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ORIGINALARTICLE

Explaining the Model of Transformational Leadership's Behavioral Drivers in Improving Urban Management Effectiveness: A Case Study of Tehran Municipality

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T

Introduction

Municipalities serve as principal institutions governing urban life, playing a fundamental role in organizing public services, enhancing quality of life, promoting spatial justice, and responding to the diverse needs of citizens. In today's rapidly changing environments, urban management is exposed to growing complexities, including rapid population growth, infrastructure strain, resource limitations, environmental challenges, rising citizen expectations, and the demand for administrative agility. Under these conditions, the effectiveness of urban management is no longer determined by formal regulations, physical planning, or organizational structures alone. Instead, it depends heavily on the quality of leadership, the strength of organizational interaction, and the capacity to mobilize human capital. Tehran Municipality, as one of Iran's largest and most complex public service organizations, faces critical administrative challenges. These include excessive bureaucracy, multiple layers of decision-making, weak interdepartmental coordination, political interference, ineffective performance evaluation, declining employee motivation, and the underutilization of employees' creative and intellectual capacities. These systemic issues necessitate a fundamental reconsideration of prevailing leadership approaches within the organization.

While transformational leadership is widely recognized in management literature for improving organizational performance, commitment, and communication through dimensions such as idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, many studies treat this relationship as a direct, linear association. Such approaches often overlook the complex mediating mechanisms and foundational layers critical to public and service-oriented organizations. In municipalities, where performance is shaped by institutional, cultural, ethical, and participatory contexts, leadership effectiveness cannot be reduced to personal traits. It must be analyzed through the behavioral drivers that connect leadership to performance.

This study identifies, categorizes, and tests the causal relationships among the behavioral drivers of transformational leadership to enhance urban management effectiveness in the Tehran Municipality. The research offers three primary innovations: identifying specific behavioral drivers within the urban management context; employing Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) to explain the hierarchical positioning of these drivers; and utilizing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to empirically test these relationships. This study argues that urban management effectiveness is not the result of a simple linear process, but the outcome of a chain of ethical, participatory, communicative, and empowering drivers. Furthermore, because sustainable urban governance requires strong institutional capacity, the study assumes that improving municipal effectiveness is a prerequisite for achieving urban resilience and responding to complex urban challenges.

Methodology
This study adopts an exploratory-explanatory mixed-methods approach. In the first phase, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to identify the behavioral drivers of transformational leadership in urban management. Participants included 15 experts in urban management, human resources, and municipal administration, selected via purposive and snowball sampling. Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews. Theoretical saturation was reached at the twelfth interview, but interviews were continued until the fifteenth participant to ensure data adequacy. The analysis yielded 145 initial codes, which were refined and organized into 25 basic themes, 8 organizing themes, and 2 overarching themes.

In the second phase, Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) was used to determine the hierarchical relationships among the identified themes. This stage contextualized the behavioral drivers within a multilayered system, identifying foundational, mediating, and outcome-oriented variables. The results highlighted that ethical and spiritual patterns, alongside collaboration and collective deliberation, occupied the foundational levels of the model, providing the base on which other variables were formed.

In the third phase, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the conceptual model and examine the relationships among the constructs. The statistical population comprised 308 senior and executive managers of the Tehran Municipality. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan table, 191 participants were selected through stratified random sampling. A researcher-developed questionnaire, derived from the qualitative findings, served as the primary instrument. To assess reliability and validity, we calculated factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), and Cronbach's alpha. Results confirmed that all factor loadings exceeded 0.4, AVE values were above 0/5, and both CR and Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0/7. Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and HTMT values below 0/9. Finally, the overall goodness-of-fit index (GOF = 0/530) demonstrated satisfactory explanatory power for the structural model.

Findings
The findings across both phases demonstrate that urban management effectiveness in Tehran Municipality is a multidimensional behavioral and structural process rather than the direct outcome of a single leadership style. Qualitative analysis identified eight principal constructs: shared vision creation, inspirational motivation, employee empowerment, effective interaction and communication, intellectual stimulation and influence, collaboration and collective deliberation, dynamic organizational performance, and ethical-spiritual patterns. These constructs were located at different hierarchical levels in the ISM model, confirming the layered nature of their relationships.

