

Analysis of the Impact of Leadership Change Utilizing Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Initiatives on Employee Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how a leadership transition affects employee engagement at PT XY Indonesia, with a focus on the quality of leader–employee relationships during periods of organizational change. The research *International Conference Proceedings*, applies the Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which highlights the role of trust, respect, and mutual obligation in leader–follower relationships. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, this study aims to capture in-depth employee perspectives and experiences following a change in top leadership. The findings are expected to provide practical insights into how relational leadership can sustain or enhance employee engagement during change. This research is particularly relevant for human resource professionals and leaders seeking to support workforce morale, commitment, and motivation in the face of transitions, and to understand the relational strategies that can help employees remain engaged throughout periods of organizational adjustment.

Keywords: Employee Engagement; Employee Perception; Leadership Change; Leadership Transition; Leader–Member Exchange; Organizational Relationships

INTRODUCTION

Change is an inevitable aspect of organizational life, and leadership transitions are among the most consequential shifts an organization can experience. Such changes extend beyond merely replacing a leader; they reshape trust, communication, and relationships across the workplace. Leaders strongly influence how employees perceive their jobs, their sense of belonging, and their motivation to remain engaged with the organization. Positive leadership often fosters trust, motivation, and commitment (Breevaart & Bakker, 2018), whereas poorly managed transitions can create uncertainty, lower morale, and lead to disengagement (Essel, 2025).

Several leadership theories provide useful lenses for examining these dynamics. Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiration, empowerment, and individualized support, which have been shown to sustain engagement during times of change (Lewa et al., 2022). In contrast, transactional leadership focuses on structured goals and rewards, which may be less effective in addressing employees' psychological and emotional needs during uncertain periods (Jaqua & Jaqua, 2021). The Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory further highlights how the quality of relationships between leaders and team members, characterized by trust, respect, and open communication, directly affects engagement, commitment, and performance (Martin et al., 2016). Lewin's three-stage model of organizational change (unfreezing, changing, refreezing) also provides a useful framework for understanding how employees adjust to leadership transitions, particularly in how trust and psychological safety are built or eroded in the process.

Against this theoretical backdrop, PT XY Indonesia (PTXYI), a small-to-medium enterprise in the chemical adhesives industry, presents a timely case. For nearly a decade, the company was led by the same President Director, under whom organizational culture remained stable and employee engagement steadily improved. In late 2024, the company experienced its first major leadership transition when a new President Director was appointed. Initial signs indicated significant disruption. Data from the 2025 engagement survey revealed notable declines in key indicators: trust and perceptions toward top management dropped sharply, with scores for "Top Management Concern," "Trust and Confidence in Top Management," and "Overall Top Management" falling by 36, 20, and 28 points, respectively. Other areas closely tied to leadership, such as internal communication (−20 pp), employee empowerment (−17 pp), and support for resources (−14 pp), also decreased. At the same time, reports of stress, burnout, and disengagement increased.

This context raises critical research questions: how and why did the 2024 leadership transition at PTXYI lead to a measurable decline in employee engagement? Furthermore, how did changes in leadership style and leader–member relationships influence trust, communication, and motivation among employees? By examining these issues, this study contributes to the broader understanding of leadership transitions and their impact on employee engagement, with particular attention to the role of LMX and organizational change frameworks. Although leadership and engagement have been widely studied, there remains limited empirical work examining leadership transitions specifically within small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) in Indonesia. Much of the existing literature focuses on leadership styles in large organizations or treats engagement as an abstract outcome without attention to the unique dynamics of leadership change. Moreover, while Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory has been applied in various contexts, few studies have explicitly connected LMX quality to leadership transitions and employee engagement in Indonesian organizational settings. This gap is significant because SMEs often rely heavily on close-knit relationships and cultural continuity. A

leadership transition in such contexts may disrupt not only strategic direction but also the social bonds that sustain engagement. Understanding how leadership transitions influence trust, communication, and engagement in SMEs can therefore provide important insights for both theory and practice.

