

Designing Improvements in Academic Service Quality in Higher Education Using Transformational Leadership to Foster Work Motivation

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Abstract

The leadership style of university administrators is a key factor contributing to the suboptimal performance of higher education in Indonesia. The effectiveness of lecturers and educational staff is largely influenced by how the rector leads the institution. A rector is expected to drive transformation within the university environment by fostering a strong quality-oriented work culture, while also motivating and supporting the professional development of academic and administrative personnel. This study aims to identify the components of transformational leadership demonstrated by rectors in private engineering universities. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, involving participants such as rectors, vice rectors, deans, and heads of study programs. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation, and validated using source and method triangulation. The data were analyzed qualitatively using the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that: (1) The rector's idealized influence is reflected in the involvement of stakeholders in formulating the university's vision, mission, and programs, as well as in conducting regular meetings to address challenges; (2) Inspirational motivation is demonstrated through the use of flexible leadership styles adapted to different situations; (3) Intellectual stimulation is shown by encouraging efficiency, punctuality, and collaboration in work processes; (4) Individualized consideration is evident in the attention given to the needs of lecturers and educational staff; (5) Overall, the rector's transformational leadership has proven effective in enhancing work motivation among lecturers and administrative staff.

Keywords: Leadership, Motivation, Quality, Transformational, University

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions in Indonesia are currently confronted with major challenges in maintaining both effectiveness and quality. In many cases, educational activities are still viewed as routine administrative tasks rather than as transformative processes aimed at developing competent and competitive human resources (Nugroho, 2026). This condition has led to a discrepancy between public expectations for high-quality academic services and the actual outcomes delivered by universities. One crucial factor influencing institutional performance is the leadership style adopted by university management (Khotimah et al., n.d.). Leadership that focuses solely on directive functions tends to weaken the motivation of lecturers and administrative staff, whereas inspiring and adaptive leadership can foster innovation, commitment, and the achievement of organizational objectives (Prayuda & Herminingsih, 2024).

In private universities offering engineering programs, these challenges are often more evident. Frequent leadership turnover at the rector, faculty, and study program levels can lead to shifts in policies, organizational culture, and work practices. Although such transitions are unavoidable, they may reduce managerial consistency and negatively affect the motivation of lecturers and administrative personnel (Hidayati et al., 2024). Educational staff, who are essential for ensuring smooth academic administration, are particularly vulnerable to these changes. Their performance, which directly impacts service quality for both students and lecturers, is highly dependent on how leaders provide guidance, recognition, and opportunities for professional growth (Silaji et al., 2026).

Transformational leadership offers a relevant approach to address this problem. Unlike transactional or bureaucratic leadership styles, transformational leadership emphasizes vision, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individual attention. Leaders who apply this style are expected

not only to guide but also to motivate, instill a sense of meaning in work, and create a conducive environment for innovation. In practice, transformational leadership can strengthen staff commitment, improve service quality, and support the achievement of strategic goals of higher education institutions (Wen & Harms, 2025).

Given these dynamics, this research becomes important to explore the role of transformational leadership in strengthening the work motivation of lecturers and educational staff at private universities. Specifically, the study aims to analyze how the four main dimensions of transformational leadership—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—contribute to improving staff motivation and, consequently, enhancing the overall quality of academic services (Alessa & Ghuzayyil, 2021).

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with descriptive methods. The qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on deeply understanding how the transformational leadership style of university leaders influences the work motivation of lecturers and educational staff, rather than simply measuring variables quantitatively (Zefeiti & Mohamad, 2015). Descriptive methods are used to describe the phenomena in the field in detail based on data from interviews, observations, and documentation (Jamshed, 2014). The subjects of this study were several leaders and administrators of higher education institutions providing engineering education in Surabaya. The subjects included rectors, vice-rectors, deans, heads of study programs, lecturers, and educational staff (administrative staff and administrative departments). Subjects were selected using purposive sampling, based on their roles and direct involvement in leadership activities and work motivation at the university.

