

## LEADERSHIP AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE LEADER: IMPACTS ON SUBORDINATE PERFORMANCE

**Umar Idris Jaafaru**

Department of General Studies (Languages), Nigerian Army  
College of Environmental Science and Technology, Makurdi,  
Benue State.

[jaafaruumaridris@gmail.com](mailto:jaafaruumaridris@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This study examines how leaders' language influences subordinate motivation, satisfaction, and performance within organizational settings. Drawing on theories such as Transformational Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX), Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), Speech Act Theory, and Emotional Intelligence Theory, the research explores how tone, clarity, and empathy in leader communication affect team dynamics and productivity. Using a structured questionnaire distributed to 50 respondents, data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores and percentages. Findings revealed that clear, motivational, and respectful communication from leaders strongly enhances teamwork, confidence, and productivity, with mean scores ranging between 4.4 and 4.7. The results align with previous studies emphasizing the critical role of communication in leadership effectiveness. The study concludes that leaders' language encompassing tone, emotional intelligence, and motivational phrasing is a strategic tool that drives engagement and organizational success. It recommends leadership training focused on strategic communication, emotional intelligence, and feedback systems that foster trust and collaboration between leaders and subordinates.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Language, Communication style, Subordinate Performance.

### **Introduction**

One of the most powerful tools a leader possesses is language. Job satisfaction and subordinate performance are positively impacted by a leader's oral communication (Jacqueline et al., 1998). This suggests that the way leaders communicate with their subordinates, what they say, how they say it, and what they imply, has a significant impact on team dynamics and performance results. Leadership is frequently characterized by vision, strategy, and decision-making. Influence, communication, and the capacity to motivate others to achieve their maximum potential are all components of leadership, which goes beyond simply assigning tasks or overseeing groups. Language is one of the most effective instruments a leader can use.

Understanding the strengths, weaknesses and behavioural patterns of subordinates help organizational leaders adopt strategies that can influence the organizational performance through leadership style, motivation and communication methods (Odiaka et al., 2022). Leaders may greatly influence how their subordinates view their work, their worth to the company, and their drive to do well by the language they use, the tone they adopt, and the way they phrase their communications. A leader's language extends beyond official correspondence to embrace regular conversations, feedback meetings, support mechanisms, and even innocuous comments that have the power to inspire or discourage a group. The association between contextual performance and leader motivational language was positively mediated by feedback quality in the works of Yue and Bing (2020). They observed that effective leadership communication promotes trust, increases engagement, and eventually improves performance. On the other hand, ambiguous, severe, or inconsistent language can cause misunderstandings, lower morale, and decrease output.

According to Karunakaran and Temam (2022), a democratic leadership style positively influences employees' job satisfaction and performance, whereas laissez-faire leadership negatively

affects performance. Apparently, various leadership styles, including autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, transactional, and transformational, significantly influence job performance (Adeke et al., 2024; Sani et al., 2018). Furthermore, Kumburu (2021), expressed that communication acts as a mediator between leadership and performance in firms, and good leadership can have a favourable impact on performance. Strong leadership abilities have been linked to improved communication techniques, which in turn boost organizational cohesiveness and employee motivation (Nwanmuoh et al., 2024). In order to understand how leaders' verbal and nonverbal communication techniques affect the work environment and team results, this study investigates the crucial relationship between leadership language and the performance of the subordinates.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The main aim of the study is to examine how the language, communication style, and verbal expressions of leaders influence the motivation, job satisfaction, and overall performance of their subordinates within an organizational setting.

#### **Specific Objectives of the Study**

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- i. Examine the effect of leaders' communication styles on subordinate motivation and task performance.
- ii. Determine the linguistic features most associated with high subordinate performance.
- iii. Analyze how effective leadership language contributes to organizational success.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Although effective communication is widely acknowledged as a vital component of successful leadership, many organizations continue to struggle with low performance, reduced morale, and frequent misunderstandings between leaders and subordinates due to poor language use. Leaders often fail to

recognize how tone, clarity, and emotional intelligence influence employee motivation and productivity. Ambiguous, harsh, or uninspiring communication erodes trust and teamwork. Therefore, this study explores how leadership language shapes subordinate performance and promotes organizational effectiveness.

### **Significance of the Study**

A leader's language has a big impact on how well their subordinates perform. The leader's vision, values, emotional intelligence, and capacity for inspiration and motivation are all embodied in effective leadership communication, which goes beyond the simple dissemination of facts. Leaders that speak in such manner displays positive values, straightforwardness, and tend to encourage greater levels of trust, engagement, and output from their followers. Furthermore, the context, tone, and style of a leader's language can either foster a productive workplace or lead to disengagement and poor performance. In essence, the study seeks to understand how leaders' choice of words, tone, clarity, emotional intelligence, and feedback techniques affect subordinate behavior, engagement, and productivity, thereby contributing to organizational effectiveness.

