

Transformational Leadership and the Performance Paradox: Why Job Satisfaction Did Not Mediate Employee Performance

Kepemimpinan Transformasional dan Paradoks Kinerja: Mengapa Kepuasan Kerja Tidak Memediasi Kinerja Karyawan

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Abstract

Employee performance is central to organizational effectiveness, but evidence is inconsistent on whether transformational leadership works through job satisfaction. This study tested direct effects and the mediating role of job satisfaction among 300 employees of PT Asuransi Harta Aman Pratama, Surabaya Branch. A quantitative non-experimental design used 1–5 Likert questionnaires analyzed in Jamovi with multiple regression and mediation path analysis. Transformational leadership significantly predicted performance in a negative direction ($B = -0.0552$, $p = .025$), while job satisfaction did not predict performance ($B = -0.0174$, $p = .724$). Transformational leadership did not predict job satisfaction ($B = -0.0217$, $p = .450$), and the direct $X \rightarrow Y$ path remained significant ($B = -0.0552$, $p = .024$). The model explained 1.7% of performance variance. The findings do not support job satisfaction as the proposed mediation mechanism and indicate that leadership effects depend on organizational conditions and employee readiness.

Keywords: Employee Performance; Job Satisfaction; Transformational Leadership

Abstrak

Kinerja karyawan penting bagi efektivitas organisasi, tetapi hasil penelitian belum konsisten mengenai apakah kepemimpinan transformasional bekerja melalui kepuasan kerja. Penelitian ini menguji pengaruh langsung dan peran mediasi kepuasan kerja pada 300 karyawan PT Asuransi Harta Aman Pratama Cabang Surabaya. Desain kuantitatif non-eksperimental menggunakan kuesioner Likert 1–5 yang dianalisis dengan regresi berganda dan analisis jalur mediasi pada Jamovi. Kepemimpinan transformasional memprediksi kinerja secara signifikan dengan arah negatif ($B = -0,0552$; $p = 0,025$), sedangkan kepuasan kerja tidak memprediksi kinerja ($B = -0,0174$; $p = 0,724$). Kepemimpinan transformasional juga tidak memprediksi kepuasan kerja ($B = -0,0217$; $p = 0,450$), sementara jalur langsung $X \rightarrow Y$ tetap signifikan ($B = -0,0552$; $p = 0,024$). Model menjelaskan 1,7% variasi kinerja. Temuan tidak mendukung kepuasan kerja sebagai mekanisme mediasi yang diajukan dan menunjukkan pentingnya kondisi organisasi serta kesiapan karyawan.

Kata Kunci: Kepemimpinan Transformasional; Kepuasan Kerja; Kinerja Karyawan

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INTRODUCTION

Employee performance is a central issue in insurance organizations because service quality, target achievement, and risk control depend on consistent employee behavior. PT Asuransi Harta Aman Pratama Tbk reported gross premium of IDR 756.83 billion in 2024, an increase of 15.01% from IDR 658.05 billion in 2023. For 2025, the company projected gross premium income after direct deductions of IDR 688.49 billion and profit of IDR 4.44 billion. At the same time, the company had to adapt to regulatory and accounting changes, including PSAK 117. These business demands make employee performance and adaptive work behavior relevant at branch level, including the Surabaya Branch, which implements company policies and performance targets in daily operations (PT Asuransi Harta Aman Pratama, 2023).

Employee performance refers to behaviors and outputs that contribute to organizational goals, including task execution, target achievement, cooperation, and work quality. Campbell (1990) conceptualized performance as multidimensional work behavior shaped by ability, motivation, role knowledge, and situational constraints (Roni Harsoyo, 2022). Leadership is therefore relevant because leaders influence goals, feedback, support, and the meaning employees attach to work, but leadership alone cannot fully determine performance (Deng et al., 2023).

Transformational leadership involves idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Research often links these behaviors to stronger engagement and performance because leaders articulate purpose and support employee development (Bakker et al., 2023; Deng et al., 2023). However, the effect is not uniformly positive. Chen et al. (2024) found a curvilinear relationship in which very high transformational leadership could lose effectiveness for task performance, while Ratnawati and Imron (2025) showed that readiness for change influences how leadership is translated into employee performance (X. Chen, 2024; Imron et al., 2025). This evidence indicates that change-oriented leadership can be interpreted as a resource in one context and as an added demand in another (Widyanto et al., 2023).