This study uses two data sources: primary data from interviews with the Rector, vice rectors, deans, heads of study programs, lecturers, and administrative staff. Secondary data is also available, including university documents (organizational structure, work regulations, activity reports, administrative archives) and observations of daily activities at the university. This study uses several techniques to obtain valid data, including in-depth interviews with the Rector, vice rectors, deans, heads of study programs, lecturers, and administrative staff to gain insights into their perspectives on leadership styles and work motivation. The second data collection technique is observation, where the researcher directly observes the Rector's leadership activities, interactions with lecturers, and the working conditions of the administrative staff. The third data collection technique is documentation, where the researcher collects university documents such as regulations, performance reports, and administrative records as supporting evidence. Data validation in this study used a triangulation method from various sources of information by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation, as well as comparing information from several sources (Rector, vice rector, dean, head of study program, lecturers, and educational staff) to see the consistency of the data (Ghorbani et al., 2023).

Data were analyzed using the Miles & Huberman model, with the first stage being data collection, where data were obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Second, data reduction can be achieved by sorting, summarizing, and focusing on data relevant to transformational leadership. The third stage was data presentation, which involved arranging the data through narratives, tables, or charts for easy understanding. Moreover, the final stage was concluding/verification: repeatedly summarizing and verifying the research findings to ensure validity (Asipi et al., 2022). The analysis of this study is based on four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, where these four dimensions are the leading indicators for assessing the application of the Rector's transformational leadership to increase the work motivation of lecturers and educational staff (Javier, 2026).

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Several institutions, referred to as University A, University B, University C, University D, and University E, offer engineering education targeting the middle-class population in Surabaya, East Java. These institutions are recognized as prominent universities, each accommodating more than 5,000 students. Their strategic locations contribute to their popularity among residents of Surabaya and nearby

regions. Given the large number of lecturers, administrative personnel, and students, effective and adaptable leadership is essential for managing these institutions. Beyond academic staff, these universities also employ educational personnel such as administrative officers, academic support staff, librarians, laboratory assistants, and other supporting roles. Although they are not directly engaged in teaching activities, they play a vital role in ensuring the smooth operation of the educational process. The motivation of these staff members is crucial for the success of higher education management, as efficient administrative services significantly support overall academic performance. The participants in this study included the Rector, vice rectors, deans, heads of study programs, lecturers, and educational staff. The Rector served as the primary informant and was considered the key figure in implementing transformational leadership. Meanwhile, vice rectors, deans, heads of study programs, lecturers, administrative staff, and other educational personnel were involved as supporting informants to provide a comprehensive understanding of how transformational leadership is applied and how it influences work motivation.

3.1. Key Findings Based on the Four Dimensions of Transformational Leadership

As Bass and Avolio (*Transformational Leadership - an Overview | ScienceDirect Topics*, n.d.) proposed in transformational leadership is analyzed through four main dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

3.2. Idealized Influence (Ideal/Exemplary Influence)

Observations and interviews indicate that the rectors at the universities observed can serve as role models for lecturers and educational staff. As the highest leader of the institution, the Rector consistently demonstrates discipline by arriving on time, consistently implementing regulations, and firmly enforcing university policies. The behavior of the rector and university leaders or administrators earns respect from staff, increasing their willingness to follow directions and perform better. Several lecturers stated:

"The Rector always sets a good example. He arrives early, before class, politely reprimands anyone who's late, and cooperates with us when we have important assignments. It makes us feel ashamed if we don't emulate his discipline." This example demonstrates that leaders not only give orders but also set a concrete example. Staff trust is strengthened because the rector and university administrators consistently maintain their attitudes and behavior. Thus, the idealized influence dimension is strongly reflected in the leadership at this institution.

Table 1. Components of Idealized Influence

No.	Behavioral Aspects	Observed Leadership of University Chancellors
1.	Involving lecturers, educational staff, and stakeholders in the preparation of the vision, mission, goals, and strategic plans	The Chancellor always involves lecturers, educational staff, students, and other stakeholders in preparing the university's vision, mission, goals, and program activities.
2.	Prioritize planned, systematic, and sustainable quality.	Always hold regular meetings regarding obstacles faced in the university's activity programs.

3.3. Inspirational Motivation

The second dimension identified was the Rector's ability to provide inspirational motivation. The Rector regularly conveys the university's vision and mission at various occasions, both in official meetings and in daily communications. This vision is not merely normative but accompanied by an invitation to contribute significantly to achieving shared goals. In interviews, several lecturers stated:

"He always reminded us that our work in administration was crucial. Without orderly administration, teachers and students couldn't function effectively. That made us feel like our work had meaning." The Rector's remarks instilled a renewed sense of pride and motivation among the staff. They felt their work was valued and recognized as part of the university's success. This aligns with the concept

of inspirational motivation, which emphasizes the importance of inspiring enthusiasm and giving meaning to subordinates' work.

