

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

June 27–29, 2025

Vancouver, Canada



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Conference Proceeding

June 27-29, 2025 Vancouver, Canada

Format: Electronic Book

ISBN: 978-1-998259-87-8



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Content Details:

Don Markland <i>Accountability Now</i>	Balancing Influence and Integrity: Rethinking Ethics in Influencer Collaborations
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Abstract

Influencer marketing has reshaped brand communications, offering personal, trusted channels for reaching audiences. Yet with this rise comes serious ethical challenges: undisclosed sponsorships, misalignment between brands and influencers, and erosion of consumer trust. While disclosure laws exist, they fall short of addressing deeper ethical concerns in influencer collaborations. This paper proposes a practical ethical framework for influencer marketing that moves beyond legal compliance to focus on authenticity, transparency, and audience respect. Through analysis of past ethical failures and emerging trends, it argues that brands that invest in ethical influencer partnerships today will secure long-term trust, loyalty, and market leadership. This research aims to help social media managers and digital marketers reimagine influencer collaborations not just as growth tools, but as pillars of sustainable brand credibility.

****Keywords:**** influencer marketing, ethics, brand trust, transparency, audience engagement

Balancing Influence and Integrity: Rethinking Ethics in Influencer Collaborations

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Introduction

In 2020, a popular fitness influencer with millions of followers posted a glowing review of a new energy drink. She shared workout videos, smiling endorsements, and snapshots of her "daily routine" featuring the drink in hand. Her audience, built on authenticity and shared wellness goals, trusted her. It wasn't until months later that users uncovered a series of undisclosed financial ties between the influencer and the drink's parent company — a detail omitted from her posts. The backlash was swift. Followers accused her of betrayal, and brands quietly cut ties. One relationship — once built on shared values — unraveled because of a simple ethical misstep: silence when transparency was needed most.

Influencer marketing has transformed the way brands connect with consumers. What was once a world of polished advertisements has shifted toward personal, seemingly authentic endorsements woven into everyday digital life. But as the line between genuine recommendation and paid promotion continues to blur, the ethical stakes have never been higher.

While disclosure guidelines, such as those issued by the Federal Trade Commission, aim to address some concerns, they represent the floor — not the ceiling — for ethical behavior. In reality, the challenge for brands and influencers isn't simply following the letter of the law. It's building and maintaining the fragile trust that underpins every endorsement.

This paper argues that brands must move beyond basic legal compliance and invest in deeper ethical standards when collaborating with influencers. Through an exploration of common ethical pitfalls, business risks, and emerging solutions, this research offers a framework for ethical influencer partnerships that protect both brand reputation and audience trust.

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Literature Review

There was a time when influencer marketing operated in a kind of digital Wild West. Brands sent products, influencers shared glowing reviews, and followers assumed it was all genuine. There were no formal disclosures, no #ad hashtags, no clear signals separating personal endorsement from paid promotion. Trust was built on appearances, and appearances were easy to manage.

But as influencer marketing grew into a billion-dollar industry, the cracks in that trust began to show. Consumers started asking harder questions. Regulators took notice. And for the first time, clear lines were drawn.

In 2023, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission updated its Endorsement Guides, laying out clear expectations: any material connection between a brand and an influencer must be disclosed plainly and conspicuously. The goal wasn't just legal clarity — it was to protect consumers from being misled by endorsements disguised as personal opinion (Federal Trade Commission, 2023).

Academic research soon followed, highlighting just how critical authenticity was to the influencer-audience relationship. Djafarova and Trofimenko's 2019 study found that young consumers, particularly women, were more likely to trust — and act on — endorsements they believed to be genuine. When sponsorships were hidden or felt inauthentic, the power of influence collapsed (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

The message was clear: the future of influencer marketing would depend not just on reach or aesthetics, but on credibility. Yet even today, disclosure alone isn't enough. True ethical influence demands a deeper commitment — one that both brands and influencers often underestimate.

Current Ethical Challenges in Influencer Collaborations

In April 2017, a wave of glossy Instagram posts promised the ultimate luxury getaway: private villas, gourmet meals, and performances by the world's top artists. Models and influencers like Bella Hadid and Kendall Jenner lent their names and images to the Fyre Festival — selling not just an event, but a dream. What attendees actually found when they landed in the Bahamas was a half-built disaster site, disaster relief tents, and no music at all. The backlash was immediate and brutal. Lawsuits followed, but not just against the festival organizers — influencers themselves were sued for promoting a fantasy they had never verified.

The Fyre Festival wasn't just a marketing failure. It was a warning. It showed that influencer collaborations, when handled without care or ethics, could destroy trust in a single swipe.

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Today, the ethical challenges facing influencer marketing are more subtle — but no less serious.

One of the most common pitfalls remains undisclosed sponsorships. Despite clear regulatory guidelines, a 2023 survey by Influencer Marketing Hub found that nearly 20% of influencer posts promoting products or services still lacked proper disclosure (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). When followers can't tell whether a recommendation is paid or personal, the foundation of trust starts to erode.

Misalignment

Misalignment between brands and influencers is another growing risk. In the race for reach, some brands prioritize follower counts over values, partnering with influencers whose lifestyles or public views clash with the brand's core identity. These missteps can lead to fast-moving public backlash, especially when audiences feel they have been misled.

Then there's overexposure — when influencers promote so many products, often conflicting ones, that their endorsements lose meaning altogether. Audiences have become adept at spotting what feels manufactured versus what feels real. A single misstep doesn't just hurt the influencer; it damages the brands they promote along the way.

