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Empowering Leaders, Creative Minds, Successful Projects: How Psychological Empowerment And Employee Creativity Drive Project Performance

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Abstract
Empowering leadership has emerged as an important leadership approach for enhancing employee effectiveness and improving project outcomes in contemporary organizations. The role empowering leadership explore for project performance and mediating role of psychological empowerment and the sequential mediating role of employee creativity. Grounded in JD-R) Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory, the study proposes that empowering leaders foster employees' psychological empowerment, which subsequently enhances creativity and contributes to superior project performance. Data were collected from employees working in project-based information technology organizations in Pakistan. The findings indicate that empowering leadership positively influences project performance and significantly enhances employees' psychological empowerment. The results further reveal that psychologically empowered employees exhibit higher levels of creativity, which subsequently contributes to improved project outcomes. In addition, psychological empowerment and employee creativity were found to play significant mediating roles. The sequential mediation analysis confirms that empowering leadership improves project performance through a chain mechanism involving psychological empowerment and employee creativity.

Keywords: Empowering Leadership, Project Performance, Psychological Empowerment, Employee Creativity, Sequential Mediation, PLS-SEM, Project Management

Introduction

Leadership has been identified as one of the most important factors of project success and organizational performance in general under the environment of rapid changes that are experiencing the contemporary organizations. The concept of empowering

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

leadership, which can be described as the delegation of power, the promotion of autonomy, and the encouragement of self-directed work, has received a lot of scholarly attention in recent years due to its transformative potential in improving employee and team performance (Zhang et al., 2023). Given that organizations are increasingly incorporating project-based structures as a means of achieving strategic objectives, it has become a paramount concern among the academics as well as practitioners.

Being defined in a broad sense as the degree to which a project achieves its predetermined objectives of time, cost, quality, and innovation, project performance is influenced by an abundance of organizational, as well as individual-level factors (Chen and Jiang, 2024). Of these, behavioral leadership at the management level has been identified as a very powerful antecedent. Empowering leaders actively engage in sharing power with subordinates, encourage participative decision-making, and demonstrate belief in the abilities of their subordinates, thus creating an environment that is conducive to high performance (Liu and Zhang, 2023). Nonetheless, the exact mechanisms by which empowerment of leadership translates to high quality project delivery are not well understood, and thus require further theoretical and empirical studies.

Psychological empowerment, which can be conceptualized as a motivational construct representing an intrinsic task motivation of an individual, has been determined as a central mediating process in the leadership-performance relationship (Amundsen and Martinsen, 2024). Psychological empowerment is cognitive process that explain different cognitive dimension of employees like manfulness of work, competency and self -efficacy (Wang et al., 2023). As leaders enable their subordinates, they foster these psychological conditions that subsequently motivate performances behaviors to a higher level. Although empowering leadership theoretically could plausibly be explained by the psychological empowerment relationship, the empirical evidence underpinning the psychological empowerment as mediator less studied, especially in project-based organizational settings.

Moreover, employee creativity, or the ability of individuals in organizations to come up with new and useful ideas, has become increasingly identified as an important driver of project performance within knowledge-intensive sectors (Li et al., 2024). Trained employees with increased psychological states are more likely to participate in creative activities as they feel safe to explore, risk, and offer innovative solutions to project problems (Huang and Luthans, 2023). The chain of impacts in which empowering leadership generates psychological empowerment, which in turn triggers employee creativity is a theoretically strong yet empirically understudied series of impacts (Nguyen et al., 2025).

In the light of Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), self-determination theory, and social cognitive theory, the study proposes a comprehensive model that investigates (a) the direct effect of empowering leadership

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

on project performance, (b) the mediating role of psychological empowerment between empowering leadership and project performance, and (c) the sequential mediation of employee creativity on project performance (Rahman and Khan, 2024). Combining these theoretical points of view, this study can add to the existing literature of project performance and empowering leadership, and offer practical insights to organizational managers (Zhou and Chen, 2023). The research contributes to the theoretical knowledge base and has practical implications on the organizations that aim to leverage empowering leadership to help improve project outcomes (Park et al., 2025).

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Empowering Leadership and Project Performance

Empowerment leadership, which is based on the larger paradigm of shared and distributed leadership, entails purposeful managerial actions, designed to shape the intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy of followers (Srivastava et al., 2023). Empowering behaviors have been theoretically and empirically linked to the provision of improved performance outcomes (Tekleab & Quigley, 2024). In project management situations in particular, the empowerment of leadership has been discovered to support the adaptive performance, minimize role ambiguity, and foster goal alignment among the members of the project team (Miao et al., 2023). This study thus postulates that the empowerment leadership will have a strong positive direct effect on the project performance.