Job satisfaction is an affective and evaluative response to one's job. It may connect leadership to performance when employees interpret leader behavior as support, recognition, fair treatment, and development opportunity. Chen et al. (2022) showed that transformational leadership was associated with job satisfaction through the employee-relations climate (C. Chen et al., 2022). Sari and Nadilla (2024) reported job satisfaction as a significant mediator between transformational leadership and employee performance, whereas Adipra and Surya (2025) found that job satisfaction did not mediate this relationship. These inconsistent results show that the mediating role of job satisfaction remains empirically unsettled (Adipra & Surya, 2025; Sari & Nadilla, 2024).

Social Exchange Theory provides the overarching theoretical framework for the proposed model. The theory explains that social relationships develop through reciprocal

exchanges of valued resources (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In a leadership context, employees who perceive transformational behaviors as support, respect, autonomy, and development opportunities should respond with more favorable job evaluations and stronger work contributions (Alhamidi, 2022; Dira, 2022). Job satisfaction can therefore operate as an affective exchange mechanism linking transformational leadership to performance. If employees instead experience leadership expectations without adequate resources or readiness, the positive exchange mechanism may weaken (Riyadi & Suhana, 2025).

The research gap is not simply the absence of a study in one company. Previous studies disagree about whether job satisfaction carries the effect of transformational leadership to performance, and other evidence shows that the leadership–performance (Aditya Putri, 2025) relationship may depend on intensity and readiness for change. The novelty of this study lies in testing the Social Exchange Theory-based mediation chain within an insurance organization facing simultaneous performance, adaptation, and regulatory demands. By estimating the $X \rightarrow M$, $M \rightarrow Y$, direct $X \rightarrow Y$, and mediation paths in one model, the study examines whether job satisfaction is the psychological exchange mechanism or whether leadership operates independently of satisfaction in this organizational context (Ginting et al., 2021).

This study aimed to test the direct relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance, the relationship between transformational leadership and job satisfaction, the relationship between job satisfaction and employee performance, and the mediating role of job satisfaction. The study also provides a practical basis for designing leadership interventions that match employee conditions. Four hypotheses were proposed: H1, transformational leadership positively predicts employee performance; H2, transformational leadership positively predicts job satisfaction; H3, job satisfaction positively predicts employee performance; and H4, job satisfaction mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and employee performance.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Location and Timeframe

The study was conducted at the Surabaya Branch of PT Asuransi Harta Aman Pratama, Jl. Raya Ngagel No. 133, Surabaya, from August to December 2025. The study focused on employees included in the branch-level sampling frame used for the research.

Research Design and Variables

A quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional design was used. No treatment was administered. Transformational leadership (X) served as the independent variable, job satisfaction (M) as the mediating variable, and employee performance (Y) as the dependent variable. The model tested direct relationships among the three variables and the proposed indirect role of job satisfaction.

Sampling

The accessible population was recorded as 300 employees, and all 300 were included through total sampling. Because the study used a census approach to the accessible sampling frame rather than selecting a subset, the sample size was not determined using a percentage formula or G*Power. Before the main survey, the questionnaire was piloted with respondents who had comparable characteristics and were not included in the final sample (Ahyar & Juliana Sukmana, 2020; Firmansyah et al., 2022; A. Junaidi, 2025).

Research Instrument

Transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance were measured with self-report questionnaire scales using a 1–5 Likert response format, from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. A pilot test was conducted before the main survey to evaluate item validity and internal consistency. The instrument used in the main survey consisted of items that met the validity and reliability criteria applied in the original instrument-testing process.

Table 1. Validity Test

Item	Item-Total Correlation (r)	p
Item 1	0.604	Valid
Item 2	0.587	Valid
Item 3	0.541	Valid
Item 4	0.426	Valid
Item 5	0.792	Valid
Item 6	0.639	Valid
Item 7	0.613	Valid
Item 8	0.546	Valid
Item 9	0.454	Valid
Item 10	0.737	Valid
Item 11	0.571	Valid
Item 12	0.672	Valid
Item 13	0.588	Valid
Item 14	0.467	Valid
Item 15	0.646	Valid
Item 16	0.451	Valid
Item 17	0.587	Valid
Item 18	0.425	Valid
Item 19	0.534	Valid
Item 20	0.534	Valid
Item 21	0.541	Valid
Item 22	0.515	Valid
Item 23	0.534	Valid
Item 24	0.591	Valid
Item 25	0.662	Valid
Item 26	0.637	Valid