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

The relationship between leadership and the performance by the subordinate has been extensively explored through various leadership theories. The study draws from theories of Transformational Leadership, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), Speech Act Theory and Emotional Intelligence Theory to establish the pathways between leadership language and subordinate outcomes.

- **Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985):** Bernard M. Bass introduced Transformational Leadership Theory in 1985, which is a leadership style that focuses on inspiring and encouraging followers to

accomplish extraordinary results while also developing their own leadership skills. Transformational leadership, as opposed to transactional leadership, which employs rewards and punishments to drive performance, emphasizes vision, inspiration, and personal development. Transformational leadership boosts motivation, morale, and performance much beyond what is expected. It promotes organizational change and creativity by persuading followers to put their own interests aside in order to achieve common goals. It is frequently contrasted with transactional leadership, which focuses on routine, organized activities and reward-punishment schemes. Bass contended that transformational leaders change both the business and its individuals, fostering a culture of commitment, inventiveness, and long-term success. Bass's Transformational Leadership Theory has idealized influence (Charisma), where the leaders serve as role models, earning respect and trust. Inspirational Motivation: Leaders articulate a compelling vision, set high standards, and encourage their people to commit to common goals. Leaders promote innovation, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Followers are encouraged to think creatively and challenge their assumptions. Leaders are concerned with their followers' personal needs and growth, serving as mentors or coaches to assist them to progress.

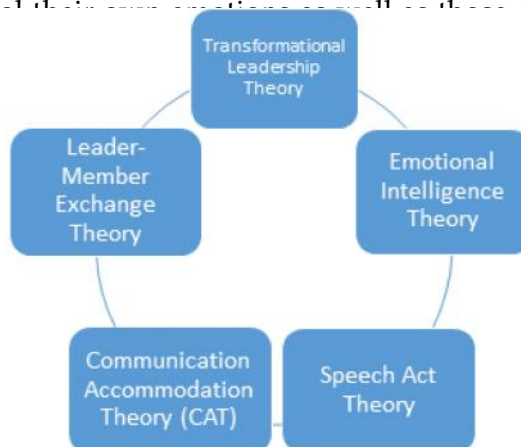
- **Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995):** Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) proposed the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, which focuses on the distinctive dyadic connections between leaders and their subordinates. It implies that leaders develop high-quality connections with some employees due to their trust, respect, and open communication, while others maintain low-quality, formal interactions (the out-group). High LMX interactions lead to enhanced motivation, work satisfaction, performance, and

organizational commitment. According to the notion, effective leadership depends on generating positive, individualized exchanges with all members, encouraging justice, inclusiveness, and mutual influence in order to improve team cohesion and overall organizational performance. Subordinate involvement and output are impacted by the leader's language, which also impacts the quality of leader-member relationships. This theory is anchored on mutual obligation, respect, and trust.

- **Communication Accommodation Theory CAT (Giles, 1973):** Howard Giles proposed Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) in 1973, which describes how people modify their communication styles to handle social interactions. People modify their speech, tone, and behavior to either converge becoming more similar to others to gain approval or build rapport or diverge, emphasizing differences to assert identity or independence. A third option, maintenance, involves keeping one's usual style. These adjustments reflect social identity, group belonging, and power dynamics. Effective accommodation fosters understanding and positive relationships, while poor adjustment can cause tension or misunderstanding. CAT illustrates how communication adapts to social and interpersonal contexts. Language accommodations can help subordinates feel more included and supported, which will improve their performance.
- **Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969):** J. L. Austin (1962) established Speech Act Theory, which was refined by John Searle (1969), to explain that language is used not just to convey information but also to conduct actions. Every utterance consists of three parts, the locutionary act (literal meaning), the illocutionary act (the speaker's intention, such as requesting or promising), and the perlocutionary act (the listener's reaction). Searle divided speech acts into five categories

such as the assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. According to their notion, people use words to conduct social acts that define connections, obligations, and communication. Performance of the subordinate can be directly impacted by the leader's employment of particular speech acts to inspire, educate, or correct them.

- **Emotional Intelligence Theory (Goleman, 1995):** Emotional Intelligence Theory, introduced by Daniel Goleman in 1995, highlights the ability to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others. Goleman outlined five core elements: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Unlike traditional intelligence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ) focuses on how emotions shape thoughts, actions, and relationships. Goleman proposed that EQ plays a vital role in achieving personal and professional success by enhancing communication, leadership, teamwork, and emotional resilience. Individuals with high EQ can navigate social complexities, inspire others, and manage stress more effectively, contributing to improved performance and well-being. Leaders that possess strong emotional intelligence are able to identify, comprehend, and control their own emotions as well as those of others.