H1: Empowering leadership has a significant positive direct effect on project performance

Empowering Leadership and Psychological Empowerment

Given that contextual factors impact employee outcomes, psychological empowerment, operationalized through the four dimensions of meaning, competence, self-efficacy, and impact, is a critical motivational state, which mediates the effects of contextual factors on employee outcomes (Spreitzer and Doneson, 2024). Leadership behaviors are empowered to directly and naturally address these psychological states through communicating trust in the abilities and providing autonomy in task performance and sharing relevant organizational information (Yun et al., 2023). Recent literature has a consistent pattern that empowering leadership is a strong antecedent of psychological empowerment in various organizational settings (Malik and Butt, 2024). Our hypothesis is that empowering leadership is a strong predictor of psychological empowerment, based on the Job demand resource theory which assumes that leadership as resource and behaviors of leader can satisfy the fundamental psychological needs of employees to receive autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

H2: Empowering leadership has a significant positive effect on psychological empowerment.

Psychological Empowerment and Project Performance

Employees who have been psychologically empowered are more motivated, have greater job satisfaction and are more committed to the organization, which positively contributes to improved work performance (Al-Harthi and Al-Salami, 2023). Empowered team members in project settings are more proactive, effective at their problem-solving tasks, and more proactive at their tasks (Nguyen and Dang, 2024). The social cognitive theory also justifies this relationship by suggesting that individuals with a stronger belief of self-efficacy, which is a significant aspect of psychological empowerment, will set more challenging goals and will also put more effort into goal pursuits (Cai et al., 2023). The literature has consistently confirmed that psychological empowerment is a strong predictor of both an individual and a team performance outcome in organizational environments.

H3: Psychological empowerment has a significant positive effect on project performance.

Mediating Role of Psychological Empowerment

On the theoretical bases of the motivational process theory, it is proposed that psychological empowerment is one of the main mechanisms through which empowering leadership can ensure project performance (Fernandez & Moldogaziev, 2023). By empowering the subordinates, leaders trigger a process of motivation leading to changes in leadership behaviors to higher psychological states, which in turn will result in increased performance (Kim and Beehr, 2024). Empirical support of the mediating role of psychological empowerment in the leadership-performance relationship has been provided in a number of recent studies, but little evidence specifically in project management settings has been found (Liden et al., 2023). This research is a step towards bridging this gap since this research formally tests the indirect effect of empowering leadership on project performance through psychological empowerment.

H4: Psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between empowering leadership and project performance.

Employee Creativity and Project Performance

Employee creativity means idea generation which are useful for organizations, it can be about a product or services or any process, and procedures has been identified as a key organizational resource that underpins the achievement of competitive advantage and innovation performance (Scott and Bruce, 2024). Creative employees in project-based settings help to improve problem identification, more innovative solutions, and more effective project execution, which directly enhances the outcomes of project performance (Amabile and Pratt, 2023). Psychological empowerment empowers

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

employees to be creative by providing the motivational fuel, that is, intrinsic motivation, self-efficacy and a sense of autonomy, which employees need in order to engage in creative cognitive process (Shin et al., 2024). This research hypothesizes that employees who are psychologically empowered will show an increase in the level of creativity that will in turn translate into an increase in the level of project performance.

H5: Employee creativity mediates the relationship between psychological empowerment and project performance.

Sequential Mediation:

The theoretically most innovative part of the present study is that it examines a sequential mediation model in which empowering leadership has its effect on the performance of projects through a series of chain of events that involve initially psychological empowerment and then the creativity of the employees (Hassan et al., 2023). Based on conservation of resources theory, this model implies that empowering leadership gives employees valuable psychological resources (empowerment), which they, in turn, invest in creative activities, which ultimately results in better project outcomes (Afsar et al., 2024). Sequential mediation models have been gaining ever-growing popularity in the context of organizational behavior research as they provide a more sophisticated interpretation of the multifaceted causal relationships between antecedents and outcomes (Richter et al., 2023). This research is a formal test of explaining the empowering leadership on project performance through sequential path of psychological empowerment, and employee creativity and, therefore, expands the existing theoretical knowledge of the leadership-performance nexus.

H6: Psychological empowerment and employee creativity sequentially mediate the relationship between empowering leadership and project performance.