At the heart of each of these issues is a simple truth: the audience's trust is fragile. Influencers and brands who treat that trust casually — as just another transaction — risk losing it altogether.

Business Case for Ethics in Influencer Marketing

In the early days of influencer marketing, brands believed that if an influencer had a big enough audience, trust would come naturally. A popular face was enough. A few million followers and a handful of well-edited photos seemed to guarantee influence — and, by extension, sales.

But the market matured. Audiences grew smarter. Today, the most damaging mistake a brand can make isn't picking the wrong influencer — it's underestimating how deeply audiences care about authenticity.

According to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer, 63% of consumers say they trust brand messages less when endorsements seem insincere or overly commercialized. Even more striking, 52% reported that discovering a paid endorsement without clear disclosure made them reconsider purchasing from that brand altogether (Edelman, 2024). In a landscape where attention is currency,

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and loyalty is fragile, one ethical misstep can cost more than a campaign — it can cost a company's future credibility.

The risk isn't just theoretical. Brands that fall into ethical gray areas face tangible consequences:

- Lost Consumer Loyalty: Trust, once broken, rarely returns at full strength.
- Public Backlash: Social media moves fast — negative sentiment can trend within hours.
- Legal Exposure: Failing to disclose properly can invite penalties, lawsuits, and regulatory investigations.
- Talent Fallout: Ethical missteps can alienate other influencers and brand ambassadors, shrinking a company's pool of willing partners.

On the other hand, brands that lead with ethics see compounding advantages. They build communities of true advocates, attract influencers whose endorsements feel natural, and create marketing campaigns that grow in value over time. When an audience believes that an influencer genuinely loves what they are sharing — and when that belief is backed by transparent practices — the impact is stronger, deeper, and longer-lasting.

In the end, ethics in influencer marketing isn't about following rules for the sake of compliance. It's about safeguarding the single most valuable asset any brand can have: trust.

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Proposed Ethical Collaboration Framework

Imagine sitting across from a friend who just recommended a new book, raving about how it changed their life. You're excited. You trust them. Then, halfway through the conversation, they admit they were paid to say it. Suddenly, the book feels a little less interesting. The recommendation feels a little less pure. The trust between you — once simple and strong — is now harder to define.

This is the invisible thread that runs through every influencer-brand partnership. Trust isn't declared; it's earned, moment by moment. And in a world where every swipe carries both opportunity and risk, brands must do more than follow disclosure laws — they must build collaborations rooted in real integrity.

The Five Pillars

A truly ethical influencer partnership rests on five pillars:

Alignment. Before follower counts, engagement rates, or aesthetic fit, comes values. Brands and influencers must share core beliefs. A fitness brand partnering with an influencer known for unhealthy habits, or a sustainability brand working with a fast-fashion promoter, creates tension that audiences can sense immediately. Alignment isn't about surface similarities; it's about deeper purpose matching.

Authenticity. Authenticity is the currency of influence. Scripted endorsements, overly produced posts, and forced narratives don't just fall flat — they repel. Influencers must be encouraged to share products in ways that fit naturally into their lives, using their real voices, not corporate soundbites.

Transparency. The audience deserves clarity. Every paid partnership, every material connection, must be disclosed openly and plainly. But true transparency goes beyond hashtags like #ad — it's about honesty in tone, language, and intention. It's giving followers the context they need to make informed choices.

Audience Respect. Influencers and brands alike must see audiences not as targets, but as communities. Pushing products that don't fit, promoting items simply for a check, treats audiences like commodities. Ethical collaborations ask: Is this offer genuinely valuable to the people we serve?

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Accountability. Partnerships shouldn't end when the post goes live. Both brand and influencer should remain responsible for monitoring audience response, correcting misinformation, and learning from every campaign. Ethical partnerships are living relationships, not one-time transactions.

Together, these five pillars offer more than just a checklist. They create a foundation for influencer marketing that respects audiences, strengthens brands, and restores a sense of integrity to an industry still finding its way.

The Future of Ethical Influencer Marketing

Picture this: it's 2028. A teenager scrolling through her feed doesn't just glance at influencer posts — she taps a certification badge before trusting any recommendation. That badge, issued by an independent body, verifies that the influencer discloses partnerships transparently, promotes products responsibly, and maintains audience trust. In this future, credibility isn't assumed. It's earned — and verified.

This imagined future isn't far away. The pressure on influencer marketing to evolve is building from three directions at once: government regulation, consumer skepticism, and platform accountability.

Governments are already moving to tighten disclosure laws, inspired by the cracks exposed in early influencer scandals. Regulatory bodies across Europe, Asia, and North America are considering stricter penalties for noncompliance, broader definitions of "sponsorship," and more aggressive enforcement actions. Influencers and brands that once operated in gray areas will soon find those spaces shrinking.

Meanwhile, audiences are growing sharper and less forgiving. As platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube mature, users are better at spotting inauthentic endorsements. They expect more: real stories, real alignment, real respect. In a digital world overflowing with content, authenticity becomes not just an advantage but a survival skill.

Finally, social media platforms themselves are beginning to shoulder more responsibility. New features like partnership tags, automated disclosure prompts, and transparency reporting tools signal a shift: the future of influencer marketing will be policed not just by regulators or audiences, but by the platforms hosting the conversations.

According to the 2024 Influencer Marketing Benchmark Report, brands are already adjusting. A growing number are moving away from one-off, transactional partnerships toward long-term collaborations based on shared values and mutual accountability (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2024). Ethical alignment is becoming a competitive edge.

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The brands and influencers who recognize these shifts — and act now — will be the ones leading tomorrow's digital marketplace. Those who cling to outdated models of influence will find themselves losing relevance, one quiet unfollow at a time.

