



TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AMONG SENIOR MANAGERS IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: NAVIGATING MULTICULTURAL WORKFORCES THROUGH VISION, TRUST, AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine how senior managers in United Arab Emirates (UAE) organizations understand and enact transformational leadership within a multicultural business environment, responding to a shortage of qualitative, senior-management-specific research on Gulf leadership.

Design/Methodology/Approach. Using a qualitative, interpretivist design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five senior managers and chief executives based in UAE organizations, purposively sampled for a minimum of five years of senior leadership experience. Data were analysed using a six-step thematic analysis procedure.

Findings. Four themes emerged. First, leadership combines fast-moving, performance-driven business practice with continuing regard for hierarchy, requiring leaders to shift styles according to team composition. Second, trust is built through consistent fairness across nationalities rather than through a single, uniform practice. Third, innovation is pursued through structured multicultural collaboration rather than informal, decentralized experimentation. Fourth, leaders sustain motivation through storytelling and visible presence that bridge cultural and generational divides within a largely expatriate workforce.

Research Limitations. This study is based on a small, purposive sample of five senior managers and is therefore not intended to support statistically generalizable claims. The data were drawn from a subset of a larger three-country comparative research project.

Practical Implications. Organizations in the UAE should build cultural intelligence into core leadership competencies and prepare leaders to shift deliberately between directive and participative styles depending on team composition. Inclusive, culturally adaptive leadership of this kind supports decent work and stronger workplace institutions for a predominantly expatriate workforce.

Originality/Value. Given the comparatively limited qualitative literature on transformational leadership in the Gulf, this study contributes fine-grained, senior-management-specific evidence of how each classical dimension of transformational leadership is locally re-expressed in a highly multicultural, moderate-power-distance environment.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Senior Management, United Arab Emirates, Multiculturalism, Cultural Intelligence, Gulf Region, Trust, Employee Empowerment

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

The Gulf region presents a distinctive set of leadership pressures, including a high proportion of expatriate employees and a business culture that is internationally oriented yet retains a strong regional undercurrent of hierarchy, hospitality, and relationship-based practices (Mellahi et al., 2016). Within this context, leadership is among the most significant enablers, or barriers, to retaining talent, sustaining performance, and supporting a genuinely multinational workforce. Among the leadership models addressing



these combined pressures, transformational leadership has drawn particular attention to its focus on vision, moral engagement, and follower development, in contrast to a transactional exchange of effort for reward (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

According to Bass (1985), the core components of transformational leadership are idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. A substantial body of research links these behaviors to increased employee engagement, creativity, and organizational performance, though much of this evidence is drawn from Western institutional settings. A growing body of scholarship indicates that the meaning and practice of transformational leadership is strongly shaped by national culture (Hofstede, 1980) and by dimensions such as power distance and collectivism, which influence how authority is exercised and how followers expect to be led (House et al., 2004).

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) offers a valuable, though comparatively under-researched, context for examining this question. It is characterized by moderate power distance, an internationalizing business environment, and a workforce that is overwhelmingly international and diverse in nationality (Mellahi et al., 2016). Existing UAE-focused leadership research has tended to concentrate on institutional or sector-specific outcomes of transformational leadership rather than on how senior managers personally enact their behavioural dimensions on a day-to-day basis. This paper addresses that gap.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the growing recognition of transformational leadership's importance in multicultural organizational contexts, there is limited empirical evidence on how senior managers in the UAE specifically enact transformational leadership behaviors when leading predominantly expatriate, culturally diverse workforces. The literature on the relationship between transformational leadership and multicultural workforce management in Gulf Cooperation Council countries remains scarce. This poses a challenge to organizations, leadership development practitioners, and policymakers on how to leverage culturally adaptive leadership practices for fostering inclusive workplaces and enhancing organizational performance in the UAE context.