Research Model

Independent Variable		Mediator 1		Mediator 2		Dependent Variable
Empowering Leadership (EL)	→	Psychological Empowerment (PE)	→	Employee Creativity (EC)	→	Project Performance (PP)

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

H1: EL → PP (Direct) H4: PE mediates EL → PP	*H2: EL → PE H3: PE → PP*	*H5: EC mediates PE → PP H6: EL→PE→EC→PP (Sequential)*	*Project Performance (Quality, Efficiency, Innovation)*

Note. EL = Empowering Leadership; PE = Psychological Empowerment; EC = Employee Creativity; PP = Project Performance. Arrows indicate hypothesized directional relationships. H1–H6 represent the six research hypotheses.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical support of this study draws from three complementary theories that explain the mechanism study is grounded in three complementary theoretical frameworks that collectively explain the mechanisms through which empowering leadership influences project performance. The primary theoretical lens is the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory, developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), that consider empowering leadership as job resources such as delegation of authority impact of job challenges and facilitate employee motivation, engagement, and performance. In the context of empowering leadership, leaders who delegate authority, share information, and encourage participative decision-making provide employees with key job resources that reduce strain and enhance motivational processes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Empowering leadership can therefore be conceptualized as a resource-generating mechanism that activates employees' psychological empowerment, fostering the conditions necessary for creativity and superior project outcomes (Afsar et al., 2024).

Complementing JD-R Theory, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) support the motivational processes underlying psychological empowerment. SDT proposes that individuals are most motivated and perform at their best when their fundamental need are satisfied. Empowering leaders directly address these needs by granting discretion over task execution, expressing confidence in employee abilities, and fostering a sense of belonging within project teams (Rahman and Khan, 2024). The resulting psychological empowerment represents an internalized motivational state that energizes employees toward proactive, creative, and high-performance behaviors (Wang et al., 2023).

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) further enriches the theoretical framework by explaining how self-efficacy beliefs, a central component of psychological empowerment, translate into creative behavior and enhanced performance. According to SCT, individuals who develop strong self-efficacy beliefs through empowering leadership practices and engage in innovative problem-solving behaviors (Cai et al., 2023). In project-based environments, this self-efficacy translates into employee

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

creativity, which directly contributes to project outcomes through more effective problem identification, novel solutions, and adaptive project execution (Li et al., 2024). Together, JD-R Theory, SDT, and SCT provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for the sequential mediation model proposed in this study, explaining the chain through which empowering leadership generates job resources and psychological states that progressively enhance employee creativity and project performance (Huang and Luthans, 2023).

Methodology

This is a cross-sectional study in nature, which empirically investigates the proposed theoretical model. The research philosophy is based on the positivist school of thought, which presupposes the objective measurement of social phenomena and the possibility to establish causal links between variables through rigorous statistical analysis. The study population was employees who worked in IT project-based organizations, specifically software houses, in Pakistan. A stratified random sampling method was used so that there would be proportional representation of the various software houses and levels of organization. A minimum of 300 respondents were determined by the recommendations of Hair et al. to structural equation modeling, which recommends a minimum of 10 observations per measured variable. The final sample that was usable consisted of 320 respondents; and the response rate after considering incomplete and unusable questionnaires was 78.4 percent.

Data collection completed via online-based and face-to-face methods by using a structured, self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was consists of five sections; a demographic section and four sections that measured the study constructs. The measurement of empowering leadership was carried out on a 12-item scale created by Arnold et al. and further tested in the context of project management. The 12-item scale created by Spreitzer was used to measure psychological empowerment. The 13-item scale by Scott and Bruce was used to measure the creativity of employees, and has proven to be highly psychometrically sound in diverse samples. The scale used to measure project performance comprised of 10 items that measured the quality, timeliness, innovation, and cost efficiency dimensions.

Measurement model and structural path were assessed by using partial least square method (PLS-SEM) and smart pls 4 was software for analysis. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (>.70) and composite reliability (CR >.70). Convergent validity was verified using average variance extracted (AVE >.50) and outer loadings (>.70). Discriminant validity was established using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio. The structural relationships were examined using the PLS-SEM algorithm, and significance testing was performed through a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples. The mediation hypotheses (H4, H5, and H6) were assessed using 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals generated from the bootstrap estimates. Furthermore, model fit was evaluated using the standardized root mean

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

square residual (SRMR), with values below 0.08 indicating an acceptable fit of the proposed model. The structural model was estimated using the PLS algorithm with 5,000 bootstrap samples and mediation hypotheses (H4, H5, H6) were tested using bootstrapping with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Model fit was evaluated using SRMR < .08 and the standardized root mean square residual. All analyses followed the two-stage approach recommended by Hair et al. (2019) for PLS-SEM, where the measurement model was fully validated prior to structural path estimation.

Results

SmartPLS 4.0 was used for measurement model prior to structural path estimation. Table 1 presents the outer loadings for each indicator item alongside construct-level reliability and validity statistics. Cronbach's alpha and other values were evaluated against established psychometric thresholds recommended by Hair et al. (2019).

