
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Leadership Styles and Employee Motivation: A Quantitative Study in a Chinese Call Center

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| ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of different leadership styles—transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire—on employee motivation in a Chinese call center environment. The research aims to identify the dominant leadership style, assess employee motivation levels, and determine the relationship between leadership approaches and motivation. A quantitative method was employed using a Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) and the Workplace Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation Scale (WEIMS). The findings indicate that transactional leadership is the most prevalent style, but transformational leadership has the strongest positive correlation with employee motivation. The study suggests that a combination of transformational and laissez-faire leadership styles could enhance employee motivation and job satisfaction.

| KEYWORDS

Leadership Styles; Employee Motivation; Chinese Call Center

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Employee motivation plays a crucial role in determining productivity and job satisfaction within the call center industry. Leadership styles significantly shape how employees perceive their roles, engage with their tasks, and commit to achieving organizational goals. While transformational leadership is often associated with high motivation levels, many companies, including those in China's call center sector, continue to rely on transactional leadership approaches that emphasize performance-based rewards. Given the high turnover rates in call centers, understanding the relationship between leadership styles and employee motivation is essential for improving retention and overall productivity.

This study seeks to identify the dominant leadership style in a Chinese call center, explore how employees perceive their leaders, measure motivation levels, and analyze the impact of leadership on employee motivation. Specifically, it aims to determine the most prevalent leadership style, assess whether employees are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, and evaluate how different leadership styles influence job satisfaction. To address these objectives, the study investigates key questions, such as identifying the leadership style currently practiced in the organization, understanding whether employees are driven more by intrinsic or extrinsic factors, and analyzing how leadership approaches affect motivation within the call center environment.

The findings of this study hold significant value for managers and policymakers in Chinese call centers. By gaining insights into how leadership styles impact motivation, organizations can develop more effective management strategies that foster employee engagement, job satisfaction, and long-term performance. Implementing leadership practices that align with employees' motivational needs can ultimately contribute to a more productive and committed workforce.

2. Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research approach to examine the relationship between leadership styles and employee motivation in a Chinese call center. A descriptive research design was used to analyze the characteristics of employees, their perceptions of leadership styles, and their motivation levels. Furthermore, inferential statistical analysis was conducted to determine the correlation between different leadership styles—transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire—and employee motivation. By employing a structured survey approach, the study aimed to collect measurable data that could provide statistically significant insights into leadership effectiveness and its impact on employee motivation.

Participants and Sampling

The research was conducted in a large Chinese call center, where employees from various departments were invited to participate in the survey. A random sampling technique was used to ensure fair representation across different job roles. The final sample consisted of employees primarily aged 25-34 years (67.3%), followed by a smaller percentage under 25 years (26%) and an even smaller group over 34 years (6.7%). In terms of gender distribution, 64% of the respondents were female, while 36% were male. The sample was representative of the workforce structure in Chinese call centers, where younger employees dominate the workforce, and a significant number of women are employed in customer service roles.

Data Collection Instruments

To measure the relationship between leadership styles and employee motivation, two standardized questionnaires were used:

1. Multi-Factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) – Developed by Bass & Avolio (2004), this tool was used to assess the leadership styles of managers. It evaluates three leadership approaches: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership. The MLQ was chosen for its validity and reliability in leadership studies.
2. Workplace Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation Scale (WEIMS) – This scale was employed to measure employee motivation levels, distinguishing between intrinsic motivation (internal drive and job satisfaction) and extrinsic motivation (incentives, rewards, and external factors).

Both questionnaires used a Likert scale format, allowing employees to rate their responses numerically, providing quantifiable data for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods to interpret the findings effectively:

1. Descriptive Analysis – This method was applied to assess demographic data (age, gender, and education level), leadership styles, and employee motivation levels. Mean and standard deviation were used to identify the dominant leadership style and determine whether employees were intrinsically or extrinsically motivated.
2. Inferential Statistical Analysis – To examine the relationship between leadership styles and employee motivation, correlation analysis was conducted. This analysis tested the strength and significance of the relationship between the independent variables (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles) and the dependent variable (employee motivation).

The findings from these statistical tests provided empirical evidence on how different leadership styles influence employee motivation in the Chinese call center industry, helping to identify the most effective leadership approach for enhancing employee engagement and job satisfaction.

3. Results and Discussion

Demographic Analysis

The demographic profile of the respondents provides insights into the composition of the workforce in the Chinese call center. The majority of the participants were female (64%), while male respondents accounted for 36% of the sample. In terms of age distribution, most employees fell within the 25-34 age group (67.3%), indicating a relatively young workforce. A significant portion of employees were under 25 years old (26%), while a smaller percentage, 6.7%, were over 34. Educational background analysis revealed that 86.7% of the employees held a bachelor's degree, whereas 13.3% had a master's degree, reflecting a well-educated workforce.