1.3 Research Gap and Rationale

While transformational leadership has been extensively studied in Western contexts, its application in non-Western, multicultural settings, particularly in the Gulf region, remains underexplored. The UAE presents a unique case where leaders must navigate a workforce comprising over 80% expatriates from diverse national, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. This demographic reality demands leadership approaches that transcend traditional, culturally homogenous models. Furthermore, the existing literature has largely relied on quantitative surveys and has not adequately captured the lived experiences and nuanced interpretations of senior leaders themselves. This study responds to this gap by providing a qualitative, senior-management-specific account of how transformational leadership is understood and enacted in UAE organizations.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

Using transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985) and the cultural contingency perspective (House et al., 2004), this research defines transformational leadership as comprising four dimensions, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, which are expressed through culturally adapted behaviors in the UAE context. The theoretical framework posits that national culture and workforce diversity shape how each transformational leadership dimension is enacted, requiring leaders to adapt their behaviors to a multicultural, moderate-power-distance environment. The study explores how senior managers in UAE organizations understand and implement these leadership dimensions to effectively lead predominantly expatriate, culturally diverse workforces.

1.5 Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- **RO1:** To examine how senior managers in UAE-based organizations understand and enact the dimensions of transformational leadership within a multicultural organizational context.
- **RO2:** To identify the cultural, economic, and organizational factors that shape the adaptation of transformational leadership by senior managers in the UAE.



1.6 Research Questions

Correspondingly, the study poses the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do senior managers in UAE-based organizations understand and enact the dimensions of transformational leadership within a multicultural organizational context?
- **RQ2:** What cultural, economic, and organizational factors shape the way transformational leadership is adapted by senior managers in the UAE?

1.7 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it provides fine-grained, qualitative evidence on transformational leadership in the Gulf region, an area that has received comparatively limited scholarly attention relative to Western settings. Second, it offers practical insights for organizations and leadership development practitioners in the UAE, highlighting the importance of cultural intelligence and adaptive leadership practices. Third, it informs policy discussions on workforce development, diversity management, and institutional strengthening in alignment with Sustainable Development Goals 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Finally, by capturing the voices of senior leaders themselves, this research adds depth and authenticity to the understanding of leadership in one of the world's most culturally diverse business environments.

1.8 Structure of the Paper

This paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on transformational leadership theory, cultural contingency perspectives, and leadership in the UAE context. The methodology section then describes the qualitative, interpretivist research design, including participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures. The findings section presents the four emergent themes from the interview data. The discussion interprets these findings in light of the theoretical framework and existing literature, drawing out theoretical, practical, and policy implications. The paper concludes with a summary of key contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership was first described by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass (1985) as a leadership style that moves beyond transactional exchange by inspiring followers toward outcomes that go beyond a purely transactional relationship. Bass and Riggio (2006) define the construct through four dimensions: idealized influence (modelling ethical conduct that followers respect and admire); inspirational motivation (establishing a vision that followers find compelling); intellectual stimulation (challenging followers to think creatively and generate new ideas); and individualized consideration (attending personally to each follower's developmental needs) (Batool & Asif, 2026). Meta-analytic studies support the association between these behaviors and positive organizational outcomes; however, the strength and nature of these associations have been questioned across different cultural and institutional settings (Rosing et al., 2011).

2.2 Cultural Contingency and the GLOBE Study

Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions theory remains widely used to explain cross-national variation in leadership practice. Power distance and individualism–collectivism shape how transformational behaviors are received and interpreted. The GLOBE study further demonstrated that culturally endorsed models of effective leadership vary systematically across societal clusters, and that leaders attuned to their employees' needs are more likely to earn their commitment and loyalty (House et al., 2004; Rahman & Asif, 2026). Across these studies, the four dimensions of transformational leadership appear to remain intact as constructs while being expressed through markedly different behaviors depending on national and organizational context (Mushtaq et al., 2026).