This study addresses this gap by examining the case of PT XY Indonesia (PTXYI), a multinational company in the chemical adhesives industry with fewer than 100 employees. After nearly a decade under the same leadership, the company underwent its first major leadership change in 2024. This transition provides an opportunity to explore how shifts in leadership style influence trust, communication, and engagement, and to contribute to broader discussions on leadership effectiveness during organizational change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transactional and Transformational Leadership

Transactional and transformational leadership are two central approaches in leadership theory. Transactional leadership emphasizes structured exchanges between leaders and followers, focusing on clear goals, performance expectations, and contingent rewards (Lewa et al., 2022). Leaders provide tangible incentives such as salary, promotion, or recognition in exchange for task completion or compliance, fostering short-term efficiency and role clarity (Jaqua & Jaqua, 2021). Although effective in maintaining stability and control, this approach primarily manages behavior through rewards and punishments and may fall short in addressing employees' deeper psychological needs during times of change.

Transformational leadership, in contrast, seeks to inspire and engage followers beyond basic performance expectations and has been shown to enhance employee engagement, particularly during organizational transitions. Effendy and Arquisola (2022) found that transformational leadership significantly influences digital maturity, while Prakasa et al. (2020) showed it can reduce employee resistance by fostering psychological safety and shared purpose. Similarly, Ravani (2025) concluded that transformational leadership strengthens engagement and resilience through empathy, clear communication, and collaboration. Albrecht et al. (2015) also highlight that transformational leaders build engagement by aligning intrinsic motivation with organizational goals, promoting growth, and reinforcing shared values such as learning and autonomy.

Conversely, ineffective leadership during transitions can cause confusion, loss of direction, and declining morale. Olley (2023) noted that the absence of clear vision and trust leads to emotional disengagement and organizational fatigue. In this regard, transformational leadership provides a framework for sustaining engagement during transitions by offering clarity, emotional support, and a shared vision. As emphasized by Effendy and Arquisola (2022), transformational leadership extends beyond strategic decision-making, it nurtures relationships and empowers teams toward long-term growth and adaptability.

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Leader Member Exchange (LMX) Theory provides valuable insight into how the quality of relationships between leaders and subordinates influences key organizational outcomes such as employee engagement. The theory explains that leaders form relationships of varying quality with different employees, characterized by differing levels of trust, communication, loyalty, and mutual support (Chaurasia & Shukla, 2016; Martin

et al., 2016). These relationships evolve reciprocally over time through shared interactions and contributions rather than formal job structures.

Research consistently shows that high-quality LMX relationships, defined by emotional support, transparent communication, and mutual respect, significantly enhance engagement and performance, particularly during organizational change (Agarwal et al., 2012; Jiang & Chen, 2020). Conversely, employees involved in low-quality LMX exchanges often feel marginalized or disengaged, especially during periods of leadership transition that introduce uncertainty.

According to Martin et al. (2016), LMX quality can be understood through core relational dimensions such as affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect, which collectively reflect trust and mutual support between leaders and team members. High levels of affect encourage emotional closeness and trust, loyalty strengthens mutual commitment, contribution highlights collaborative work efforts, and professional respect enhances admiration for a leader's competence and integrity, each fostering stronger engagement during change processes.

LMX theory also distinguishes between in-group and out-group dynamics. In-group members experience higher trust, autonomy, and communication, while out-group members engage in more limited, transactional exchanges (Wagner & Koob, 2022; Olley, 2023). During leadership transitions, these dynamics may shift, influencing employees' sense of belonging, security, and engagement within the organization.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a central topic in organizational research, particularly in relation to leadership effectiveness, employee well-being, and organizational change. It is defined as a psychological state reflecting employees' emotional, cognitive, and physical involvement in their work (Schaufeli, 2021). Engaged employees are typically energetic, passionate, and focused, influencing both performance and workplace relationships. According to Schaufeli et al. (2019), engagement consists of three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor represents sustained energy and resilience under pressure, dedication involves enthusiasm and a strong sense of purpose, and absorption reflects deep concentration and immersion in tasks. This framework is relevant for examining how employees respond to leadership transitions that disrupt routines and affect workplace dynamics.