The future of influencer marketing isn't just faster, louder, or more viral. It's more human — and more ethical. And the smartest players are already moving toward it.

Conclusion

There was a time when influence was easy. Post a photo, share a link, and watch the sales roll in. But influence built on shortcuts — on hidden agendas, unspoken deals, and misplaced endorsements — doesn't last. It cracks under pressure. It fades the moment trust is tested.

Today, influencer marketing stands at a crossroads. Brands and influencers can continue chasing quick wins, cutting corners, and hoping audiences won't notice. Or they can recognize the truth that has quietly been reshaping the digital world: influence is not a transaction. It's a relationship. And like any real relationship, it demands honesty, respect, and responsibility.

The five pillars outlined here — alignment, authenticity, transparency, audience respect, and accountability — are more than best practices. They are survival strategies for a world where attention is fleeting and trust is everything.

The brands that lead ethically today will not only win loyalty; they will build movements. They will create communities that advocate for them, that believe in them, and that carry their messages farther than any algorithm ever could.

Ethical influencer marketing is not a burden. It's an opportunity. It's a chance to turn every post, every story, every partnership into something bigger: a foundation for lasting, human connection in a digital world that desperately needs it.

The future will belong to those who understand that influence without integrity is just noise — and that real influence, the kind that endures, is built one honest conversation at a time.

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Mahdi Salimi <i>Sam Afrooz Melal</i>	Exploring the Leadership Deficiencies: Insights from Employee Experiences in Tehran
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Abstract

Leadership plays a central role in determining organizational success. However, deficiencies in administrative practices can undermine employee satisfaction and general performance. The current study surveys employee perceptions to explore the leadership challenges among 13 Tehran-based companies. This case study collected data from phenomenological interviews, identifying eight recurring themes: inadequate training, misaligned job assignments, unfair practices, praxis shock, overwhelming workloads, insufficient internships, stifled creativity, and leadership liability. Findings reveal systemic issues, including the lack of structured onboarding programs, favoritism, and mismanagement, which disrupt employee productivity and engagement. Cross-cutting patterns highlight gaps in mentorship, transparency, and alignment between managerial strategies and employee capabilities. The findings also contribute to the organizational leadership discourses more broadly by introducing new practical understandings from real-world involvements in Tehran's corporate sector.

Key words: Leadership deficiencies, Employee perceptions, Leadership training, Decision-making, Communication barriers, Organizational justice

Introduction

Leadership value has long been known as a keystone of organizational victory. In this regard, leaders' most effective qualities can be inspiring their teams, aligning target plans, and nurturing environments capable of thriving employees. On the contrary, leadership deficiencies can spread conflict, shrink productivity width, and risk business outcomes. These challenges are mainly severe in dynamic and competitive markets, such as those in Tehran, where businesses often face pressures to acclimatize quickly to changing conditions. As a significant economic hub in Iran, Tehran demonstrates the difficulties of balancing traditional management approaches with modern organizational demands. Its unique socio-economic landscape provides fertile ground for examining how leadership deficiencies impact businesses and their employees.

Accordingly, separated economic, cultural, and organizational elements enlarge leadership challenges in developing countries like Iran. Moreover, economic instability, resource boundaries, and bureaucratic inadequacies often hinder companies from applying best practices in leadership. Moreover, cultural standards highlighting hierarchy and authority can sometimes repress open communication and creativity within organizations, fostering a setting where outmoded management styles persist. As such, leaders may tussle to bridge the breach between employee prospects and administrative needs, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and reduced performance.

A significant contributing element to these leadership deficiencies is the absence of investment in human capital development. Leadership training, mentorship enterprises, and organized onboarding processes are often underfunded or preoccupied, leaving managers illequipped to address the difficulties of the modern business setting. This lack of training directly impacts employees, who often meet inadequate training, uneven job assignments, and perceived discrimination in workplace practices. These defies are compounded by a disconnect between theoretical management principles and real-world application in Tehran's miscellaneous corporate settings.

This research aims to deliver actionable references to address these deficiencies, emphasizing the position of emotional intelligence, transparency, and adaptability in leadership.

By shedding light on these shortages, this research highlights the urgent need for organizations to readjust their leadership methods with modern workforce expectations, ultimately fostering a culture of inclusion, innovation, and sustainable growth.

The developing body of research on leadership in developing economies underpins how regional, cultural, and economic contexts form leadership practices and outcomes. Economic

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instability, cultural emphasis on hierarchy, and limited resources exacerbate these deficiencies in countries like Iran. Research has shown that leadership styles in these settings can considerably impact employee inspiration and job satisfaction, yet autocratic propensities often suppress innovation and creativity (Rana & Malik, 2017). Moreover, Al-Hussami et al. (2018) recognized inadequate training and poor mentorship as hurdles to effective leadership in the Middle East.

Emotional intelligence has also been emphasized as a potential bridge to leadership gaps. According to research by Ghasemy et al. (2018), leaders with higher emotional intelligence were more successful in fostering team cohesion and addressing employee grievances. However, systemic support for developing such skills within organizations is lacking, further highlighting the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical leadership abilities. From an organizational justice viewpoint, Golparvar et al. (2012) explored equality in Iranian workplaces, finding that perceived inequities in job assignments and payments often led to decreased employee engagement and better turnover. These findings support global studies such as Greenberg's (2017), which emphasized the importance of equality in maintaining employee morale.

