RESEARCH ARTICLE

LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN HEALTHCARE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RIYADH HEALTH CLUSTERS IN SAUDI ARABIA

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping employee engagement, particularly in the healthcare sector, where engaged employees are essential for delivering high-quality patient care. This review article examines the relationship between leadership styles and employee engagement within Riyadh's health clusters, which are central to Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation under Vision 2030. This article analyzes existing literature and highlights the impact of transformational, transactional, and servant leadership on healthcare professionals' engagement levels. Findings suggest that transformational leadership, characterized by inspiration and intellectual stimulation, significantly enhances employee engagement, while transactional leadership, focused on rewards and penalties, has a more limited impact. Servant leadership, which emphasizes empathy and support, also emerges as a key driver of engagement. The review identifies challenges such as hierarchical structures, communication gaps, and resistance to change, which hinder engagement in Riyadh's health clusters. Recommendations include fostering inclusive leadership practices, enhancing communication channels, and implementing engagement-focused training programs to align with Vision 2030's goals of improving healthcare quality and workforce satisfaction.

Introduction

The healthcare sector in Saudi Arabia is undergoing a significant transformation under Vision 2030, a strategic socio-economic plan aimed at improving healthcare quality, accessibility, and efficiency. This vision emphasizes a patient-centric approach, preventive care, and public-private partnerships to enhance healthcare delivery. A key component of this transformation is the development of health clusters, particularly in Riyadh, which serve as the backbone of the Kingdom's healthcare delivery system (Suleiman & Ming, 2025). Leadership within these health clusters plays a crucial role in driving organizational success and ensuring employee engagement. Employee engagement is defined as the emotional commitment and dedication employees have toward their work and organization. It is closely linked to leadership practices, as effective leadership fosters a positive work environment, enhances job satisfaction, and improves overall organizational performance.

Fostering a positive work environment is crucial for effective leadership in health clusters. Leaders must create an environment that supports collaboration, innovation, and continuous learning, which are essential for high-quality patient care. This involves encouraging open communication where team members feel comfortable expressing their ideas and concerns. It also includes promoting teamwork and collaboration through team-building activities and recognizing the contributions of all team members. More so, supporting employee well-being by implementing wellness programs and providing resources for stress management and mental health support is vital. Ensuring both physical and psychological safety by establishing protocols for accident prevention and enforcing a zero-tolerance policy for bullying and harassment is also important (Singh, Singh, Kumari & Tiwari, 2024).

Enhancing job satisfaction is another key aspect of leadership in health clusters. Leaders can boost morale and motivation among healthcare professionals by recognizing and rewarding employee contributions. Implementing recognition programs that celebrate employees' achievements, such as awards or bonuses, can significantly impact job satisfaction. Providing opportunities for growth through career development opportunities, mentorship programs, and training to enhance professional skills and advancement is also essential. Fostering a culture of appreciation by regularly expressing gratitude to employees for their dedication and quality of care can be as simple as verbal thanks or personal notes. Improving organizational performance is closely linked to effective leadership practices. Leaders should set clear goals and expectations and ensure that all employees understand their roles in achieving these objectives. Providing constructive feedback that is both supportive and constructive helps employees improve their performance and contribute to better healthcare outcomes (Hardavella, Aamli-Gaagnat, Saad, Rousalova & Sreter, 2017). Encouraging innovation by creating an environment where employees feel empowered to suggest new ideas and innovations that can improve patient care and organizational efficiency is also vital. Focusing on these will make leaders in health clusters to drive organizational success and ensure high-quality patient care.

The transformation of the healthcare sector in Saudi Arabia encounters several challenges and one of the primary issues is inadequate infrastructure, which includes outdated facilities and equipment that need modernization to support high-quality care (Al Khashan et al., 2021). Another significant challenge is insufficient personnel, as the healthcare system requires more skilled professionals to meet the growing demand for services. In addition, resistance to change can hinder the adoption of new practices and technologies, requiring strong leadership to manage these transitions effectively. Addressing these challenges demands a strong commitment and collaboration among stakeholders, including government entities, healthcare providers, and private investors (Ahmed et al, 2024).

