

Leadership Competencies as Predictors of Employee Engagement: The Role of Driving Change Through Innovation

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Abstract. This study examined whether leadership competencies can predict employee engagement. Using a descriptive-correlational design, the researchers gathered data through total enumeration from 71 middle managers of a publicly listed sugar manufacturing firm in the Philippines, one of the largest in Asia. Descriptive results showed that perceptions of leadership competencies – people development, delivering purposeful results, driving change with innovation, and strategic thinking – were rated high, as was the level of employee engagement, measured in terms of retention, absenteeism, productivity, and growth mindset. To identify which competencies best explain engagement, the researchers conducted a stepwise multiple linear regression analysis. This method tested the relative contribution of each leadership competency to predicting engagement. Findings revealed that only driving change with innovation significantly predicted employee engagement. This highlights the critical role of innovative leadership in fostering engagement. By driving change through creative ideas and approaches, companies can strengthen employee commitment and performance.

Keywords: Leadership; Employee engagement; Driving change with innovation; Middle managers; Philippine sugar industry

1.0 Introduction

Navigating through an environment of volatility, uncertainty, ambiguity, complexity, and disruption, employee engagement (EE) is one of today's most significant priorities in many organizations. EE is a positive and meaningful attitude (Meswantri & Ilyas, 2018; Al Mehrzi & Singh, 2016) characterized by high energy and deep dedication (Bakker *et al.*, 2011; Vigoda-Gadot *et al.*, 2013) with the intensity and focus of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy (Shuck & Wollard, 2017). EE has attracted considerable attention among scholars and organizational experts alike, as studies confirm that higher engagement leads to greater retention, higher organizational productivity, higher profitability, and a stronger employer brand (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Indeed, EE has become one of the critical antecedents of organizational effectiveness (Yadav *et al.*, 2022). Conversely, disengagement, or the decoupling of oneself from work roles (Kahn, 1990), characterized by employees' reduced productivity and minimal effort at work, can cause more harm and be detrimental to the achievement of organizational goals (Cayanan, 2020). Gallup (2017) reported that in the US alone, disengaged employees resulted in annual productivity losses ranging between \$483 billion and \$605 billion.

According to Abderrahim and İyigün (2023), EE has been widely recognized as essential for boosting productivity, quality, and customer retention. It has also been shown to correlate with leadership competence, as organizational performance is powerfully shaped by leaders' ability to inspire and guide their teams (Stroud, 2009; Rohana & Abdullah, 2017). Leadership influences employees' willingness to invest in their roles (Kahn, 1990; Nienaber & Martins, 2020), making competencies central to sustaining engagement. Leadership competencies—defined as the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes enabling effective performance (Das *et al.*, 2011)—are critical success factors in organizations (Meerits & Kivipõld, 2020; Clarke, 2010). These include intrapersonal qualities such as self-awareness, ethics, and self-regulation (Walumbwa *et al.*, 2008; Beddoes-Jones & Swailes, 2015) as well as interpersonal skills like communication, collaboration, and fair decision-making (Gardner *et al.*, 2005). More recent frameworks, such as those of Zivkovic (2022), emphasize adaptability, innovation, and digital literacy. Studies confirm that competencies like integrity, justice, and leading change enhance job performance (Johari *et al.*, 2022). Practical competencies foster innovation and trust (Jing & Inga, 2014), improve productivity and reputation (Douglas *et al.*, 2021), and sustain long-term success (Phillips, 2020; McCown *et al.*, 2023).

EE, conceptualized initially as employees' physical, emotional, and cognitive investment in work roles (Kahn, 1990), has been shown to drive motivation, satisfaction, and retention (Van den Berg *et al.*, 2013). It reduces absenteeism and turnover (Neuber *et al.*, 2021; Kissi, 2023) and encourages discretionary effort (Lavigna, 2015). Recent studies also emphasize the role of a growth mindset in strengthening engagement, as employees motivated by continuous improvement display greater commitment (Nalipay *et al.*, 2021; Caniels *et al.*, 2018). Leadership competencies, therefore, remain vital, as effective leaders create the conditions for engagement, innovation, and organizational sustainability (Phillips, 2020; Douglas *et al.*, 2021).

According to Kim *et al.* (2023), leadership styles and EE have been extensively studied. However, fewer works explore the direct link between leadership competencies and EE, particularly in emerging markets. In the Philippines, despite relatively high engagement levels (Viray, 2018) and heavy investments in leadership training (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2021), evidence on whether competencies translate into higher engagement remains limited. Moreover, most studies emphasize rank-and-file employees, overlooking middle managers who play a pivotal role in translating leadership into team outcomes (Fenton-O'Creevy, 1996; Hall, 2018).