Table 2. Components of Inspirational Motivation

No.	Behavioral Aspects	Observed Leadership of University Chancellors
1.	Implementing a democratic, participatory, and collegial leadership style.	The Chancellor does not only use one leadership style but always looks at the situation and conditions faced.
2.	Developing a conducive, relaxed work atmosphere and intrinsic motivation to increase work productivity.	You should always join the lecturers and educational staff during break time or when there are no assignments or obligations to be completed.
	Developing values of togetherness, group awareness, and organization, respecting consensus, mutual trust, tolerance, enthusiasm for progress, and sharing creativity and new ideas.	The values instilled by the Chancellor and the management of the higher education institution include smiling, greeting, politeness, and discipline.

3.4. Intellectual Stimulation

The Chancellor also encouraged staff to think critically and creatively when carrying out their duties. One innovation that emerged was digitizing administrative archives, which had previously been maintained only in physical form. The Chancellor allowed staff to try new ideas, despite the risk of errors. Several lecturers and educational staff shared:

"At first, we were afraid of making mistakes when trying to create a digital archiving system. But the Chancellor always said, it's better to make mistakes and fix them than not try at all. From there, we finally succeeded in creating a simple database."

This kind of encouragement encourages lecturers and educational staff to be more innovative. The intellectual stimulation dimension is evident when staff can develop new work methods, resulting in more effective and efficient work.

Table 3. Components of Intellectual Stimulation

No.	Behavioral Aspects	Observed Leadership of University Chancellors
1.	Developing a positive work culture, work ethic, discipline, and fairness.	- The Chancellor focuses on completing work efficiently and on time, always prioritizing teamwork. - The Chancellor, university leaders, and administrators also avoid patronizing lecturers and educational staff but encourage them to collaborate.
2.	Taking an approach to harmonious relationships	You should always join the lecturers and educational staff during break time or when there are no assignments or obligations to be completed.
3.	Developing values of togetherness, group awareness, and organization, respecting consensus, mutual trust, tolerance, enthusiasm for progress, and sharing creativity and new ideas.	The Chancellor and leaders or managers of higher education institutions become friends and maintain a friendly attitude towards the students and educational staff. The Chancellor also creates harmonious relationships with students. The closeness created makes the elements of the higher education institution feel comfortable.

3.5. Individualized Consideration

The Chancellor demonstrates personal concern for lecturers and educational staff. For example, when a lecturer or educational staff member experiences family problems, the Chancellor and university leaders or administrators grant special permission and even visit the staff member's home. Several lecturers and educational staff members stated:

"I felt appreciated because he came to my house when my parents were sick. It made me more enthusiastic about working."

This individual attention strengthens the emotional bond between leaders, faculty, and educational staff. Staff loyalty increases because they feel treated as valued human beings, not simply employees.

Table 4. Components of Individual Consideration

No.	Behavioral Aspects	Observed Leadership of University Chancellors
1.	Responsive and caring to the needs of lecturers, educational staff, and students.	The Chancellor always follows up on the needs of lecturers and educational staff.
2.	Developing the professionalism of lecturers and educational staff.	Always participate in and hold workshops, education and training, and comparative studies.

3.6. Impact of Transformational Leadership on Work Motivation

The Rector's implementation of transformational leadership significantly impacts the work motivation of lecturers and educational staff. These impacts can be described as follows:

1. Improved work discipline. Lecturers and educational staff are more disciplined in arriving on time, completing work by deadlines, and adhering to university regulations.
2. There is a growing sense of belonging. With inspirational motivation, lecturers and administrative staff feel a vital part of achieving the university's vision and are proud to be part of the institution.
3. Increased creativity and innovation.
4. The rector and university leaders or administrators' encouragement of critical thinking results in innovations in administrative systems and services.
5. More harmonious working relationships. Individual attention from the Rector and university leaders or administrators strengthens social relationships in the workplace. The work atmosphere is more conducive and collaborative.
6. Improved productivity and service quality. High work motivation improves the quality of administrative services to teachers, students, and parents.