2.3 Leadership in the UAE Context

The UAE presents a distinctive profile within this literature. Hierarchical relationships remain present, even as egalitarian principles are increasingly reinforced in the workplace, alongside a significant and growing degree of workplace multiculturalism (Mellahi et al., 2016). Given the region's conservative cultural values and the rapid expansion of an international economy, leaders must balance global business practice with local expectations around respect, hospitality, and relationship-building. Because the UAE workforce is inherently diverse, effective leadership in this setting depends heavily on cultural intelligence: the capacity to understand, respect, and work effectively with individuals from a wide range of cultural backgrounds (Ahmad & Bashir, 2022). Al-Fardan et al. (2022) similarly describe leadership across the Gulf Cooperation Council as requiring leaders to move fluidly between more directive and more participative styles depending on team composition, rather than settling on a single uniform approach. Cultural intelligence in this sense has been described as central to effective transformational leadership in multicultural environments such as the UAE, where leaders must adapt to the cultural norms and expectations of diverse teams to support both inclusivity and innovation (ElKordy, 2021).

What remains comparatively underexplored is a close, qualitative account of how senior managers in the UAE personally describe enacting each of the four transformational leadership dimensions in day-to-day practice, and how they reconcile these behaviors with a predominantly expatriate, highly multicultural workforce. This paper responds to that gap.

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3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory design grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy. This approach was chosen because transformational leadership is a complex phenomenon, deeply embedded in social context, that is best understood through the lived experience and perceptions of practicing leaders rather than through pre-specified quantitative measures. An interpretivist stance treats what senior managers say as valuable data in its own right, allowing the analysis to reveal the local meanings and legitimacy of leadership behaviours within a multicultural business context

3.2 Population and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria required a minimum of five years of experience in a senior leadership role, responsibility for cross-functional or strategic decision making, and a demonstrated track record in organizational development or innovation. Five senior managers and chief



executives meeting these criteria were interviewed from a larger sample of 15 participants spanning the UAE, Pakistan, and the United States. Participants held a range of functional backgrounds, including executive leadership, operations, and multicultural workforce management.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Participant	Age	Gender	Highest Level of Education	Years of Leadership Experience	Current Job Title	Tenure in Current Organization (Years)
Participant 1	52	Male	Bachelor of Engineering	15	Senior Project Engineer	2
Participant 2	56	Male	MBA + MSc Finance	10	CEO	6.5
Participant 3	59	Female	BS	10	Vice President	21
Participant 4	55	Male	Masters in electrical engineering	20	CTO	14
Participant 5	48	Male	Chartered Accountant	20	Chief Executive Officer	6

Note. All participants held senior leadership or chief executive roles in UAE-based organizations at the time of interview.

The sample of five senior leaders is consistent with guidance on qualitative research involving relatively homogeneous, elite participant groups. Guest et al. (2006) report that methodologically rich qualitative data are typically achieved within the first twelve interviews of a homogeneous sample, while Boddy (2016) suggests that up to twenty expert or elite interviews can yield methodologically sound data. A saturation analysis conducted for this study found no new themes in the fourth or fifth UAE interview, suggesting that the number of interviews conducted was sufficient. The intent of the design was to achieve analytic depth and contextual richness rather than statistical generalizability.

3.3 Instrument Development

The interview protocol was designed based on valid scales and interview protocols used in previous research in peer-reviewed literature (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The questions were designed for the exploration of key themes, including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Different types of questions were designed to ensure that key themes could be understood. These questions were designed in a way to enquire information about transformational leadership behaviors and cultural adaptation addressing research objectives of leadership enactment in multicultural contexts.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews lasting 60–90 minutes, conducted face-to-face, by videoconference, or by telephone depending on participant availability. The interview guide was organized around the four dimensions of transformational leadership, with open-ended questions allowing interviewees to elaborate on their own leadership experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. Recruitment involved both professional networks and direct or peer referral, and participants received a participant information sheet before taking part.



3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using a six-step thematic analysis procedure: familiarization with the transcribed data; coding of meaningful data segments; generation of candidate themes from related codes; review of candidate themes against the coded data; definition of each theme in relation to the research questions; and a final analytic pass identifying how each theme was expressed within the UAE organizational context.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

All participants provided informed written consent and were informed of the study's purpose, scope, and intended use before the interview took place. Participant identities were anonymized throughout data storage and analysis, participants were free to withdraw at any time without restriction, and no data were collected without informed consent.