In addition, leadership development programs remain scarce in many developing economies, further hindering managerial effectiveness. Baron and Parent (2020) noted that companies in resource-constrained settings often deprioritize leadership training, leading to skill gaps at managerial levels. In Iran, Jalalabadi et al. (2024) found that structured leadership training programs could enhance managerial effectiveness, yet such initiatives remain limited across sectors.

This literature underscores the critical need for robust leadership frameworks tailored to the unique challenges of developing countries. There is still a gap between leadership theory and practice, particularly in Tehran's corporate sector, where employees often face leadership deficiencies that hinder organizational growth. This study aims to build on existing research by offering firsthand insights into employees' lived experiences, shedding light on leadership shortcomings and their implications for business success in the region.

Context of the Study

The research was conducted within Tehran's corporate setting, a fast-evolving and competitive business hub in Iran. Tehran's unique economic, cultural, and organizational factors—economic instability, bureaucratic inadequacies, and cultural prominence on hierarchy—create an idiosyncratic condition for leadership practices. Given these contextual problems, Tehran-based companies often adopt modern leadership practices that align with employee needs and organizational goals. This study shed light on how leadership deficiencies manifest within these

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organizations, focusing on employee experiences and perceptions of leadership effectiveness.

Method

This study applied a mixed-methods design, following quantitative and qualitative methodologies to investigate leadership deficiencies within Tehran-based organizations. Accordingly, using a survey to collect quantitative data and semi-structured interviews for qualitative data, this study aimed to provide a broad understanding of leadership issues and their effect on employee experiences and organizational outcomes.

Design of the Study

This research adopted a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection to provide a comprehensive picture of employees' leadership challenges. The quantitative section used a survey to measure employee opinions of leadership styles, job satisfaction, and organizational justice. The qualitative section applied in-depth, semi-structured interviews to capture employees' lived experiences, challenges, and suggestions for successful leadership practices. This approach provided broad generalizations about leadership practices in Tehran-based organizations and in-depth insights into the issues employees encounter in their work environments.

Participants and sampling

For this study, a purposive sampling method was employed to ensure the selection of participants with relevant experiences and insights into leadership practices within their organizations. The quantitative sample included 65 survey participants, chosen to reflect a diverse representation of industries and organizational roles. For the qualitative portion, 12 participants were interviewed, providing in-depth perspectives on workplace leadership challenges. This dual approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the broader trends and the nuanced experiences related to leadership deficiencies, offering a balanced exploration of the research problem. The study's participants were selected from various Tehran industries, including public and private sector organizations. A total of 65 employees participated in the quantitative phase of the study. These participants were chosen using stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different job roles, age groups, and educational backgrounds.

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For the qualitative interviews, 12 employees were selected through purposive sampling. These participants were chosen based on their direct experience with leadership practices in their organizations and their ability to provide meaningful insights into leadership deficiencies. The qualitative sample included employees from various organizational levels, ensuring the interviews captured diverse perspectives, including entry-level workers and senior managers.

Table 1 Demographic data of the participants

Demographic Factor	Category	Survey (n = 65)	Percentage (Survey)	Interview (n = 18)	Percentage (Interview)
Gender	Male	45	69.2%	13	72.2%
	Female	20	30.8%	5	27.8%
Age Range	22-37 years	20	30.8%	5	27.8%
	25-49 years	45	69.2%	13	72.2%
	Graduate	65	100%	18	100%
Academic Level	Master's or higher	37	56.9%	10	55.6%
	No Master's	28	43.1%	8	44.4%
Years of Experience	3-25 years (Male)	45	69.2%	13	72.2%
	2-10 years (Female)	20	30.8%	5	27.8%

Data Collection

Quantitative Data Collection

The quantitative data were congregated through a structured survey to evaluate employee perceptions of leadership, organizational justice, and job satisfaction. The survey included closedended questions, most of which were measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The survey included sections on:

- **Leadership effectiveness:** Adapted from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass & Riggio, 2006).
- **Organizational justice:** Measured using the Organizational Justice Scale (Colquitt, 2001).
- **Job satisfaction:** Based on a standard job satisfaction scale.

The survey was distributed electronically to the participants, who completed it voluntarily. It was designed to be straightforward and took approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

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Qualitative Data Collection

The qualitative section of the study used semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in investigating participants' understandings and perspectives. Depending on participant favorites and logistical constraints, the interviews were conducted face-to-face or via video conferencing. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Participants were asked open-ended questions such as:

- “Can you tell us about your experiences with leadership in your organization?”
- “What challenges do you face concerning leadership?”
- “How do you identify fairness and communication in your workplace?”

These interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns related to leadership deficiencies.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the participants' leadership styles and job satisfaction insights, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. Inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis, examined the relationships between leadership styles (e.g., transformational, transactional) and employee outcomes like job satisfaction and motivation.

The qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This method allowed for identifying key themes related to leadership practices, organizational justice, and employee experiences. Moreover, the data was coded and visualized via MAXQDA 2018.

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Results

The survey and interview data findings aimed to explore the leadership deficiencies reported by employees in Tehran-based organizations. The goal of this study was also to find and analyze the leadership inadequacies that employees experience daily and to explain the broader implications of these challenges for organizational performance and employee satisfaction. The data reflect common themes related to poor leadership tactics, emphasizing the significant barriers to effective management in the county.

In addition, table 2 summarizes important statistical data derived from the survey, including means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions for the main variables in this study. These variables include communication deficiencies, lack of support and recognition, inadequate decision-making, deficient leadership skills, and the impact on organizational outcomes.