This study addresses this gap by examining leadership competency and EE among middle managers in a publicly listed firm that is one of the largest sugar producers in Asia. The sugar industry is vital to the Philippine economy, ranking 18th globally (Foreign Agricultural Service, 2024) and providing livelihood to 700,000 employees and millions of indirect workers (Sugar Regulatory Administration, 2019). However, it faces fluctuating markets, seasonal labor, and regulatory challenges. In this context, engaged middle managers are crucial to sustaining productivity, efficiency, and competitiveness. By investigating how leadership competencies shape EE in this sector, this research contributes insights into leadership development, organizational culture, and workforce sustainability in a vital Philippine agro-industry.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to determine whether leadership competency predicts employees' engagement, in terms of people development, delivering purposeful results, driving change through innovation, and strategic thinking. The descriptive research design aims to provide insight into the characteristics or phenomena of the population under investigation (Slater & Hasson, 2024). On the other hand, correlational research is a non-experimental approach that explores the relationship between two or more variables to determine the degree of their association. It primarily aims to describe, explain, and predict human behavior (Selviana *et al.*, 2024).

Both methods can provide descriptive summaries about the sample and describe any relationships among the study's variables. The descriptive-correlational approach was appropriately used to examine the following: (a) participants' perceptions of their line leaders' competence in people development, delivering purposeful results, driving change through innovation, and strategic thinking; and (b) participants' level of engagement in terms of

their decision to stay, attendance regularity, departmental productivity, work performance, and growth mindset. Furthermore, the researchers considered correlational research methods appropriate for identifying the leadership competency that predicts employee engagement.

2.2 Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants in the study are the seventy-one (71) middle managers of a publicly listed firm engaged in sugar manufacturing, which is also one of the largest sugar mills and refineries in Asia in terms of production. The researchers employed total enumeration to determine the number of participants, based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) should be unit managers in levels 1 and 2; (2) from the manufacturing departments of the firm; (3) with two years or more of tenure in the organization; (4) assigned in the following departments of the company, Mills, Raw Sugar, Refined Sugar, Plant Maintenance, Cogeneration, Electrical-Instrumentation, and Distillery. Exclusions as participants were determined as follows: (1) any unit manager from the sample departments whose tenure is below 2 years; (2) those whose employment is consultancy in nature; and those who are over 65 years old. Based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the study participants are distributed across the following departments: Mills (7), Raw Sugar (7), Refined Sugar (10), Plant Maintenance (8), Cogeneration (13), Electrical-Instrumentation (8), and Distillery (18).

2.3 Research Instrument

The researchers developed and used a self-made questionnaire. The 4-point Likert scale instrument measured participants' perceptions of leadership competencies and engagement in terms of stay decisions, regularity of attendance, productivity, and growth mindset. The researchers used Good and Scates' criteria to validate the instrument. Four (4) experts and practitioners in the fields of academe, human resources management, the sugar industry, and research validated the instrument. The validation mean score of 4.48 indicates that the instrument is valid. This also confirmed that all items in the questionnaire were relevant to the study's objectives. The researchers incorporated post-validation comments and suggestions in the finalization of the instrument prior to its use. Overall, the leadership competencies questionnaire is reliable with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.985. The subscales were also found to be reliable. More specifically, the people development questionnaire is reliable with Cronbach's alpha 0.930; the delivering purposeful results questionnaire is reliable with Cronbach's alpha 0.958; the driving change with innovation questionnaire is reliable with Cronbach's alpha 0.937; the strategic thinking questionnaire is reliable with Cronbach's alpha 0.965.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers began data collection only after obtaining ethics clearance from the Research Ethics Committee. A formal letter requesting agency consent to conduct the study was sent to the firm's management. The researchers secured company approval before beginning any data collection activities. Prior to answering the survey, Informed Consent Forms (ICF) containing the details and relevant information about the study were sent to the personal email addresses of the identified participants. A dedicated email account, created solely for the research, was used for this purpose to ensure security and confidentiality. This step was undertaken to guarantee that participants fully understood their roles, rights, and responsibilities in the research process. The same secured email account was also used to distribute the survey questionnaires, which were administered virtually through Google Forms. The researchers collated all responses using Google Sheets, restricting access to themselves and one trained enumerator. Collected data were stored in a secure file, with exclusive access granted only to the researcher to maintain data privacy and integrity.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

The descriptive aspect of the data, such as the level of leadership competency of the department managers as perceived by the participants, was processed using mean scores. Leadership competency was measured across four dimensions: developing people with passion, delivering purposeful results, driving change through innovation, and designing the future with strategic thinking. The following scale was applied: 1.00–1.49 = Very Low, 1.50–2.49 = Low, 2.50–3.49 = Average, 3.50–4.49 = High, and 4.50–5.00 = Very High. Similarly, mean scores were used to determine the level of employee engagement, measured through stay decision, regularity of attendance, productivity, and growth mindset. The same scale of interpretation was adopted: 1.00–1.49 = Very Low, 1.50–2.49 = Low, 2.50–3.49 = Average, 3.50–4.49 = High, and 4.50–5.00 = Very High.