4. Findings of the Study

Interviews conducted in the UAE generated four themes: adaptive leadership within a fast-moving, hybrid business culture; building trust across a multicultural workforce; empowering employees through structured multicultural collaboration; and human-centered leadership through storytelling and visible presence.

4.1 Adaptive Leadership Within a Fast-Moving, Hybrid Business Culture

Organizations were consistently described as diverse in membership, including multi-ethnic teams, and performance-oriented in line with the expectations of an international business, while retaining local values of loyalty and respect for seniority. One participant described their organization's culture as reflecting "the best of western productivity and the values of loyalty and respect to elders," while another described it as "a culture defined by shared beliefs, attitudes and values, and practices that influence the way people work and interact with others." This style of decision-making was consistent with the balanced organizational cultures that Mellahi et al. (2016) describe in the UAE, combining inclusiveness with harmony and ongoing hierarchy.

One constant challenge was maintaining the cultural diversity of employees while creating a unified leadership style. Participants described adapting their approach depending on whether they were interacting with local Emirati staff or expatriate employees, most of whom were British, drawing on flexibility, active listening, and cultural intelligence training as tools for managing this diversity. This aligns with Al-Fardan et al.'s (2022) description of leadership across the GCC, in which leaders adopt a more directive role when working with more directive colleagues and a more participative approach when leading a more participative team.

4.2 Building Trust Across a Multicultural Workforce

A second theme concerned how trust and credibility were built across employees from different nationalities. Participants emphasized the importance of fairness, cultural fit, and consistent ethical behavior, noting that trust had to be earned across cultural lines rather than assumed. As one participant described it, leadership in this context is "about relationship building with other people by involving everyone, being consistent with ethics, and being there at all times, good or bad times." Participants described investing time in one-on-one interaction with employees from different cultures and nationalities, with some linking this to broader corporate social responsibility initiatives that built trust with both internal and external stakeholders. This pattern corresponds to the collectivist prototype that Hofstede (1980) associates with relationship-based trust, though modified here for a workforce with no single dominant national culture.

Leaders reported building trust not through standardized practice but by demonstrating fairness consistently across a genuinely pluralistic mix of cultural expectations, consistent with Mellahi et al.'s (2016) broader discussion of the need for balanced, inclusive governance practices in UAE organizations.

4.3 Empowering Employees Through Structured Multicultural Collaboration

Innovation and employee development were described as structured processes of cross-cultural collaboration rather than as unmanaged, decentralized experimentation. These included regular ideation sessions, innovation labs staffed by employees of varied nationalities, in-house academies, multilingual training tools, and external certification opportunities for staff seeking to develop their skills. One participant



explained that “people have different views through different cultural background, so ideation sessions were arranged to get all those different views throughout the organization.”

This is consistent with ElKordy (2021), who argues that high cultural intelligence is essential for effective transformational leadership in multicultural societies such as the UAE, and that leaders comfortable operating across diverse cultural norms are better equipped to foster inclusiveness and innovation. Development was also individualized: participants described one-on-one meetings, competency matrices reflecting the multicultural nature of the workforce, and supervisors acting as talent coaches who supported development according to each employee’s background, role, and future potential.

4.4 Human-Centered Leadership Through Storytelling and Visible Presence

The final theme concerned sustaining motivation and unity among a predominantly expatriate workforce living away from home. Rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all approach to storytelling, participants described sharing personal experiences of navigating across cultures and generations, deliberately modeling adaptability, humility, and resilience for a genuinely diverse audience. Leaders also emphasized the importance of “high visibility presence” and of problem-solving together as a group during difficult periods, as well as being explicit about the mental-health challenges of living away from family and home country. Participants reported that organizational change was introduced carefully, through pilot projects and pre-implementation feedback discussions structured to preserve cultural harmony, with “empathy and strategic communication” described as the guiding approach. This reflects a wider pattern in which UAE leaders draw on narrative and physical presence to make formal messages resonate with a genuinely multinational audience.