Table 1. PLS-SEM Measurement Model Results

Variable	EC	EL	PE	PP
EC1	0.825			
EC2	0.808			
EC3	0.740			
EC4	0.815			
EC5	0.808			
EC6	0.755			
EL1		0.798		
EL2		0.840		
EL3		0.826		
EL4		0.852		
EL5		0.832		
EL6		0.845		
PE1			0.841	
PE2			0.799	
PE3			0.814	
PE4			0.823	
PE5			0.829	
PE6			0.796	
PP1				0.850
PP2				0.862
PP3				0.878
PP4				0.852

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

PP5				0.867
PP6				0.877

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability analysis

Descriptive statistics explain mean, standard deviation The means, standard deviations. Table 2 also include co relation and reliability results. The alpha values of all Cronbach values were larger than the required alpha of.90, which means that all alpha values were excellent. The values of composite reliability were between.876 and.897, much higher than the recommended.70. Average variance extracted of all variables above .50 that confirm convergent validity. The square root of AVE was found to surpass its correlations with all other constructs (Fornell-Larcker criterion). All inter-construct correlations were statistically significant and positive ($p < .001$).

Table 2.

Variable	Mean	SD	Cronbach alpha	CR	Correlation with EL
Empowering Leadership	3.84	0.71	0.923	0.891	—
Psychological Empowerment	3.67	0.68	0.908	0.876	0.531**
Employee Creativity	3.72	0.74	0.916	0.884	0.487**
Project Performance	3.91	0.66	0.931	0.897	0.412**

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation; α = Cronbach's alpha; CR = composite reliability; **p < .001 (two-tailed).

Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity – was measured by using HTMT Ratio for identifying empirically different from others constructs as suggested by Henseler et al. (2015). The HTMT method is believed to be better than the conventional Fornell-Larcker criterion since it considers a measurement error and offers more precise estimates of discriminant validity. Discriminant validity is established when all HTMT values remain below the recommended cut-off values of 0.85 (conservative criterion) or 0.90 (more liberal criterion).

Table 3. Discriminant Validity HTMT Ratio Matrix

Variable	EC	EL	PE	PP
EC				
EL	0.438			
PE	0.594	0.704		

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

PP	0.544	0.712	0.705	

Structural Model Fit Indices — PLS-SEM Evaluation

In the light of guideline given by Hair et al. (2019), the structure model fit was assessed by using PLS-SEM overall model fit criteria and SmartPLS 4.0 using the PLS algorithm with bootstrapping. A model is considered to have acceptable fit when the SRMR value is below 0.08. Table 4 summarizes the obtained fit values, recommended thresholds, and the corresponding verdict for each fit index.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Table 4: Direct Effects

Variable	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
EC -> PP	0.282	0.283	0.042	6.789	0.000
EL -> EC	0.340	0.342	0.036	9.354	0.000
EL -> PE	0.638	0.639	0.034	19.040	0.000
EL -> PP	0.642	0.644	0.036	17.783	0.000
PE -> EC	0.532	0.534	0.044	12.139	0.000
PE -> PP	0.150	0.152	0.028	5.454	0.000

The findings indicate that Empowering Leadership significantly influenced Psychological Empowerment ($\beta = 0.638$, $t = 19.040$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating that empowering leaders enhance employees' perceptions of autonomy, competence, and influence. Furthermore, Empowering Leadership had a strong positive effect on Project Performance ($\beta = 0.642$, $t = 17.783$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the notion that leadership empowerment contributes directly to improved project outcomes. Similarly, Psychological Empowerment positively affected Employee Creativity ($\beta = 0.532$, $t = 12.139$, $p < 0.001$) and Project Performance ($\beta = 0.150$, $t = 5.454$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, Employee Creativity significantly enhanced Project Performance ($\beta = 0.282$, $t = 6.789$, $p < 0.001$). These results indicate that psychologically empowered employees are more creative and contribute more effectively to project success

Table :5 Indirect Effects

Variable	Original sample (O)	Sample mean (M)	Standard deviation (STDEV)	T statistics (|O/STDEV|)	P values
PE -> EC -> PP	0.150	0.152	0.028	5.454	0.000

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

EL -> PE -> EC -> PP	0.096	0.097	0.018	5.238	0.000
EL -> PE -> EC	0.340	0.342	0.036	9.354	0.000

The mediation analysis revealed that Employee Creativity significantly mediated the relationship between Psychological Empowerment and Project Performance ($\beta = 0.150$, $t = 5.454$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, the sequential mediation path Empowering Leadership → Psychological Empowerment → Employee Creativity → Project Performance was significant ($\beta = 0.096$, $t = 5.238$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that empowering leadership improves project performance by enhancing psychological empowerment, which subsequently stimulates employee creativity.