Employee engagement differs from job satisfaction or commitment because it reflects proactive involvement and personal investment in work. Schaufeli (2021) emphasizes its active nature, noting that engaged employees exceed expectations, take initiative, and persist despite challenges. Leadership behavior plays a critical role in shaping engagement. Research shows that leaders who foster trust, share a clear vision, and support professional development significantly influence employees' sense of purpose, value, and belonging (Lewa et al., 2022). Transformational leadership behaviors, such as building trust and encouraging growth, enhance engagement by creating psychological safety and satisfaction (Albrecht et al., 2015; Breevaart & Bakker, 2018). Conversely, when leadership lacks clarity or support, employees may disengage and withdraw emotionally, reducing overall organizational effectiveness.

Engaged employees contribute not only to higher productivity but also to organizational resilience and innovation. The work environment further affects engagement. Albrecht et al. (2015) state that supportive leadership, fair HR practices, and open communication sustain engagement, while negative or unclear climates diminish it. This study applies Schaufeli et al.'s (2019) framework of vigor, dedication, and absorption to assess how

leadership transitions at PT XY Indonesia influence employees' motivation and involvement. This model allows a comprehensive understanding of how leadership style and communication affect engagement during organizational change.

LMX–Employee Engagement Dimensions

Empirical evidence consistently shows a positive relationship between Leader Member Exchange (LMX) and employee engagement across various organizational settings. [Wagner and Koob \(2022\)](#) found that strong LMX relationships increased engagement among employees, while [Martin et al. \(2016\)](#) confirmed that high-quality exchanges enhanced trust, affective commitment, and job performance. Beyond specific sectors, [Chaurasia and Shukla \(2016\)](#) observed that LMX improved engagement and performance among managers, with engagement acting as a mediating variable. Similarly, [Agarwal et al. \(2012\)](#) demonstrated that LMX fostered work engagement, which promoted innovation and reduced turnover intentions in the service industry. In addition, [Olley \(2023\)](#) highlighted that employees who experience supportive and trusting leader relationships tend to report lower burnout and higher engagement levels. Collectively, these studies identify LMX as a central driver of employee engagement. Building on this foundation, the present study examines how LMX influences employee engagement during leadership transitions in an industrial context.

Psychological Safety Theory

Leader Member Exchange (LMX) quality plays a crucial role in developing psychological safety at work. Employees who experience trust, respect, and support from their leaders feel more confident to express ideas and take interpersonal risks ([Farmanesh & Zargar, 2021](#)). Psychological safety sustains engagement and resilience, especially during leadership transitions. Physical safety, an equally vital component, refers to protection from harm and is influenced by leadership attention to health, safety, and working conditions. [Fadli \(2024\)](#) found that effective safety measures and leader responsiveness improved job satisfaction and engagement, reinforcing the importance of a safe and supportive work environment. Similarly, [Schaufeli \(2021\)](#) emphasized that engaging leadership behaviors such as care, feedback, and empowerment create a sense of security and belonging that enhances motivation. In organizational contexts, leaders who foster trust and communicate openly strengthen both psychological and physical safety, which in turn maintain engagement and well-being ([Agarwal et al., 2012; Lewa et al., 2022](#)). Together, these forms of safety cultivate environments where employees feel secure to contribute, trust leadership, and remain motivated during organizational change. Ensuring both psychological and physical safety strengthens LMX relationships, sustains morale, and mitigates disengagement throughout transitions.