**Figure 1:** Schematics of Frameworks

The language used by leaders is a strategic asset rather than just a practical instrument. Leaders that communicate intentionally and adaptably are better able to foster team unity, increase output, and accomplish organizational objectives. Organizations can cultivate leaders who manage their subordinates and establish a meaningful connection with them to promote success by comprehending this dynamic. Achieving corporate objectives and optimizing subordinate performance need an understanding of and proficiency in the strategic use of language. It has strong communication roots as well. The language a leader use, in particular its tone, style, clarity, ability to motivate, emotional intelligence, and cultural sensitivity. A leader's words can discourage or encourage, enlighten or perplex, encourage or demoralize.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

- i. How do leaders' communication styles affect subordinates' motivation and task performance?
- ii. What specific linguistic features for instance assertiveness, empathy, clarity are most associated with high performance?
- iii. Do different communication approaches yield different performance outcomes in different cultural or organizational contexts?
- iv. Can you describe a time when your leader's communication motivated or demotivated you?
- v. How do you interpret tone and choice of words from your leader during stressful periods?

### **Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

A simple-structured questionnaire tagged "Leadership and the Language of the Leader: Impacts on the Performance of Subordinate Questionnaire (LLL: IPSQ)" with closed-ended questions was administered online to employees in various small and medium scale organizations within reach of only 50 respondents to gather their perceptions of their leaders'

communication styles and how these affect their performance in their various places of work. This method is cost-effective, easy to administer, and allows data collection from a large group quickly. Their responses were collated as primary information source and analysed for this study. Descriptive Statistics tool was adopted to analyze the data such as frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores (Table 1). This helps summarize the data to identify patterns and trends showing the relationship between leadership communication and subordinate performance.

Table 1: Summary of Response

S/N	Statement	Mean Score	Interpretation
1	My leader communicates clearly and inspires confidence	4.6	Very High
2	The leader's language motivates me to perform better.	4.5	Very High
3	Feedback from my leader helps me improve my work.	4.4	High
4	My leader's tone and words promote teamwork and respect.	4.7	Very High
5	I feel more productive because of how my leader communicates.	4.5	Very High

(Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

From the table above, the results show that respondents strongly agree that leadership language significantly influences their performance. High mean scores ranging from 4.4 to 4.7, indicate that effective, motivational, and respectful communication by leaders enhances employee morale, teamwork, and productivity. **The experienced high response from the employees might be due to Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory propounded by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) which states that leaders develop high-quality connections between leaders and their subordinates due to their trust, respect, and open communication. The result is also in consistent with the findings of Ezeobi and Ikediugwu (2023) who found a positive and strong relationship between principal's downward communication pattern, and the manner**

administrators issue instructions in an organization. Similarly, the study agrees with **Speech Act Theory stating that** performance of the subordinate can be directly impacted by the leader's employment of particular speech acts to inspire, educate, or correct them with appropriate tone and words (**Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969**). It also indicates how important leader's communication styles are influencing the experiences of their subordinates as well as promoting efficiency of their organizations.

The outcome also supported a study result by Fatokun et al. (2019), who concluded that staff productivity can be increased by managers and subordinate employees using an effective leadership technique. The findings suggest that leaders who use clear, positive, and supportive language foster stronger engagement and higher performance among subordinates. As a reflection of the profound psychological and emotional effects of leadership communication, subordinates react not just to what is said but also to how it is being conveyed according to Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) by Giles in 1973, which describes how people modify their communication styles to handle social interactions. Overall, the study highlights the crucial role of leader communication style in achieving organizational success in line with the transformational leadership theory of Bass (1985) that inspires followers through vision, motivation, and personal growth, fostering innovation, commitment, and organizational success beyond transactional reward-based leadership.

### **Conclusion**

The study successfully identified that clear, motivational, and respectful leader communication significantly enhances employee morale, teamwork, and productivity, as shown by high mean scores showing between 4.4 - 4.7. Through the analysis of responses, the study established that clarity, empathy, tone, and feedback are key linguistic attributes that positively influence subordinates' engagement and job satisfaction. And demonstrated that leaders who employ

supportive and emotionally intelligent language foster trust, collaboration, and improved overall performance, affirming that leadership communication is a strategic asset for organizational growth. Thus, as a fundamental skill for high-impact leadership; organizations should fund leadership development initiatives that prioritize positive and effective communication of instruction in order to achieve the goals of the organization optimally.

### Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of the study:

- i. Organizations should invest in **training leaders in strategic communication** focusing on tone, clarity, emotional intelligence, and motivational language.
- ii. Leaders should be advised to adopt a language style that fosters psychological safety and trust, with emphasis on avoiding negative, authoritarian, or ambiguous communication that could demotivate subordinates.
- iii. Organizations are to include communication effectiveness as a metric in leadership performance appraisals.
- iv. A **Two-Way Communication Channel should be established in** organizations. By this, feedback mechanisms will be established that allow subordinates to express how they perceive leadership communication.

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