To evaluate whether leadership competencies (independent variables) significantly predict employee engagement (dependent variable), stepwise multiple linear regression was employed. This statistical approach was selected because it systematically identifies which among several potential predictors meaningfully contribute to explaining engagement. It is beneficial in exploratory contexts where the relative influence of variables is not yet fully established. However, stepwise regression has limitations: it may capitalize on chance associations, increase the risk of overfitting, and potentially exclude theoretically essential predictors. These limitations were taken into account, and results were interpreted cautiously, emphasizing both statistical outcomes and theoretical grounding.

The sample size of 71 participants was justified, as the population of middle managers in the firm was relatively small, making total enumeration feasible and appropriate for capturing the entire group. Also, for regression analysis, a minimum ratio of 10–15 cases per predictor variable is generally recommended to ensure sufficient statistical power. With four predictors tested, the required minimum sample would be 40–60 cases, and the actual sample of 71 met this threshold, providing adequate power for the analyses conducted.

The model of multiple linear regression is represented below:

Null Hypothesis (H_0)

$$H_0: Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \varepsilon$$

Where:

Dependent Variable (Y): Employee Engagement

Independent Variables (X):

X_1 = People Development

X_2 = Delivering Purposeful Results

X_3 = Driving Change Through Innovation

X_4 = Strategic Thinking

ε = Error Term (Residual)

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to established ethical standards and was reviewed and cleared by the Research Ethics Committee of the university, which is duly accredited by the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB). Data collection commenced only after ethics clearance was secured and formal approval from the participants' company was granted. The researchers distributed the ICF to all participants, ensuring they fully understood the study's objectives and their rights, including the option to participate voluntarily and the freedom to withdraw at any time without repercussions. The study was designed to minimize any potential harm, with psychological safety safeguarded by excluding any personal or sensitive information that could identify respondents. Confidentiality, privacy, and anonymity were strictly observed. Responses were collected without identifying markers, and raw data were securely stored and disposed of after processing. To further prevent bias, a trained enumerator administered the survey, minimizing direct involvement of the researchers.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Level of Leadership Competency Managers as Perceived by the Participants

Table 1 presents the level of leadership competencies of department managers as perceived by the participants, in terms of people development, delivering purposeful results, driving change through innovation, and strategic thinking. Leadership competency was rated High across all areas: people development ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.69$), delivering purposeful results ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.66$), driving change with innovation ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.74$), and strategic thinking ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.74$). The overall mean score is 3.87, indicating a High Level. This indicates that the participants view their leaders as highly competent in their leadership roles, as evidenced by the consistent demonstration of the expected capability behavior.

Table 1. *Level of Leadership Competency of the Managers*

Leadership Competencies	Mean	SD	Level of Competency
Strategic Thinking	3.93	0.74	High

Delivering Purposeful Results	3.86	0.66	High
Driving Change with Innovation	3.85	0.74	High
People Development	3.85	0.69	High
Overall	3.87	0.71	High

Leadership is the ability of an individual to influence and guide others to direct their efforts to achieve a specific goal. Competence is a requisite of leadership. A high score on strategic leadership and innovation, as an anticipatory leadership ability, indicates that these competencies can influence employees to work towards achieving set goals. In support of this, Yukl (2013) confirmed that strategic leadership stimulates exceptional initiative and creativity and brings forth the realization of organizational goals. Kahn's Theory (1990) posits that when employees' needs for security are met, they can get their whole selves to work and maximize their unique talents to achieve meaningful outcomes. This perspective aligns with the high mean score on people development competency, which encompasses effective communication, fostering employee growth, providing rewards and recognition, and cultivating trust and confidence.

A high mean score in delivering purposeful results indicates that this leadership competency is crucial in achieving optimal results on measurable goals. This also means that a leader's ability to enunciate clear goals and targets to his team leads to the optimization of tangible results.