Lewin's Organizational Change Theory

Kurt Lewin's three-step model of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing remains foundational for understanding organizational change, particularly during leadership transitions ([Burnes & Bargal, 2017](#)). The unfreezing stage prepares employees to recognize the need for change by challenging established routines and encouraging openness to new perspectives ([Cummings et al., 2016](#)). The change stage involves adopting new leadership styles, behaviors, or structures, while the refreezing stage stabilizes these changes through cultural reinforcement and aligned policies. Rather than enforcing rigidity, refreezing institutionalizes new norms to prevent regression.

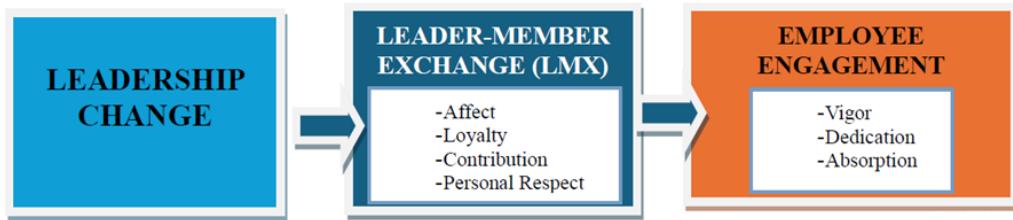
Although developed decades ago, Lewin's model remains relevant due to its human-centered focus on behavioral readiness and adaptation. Studies such as [Burnes and Bargal \(2017\)](#) demonstrate that the model continues to guide modern organizational change through its emphasis on unfreezing, moving, and refreezing stages that help individuals adapt to new environments. Similarly, [Cummings et al. \(2016\)](#) emphasized

that Lewin's approach provides a structured and evidence-based foundation for managing transformation by promoting communication, participation, and shared understanding. In contemporary settings, these principles support digital transformation and leadership practices that foster engagement, trust, and commitment among employees. Overall, Lewin's framework continues to provide a practical foundation for integrating leadership, communication, and engagement during organizational change.

Conceptual Framework

The study framework model is depicted in [Figure 1](#).

Figure 1. Research Framework



This study examines how leadership transition influences employee engagement through the lens of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, linking leadership change, relationship quality, and engagement at PT XY Indonesia. The transition, marked by a shift in top management after nearly a decade of stability, introduced a new leadership style and direction that generated uncertainty affecting trust, communication, and goal alignment. Using LMX theory, the study investigates how relationship quality, characterized by trust, respect, loyalty, and contribution, mediates the effects of leadership change on engagement. High-quality LMX relationships foster support, involvement, and psychological safety, which sustain engagement during transitions ([Breevaart & Bakker, 2018](#)). Employee engagement, encompassing vigor, dedication, and absorption ([Schaufeli et al., 2019](#)), reflects employees' behavioral and emotional commitment to their work and is strongly influenced by leadership behavior. The framework proposes that when LMX quality declines, engagement decreases, whereas strong relationships help maintain or enhance engagement. This model is particularly relevant to PT XY Indonesia, where leadership change coincided with reduced engagement, highlighting the importance of strengthening leader and employee relationships to preserve trust and stability during organizational change.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the impact of leadership transition on employee engagement at PT XY Indonesia, a multinational adhesives company with fewer than 100 employees. The case study design is suitable for exploring "how" and "why" questions within real-life contexts ([Yin, 2018](#)), while the interpretivist paradigm allows for a deeper understanding of employees' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. Purposive sampling was applied to select participants who had worked under both the previous and current leadership, with a minimum tenure of two years. Respondents represented multiple hierarchical levels, including staff, supervisors, and managers, and came from departments such as sales, marketing, technical, supply chain, finance, and HRGA. Data collection comprised semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions involving managers, supervisors, and staff to capture both individual and group perspectives. All sessions were conducted with participants' consent, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. The interview and focus group guides were developed based on literature concerning leadership, Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), and employee engagement. Leadership

change referred to shifts in management style and direction, LMX represented the quality of leader–employee relationships, and engagement encompassed vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2019). Data were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework, with credibility ensured through triangulation, member validation, and maintenance of an audit trail. Ethical protocols included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and guaranteeing voluntary participation without harm.