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Frequency (Count)
Communication Deficiencies	3.8	0.8	39
Lack of Support and Recognition	3.6	0.9	45
Inadequate Decision-Making	3.5	1.0	37
Deficient Leadership Skills	3.7	0.7	42
Impact on Organizational Performance	3.9	0.6	48

Table 2. The statistical results

The analysis showed that one of the most compelling issues was the occurrence of topdown management styles, often compounded by strict leadership behaviors. This hierarchical and controlling approach created an environment where employees felt disengaged and separated from key decision-making processes. Many employees stated that their influences were neither asked nor valued, which left them feeling ineffective and uninvolved in finding the direction of their work or the organization. Therefore, the ability to increase creativity, innovate, and solve problems was strictly hindered. Employees were often reluctant to voice new ideas, fearing they would be dismissed or ignored, significantly reducing motivation and enthusiasm.

Strict management behaviors, such as micromanagement and the lack of autonomy, aggravated these feelings of disconnection. Accordingly, employees described their leaders as controlling and focused on every detail, suppressing their creativity and damaging their confidence and sense of

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responsibility. In such settings, employees struggled to develop professionally, as chances for growth, learning, and teamwork were limited. This lack of trust between leadership and staff formed a low morale cycle, destructively reducing job satisfaction and overall organizational outcomes.

The findings revealed five key themes from the survey and interview data analysis. These themes provide a deeper understanding of the pervasive impact of poor leadership practices, from communication failures to the lack of support and recognition, and demonstrate the far-reaching costs for employees and their organizations.

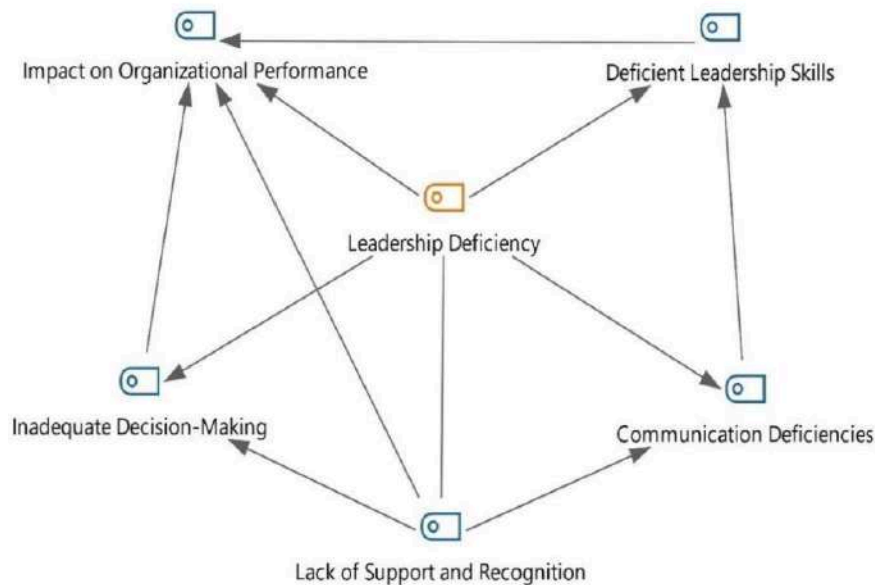


Figure1. The semantic network

Figure 1 illustrates the semantic network showing the interconnections among various themes related to leadership deficiencies. At the center of the network is the concept of Leadership Deficit, which directly influences and is influenced by five primary themes: Communication Deficiencies, Lack of Support and Recognition, Inadequate Decision-Making, Deficient Leadership Skills, and the Impact on Organizational Performance. The arrows signify the corresponding relationships among these factors, showing how they contribute to one another.

Communication Deficiencies

One of the most prominent survey and interview themes was communication deficiencies. Employees across various segments stated that ineffective communication from leadership meaningfully affected their work experience. From the survey, more than half of the respondents (over 60%) indicated that poor communication from leaders is associated with misunderstanding about expectations, project goals, and the organization's overall direction. One employee explained: *"Sometimes I do not know what the leadership expects. It is frustrating because it feels like we are all working without a clear plan."*

In interviews, this theme was reinforced by several participants, who expressed that leaders often failed to provide sufficient information about decisions or changes that affected their teams. One participant shared: *"When changes happen, the leaders do not communicate well about why those decisions are made. It leaves the team feeling left out of the process."*

This lack of clarity and communication breakdown was perceived as a significant leadership deficit, leading to lower morale and decreased trust in leadership.

Lack of Support and Recognition

Another key theme that emerged from the data was the lack of support and recognition from leadership. Many employees reported feeling overlooked and unsupported, mainly regarding career growth and handling challenging tasks.

Survey results showed that 70% of respondents felt that leadership rarely provided the guidance or recognition needed for professional development. One participant shared: *"It feels like we are left to figure things out independently. There is no real mentorship, which is never acknowledged when you do something well."*

This theme resonated strongly in the interviews, with several employees sharing their frustration about not being recognized for their hard work. One interviewee said: *"It is not that we want praise for every little thing, but we need to know that our efforts are noticed. Leadership should make us feel valued, not just as workers, but as individuals."*

This lack of support affected employee engagement and contributed to feelings of alienation within the organization.

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Inadequate Decision-Making

The next dominant theme that emerged was inadequate decision-making. Quite a few employees pointed out that leaders usually made important decisions without asking their teams or considering the broader implications for employees.

Survey responses indicated that 58% of participants sensed that leadership choices were often made in isolation without involving those affected. One survey respondent mentioned: *"Our managers usually made their decisions behind the doors and then just told us what to do. It feels like the leaders do not trust us to have a say in what happens at work."*

In interviews, employees elaborated on the negative impact on their work. One participant explained: *"When leaders make decisions without consulting us, they do not understand our daily challenges. It leads to confusion and sometimes even mistakes."*

The lack of collaborative decision-making was a substantial wall against building trust and collaboration between employees and their leaders.