Leadership Style Analysis

The statistical analysis of leadership styles in the organization revealed that transactional leadership was the most dominant leadership style, with a mean score of 3.34 and a standard deviation (SD) of 1.00. This suggests that leaders in the call center primarily focus on structured performance expectations, rewards, and corrective actions to manage employees. However, despite the prevalence of transactional leadership, transformational leadership was found to have a stronger correlation with employee motivation. This indicates that while transactional leadership is the most practiced, it may not be the most effective for increasing employee engagement and job satisfaction.

Employee Motivation Levels

The study found that employees in the Chinese call center were primarily extrinsically motivated, meaning that their work motivation was largely driven by external rewards such as bonuses, incentives, and recognition rather than internal satisfaction. This was reflected in a mean extrinsic motivation score of 2.62 (SD = 1.22). On the other hand, intrinsic motivation was lower, with a mean score of 2.43 (SD = 1.09), suggesting that fewer employees were motivated by personal growth, learning opportunities, or a deep sense of job fulfillment. These findings highlight the need for leadership strategies that can enhance intrinsic motivation to improve job satisfaction and long-term employee commitment.

Correlation Between Leadership Styles and Employee Motivation

The correlation analysis examined how different leadership styles influenced employee motivation. Transformational leadership exhibited the strongest positive correlation with motivation, indicating that leaders who inspire, empower, and support employees tend to have a greater impact on their engagement and productivity. Laissez-faire leadership also showed a positive relationship with motivation, although this leadership style was less commonly practiced within the organization. Interestingly, transactional leadership was found to have a weaker correlation with motivation, suggesting that while it is the dominant leadership style, it may not be the most effective for fostering high employee motivation. These findings imply that leadership strategies focused solely on performance-based rewards may not be sufficient to sustain long-term motivation in a call center setting.

4. Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study suggest that although transactional leadership is the most widely used approach in the call center, it does not have the highest impact on employee motivation. Instead, transformational leadership emerged as the most influential leadership style in motivating employees, reinforcing previous research that highlights the benefits of visionary, supportive, and empowering leadership. Additionally, the results showed that employees in this Chinese call center are predominantly extrinsically motivated, meaning that they are driven more by external incentives rather than an inherent passion for their work. This reliance on external rewards can pose challenges for long-term employee retention, as motivation may decline if incentives are removed or become less appealing.

Implications for Management

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made for management strategies in Chinese call centers:

1. **Encouraging Transformational Leadership** – Since transformational leadership has the strongest positive correlation with motivation, managers should focus on inspiring employees, providing meaningful work, and fostering a supportive work environment to enhance job satisfaction. By mentoring employees and promoting personal growth, transformational leaders can help shift motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic, leading to a more engaged workforce.
2. **Considering Laissez-Faire Leadership** – Although laissez-faire leadership was less practiced, it showed a positive impact on motivation. Implementing elements of this style, such as allowing employees more independence and decision-making power, may increase their sense of autonomy and improve overall job satisfaction.
3. **Optimizing Transactional Leadership** – Since transactional leadership remains the dominant leadership style, further research is needed to explore ways to make it more effective in a call center environment. While performance-based rewards are essential, integrating elements of transformational leadership, such as recognizing employees' contributions beyond monetary rewards and encouraging skill development, may enhance motivation and reduce turnover.

These insights provide a roadmap for leadership development in call centers, emphasizing the importance of adopting a flexible leadership approach that balances structured rewards with inspiration and empowerment to foster a highly motivated workforce.

5. Conclusion

This study confirms that leadership styles significantly impact employee motivation in a Chinese call center. While transactional leadership remains the dominant style, transformational leadership has the most significant positive effect on motivation. The findings suggest that a combination of transformational and laissez-faire leadership could enhance employee engagement, reduce turnover, and improve overall performance. Call center managers should focus on fostering intrinsic motivation by creating a supportive and inspiring work environment.

6. Recommendations

1. Train managers to adopt transformational leadership to enhance motivation and job satisfaction.
2. Introduce laissez-faire elements to encourage employee autonomy.
3. Conduct further studies on the impact of transactional leadership in a larger sample.
4. Develop leadership training programs to help managers implement the most effective leadership styles.
5. Focus on intrinsic motivation by recognizing employee achievements and aligning their goals with organizational success.

7. Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited to one call center in China, and the findings may not be generalizable to all organizations. Future research should explore other industries and compare results across different organizational settings.

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