RESULTS

Data from the first Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with managerial-level participants provides early insights into how the leadership transition at PT XY Indonesia is perceived and how it has affected employee engagement. The discussion involved managers from the HR, Finance, Supply Chain, Sales, Technical, and Marketing departments who had worked under both the previous and current leadership.

Overall, managers described the transition as disruptive and emotionally unsettling. At the unfreezing stage of Lewin's change model, the announcement of the new leadership generated initial shock, uncertainty, and mixed expectations. While some expressed hope for positive change, most reported anxiety due to unclear directions and the absence of open communication.

When asked to compare leadership styles, participants emphasized strong differences. The previous leader was described as supportive, approachable, and highly engaged with employees, often acting as a problem-solver and motivator. In contrast, the new leader was perceived as distant, transactional, and rarely present in the workplace. Managers highlighted that the leader seldom greeted employees or engaged in informal interactions, which weakened the sense of connection.

This shift was strongly linked to declines in Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) quality. Managers reported that trust, respect, and open communication had diminished, with one participant noting that the leader “always feels he is the smartest and does not value others.” Such perceptions suggest that the new leadership is experienced as highly transactional, prioritizing authority and direction over collaboration.

As a result, employee engagement was seen to decline. Managers observed lower motivation and energy among their teams, with some staff openly considering resignation. While certain employees remained engaged due to personal and financial necessity, overall levels of vigor and dedication (Schaufeli, 2019) appeared to weaken. Moreover, psychological safety was described as compromised. Participants expressed that employees no longer felt safe voicing ideas or concerns, leading to a more closed and less connected work environment.

These preliminary results indicate that the leadership transition not only altered leadership style but also disrupted the relational foundation of the organization. The decline in LMX, combined with reduced psychological safety, appears to have directly influenced engagement levels. As these findings stem from a single FGD at the managerial level, they should be treated as provisional. Further data from semi-structured interviews and additional FGDs will be required to provide a comprehensive picture of how leadership change is shaping employee engagement across PT XY Indonesia.

DISCUSSION

Employee Perceptions of Leadership Transition

The preliminary findings reveal that employees at PT XY Indonesia perceived the leadership transition as a disruptive event that unsettled their sense of organizational stability. Many participants expressed feelings of shock and uncertainty when the announcement was first made, suggesting that the transition represented a rupture in what had been a decade of relatively stable leadership. This aligns with Lewin's (1947, as reinterpreted by [Burnes & Bargal, 2017](#)) "unfreezing" stage, in which established routines and psychological comfort are challenged by external changes. While some employees initially welcomed the possibility of renewal, optimism was short-lived as the incoming leader's style diverged sharply from the relational and approachable approach of the former director. This mirrors earlier research by [Olley \(2023\)](#), who argued that the absence of clarity and trust during leadership change contributes to emotional disengagement and organizational fatigue.

Transactional Style and Decline in LMX Quality

A consistent theme that emerged from the focus group discussions (FGDs) was the characterization of the new leader as highly transactional. Employees reported that the new director engaged in minimal interaction, seldom offered recognition, and was largely absent from the daily workplace environment. These behaviors suggested a leadership style centered more on control and compliance than on inspiration or relational exchange. According to Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, a transactional leadership approach reduces the strength of leader–employee relationships by undermining mutual respect, trust, and loyalty between the parties involved ([Martin et al., 2016](#)). Statements such as the leader "rarely being in the office" or "not greeting people" illustrate how micro-behaviors and everyday presence shape LMX quality. The preliminary findings resonate with research by [Chaurasia and Shukla \(2016\)](#), who found that high-quality LMX relationships directly strengthen engagement and performance, while poor-quality exchanges generate detachment. Similarly, [Wagner & Koob \(2022\)](#) highlighted the positive link between LMX and work engagement, further supporting the notion that PT XY Indonesia's decline in engagement can be partly explained by a deterioration in relational quality.