5. Discussion

Taken together, these findings indicate that the four dimensions of transformational leadership described by Bass (1985) are evident in the leadership of UAE senior managers, though each dimension is implemented differently across the diverse cultural groups represented within the UAE rather than uniformly. Idealized influence is expressed through fair and consistent treatment of all nationalities rather than through reference to a single shared cultural or religious code. Inspirational motivation relies on the deliberate use of storytelling and high-visibility presence as tools for transcultural communication that bridge cultural and generational divides. Intellectual stimulation is pursued through formal, structured cross-cultural collaboration, including dedicated innovation labs and cross-cultural mentoring, rather than through informal decentralization (Rafiq-uz-Zaman & Asif, 2026). Individualized consideration is delivered through one-on-one development and competency frameworks tailored to a workforce with no single dominant cultural background.

This pattern extends the cultural contingency argument advanced by Rosing et al. (2011) and supports Mellahi et al.’s (2016) account of UAE organizations as balancing global business practice with continuing local values. It also responds to the broader claim that transformational leadership travels across cultural settings not intact, but re-expressed through locally legitimate structures of authority, relationship, and communication (House et al., 2004; Safdar et al., 2026). What the UAE data add to this picture is the specific demand of leading a workforce with no single dominant national culture: participants describe a leadership style built around constant adaptation to whichever cultural mix a given team represents, rather than a single, fixed adjustment to one national culture, as documented in prior single-culture studies of transformational leadership.

5.1 Research Implications

5.1.1 Theoretical Implications. This study contributes fine-grained, senior-management-specific qualitative evidence to a literature on transformational leadership in the Gulf that has, to date, been comparatively limited relative to Western settings (Mellahi et al., 2016; ElKordy, 2021). By detailing how each of the four transformational leadership dimensions is locally re-expressed in a highly multicultural, moderate-power-distance environment, the study extends the cultural contingency perspective with a specific, behaviorally grounded account applicable to senior management in the UAE.



5.1.2 Practical Implications. For organizations operating in the UAE, the findings suggest that leadership-development initiatives should build cultural intelligence into core leadership competencies rather than treating it as a supplementary skill and should explicitly prepare leaders to move between directive and participative styles depending on team composition. Leadership training should also develop leaders' capacity to use storytelling and visible presence deliberately, as tools for building cohesion across a genuinely multinational workforce.

5.1.3 Social and Policy Implications. At a policy level, the findings suggest that inclusive, culturally adaptive leadership practices support decent work and stronger workplace institutions for a predominantly expatriate labor force, consistent with the aims of Sustainable Development Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). National leadership-development initiatives and business-school curricula in the UAE could usefully combine cultural intelligence training with the practical, relationship-based leadership practices described by participants in this study.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

This study is based on a small, purposive sample of five senior managers and is therefore not intended to support statistically generalizable claims; rather, it offers contextual and analytic insight consistent with established qualitative research practice involving elite participants (Guest et al., 2006; Boddy, 2016). The data were drawn from a subset of a larger three-country comparative research project, and a study designed from the outset as a single-country investigation might surface additional contextual nuance. Participants were also self-selected, willing interviewees, which may favor leaders who are naturally more reflective or transformational in orientation.

Future research could extend this study with larger, sector-differentiated samples; test the adapted four-dimension model proposed here using quantitative survey methods; and track how leadership practice evolves over time as the UAE workforce and economy continue to diversify.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The question underlying this study was how senior managers perceive and enact transformational leadership within their own multicultural organizations in the UAE. Across these five accounts, the core elements of the theory—vision, integrity, empowerment, and empathy—are clearly present, but they are expressed through adaptation to a workforce with no single dominant culture rather than adaptation to one national culture. Trust is established through consistent fair treatment regardless of nationality; innovation is cultivated through structured multicultural collaboration; and motivation is sustained through storytelling and visible presence that bridge cultural and generational divides. These are not merely theoretical distinctions but practical starting points for organizations and leadership-development practitioners in the UAE. Given the relatively limited body of research on transformational leadership in the Gulf, this study offers a close, qualitative account of how the role is constructed and understood by senior leaders themselves.

Author Contributions

Author participated in ideation, development, and writing the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.



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