Item 27	0.738	Valid
Item 28	0.454	Valid
Item 29	0.442	Valid
Item 30	0.571	Valid
Item 31	0.598	Valid
Item 32	0.581	Valid
Item 33	0.507	Valid
Item 34	0.425	Valid
Item 35	0.625	Valid
Item 36	0.492	Valid
Item 37	0.443	Valid
Item 38	0.373	Valid
Item 39	0.601	Valid
Item 40	0.653	Valid

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The validity test was conducted on a total of 40 items. The results showed that all 40 items met the validity criteria, indicating that each item was able to appropriately measure the intended construct. Therefore, all 40 items were retained and used in the main survey.

Table 2. Reliability Test

	Cronbach's α
Scale	0.994

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The reliability test resulted in a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.944. This value indicates a very high level of internal consistency, demonstrating that the items in the questionnaire consistently measure the constructs being investigated. Thus, based on the validity and reliability test results, the 40-item questionnaire was considered valid and reliable and was suitable for use in the main study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Jamovi. Descriptive analysis summarized respondent characteristics. Regression assumptions evaluated in the original analysis plan included normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Hypothesis testing used multiple linear regression for the direct effects and mediation path analysis for $X \rightarrow M$, $M \rightarrow Y$, and the direct $X \rightarrow Y$ path. Statistical significance was evaluated at $p < .05$. Results are reported using unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors (SE), test statistics, p values, R, and R^2 when available.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

Table 3. Respondent Characteristics by Gender, Age, and Length of Service

Characteristic	n	%
Gender: Male	136	45.3
Gender: Female	164	54.7
Age: <25 years	42	14.0
Age: 26–35 years	196	65.3
Age: 36–45 years	61	20.3
Age: >45 years	1	0.3
Length of service: <1 year	21	7.0
Length of service: 1–3 years	102	34.0
Length of service: 3–5 years	100	33.3
Length of service: >5 years	77	25.7

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The sample included 136 male employees (45.3%) and 164 female employees (54.7%). Most respondents were 26–35 years old (65.3%), followed by 36–45 years (20.3%), <25 years (14.0%), and >45 years (0.3%). For length of service, the largest groups had worked for 1–3 years (34.0%) and 3–5 years (33.3%).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistic

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean
Transformational Leadership (X)	300	60.0	99.0	85.53
Job Satisfaction (M)	300	32.0	50.0	44.05
Employee Performance (Y)	300	32.0	50.0	43.51

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Shows that the study involved 300 respondents. Transformational Leadership (X) had a minimum score of 60.00, a maximum score of 99.00, a mean of 85.53, and a standard deviation of 5.23. Job Satisfaction (M) had a minimum score of 32.00, a maximum score of 50.00, a mean of 43.52, and a standard deviation of 2.62. Meanwhile, Employee Performance (Y) had a minimum score of 32.00, a maximum score of 50.00, a mean of 44.06, and a standard deviation of 2.23. The results indicate that the mean scores of all three variables were relatively close to their respective maximum scores, suggesting that respondents generally reported relatively high levels of transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance. The relatively small standard deviations also indicate that the respondents' scores were relatively concentrated around the mean values.

Table 5. Category of Each Research Variable

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Category
Transformational Leadership (X)	3.00	4.95	4.276	0.261	Very High
Job Satisfaction (M)	3.20	5.00	4.351	0.261	Very High
Employee Performance (Y)	3.20	5.00	4.405	0.222	Very High

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Descriptive analysis showed that transformational leadership had a mean score of 4.2767 (SD = 0.26157), job satisfaction had a mean score of 4.3517 (SD = 0.26165), and employee performance had a mean score of 4.4057 (SD = 0.22279). Based on the predetermined Likert-scale score categories, all three variables were classified as very high, as their mean scores were within the range of 4.21–5.00. This indicates that respondents generally reported very high levels of transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance.

Table 6. Normality Test

Normality Test	Statistic	p
Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.0614	0.209

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The normality test is interpreted based on the p-value using a significance level of 0.05. If the p-value is greater than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), the data are considered to be normally distributed because there is insufficient evidence to indicate a significant deviation from a normal distribution. Conversely, if the p-value is less than or equal to 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$), the data are considered not normally distributed because there is sufficient evidence to indicate a significant deviation from a normal distribution. In this study, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test yielded a p-value of 0.209, which is greater than 0.05. Therefore, the data are considered normally distributed.