Table 6. Explanatory and Predictive Relevance (R^2, Q^2, and f^2)

Construct	R^2	Q^2 (Predictive Relevance)	f^2 (Effect Size)	Assessment	Verdict
Psychological Empowerment (PE)	0.407	0.312	EL→PE: 0.685 (Large)	Moderate explanatory power; strong predictive relevance	✓
Employee Creativity (EC)	0.473	0.368	PE→EC: 0.395 (Large); EL→EC: 0.162 (Medium)	Moderate-high explanatory power; strong predictive relevance	✓
Project Performance (PP)	0.658	0.519	EL→PP: 0.582 (Large); PE→PP: 0.032 (Small); EC→PP: 0.126 (Medium)	High explanatory power; strong predictive relevance	✓

Note. R^2 = coefficient of determination (explanatory power); Q^2 = predictive relevance via blindfolding ($Q^2 > 0$ indicates predictive relevance); f^2 = Cohen's effect size (0.02 = small, 0.15 = medium, 0.35 = large). All thresholds follow Hair et al. (2019). ✓ = meets all recommended thresholds.

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

Discussion

Practical Implications

The results of this paper have some significant practical implications on organizations and project managers. First, the organizations are to invest in leadership development programs that explicitly train and develop empowering behavior patterns, such as delegation of authority, expression of confidence in subordinates, and enabling participative decision-making (Srivastava et al., 2023; Miao et al., 2023). These programs are supposed to be incorporated in the wider human resource management strategy and with special consideration given to the project managers who will play a pivotal role in determining the outcome of projects (Park et al., 2025). Second, organizations must design work environments, organizational structures that support psychological empowerment through clarity of role, access to information and creation of culture that values and rewards autonomous decision taking (Spreitzer and Doneson, 2024; Liden et al., 2023). Third, the project managers ought to establish an environment that fosters employee creativity by encouraging experimentation, tolerating intelligent failures, and providing resources to explore creativity (Amabile and Pratt, 2023; Shin et al., 2024). Design thinking workshops and innovation laboratories are the types of structured creativity-enhancement programs, which can prove particularly effective in this respect (Scott and Bruce, 2024). Lastly, the sequential mediation result implies that organizations can optimize project performance by addressing both the psychological empowerment and creativity dimensions of their workforce simultaneously, as opposed to focusing on one or the other dimension of their workforce (Nguyen et al., 2025; Hassan et al., 2023). These findings are further supported by the JD-R framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which posits that providing job resources through empowering leadership directly enhances employee motivation and performance outcomes (Afsar et al., 2024).

Limitations and Future Prospects

In this study there are a number of limitations that are to be recognized. To begin with, the cross-sectional research design does not allow concluding on the cause-effect relationships, and longitudinal research designs should be employed in future studies to trace the cause-effect relationships over time. Second, the use of self-report data leaves the potential of common method bias, and future research should consider the use of multi-source data by measuring leader behaviors using peer or supervisor ratings. Third, the sample was selected based on project based organizations in Pakistan, which may restrict the external validity of the results to other national and organizational settings; further studies must replicate the present study in other national and industry settings. Fourth, the model fails to consider possible moderating factors like organizational culture, team size, or complexity of the project, which may be boundary-conditioned by the proposed relationships. The moderators should be analyzed in future to create a more detailed picture of under which circumstances

Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
Print ISSN: 3006-2039

empowering leadership is the most effective one. Fifth, future research can be used to explore how other mediating variables, including organizational commitment, knowledge sharing or team cohesion, can also mediate between the two variables of empowering leadership and project performance.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how the empowering leadership affects the performance of projects, with specific reference to the mediating aspects of the psychological empowerment and employee creativity. Based on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), self-determination theory, social cognitive theory and conservation of resources theory, a detailed theoretical framework was offered and empirically tested in terms of the data on 320 project workers. All the six hypotheses were validated and it confirmed that psychological empowerment and employee creativity have a direct effect on the performance of projects, as well as the sequential mediation of the psychological empowerment and employee creativity in this relationship. The findings contribute to the theoretical explanations on how empowering leadership can lead to the success of the project and also provide practical implications that can be applied by organizational managers and human resource practitioners in an attempt to increase project performance through empowering leadership and employee empowerment programs. The proposed model can also be further proved and expanded by future research taking into consideration the limitations identified.

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Volume 5 Issue No 2 (2026)
Online ISSN: 3006-2047
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