Deficient Leadership Skills

A central theme across surveys and interviews was the deficiency in leadership skills. Accordingly, employees frequently noted that their leaders required key skills such as empathy, problemsolving, and motivation. According to the survey's analysis, almost 65% of participants believed their leaders lacked essential leadership skills. One survey respondent noted: *"In my opinion, our leaders do not understand a solution to manage conflict or stimulate motivation in the team. They do not show any real empathy toward the problems we face."*

Several employees expressed dissatisfaction with the leadership's ability to handle challenges effectively in interviews. Another participant stated: *"How can you follow a manager who has lost it when things go wrong? What we need is someone who can think fast and decide and lead us in difficult times."*

Therefore, a lack of practical leadership is directly associated with decreased employee morale and discouragement of the leadership team.

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Impact on Organizational Performance

The final theme was the impact of leadership deficiencies on organizational performance. Employees repeatedly stated that leadership inadequacies affected job satisfaction and negatively influenced the organization's general performance. According to the data, 72% of the participants felt leadership deficiencies were linked to lower productivity and a lack of team innovation. One survey respondent stated: *"When a manager cannot share decision-making with staff, it affects our performance as a team. It is hard to stay inspired when everything keeps changing."*

Interviews further supported this finding, emphasizing that leadership deficiencies were linked to high turnover rates, missed deadlines, and decreased employee engagement. One participant explained: *"When leadership is weak, it trickles down. People do not feel inspired to give their best. We see high turnover because people get frustrated and leave."*

The consensus was that leadership deficiencies created a toxic work environment that hindered organizational growth and productivity. By accepting these issues, companies can begin to indicate the gaps in leadership and provide a more supportive environment. The findings of this study suggest that leadership development programs should focus on communication, decision-making, and emotional intelligence.

Discussion and conclusion

This study identified key themes, including a lack of productive communication, support and recognition, ineffective decision-making, and poor management skills. In this regard, the findings of this study indicate that communication deficiencies were one of the most significant leadership deficiencies identified by employees. Many participants believed that lacking productive communication with leadership creates misunderstanding, misalignment, and hindrance inside teams. Moreover, when companies do not involve their staff in their goals and expectations, it will create employee dissatisfaction and disengagement.

This study's results align with the work of Robinson and Judge (2017), who state that effective communication is vital for creating trust and aligning targets with organizational objectives. Likewise, Baker and Wichard (2015) highlight that leaders who cannot communicate effectively may create feelings of disconnect and uncertainty about their job's future among employees. However, this study adds to the existing literature by stating that poor communication can significantly impact employee performance and cause more complicated issues (e.g., lack of direction and sense of unity) within teams. In this regard, Mayer et al. (2020) state that collaboration will diminish when productive communication is absent and decreases organizational

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productivity. This study's findings align with the work of Robinson and Judge (2017) and Mayer et al. (2020), who found that a lack of strong and effective communication can cause lower employee engagement and trust.

The second central theme is the lack of support and recognition from leadership. Accordingly, many employees stated that their efforts are usually unnoticed and unappreciated, causing frustration and feeling undervalued. This theme was especially prevalent in organizations where leadership was perceived as distant or uninvolved in employee development. This study's findings align with the findings of Harter et al. (2002) and Kuvaas (2016), who demonstrated the importance of support and recognition in improving employee morale and performance.

Contrary to previous studies' findings, this research demonstrates a more common concern among employees, stating that leadership support recognizes individual success and provides constant career guidance and development opportunities. In this regard, the findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Saks (2006), who suggests that career development support is a crucial aspect of effective leadership.

The findings of this study also revealed that inadequate decision-making was a significant leadership deficit. Most participants were concerned about decisions being made without consultation or explanation, which creates feelings of disempowerment and a lack of ownership over their work. Accordingly, this finding is also consistent with the work of Bass and Riggio (2006), who found that effective leaders involve their teams in decision-making to create a sense of ownership and accountability. Moreover, Avolio et al. (2009) also emphasize that job satisfaction and organizational commitment are created in a connected leadership where the upstairs employees hear the downstairs. Thus, the employees who feel excluded from key organizational decisions face frustration and demotivation. This feeling of exclusion can lead to alienation and ultimately affect performance and retention. Accordingly, Jiang et al. (2019) emphasize the importance of involving employees in decision-making, especially in rapidly changing environments where quick assimilation is necessary. This study further denotes that leadership practices that do not involve employees can lead to contrary results, including reduced trust in leadership.

The last theme that emerged is deficient leadership skills. Some of the participants of this study believed that most of their leaders lacked essential leadership abilities, such as understanding, conflict resolution, and problem-solving. This deficiency in leadership skills was mainly manifested when teams encountered difficult situations where effective leadership was vital. These findings support previous research of Goleman (2004), who emphasizes the significance of emotional intelligence and problem-solving skills in leadership. Furthermore, Northouse (2018) similarly argues that leaders who demonstrate emotional and interpersonal competence foster greater team trust and collaboration. This study's findings also align with the findings of Bennis

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and Nanus (2007), who found that leadership effectiveness directly affects employee engagement and overall organizational outcomes.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underline the precarious importance of addressing leadership deficiencies in Tehran-based business groups. Therefore, communication deficiencies, lack of support and recognition, inadequate decision-making, and deficient leadership skills emerged as significant issues for establishing and developing effective management. These factors decrease employee job satisfaction and deter organizational performance, reducing productivity, creativity, and employee retention.