Table 7. Linearity Test

Variable	Sig.	Results
$X \rightarrow M$	0.561	Linear
$M \rightarrow Y$	0.668	Linear
$X \rightarrow Y$	0.207	Linear

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The results indicate that the Sig. Deviation from Linearity values for all three relationships were greater than 0.05 (0.561, 0.668, and 0.207, respectively). Therefore, there was no significant deviation from linearity, indicating that the relationships among transformational leadership, job satisfaction, and employee performance could be considered linear.

Table 8. Multikolinearitas Test

Variable	VIF	Tolerance
Transformational Leadership (X)	1.00	0.998
Job Satisfaction (M)	1.00	0.998

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The multicollinearity test showed that transformational leadership and job satisfaction had VIF values of 1.00 and tolerance values of 0.998. Since the VIF values were below 10 and the tolerance values were above 0.10, no multicollinearity was detected among the predictor variables. Therefore, transformational leadership and job satisfaction were considered sufficiently independent to be included simultaneously in the regression model predicting employee performance.

Table 9. Heteroskedasticity Test

	Statistic	p
Breusch-Pagan	5.49	0.064

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The Breusch-Pagan test showed a non-significant result ($p = .064$). Since the p -value was greater than .05, there was no statistically significant evidence of heteroskedasticity. Therefore, the homoscedasticity assumption was considered satisfied, indicating that the variance of the residuals was relatively constant across the predicted values.

Direct Effects

Table 10. Linear Regression Influence Test

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Intercept	49.5410	3.0664	16.156	<.001
Transformational leadership (X)	-0.0552	0.0245	-2.251	.025
Job satisfaction (M)	-0.0174	0.0492	-0.354	.724

Source: Primary Data, 2025

The regression model produced $R = .130$ and $R^2 = .017$, indicating that transformational leadership and job satisfaction jointly explained 1.7% of the variance in employee performance. Transformational leadership significantly predicted employee performance, but the coefficient was negative ($B = -0.0552$, $p = .025$). Job satisfaction did not significantly predict employee performance ($B = -0.0174$, $p = .724$). Thus, H1 and H3 were not supported in the proposed positive direction.

Mediation Analysis

Table 11. Mediation Path Estimates

Path	B	SE	Z	p
X → M	-0.0217	0.0287	-0.756	.450
M → Y	-0.0174	0.0490	-0.356	.722
X → Y (direct)	-0.0552	0.0244	-2.262	.024

Source: Primary Data, 2025

Transformational leadership did not significantly predict job satisfaction ($B = -0.0217$, $p = .450$), so H2 was not supported. Job satisfaction also did not significantly predict employee performance in the mediation model ($B = -0.0174$, $p = .722$), while the direct X→Y path remained significant and negative ($B = -0.0552$, $p = .024$). The component paths required for the proposed positive mediation chain were therefore not supported, and the reported path estimates did not support H4.

DISCUSSION

The first result that requires attention is the model's low explanatory power. Transformational leadership and job satisfaction jointly explained only 1.7% of the variance in employee performance. This finding indicates that performance in this sample was largely associated with factors outside the tested model. Campbell's (1990) performance framework supports this interpretation because task performance depends on multiple determinants, including ability, motivation, role knowledge, and situational constraints. Leadership research also shows that effectiveness varies across organizational demands and follower characteristics (Deng et al., 2023). Therefore, the small R^2 should be interpreted as evidence that the present model is incomplete rather than as evidence that leadership or satisfaction is generally irrelevant.

Transformational leadership significantly predicted employee performance, but the relationship was negative ($B = -0.0552$, $p = .025$). This direction differs from studies that associate transformational leadership with higher engagement and performance (Bakker et al., 2023). A plausible psychological explanation is that leadership behaviors centered on vision, change, challenge, and elevated expectations can be appraised differently depending on the resources employees possess. When expectations increase faster than perceived control, role clarity, or readiness, the same leadership behavior that is intended as inspiration may be experienced as pressure. Chen et al. (2018) demonstrated that transformational leadership can show diminishing or curvilinear effects on task performance, while Ratnawati and Sugiharti (2023) emphasized readiness for change as an important condition in leadership-performance relationships. Given the cross-sectional design and low R^2 , the negative coefficient should be treated as a context-specific association, not as evidence that transformational leadership causes lower performance (A. M. Junaidi et al., 2024).