Table 5. Components of Inspirational Motivation

No.	Behavioral Aspects	Observed Leadership of University Chancellors
1.	Implementing a democratic, participatory, and collegial leadership style.	The Chancellor does not only use one leadership style but always looks at the situation and conditions faced.
2.	Developing the professionalism of lecturers and educational staff.	You should always join the lecturers and educational staff during break time or when there are no assignments or obligations to be completed.
3.	Developing values of togetherness, group awareness, and organization, respecting consensus, mutual trust, tolerance, enthusiasm for progress, and sharing creativity and new ideas.	The values instilled by the Chancellor and the management of the higher education institution include smiling, greeting, politeness, and discipline.

3.7. Obstacles in the Implementation of Transformational Leadership

Despite its positive impact, implementing transformational leadership is not without its challenges. These challenges include resistance to change, where some senior staff struggle to accept change,

particularly in using digital technology. Limited resources, such as limited technological facilities, slow down the implementation of new ideas. Due to limited staff, high workloads can cause some to feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of tasks. Furthermore, differences in background, such as lecturers and educational staff of varying ages and educational levels, create gaps in the acceptance of new ideas. Furthermore, several obstacles to implementing transformational leadership are summarized in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Type of Obstacles to Implementing Transformational Leadership

No.	Types of Obstacles	Observation Results	Impact	Emerging Complaints
1.	Limited resources such as human resources, facilities, and infrastructure	Limited resources such as human resources, facilities, and infrastructure; bottlenecks on shared devices, tasks piling up when the system is having problems, and initiatives stopping midway	frustration, fatigue, and decreased self-efficacy	"It is useless to innovate if you do not have enough tools."
2.	High workload and unbalanced roles	Limited staff with a wide range of tasks; when innovation occurs, the workload increases before processes become efficient. Repeated overtime, blurred priorities, and improvised work without standard operating procedures (SOPs) exist.	decreased intrinsic motivation	"If the work model is like this, our energy will run out."
3.	A formal and hierarchical culture makes staff hesitate to raise ideas or objections.	One-way meetings, minimal honest feedback, strong dependence on superior instructions	Low psychological safety; creativity and initiative are hampered.	"Too many meetings actually make us more passive."
4.	Technology anxiety	Avoid new features and repeated errors due to a lack of practice.	Feelings of inadequacy resulting in decreased motivation and self-confidence, or stagnation in innovation	"Just ask someone else to do it."
5.	Ambiguity of performance indicators & feedback	Service targets and accuracy/speed metrics are not clearly stated; rewards are not specific. Staff are confused about measuring "good work," achievements are difficult to celebrate, and feedback is sporadic.	Achievement motivation weakens; TL has difficulty linking vision to measurable daily achievements.	"Where do we want to be directed or what is the purpose of this work?"
6.	Inconsistency of role modeling	Double standards, selective tolerance, staff returning to "minimal norms"	Decreased trust; motivation from "following the example" turns into compliance with formalities	"Our leader's words and behavior are different."
7.	Change of Rector, faculty leaders, and study program leaders (managerial rotation)	Leadership changes bring new styles and priorities, disrupting TL continuity. Programs stall during transition, "waiting for new leadership's	Change fatigue; staff are tired of adapting, so innovation motivation decreases.	"We do not need to do it yet; wait for the new leadership's instructions."

		direction," and policies are repeated from scratch.		
8.	Asynchronous reward schemes	Formal awards often assess easily measured things (attendance, paperwork) rather than initiative/collaboration. Innovation is not captured in the assessment; it is what is rewarded.	Intrinsic motivation of experts/innovators weakens; staff reverts to safe working mode.	"Why push too hard? We are not considered anyway."
9.	Lack of mentoring & micro-learning systems	Workshop once, then "abandoned"; no technology clinic hour; tactical teaching materials absent.	Self-confidence does not grow when exploration motivation is low.	"What was the continuation of yesterday's activity?"
10.	Role conflict and task ambiguity	Overlapping, passing off tasks, or approval bottlenecks	Role stress results in decreased motivation and team cohesion	"What are we being asked to do?"
11.	Dependence on the figure (person-dependent)	The success of transformational leadership is often tied to the role of the Rector. When the Rector is absent, collective energy declines. Initiatives stall when the head of the department is away, and minor decisions await superiors.	Autonomous motivation does not grow; a culture of independence has not yet formed.	"Let us just wait for his orders."
12.	Procedural justice is perceived as not being evenly distributed.	Whispers of "those close to the leader get more attention", sensitive to assignments	Affective commitment decreases, and perceptions of fairness sabotage transformational leadership efforts.	"It seems like we are being differentiated, huh?"