3.2 Level of Engagement of the Participants

Table 2 presents the level of engagement of participants in terms of retention, regular attendance, productivity, and growth mindset. The engagement level of the participants was rated High in terms of stay decision/retention ($M=3.71$, $SD=.67$), regularity of attendance/absenteeism ($M=3.77$, $SD=.55$), productivity ($M=3.83$, $SD=.66$), and growth mindset ($M=3.73$, $SD=.67$). This means that the participants connect positively to their jobs and the company. According to Byrne *et al.* (2017), workers who are more engaged at work are less likely to say they intend to quit. Notably, the High mean score in the stay decision confirms the favorable retention data on the part of the organization.

Table 2. *Level of Employee Engagement of the Participants*

Engagement In	Mean	SD	Level of Engagement
Productivity	3.83	0.66	High
Absenteeism	3.77	0.55	High
Growth Mindset	3.73	0.67	High
Retention	3.71	0.67	High
Overall	3.76	0.64	High

Løkke (2022) has identified leadership styles and behavior as among those affecting employees' attendance. The high mean score on regular attendance indicates that the participants are enthusiastic and dedicated to their job and the company. This confirms that when employee engagement is high, the absenteeism rate is low, as noted by Neuber *et al.* (2021). Since motivated workers constantly aim to increase productivity at work (Miao, Lu, Cao, & Du, 2020), and engaged workers will use their voices to offer suggestions on how to improve workflow and boost productivity, the high mean score on productivity indicates that the participants affirmed their engagement at work. Growth mindset positively correlates with increased work engagement (Nalipay *et al.*, 2021). The high mean score in this factor of engagement illustrates that participants are likely enjoying their work, and they have seen growth opportunities at work (Caniels, Semeijn, & Renders, 2017).

3.3 Factors of Leadership Competencies that Significantly Predict Employees' Engagement

The researchers conducted a stepwise multiple regression to evaluate whether leadership competencies are predictors of employees' engagement. There was linearity as assessed by partial regression plots and a plot of studentized residuals against the predicted values. Residuals were independent, as assessed by a Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.299. There was homoscedasticity, as assessed by visual inspection of a plot of studentized residuals versus unstandardized predicted values. There was no evidence of multicollinearity, as assessed by tolerance values greater than 0.1. There were no studentized deleted residuals greater than ± 3 standard deviations, no leverage values greater than 0.2, and no values for Cook's distance above 1. The Q-Q Plot confirmed that the data met the assumptions of normality. Table 3 shows the correlations of the variables.

At step 1 of the analysis, driving change with innovation was entered into the regression equation and was significantly related to employees' engagement, $F(1, 69) = 43.521$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .387$, adj. $R^2 = .378$, indicating that approximately 37.8% of the variance in employees' engagement can be accounted for by driving change through innovation, which, according to Cohen (1988), is a medium effect. Table 3 presents the following results: People development ($t = 0.910$, $p = 0.366$), delivering purposeful results ($t = 0.600$, $p = 0.551$), and strategic thinking ($t = 0.113$, $p = 0.910$) did not enter the equation at step 2 of the analysis. Thus, the regression equation for predicting employees' engagement was:

$$\text{Employees' Engagement} = 1.871 + .491 \times \text{Driving Change with Innovation}$$

This suggests that with an increase in the driving change through innovation, there is a 0.491 increase in employees' engagement, holding everything else constant. This suggests a positive relationship between leadership competency, driving change through innovation, and employee engagement, indicating that as efforts towards innovation increase, so does employee engagement. In a study conducted by Gomes *et al.* (2019) on innovation strategies in the sugar-energy industry, they discussed the importance of innovation in the sugar industry to compete in a free-market economy. They added that managers are tasked with identifying and matching resources to innovation strategies, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies. Gomes *et al.* cited the works of Maldonado-Guzmán *et al.* (2019). Najib and Kiminami (2011) added that innovation has a direct and significant effect on productivity and performance processes.

The positive coefficient (.491) from the equation aligns with the argument presented by Amabile & Kramer (2011) that innovative practices within an organization can significantly boost employee engagement by creating a dynamic and stimulating work environment. Other studies, such as that of Minh & Petchsawang (2024), also confirm that employee engagement has a positive relationship with innovative behavior among millennial employees. Recent findings emphasize the importance of enhancing employee engagement through corporate culture and transformational leadership, which are crucial to the practice (Sutopo *et al.*, 2022).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of the Variables