Despite these challenges, Vision 2030 offers several opportunities for advancement in the healthcare sector. One of the most promising opportunities is foreign investment in healthcare, which can bring in new technologies and expertise to enhance the quality of care. The increased use of technology, such as e-health services and digital solutions, can improve access to healthcare and streamline operations. Furthermore, the expansion of private medical facilities through public-private partnerships can increase the capacity and efficiency of the healthcare system, making it more accessible and responsive to patient needs. These opportunities not only improve healthcare services but also contribute to the overall economic growth and diversification of Saudi Arabia (AlJohani & Bugis, 2024). Succinctly, the success of Saudi Arabia's healthcare transformation under Vision 2030 depends on effective leadership within health clusters, which is critical for driving employee engagement and delivering high-quality patient care. Strong leadership can navigate the challenges while leveraging the opportunities to create a more comprehensive, efficient, and integrated healthcare system.

This review article explores the relationship between leadership styles and employee engagement within Riyadh's health clusters. It examines the impact of transformational, transactional, and servant leadership on healthcare professionals' engagement levels and identifies challenges and opportunities for improvement. The article provides insights into how leadership practices can be optimized to align with Vision 2030's healthcare objectives by synthesizing existing literature and comparative studies.

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic literature review approach, guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework. The review focuses on peer-reviewed articles, government reports, and grey literature published between 2010 and 2024. The comparative analysis of Riyadh's health clusters is based on case studies, employee surveys, and performance metrics to identify variations in leadership practices and engagement levels. The methodology is designed to synthesize existing literature, identify key themes, and provide actionable insights for healthcare leaders and policymakers.

Leadership Styles and Their Impact on Employee Engagement

Transformational leadership is a powerful approach in healthcare settings, characterized by its ability to inspire and motivate employees through a shared vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. This leadership style has been shown to significantly enhance employee engagement by fostering a sense of purpose and encouraging innovation. In healthcare settings, transformational leaders communicate a clear vision for patient-centered care and empower their teams to take initiative, creating a more engaged workforce (Ystaas, Nikitara, Ghobrial, Latzourakis, Polychronis & Constantinou, 2023). In Riyadh's health clusters, transformational leadership has been linked to higher levels of job satisfaction and reduced turnover rates among healthcare professionals. This is because transformational leaders inspire employees to go beyond their perceived capabilities, leading to improved morale and commitment to organizational goals (Gebreheat, Teame & Costa, 2023). Fostering a collaborative environment where employees feel valued and empowered, transformational leaders can drive organizational success and improve patient care outcomes (Tsapnidou et al., 2024). Moreover,

transformational leadership in healthcare is crucial for driving innovation and managing organizational change effectively. It encourages a culture that embraces change, shared decision-making, and creative problem-solving, which are essential for adapting to the evolving healthcare sector (Shufelt, 2021).

Transactional leadership is a style that focuses on maintaining order and achieving short-term goals through rewards and penalties. While this approach can ensure compliance and efficiency, its impact on employee engagement is often limited. In Riyadh's health clusters, transactional leadership has been effective in managing routine tasks but falls short in fostering long-term commitment and creativity among employees. The reliance on extrinsic motivators, such as bonuses or disciplinary actions, may lead to disengagement if not balanced with intrinsic motivators like recognition and personal growth opportunities. Studies in Saudi Arabia have shown that transactional leadership is widely practiced in healthcare settings due to its operational efficiency, but it may not improve services offered by healthcare organizations as effectively as transformational leadership (Bhatti & Alyahya, 2021).

Alflayyeh and Alghamdi (2023) study of leadership styles and its impact on employee in Riyadh Private Hospitals indicated that transactional leadership is negatively associated with employee job satisfaction in private hospitals in Riyadh, whereas transformational leadership is positively associated with both job satisfaction and employee retention. Therefore, balancing transactional leadership with elements of transformational leadership, which emphasizes intrinsic motivation and personal growth, can help enhance employee engagement and overall organizational performance. In practice, healthcare leaders in Riyadh can implement a hybrid approach by combining the efficiency of transactional leadership with the motivational aspects of transformational leadership. This could involve setting clear goals and expectations while also recognizing and rewarding employees for their contributions, providing opportunities for professional development, and fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration. By doing so, leaders can leverage the strengths of both leadership styles to improve employee engagement and deliver high-quality patient care.

Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy that emphasizes empathy, support, and the development of employees. In healthcare settings, servant leaders prioritize the well-being of their teams and actively listen to their concerns, creating a culture of trust and collaboration. This approach has been shown to enhance employee engagement by addressing the emotional and professional needs of healthcare workers. In Riyadh's health clusters, servant leadership practices such as mentorship programs and open communication channels have contributed to higher levels of engagement and job satisfaction. Servant leaders empower their teams to take ownership of their work, encouraging autonomy and creativity. This not only improves job satisfaction but also reduces burnout and turnover rates among healthcare professionals (Jairick, 2024). Servant leadership is particularly well-suited to healthcare due to its alignment with core healthcare values such as compassion, accountability, and patient-centered care. It promotes a culture where employees feel valued and supported, leading to improved patient outcomes and organizational performance (Demeke, van Engen & Markos, 2024; Abdulai, 2023).

Challenges in Leadership and Employee Engagement

Despite the potential benefits of effective leadership, several challenges hinder employee engagement in Riyadh's health clusters. The healthcare system in Saudi Arabia faces challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and insufficient resources, which can impact the ability of leaders to create an environment conducive to employee engagement (Yousef, AlAngari, AlShehri, AlSharif, Bayameen & Alnemer, 2023). Outdated facilities and equipment can hinder the delivery of high-quality care, leading to frustration among healthcare professionals. The healthcare sector struggles with workforce issues, including a shortage of skilled professionals and high turnover rates. This can be exacerbated by burnout and boreout among healthcare workers, which are linked to poor work-life balance and lack of recognition (Binkanan, Althobaiti & Alqassab, 2024). Effective leadership must address these challenges by providing opportunities for growth and recognizing employee contributions. Saudi Arabia's diverse population, including a significant expatriate community, presents cultural and demographic challenges. Leaders must navigate these differences to ensure inclusivity and engagement across diverse teams1. This involves fostering a culture that respects and values diversity, promoting open communication, and addressing the unique needs of different employee groups.

The transformation of the healthcare system under Vision 2030 involves significant changes, which can meet resistance from employees accustomed to traditional practices. Leaders must manage this change effectively to maintain engagement and motivation engagement (Yousef, AlAngari, AlShehri, AlSharif, Bayameen & Alnemer, 2023). This requires clear communication, training, and support to help employees adapt to new systems and processes. While transformational and servant leadership styles are beneficial for employee engagement, transactional leadership may still be prevalent due to its operational efficiency. Balancing these styles to meet both short-term operational needs and long-term engagement goals is crucial (Nassani, Alkhulaifi, Almuhawis & Alnujadi, 2023). Leaders must find a balance between efficiency and employee motivation, using rewards and recognition to enhance job satisfaction while fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration.

Traditional hierarchical structures in Saudi Arabia's healthcare system can create barriers to open communication and collaboration. These structures often lead to a top-down approach where decisions are made at higher levels without much input from frontline employees. As a result, employees may feel disconnected from decision-making processes, which can lead to disengagement and reduced morale. In such hierarchical systems, communication often flows from top to bottom, with limited feedback loops. This can hinder the exchange of ideas and innovation, as employees may feel their contributions are not valued or considered. Furthermore, the

lack of transparency and inclusivity in decision-making can lead to mistrust and dissatisfaction among healthcare professionals, affecting their engagement and commitment to delivering high-quality patient care. Leaders can enhance engagement, improve morale, and create a more collaborative work environment by fostering a culture of open communication and involving employees in decision-making processes. This shift towards a more participatory approach can help overcome the limitations of traditional hierarchical structures and improve overall organizational performance in the healthcare sector.

In large health clusters, ineffective communication can result in misunderstandings about organizational goals and expectations. This can lead to confusion among employees, affecting their ability to align their work with the organization's objectives. Large health clusters often involve multiple departments, each with its own communication dynamics. If information does not flow seamlessly across these departments, it can lead to inconsistencies in service delivery and patient care. Poor communication can compromise patient safety by leading to medical errors, delayed treatments, and misdiagnoses. For instance, incomplete or inaccurate information during shift handovers can increase the risk of adverse events (Alder, 2025). Utilizing digital communication tools and integrating them with electronic health records (EHRs) can streamline communication and reduce errors. Encouraging open communication and giving employees a voice can improve collaboration and reduce misunderstandings. Mobile collaboration tools can facilitate real-time communication among healthcare professionals.