3.8. Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate the theory of transformational leadership proposed by Bass & Avolio (Bass & Avolio, 1994). The four dimensions of transformational leadership have been demonstrated to be implemented by several leaders and managers of higher education institutions providing engineering education in Surabaya. Theoretically, this study aligns with Yukl's (2013) opinion in Widisatria & Nawangsari (Widisatria & Nawangsari, 2021) which states that transformational leadership can improve subordinate motivation and performance through idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual attention. The results of this study are also consistent with research in De Costa & Wickramasinghe (Costa & Wickramasinghe, 2025), which confirmed that transformational leadership from the Rector and leaders or managers of higher education institutions significantly influences staff work motivation in higher education. However, the findings also indicate that the implementation of transformational leadership faces obstacles in the form of resistance to change and limited resources.

In the higher education leadership literature, most transformational leadership studies focus on lecturers as the primary actors, such as the effects of transformational leadership on teaching performance, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and student achievement (Ntseke et al., 2022). Therefore, this article fills this gap by focusing on non-lecturer educational staff, a group often marginalized in research but crucial for the quality of higher education services. International research has often linked transformational leadership in higher education to learning climates, collaborative cultures, and reform.

Quantitative research often examines mediators such as trust in leaders, a safe psychological climate, meaning of work, engagement, and so on, and moderators such as age, tenure, task complexity, role clarity, organizational support, etc. However, qualitative studies have explored narratives but have

not tested them statistically (Hui & Long, 2024). This makes it difficult to measure factors such as trust in the Rector, which appears to be important. Meanwhile, many studies have shown that transformational leadership influences motivation and performance through trust variables. This research was conducted at institutions with at least Very Good accreditation, which does not bias the resulting model to apply to universities below Very Good. However, even though the universities studied are middle-class, they still face limitations, especially in human resources and facilities. This indicates that accreditation does not automatically eliminate operational constraints. Therefore, fair comparisons require replication at other universities with diverse resources.

4. CONCLUSION

The study's main conclusions may be presented in a short Conclusions section, which may stand alone or form a subsection of a Discussion or Results and Discussion section. The conclusion section should lead the reader to the important matter of the paper. Conclusions should answer the objectives of the research. Tells how your work advances the field from the present state of knowledge. Without clear Conclusions, reviewers and readers will find it difficult to judge the work and whether or not it merits publication in the proceedings. It can also be followed by a contribution of research that should be addressed in this section. This study concludes that the transformational leadership of the Rector at a private engineering university in Surabaya significantly increases the work motivation of lecturers and educational staff, through four key dimensions—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—the Rector and university administrators can provide consistent role models, instill relevant work meaning, create a safe space for experimentation and learning from mistakes, and provide personalized attention that fosters positive emotional bonds. This series of mechanisms leads to tangible changes in operational behavior: increased discipline and responsibility, faster and more accurate administrative services, strengthened team collaboration, and the emergence of process improvement initiatives—including the digitization of archives and the simplification of reporting flows—that collectively improve the university's service performance.

However, this study's findings also confirm that transformational leadership's effectiveness cannot be achieved in isolation; instead, it requires a supportive ecosystem. Barriers such as resistance to change (especially technology adoption), limited resources and training, high workloads, power distance and bureaucratic culture, and even leadership turnover can dampen the momentum of improvement. Therefore, transformational leadership needs to be combined with concrete managerial interventions: sharpening standard operating procedures (SOPs) and quick wins, simple but measurable service metrics (SLAs), specific feedback and appreciation cycles for innovative behavior, and ongoing micro-learning and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) mentoring. A hybrid approach with transactional elements (process certainty), distributed leadership (broad involvement), and instructional orientation (focus on service quality to support learning) will strengthen the leverage of change.

Theoretically, this study enriches our understanding of the pathways of influence of transformational leadership—through trust, a sense of meaning, and psychological safety—that lead to motivation and service performance. Practically, this study provides a list of actions that can be replicated by other higher education institutions with similar contexts. The limitations of a single-case study design open up opportunities for further multi-site, mixed-methods research to test the strength of the effects, the role of mediators and moderators (e.g., trust, tenure, age), and the longitudinal link between objective behavioral indicators (digital logs, SLA) and service outcomes. Thus, transformational leadership, supported by appropriate operational policies, deserves to be positioned as a core strategy for improving the quality of educational services.

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