Variable	M	SD	People Development	Delivering Purposeful Results	Driving Change with Innovation	Strategic Thinking
Employees' Engagement	3.76	0.58	.594 ^{***}	.545 ^{***}	.622 ^{***}	.582 ^{***}
Predictor Variable:						
People Development	3.85	0.69	--	.781 ^{***}	.825 ^{***}	.829 ^{***}
Delivering Purposeful Results	3.86	0.66		--	-.304 ^{***}	.259 ^{***}
Driving Change with Innovation	3.85	0.74			--	.930 ^{***}
Strategic Thinking	3.93	0.74				--

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

While the three (3) leadership competencies, namely, developing people, delivering purposeful results, and strategic thinking, have high competency level scores, based on statistical analysis, they are not predictors of employee engagement. Only Driving Change with Innovation is a predictor of engagement. Relative to this, the null hypothesis: "The factors in leadership competencies: people development, delivering purposeful results, and strategic thinking," is accepted. However, the portion of the null hypothesis, "the factor in leadership competencies, driving change through innovation, does not significantly predict employee engagement," is rejected.

As shown in the results, not all competencies can drive employee engagement; of the four, only one does. It is highly probable that the three other competencies — developing people, delivering purposeful results, and strategic thinking — lacked the observable behavioral indicators. Furthermore, these competencies may not have strongly predicted employee engagement because employees may not consistently observe these behaviors in their daily interactions with leaders. As a manufacturing company, the primary focus has been on enhancing production output through process improvements, technology upgrades, and machinery investments. Since these innovation efforts are obvious and driven by top management, study participants likely perceived them as stronger demonstrations of leadership. Consequently, employees are more likely to associate their engagement with these

tangible innovation initiatives rather than with leadership behaviors linked to the three competencies. Given this plausibility, there is a need for enhancements to drive employee engagement.

Table 4. *Stepwise Multiple Regression Results*

Variable	B	SEB	β	R ²	Δ R ²	Delta F
Model 1				.387	.378***	F (1, 69) = 43.521, p < .001
Driving Change with Innovation	.491	.074	.622			
Constant	1.871***	.292				

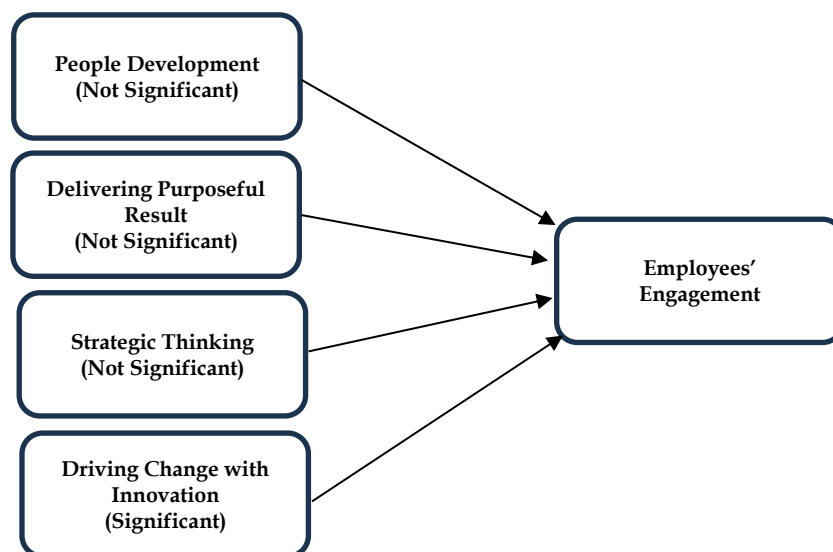


Figure 1. *Conceptual Model of Leadership Competencies as Predictors of Employees' Engagement*

4.0 Conclusion

The study revealed that middle managers perceived their leaders' competencies as high, along with similarly high levels of employee engagement. However, only driving change with innovation significantly predicted engagement, emphasizing the central role of innovative leadership in sustaining motivation, commitment, and performance. While other competencies remain valuable, their impact may depend on contextual factors or organizational support systems. The findings highlight important practical implications for leadership training and organizational policy. Companies may prioritize programs that strengthen innovation-driven leadership, encourage creativity, and support continuous improvement, as these directly foster engagement. At the policy level, organizations can embed innovation as a core competency in leadership frameworks, performance evaluations, and succession planning to ensure long-term competitiveness. Future researchers may broaden the scope by including other industries, employee levels, and larger, more diverse samples to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches could also provide deeper insights into how leadership competencies affect engagement over time. Ultimately, incorporating additional variables, such as emotional intelligence, organizational culture, or digital leadership, may help clarify how different competencies interact to sustain employee engagement in evolving work environments.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Author 1: Conceptualization, data gathering, data analysis.

Author 2: Conceptualization, data analysis, preparation, and editing for journal submission.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct, authorship, or publication of this research.

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