely boost their performance for a company and thus, also benefit the overall performance of these organizations.

As seen in the table 6, the computed rho-values ranging from 0.138 to 0.143 indicate a very weak direct relationship between personal growth and recognition and the sub variables of job satisfaction namely work life balance and benefits. While the computed rho-value of -0.019 indicates a very weak indirect relationship between personal growth and recognition and work conditions and safety. It shows that there was a statistically significant relationship between personal growth and recognition and the sub variables of job satisfaction namely

work life balance and benefits since the obtained p-values were less than 0.05. The computed rho-values ranging from 0.071 to 0.183 indicate very weak direct relationship between teamwork and collaboration and job satisfaction. There was a statistically significant relationship between teamwork and collaboration and benefits because the obtained p-value was less than 0.01. The computed rho-values ranging from 0.027 to 0.077 indicate a very weak direct relationship between communication and job satisfaction. It shows that there was no statistically significant relationship between communication and job satisfaction since the obtained p-values were greater than 0.01. On another note, Pongton et al. (2019) mentioned that the satisfaction of employees on communication has a positive impact on job satisfaction and further engaging employees. It was also found however, that there is no existing relationship between the job performance of employees and communication satisfaction.

**Table 6***Relationship Between Employee Engagement and Job Satisfaction*

Variables	rho	p-value	Interpretation
<b>Personal Growth and Recognition</b>			
Work Life Balance	0.138*	0.016	Significant
Benefits	0.143*	0.013	Significant
Work Conditions and Safety	-0.019	0.739	Not Significant
<b>Teamwork and Collaboration</b>			
Work Life Balance	0.082	0.152	Not Significant
Benefits	0.183**	0.001	Significant
Work Conditions and Safety	0.071	0.218	Not Significant
<b>Communication</b>			
Work Life Balance	0.047	0.410	Not Significant
Benefits	0.077	0.181	Not Significant
Work Conditions and Safety	0.027	0.646	Not Significant

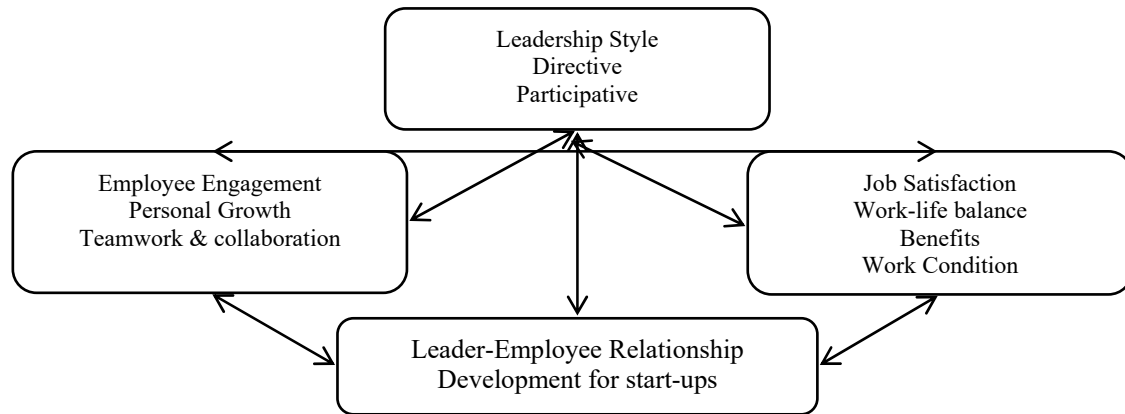
\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level/\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

*Framework towards Improvement of the Leader-Employee Relationship in Start-up Companies*

The leader-employee relationship model proposed by the researcher was based on the influence of leadership on engagement and job satisfaction of the employees. Hence, the model provides the good leadership styles and practices that may influence engagement and job satisfaction based on the study findings. The Influence of Directive Leadership on Employee Engagement indicates that there was a statistically significant relationship between directive and the sub variables of employee engagement namely personal growth and recognition and communication. In other words, the practice of directive leadership may help to engage with the employees through effective communication and to promote employee growth. A link was also drawn between directive leadership and work-life balance satisfaction of employees. There was a statistically significant relationship between transformational and the sub variables of job satisfaction namely work life balance and benefits. This indicates that an increased or decreased level of transformational leadership practices among the employees of the companies is correlated to an increased or decreased level of job satisfaction among the employees. Therefore, leaders may implement transformational leadership practices in their leadership styles so as to improve the level of satisfaction of employees.

The link between participative leadership, work-life balance satisfaction, and the employees' satisfaction with the benefits indicate that the more the employees are allowed to participate in core company roles, it may lead to increase or decrease in benefits and work-life balance satisfaction. There was a statistically significant link between personal growth and recognition and the sub variables of job satisfaction namely work life balance and benefits. This suggests that the level of employee engagement with their personal growth and recognition is linked to how satisfied they are with the benefits they receive from the company. Furthermore, there was a statistically significant relationship between teamwork and collaboration and benefits suggesting that the in order to improve teamwork and collaboration, the companies may also prioritize improving the satisfaction of employees by increasing the benefits they earn from job well done.





#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations

There is moderate level of usage of directive, participative, and transformational leadership as the managers and supervisors of the selected companies. There is moderate level of employee engagement as to personal growth and recognition, teamwork and collaboration, and communication in the selected companies. The evaluation of job satisfaction of the employees indicates moderate level of job satisfaction as to personal work-life balance, benefits, and work conditions and safety in the selected companies. There is weak direct influence on overall engagement, leadership styles show statistically significant impacts on specific satisfaction aspects: directive supports work-life balance, participative boosts job satisfaction, and transformational enhances work-life balance and benefits. While personal growth & recognition indirectly affect work conditions, they strongly impact satisfaction's work-life & benefits and team-building's impact on benefits is evident. Framework for start-ups was formulated.

The practice or implementation of directive leadership practices may help to engage with the employees through effective communication and to promote employee growth. The company managers and supervisors may also implement transformational leadership practices in their leadership styles so as to improve the level of satisfaction of employees. The company's policies may be developed towards encouraging increased participation of employees in work and work-procedures, especially in decision-making. The companies may also prioritize improving the satisfaction of employees by increasing the benefits they earn from job well done. Finally, the developed model may be adopted by the company managers and supervisors towards the improvement of leader-employee relationship and fostering engagement and satisfaction among the employees.

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