ISM framework analysis revealed that "ethical and spiritual patterns" and "collaboration and collective deliberation" form the model's foundation. Without ethical capital, organizational trust, and a culture of collective thinking, other transformational leadership dimensions fail to achieve sufficiency. These foundations create the conditions under which leadership behaviors can be meaningful and sustainable.

At the intermediate level, employee empowerment emerged as a pivotal construct. Quantitative results showed that the path from "employee empowerment" to "effective interaction and communication," with a standardized coefficient of 0/782, represented the model's strongest relationship. This suggests that as employees gain autonomy, competence, meaningfulness, and influence, the quality of interpersonal engagement, information exchange, and participation increases significantly. Empowerment, therefore, is not merely a leadership outcome but a fundamental mediating mechanism translating leadership capacity into effective organizational behavior.

Furthermore, "stimulation and influence" proved highly dependent on lower-level model variables. Innovation and leadership effectiveness are built upon ethical values, collaboration, participation, empowerment, and communication. The transition from foundational to performance-oriented levels represents a systemic, upward developmental process. Dynamic organizational performance in Tehran Municipality is optimized when leaders create a shared vision, generate inspirational motivation, empower employees, and facilitate horizontal communication. Ultimately, transformation in Tehran's system requires moving beyond command-oriented, hierarchical approaches to reconstructing relationships around ethics, participation, and dynamic communication.

Discussion and Conclusion
This study offers significant theoretical and practical implications. First, it challenges conventional understandings of transformational leadership, which prioritize direct leadership-performance links. By identifying employee empowerment as a primary mediating mechanism, the study confirms that leadership effects translate into

organizational action through specific internal processes. The strong path coefficient between empowerment and effective interaction suggests that empowerment should be viewed as the main mechanism through which transformational leadership is converted into organizational action. While this result is consistent with Amani (2023) regarding the importance of motivational approaches, the present study goes further by positioning empowerment as the explicit mechanism of transfer.

Second, the foundational position of "ethical and spiritual patterns" and "collaboration and collective deliberation" highlights the critical role of ethical capital and collective wisdom in urban management. Although this finding is consistent with Babaei and Kheirkhah (2024), the present study differs because it focuses on organizational, rather than individual, productivity. In Tehran Municipality, productivity and dynamic performance are largely the results of collective, ethical, and participatory infrastructures. This critiques classical individualistic models, illustrating that successful transformational leadership in the indigenous urban management context depends on institutionalizing ethical values, mutual trust, and teamwork culture.

Third, by expanding on Wang et al. (2022) and Trichandhara et al. (2019), this study demonstrates that variable relationships are systemic and hierarchical. The dependence of "stimulation and influence" on lower-level foundations suggests that innovation in urban management cannot emerge without reinforcing underlying dimensions like ethics and empowerment. Thus, innovation originates not from the top, but from the consolidation of foundational organizational layers.

Practically, Tehran Municipality must transition from hierarchy to facilitative, empowering leadership. Actionable steps include structured delegation, enhanced interdepartmental communication, and formal mechanisms for participative decision-making, revised performance evaluations, behavioral management training, and the institutionalization of ethical values. Additionally, utilizing digital platforms for bottom-up idea generation can reduce power distance and improve administrative agility. Through an urban ecology lens, these shifts strengthen the municipality's capacity to address environmental and social challenges.

Despite these contributions, the study is limited by its geographical focus on Tehran. Generalization to smaller cities or different administrative structures should be cautious. Moreover, the cross-sectional data may not fully capture the temporal dynamics of these relationships. Future research should test this model in other organizations and employ longitudinal designs to examine the stability of these causal links over time.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that transformational leadership in Tehran Municipality achieves sustainable performance only when grounded in organizational ethics, collective collaboration, psychological empowerment, and effective interaction. Urban management effectiveness is the outcome of an integrated behavioral and institutional system wherein ethical values, collective wisdom, and human capabilities operate in a coordinated, systemic manner.

K E Y W O R D S

Behavioral Drivers; Transformational Leadership; Urban Management; Tehran.

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