Accordingly, businesses in Tehran usually face matchless challenges due to their unique cultural and economic elements that affect leadership styles. The hierarchical nature of many workplaces and economic restraints aggravate these leadership deficiencies. However, the insights from this study suggest that organizations can address these issues by implementing targeted interventions such as:

- Leadership Improvement Programs
- Comprehensive Decision-Making Procedures
- Gratitude and Mentorship Creativities
- Clear Communication Practices

Therefore, covering these areas will lead organizations to create a more supportive workplace that benefits employees and improves overall business outcomes. This study contributes to the broader discourse on leadership in developing economies, providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between cultural, economic, and organizational factors in shaping management practices.

Implications of the Study

From a practical stance, the findings provide doable suggestions for organizations seeking to improve leadership skills. In this regard, by investing in leadership practice and developing a culture of transparency and inclusivity, businesses can improve employee gratification, reduce leaving job rates, and improve overall performance. These changes are critical in dynamic markets like Tehran, where adaptability and creativity are key to staying competitive.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the growing literature on leadership in developing

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markets and economies, offering a real perspective on the interaction between cultural, economic, and organizational factors, highlighting the need for context-specific leadership frameworks that can be used in facing unique challenges. This study also paves the way for future studies to explore practical and effective strategies for highlighting leadership deficiencies in similar contexts by bridging the gap between theory and practice.

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<p>Beemnet Abraham Akalu</p> <p><i>Unity university</i></p>	<p>Exploring the Potential for Telemedicine in Conflict-Affected Regions of Northern Ethiopia</p>
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Abstract

The ongoing conflict in northern Ethiopia, especially in the Amhara and Tigray regions, has severely disrupted access to healthcare, leaving many vulnerable populations without essential medical services. Telemedicine, an emerging field, offers a promising approach to addressing healthcare gaps in these conflict-affected areas by using digital platforms to provide remote consultations, diagnostics, and ongoing care. This study explores the feasibility of implementing telehealth solutions in northern Ethiopia, focusing on the challenges posed by internet connectivity, infrastructure deficiencies, and the local healthcare system's capacity. The research highlights how telemedicine can improve healthcare access for displaced individuals, reduce the risks associated with patient travel, and offer specialized care that is otherwise inaccessible. Furthermore, it examines the role of international collaborations, policy development, and technological advancements in supporting telemedicine initiatives in crisis zones. The study concludes that, despite significant obstacles, telemedicine has the potential to improve healthcare delivery and resilience in northern Ethiopia, providing a long-term solution to some of the region's most urgent healthcare needs during and after the conflict.

Keywords: telemedicine, northern Ethiopia, conflict zones, healthcare access, telehealth, infrastructure, chronic care, mental health, displaced populations

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Introduction

Northern Ethiopia, especially the Amhara and Tigray regions, has faced severe disruptions to healthcare due to ongoing conflict, particularly since the outbreak of the Tigray war in late 2020. The war has led to widespread destruction of vital infrastructure, including healthcare facilities, schools, and pharmacies. Consequently, millions of people have been deprived of access to essential services, including healthcare. The destruction of medical infrastructure, displacement of healthcare workers, and disruption of supply chains have escalated the healthcare crisis in these areas. Despite the urgent need for medical care, the lack of even basic healthcare services has deepened the suffering of vulnerable populations.

In Ethiopia, the concept of telemedicine using digital technology to deliver healthcare remotely is nearly non-existent, especially in the northern regions. There has been no established telemedicine infrastructure to support remote healthcare delivery. This absence of telemedicine services is a significant gap, especially in northern Ethiopia, where the ongoing conflict has devastated healthcare infrastructure and made it unsafe or impossible for people to travel to nearby health facilities. The displaced population and those living in remote areas face even greater barriers to accessing care.

Given this context, there is an urgent need for global attention and intervention to provide healthcare solutions in northern Ethiopia. Telemedicine offers a promising opportunity to bridge the healthcare gap by enabling remote consultations, diagnostics, and follow-up care. By utilizing digital platforms, telemedicine can connect healthcare providers with patients in even the most isolated and conflict-affected regions, delivering essential medical services without the need for physical travel. This would help reduce the risks associated with traveling through conflict zones, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and individuals with chronic health conditions.

The objective is to implement telemedicine services in northern Ethiopia to meet the urgent healthcare needs of people living in conflict-affected areas. By offering remote healthcare solutions, including mental health support, psychological counseling, and management of chronic illnesses, telemedicine has the potential to provide essential care to communities that are isolated from conventional healthcare systems. The scale of the crisis underscores the need for global attention to develop and support telemedicine initiatives in northern Ethiopia. With the right infrastructure, resources, and international collaboration, telemedicine can play a pivotal role in improving healthcare access and outcomes for the region. Ultimately, the goal is to save countless lives by delivering remote healthcare services to individuals suffering from physical, psychological, and chronic conditions caused by the conflict.

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Background

Impact of Conflict on Healthcare

The ongoing conflict in the Tigray and Amhara regions of northern Ethiopia has significantly hindered access to healthcare services. This disruption is due to the destruction of healthcare facilities, the displacement of medical personnel, and major obstacles in the delivery of essential medicines. Many healthcare workers have either fled the area or are unable to carry out their duties because of ongoing security threats. As a result, providing vital healthcare has become increasingly challenging, leaving millions of people in urgent need of medical care for both conflict-related injuries and chronic health conditions. Humanitarian organizations, including the WHO, have expressed concern over the severe crisis in the region, noting the extreme toll the conflict has taken on the healthcare system.