Psychological Safety and Its Erosion

Another recurring theme was the erosion of psychological safety in the workplace. Employees expressed hesitation in voicing ideas or concerns, perceiving the leader as dismissive and unresponsive. This aligns with previous findings by [Farmanesh and Zargar \(2021\)](#) and [Schaufeli \(2021\)](#), which highlighted the crucial role of leadership in fostering trust, openness, and psychological safety. In PT XY Indonesia, the absence of active listening and supportive feedback hindered employees' willingness to contribute beyond formal obligations. Within Lewin's "change" phase, this represents a fragile stage where employees should be supported to adapt to new expectations. Instead, a lack of trust and communication deepened resistance, undermining the stabilization of new behaviors. These results also reflect the argument by [Albrecht et al. \(2015\)](#), who showed that effective communication and psychological safety play key roles in maintaining employee engagement, particularly during periods of organizational transition.

Employee Engagement Under Strain

Employee engagement appeared notably weakened in the wake of the transition. FGD participants described lower motivation, decreased morale, and a tendency to perform tasks purely out of obligation rather than enthusiasm. Several indicated that they continued to fulfill job requirements primarily for financial reasons, highlighting a shift from intrinsic to extrinsic motivation. This outcome aligns with previous studies emphasizing the impact of leadership behavior on engagement. [Breevaart and Bakker \(2018\)](#) found that transformational leadership behaviors, including daily support and

encouragement, significantly enhance engagement and persistence, while [Chaurasia and Shukla \(2016\)](#) demonstrated that the quality of leader member exchange improves engagement and performance through trust and collaboration. In contrast, limited feedback and rigid managerial control tend to discourage emotional involvement, leading to compliance without commitment ([Olley, 2023](#)). In Lewin's framework, engagement at PT XY Indonesia has not yet reached the "refreezing" stage where new norms and morale stabilize. Instead, disengagement and uncertainty persist, suggesting a risk of long-term decline in performance and retention if corrective action is not implemented.

Limitations of Preliminary Findings

It is important to note that these findings remain preliminary, as they are drawn solely from FGDs with managerial-level participants. While these perspectives provide valuable insights into the leadership–engagement dynamic, they may not fully reflect the experiences of staff at operational levels. Broader data, including individual interviews and survey-based measures, will be necessary to validate and deepen the analysis. Nonetheless, the preliminary evidence strongly aligns with established literature, suggesting that the leadership style adopted during transitions plays a decisive role in shaping employee engagement outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of leadership transition on employee engagement at PT XY Indonesia through the lenses of Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, transformational and transactional leadership, and Lewin's model of organizational change. The findings indicate that a shift toward a more transactional leadership style has weakened leader–member relationships, reduced psychological safety, and lowered engagement. Employees reported diminished trust, morale, and communication, suggesting that leadership changes introduced uncertainty that remains unresolved.

The results underscore the importance of leadership behavior in shaping employee attitudes during organizational change. Openness, trust, and high-quality exchanges are essential for maintaining engagement, particularly in transitional periods. Theoretically, the findings illustrate how Lewin's stages of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing occur in practice, while highlighting the risks of transactional leadership when not complemented by transformational behaviors. Further research using broader and longitudinal data is needed to deepen understanding of how engagement evolves over time and to identify strategies that sustain morale during leadership transitions.

LIMITATION

These preliminary findings are based mainly on focus group discussions with managers, which, while insightful, do not capture the full range of employee experiences. The qualitative approach provides contextual depth but limits generalizability, and researcher interpretation may influence results. Although triangulation and member checking are planned to enhance validity, these have not yet been completed. The study's focus on a single small organization also restricts broader applicability. Moreover, as the data represent a single point in time, they do not reflect long-term changes in engagement throughout the leadership transition. Continued data collection and wider sampling are therefore necessary to build a more comprehensive understanding.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest concerning the study, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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