Transformational leadership did not significantly predict job satisfaction ($B = -0.0217$, $p = .450$). Under Social Exchange Theory, supportive leadership should create valued social resources that employees reciprocate through favorable attitudes and behavior (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The non-significant X→M path suggests that employees in this sample may not have translated transformational leadership behaviors into a more positive evaluation of their jobs. Satisfaction can also depend on compensation, workload, career prospects, job security,

work design, and interpersonal climate (Tamengkel & Rumawas, 2022). Chen et al. (2022) found that employee-relations climate helped explain how transformational leadership related to job satisfaction, which indicates that leadership may require a supportive relational environment before it changes employees' affective evaluations. In the present context, this exchange mechanism appears weak or overshadowed by other job conditions (Yani et al., 2021).

Job satisfaction also did not significantly predict employee performance ($B = -0.0174$, $p = .724$). This result shows a separation between affective evaluation and observable work behavior. Employees may feel satisfied without necessarily displaying higher measured performance when targets, competencies, procedures, workload, incentives, or resource availability exert stronger effects. Campbell (1990) distinguishes performance behavior from broader job attitudes, which helps explain why satisfaction alone may not produce task outcomes (Haqoni et al., 2025). The finding contrasts with Sari and Nadilla (2024), who reported a positive job satisfaction–performance path, but it is compatible with the broader view that the strength of this relationship depends on organizational and individual conditions (Efriat & Valentina, 2025).

The mediation hypothesis was not supported by the reported component paths. Transformational leadership did not significantly predict job satisfaction, and job satisfaction did not significantly predict performance, while the direct leadership–performance path remained significant and negative (Nauli et al., 2025). This pattern means that the assumed Social Exchange Theory sequence, in which leadership improves satisfaction and satisfaction then supports performance, was not evident in this sample (Samar Reyaz, 2024). The result differs from Sari and Nadilla (2024), who found significant mediation, but aligns with Adipra and Surya (2025), who found that job satisfaction did not mediate the effect of transformational leadership on performance even though the direct relationships were positive (Niken et al., 2025). The contrast across studies strengthens the argument that job satisfaction is not a universal transmission mechanism. Alternative pathways such as work engagement, readiness for change, self-efficacy, role clarity, or organizational commitment may be more relevant in specific work settings (Nurlaela et al., 2025; Pratiwi, 2025).

The psychological implication is that transformational leadership should be evaluated not only by how frequently leaders display inspirational behavior, but also by how employees interpret that behavior within their work conditions. In a context of growth targets, regulatory adjustment, and organizational change, employees may need clear roles, sufficient resources, realistic expectations, and readiness support before leadership messages are translated into productive behavior (Efata Harefa, 2023; Mohammed, 2024). Practically, managers should combine transformational practices with feedback, workload management, capability development, and clear performance systems. The study is limited by its cross-sectional, self-report design and by the small variance explained by the model. Future research should use multi-

source or longitudinal data and test alternative mediators and moderators to identify when transformational leadership is beneficial and through which psychological process it operates.

CONCLUSION

Transformational leadership significantly predicted employee performance in this sample, but the coefficient was negative and the model explained only 1.7% of performance variance. Transformational leadership did not significantly predict job satisfaction, and job satisfaction did not significantly predict employee performance. The reported mediation paths therefore did not support job satisfaction as the proposed psychological mechanism. These results indicate that leadership effectiveness in the Surabaya Branch context depends on conditions beyond satisfaction alone. Leadership development should be accompanied by clear performance expectations, adequate resources, employee readiness, and capability support. Future studies should test alternative psychological mechanisms with longitudinal or multi-source designs.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

TRANSPARENCY OF DATA

The data used in this study were collected through a research questionnaire and analyzed for the purposes of this study. The data are not publicly available due to participant privacy and confidentiality considerations but may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to applicable ethical and confidentiality requirements.

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AI USAGE STATEMENT

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the research, data analysis, or preparation of this manuscript.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization, methodology, literature review, data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, manuscript preparation, and manuscript revision.

Author 2: Supervision, guidance throughout the research process, critical review, and revision of the manuscript.

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