(World Health Organization (WHO), 2021).

Furthermore, the displacement of populations both within and outside the conflict zones has placed additional strain on already limited healthcare resources. This has exacerbated the challenge of providing adequate care. In such circumstances, telemedicine emerges as a promising solution, offering the ability to deliver critical healthcare services remotely, thereby reducing the need for patients to travel to distant or dangerous health centers, and minimizing the risk of further harm.

Telemedicine: A Global Perspective

Telemedicine has become an essential healthcare tool globally, particularly in rural, underserved, and conflict-affected areas. In these regions, it plays a critical role in saving lives by ensuring continuous care through virtual remote consultations. For people in need, especially those in isolated and hard-to-reach areas, telemedicine bridges the gap by offering accessible healthcare without the need for physical travel. In conflict zones, where healthcare infrastructure is often destroyed or inaccessible, telemedicine is vital for providing continuous medical support. It not only delivers technical medical expertise but also offers psychological and emotional support, helping individuals cope with trauma and its lasting effects. By enabling remote consultations and treatment planning, telemedicine ensures that even those most affected by violence can receive the care they need, significantly improving their health outcomes and quality of life. (Rathore & Tiwari, 2020).

Despite its success in various settings, implementing telemedicine in conflict zones presents unique challenges. These include issues related to infrastructure, security risks, and technological obstacles such as poor internet connectivity.

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Potential for Telemedicine in Northern Ethiopia

Benefits of Telemedicine in Conflict Zones

1.Enhanced Healthcare Access: One of the primary advantages of telemedicine in northern Ethiopia is its ability to bypass the geographic barriers created by the ongoing conflict. People in remote or difficult-to-reach areas, particularly those displaced, can access medical services without needing to travel through dangerous regions. This reduces the risks associated with traveling during conflict and helps alleviate the strain on overwhelmed healthcare facilities (Hussein et al., 2022).

2.Access to Specialized Medical Services: Northern Ethiopia faces a significant shortage of specialized healthcare professionals, particularly in fields like pediatrics, surgery, and mental health, due to the conflict. Telemedicine can connect local healthcare providers with experts from other regions or even countries, enabling remote consultations, diagnoses, and the development of treatment plans (Gidado et al., 2023).

3.Sustaining Healthcare Services: Individuals with chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, HIV/AIDS, and high blood pressure are at significant risk if their ongoing treatment is disrupted due to conflict, displacement, or other circumstances. However, telemedicine services help maintain continuous healthcare by providing virtual consultations, remote monitoring, and follow-up care. This approach can reduce the risk of severe complications, health deterioration, or even death, ensuring that patients continue to receive necessary care despite challenging situations. (Mulugeta et al., 2021)

4. Mental Health Assistance: The ongoing conflict has triggered a mental health crisis in northern Ethiopia, with many individuals experiencing trauma, anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Telemedicine offers a valuable solution for providing psychological support by connecting individuals to mental health services remotely (Getachew & Tesfaye, 2021).

Challenges to Implementation

1.Infrastructure Limitations: A key challenge to the implementation of telemedicine in northern Ethiopia is the lack of reliable internet and telecommunication infrastructure, particularly in rural and remote areas. Inadequate connectivity could significantly limit the potential effectiveness of telemedicine services (Rathore & Tiwari, 2020).

2.Security Concerns: The unstable security environment in conflict regions presents

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additional complications for the adoption of telemedicine. Ensuring the protection of healthcare professionals and patients, as well as safeguarding the infrastructure necessary for telehealth services, remains a significant issue (Gidado et al., 2023).

3. Technological Literacy: For telemedicine to succeed, both healthcare providers and patients must be proficient in using digital platforms. In northern Ethiopia, where many individuals have limited technological experience, there is a critical need for training both healthcare workers and patients to effectively use telemedicine tools (Hussein et al., 2022).

4. Absence of Regulatory Guidelines: Introducing telemedicine in northern Ethiopia necessitates the creation of clear regulatory frameworks that ensure quality service delivery. These regulations should cover aspects like safeguarding patient confidentiality, maintaining high healthcare standards, and managing the complexities of cross-border healthcare provision (Mulugeta et al., 2021).

Opportunities for Implementing Telemedicine

International Partnerships: Collaboration with international organizations and NGOs can provide technical expertise, funding, and resources to support the establishment of telemedicine infrastructure in northern Ethiopia.

These partnerships can help address the challenges of infrastructure and technology gaps (WHO, 2021).

Mobile Health Solutions: Given the high mobile phone penetration in Ethiopia, mobile health (mHealth) solutions offer a feasible platform for telemedicine. Mobile apps can be used for consultations, reminders for medication, and health tracking, all of which are critical in conflict settings (Rathore & Tiwari, 2020).

Telehealth Training: Training local healthcare workers in telemedicine practices is crucial for successful implementation. Providing remote training programs and capacity-building efforts can enhance the effectiveness of telemedicine and empower local healthcare providers to manage telehealth consultations (Getachew & Tesfaye, 2021).

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Conclusion

Telemedicine holds significant potential in improving healthcare access and outcomes in conflict-affected regions of northern Ethiopia. By overcoming barriers such as geographical isolation, infrastructure limitations, and healthcare workforce shortages, telemedicine can ensure continuity of care for displaced and vulnerable populations. However, the successful implementation of telemedicine in these regions requires addressing technological, regulatory, and security challenges. With international support, innovative solutions, and careful planning, telemedicine can play a transformative role in delivering essential healthcare to those affected by the ongoing conflict in northern Ethiopia.

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