The rapid pace of healthcare reforms under Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia has indeed led to resistance among some employees who are accustomed to traditional practices. This resistance can stem from various factors, including fear of change, lack of understanding about new systems, or concerns about job security. To navigate this resistance effectively, leaders must foster a culture of adaptability and continuous learning within their organizations. Leaders should communicate the vision and rationale behind the reforms clearly and transparently. This involves explaining how changes align with organizational goals and how they will benefit both employees and patients. Providing comprehensive training programs can help employees develop the skills needed to adapt to new practices and technologies. This includes training on digital health tools, patient-centered care models, and other innovations introduced under Vision 2030. Encouraging employee participation in decision-making processes can help build trust and reduce resistance. Leaders should promote a culture that values innovation and continuous learning. This involves celebrating successes, learning from failures, and fostering an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing ideas and suggesting improvements. Riyadh's health clusters employ a diverse workforce, including both local and expatriate professionals. Cultural differences and language barriers can impact engagement levels, requiring leaders to adopt inclusive practices that promote unity and collaboration.

Comparative Analysis of Riyadh Health Clusters

A comparative analysis of Riyadh's health clusters reveals variations in leadership practices and employee engagement levels. Clusters that prioritize transformational and servant leadership tend to report higher engagement scores. These leadership styles emphasize employee empowerment, mentorship, and continuous feedback, which are crucial for fostering a positive work environment. For instance, clusters with robust mentorship programs and regular feedback mechanisms have seen significant improvements in employee satisfaction and retention. Transformational leadership, in particular, has been linked to higher quality nursing care in Riyadh's health clusters, as it encourages innovation and collaboration among healthcare professionals (Boshra, Almutairi & Alasiry, 2024).

In contrast, clusters that rely heavily on transactional leadership often struggle with low morale and high turnover rates. Transactional leadership focuses on rewards and penalties to motivate employees, which can lead to disengagement if not balanced with intrinsic motivators like recognition and personal growth opportunities. While transactional leadership may ensure compliance and efficiency in routine tasks, it falls short in fostering long-term commitment and creativity among employees. Employee surveys and performance metrics provide evidence of these trends. Clusters with higher engagement scores typically have leaders who prioritize transformational and servant leadership practices. These practices not only enhance employee satisfaction but also contribute to better organizational outcomes, such as improved patient care and reduced turnover rates (Alrashidi, Alenezi, Alrimali & Alshammari, 2024).

Studies in Riyadh have shown that transformational leadership is positively correlated with the quality of nursing care. This suggests that aligning leadership practices with organizational goals, such as improving patient care, can lead to better outcomes. Transformational leaders in healthcare settings often prioritize employee empowerment and innovation, which can enhance teamwork and patient care outcomes (Boshra, Almutairi & Alasiry, 2024). The structure of health clusters in Riyadh, such as the First Health Cluster, involves integrated networks of healthcare providers. Aligning leadership practices with organizational goals in these clusters can help streamline services, improve access to care, and enhance overall healthcare outcomes (Alomari et al., 2021; Alshowair, Altamimi, Alruhaimi, Tolba, Almeshari, Almubrick & Abdel-Azeem, 2022).

Conclusion

Leadership is a cornerstone of employee engagement in healthcare, particularly in Riyadh's health clusters, which are central to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 goals. Transformational and servant leadership styles have been shown to significantly enhance engagement levels, while transactional leadership has a more limited impact. Addressing challenges such as hierarchical structures, communication gaps, and resistance to change is essential for fostering a culture of engagement and innovation. Riyadh's health clusters can build a motivated and resilient workforce capable of delivering high-quality patient care by adopting inclusive leadership practices and implementing engagement-focused initiatives, and thereby, achieve the objectives of Vision 2030.

Recommendations

To enhance leadership and employee engagement in Riyadh's health clusters, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Leaders should adopt inclusive practices that address the needs of a diverse workforce, including cultural sensitivity training and language support programs.
2. Implementing transparent and open communication channels, such as regular town hall meetings and digital platforms, can bridge gaps between leaders and employees.
3. Leadership training programs should emphasize transformational and servant leadership principles, equipping leaders with the skills to inspire and support their teams.
4. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, recognition schemes, and career development opportunities can boost employee engagement and retention.
5. Regular employee surveys and performance evaluations can help identify areas for improvement and measure the impact of leadership interventions.

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