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Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement among Academic Staff: Evidence from Public Universities in the Amhara Region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between university leaders' skills and academic staff workplace engagement within Ethiopian public universities. An explanatory sequential mixed-method design, grounded in the pragmatism paradigm research philosophy was employed. The quantitative data were collected from 488 academic staff among four public universities in the state of Amhara, Ethiopia, selected through multi-stage stratified sampling. Respondents had completed validated surveys measuring leadership skills and workplace engagement. The quantitative data was analyzed through inferential statistics and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), and the qualitative data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The SEM results showed that a solid and positive relationship between leadership skills and how engaged people are at work, with a coefficient of β=0.51. On the qualitative side, it was found that support from leaders tends to be more reactive and sporadic, rather than being a consistent and proactive approach. This study makes a unique contribution by examining the leadership-engagement relationship in under-researched African higher education context, employing a rigorous explanatory-sequential design that integrates statistical testing with contextual qualitative insights. The study concludes that with evidence-based recommendations for institutional transformation, including structured leadership development programs focused on consistent skill application, a distributed leadership model, systematic support and recognition systems, and institutionalized continuous monitoring of engagement metrics.

Keywords

Leadership skills, workplace engagement, higher education, academic staff

Article History

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Introduction

The global higher education sector operates in an increasingly competitive and resource-constrained environment, where the intellectual capital of the academic staff serves as the primary driver of institutional success, research innovation, and academic excellence (Berkat et al., 2025). Within this framework, an effective leadership skill emerges as a critical determinant

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of employee engagement, which is essential for productivity, morale, and job satisfaction (Ghani et al., 2023; Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022).

Employee engagement is the involvement of organization members in the work they do which includes cognitive, emotional and physical engagement levels (Kahn, 1990). In this way, engaged employees will have greater job satisfaction, loyalty and good relationship at the workplace (Atiku et al., 2024; Jo & Shin, 2025). But disengagement also results in decreased productivity, turnover, and institutional and organizational performance (Boccoli et al., 2022).

Leadership is the most significant influencing factors of workplace engagement within the organization (Atiku & Van Wyk, 2024; Gemeda & Lee, 2020). With this respect, the skill approach to leadership as articulated by Northouse (2018), emphasises a leader-centred perspective focusing on the acquisition and development of specific competencies such as technical skill (specialized knowledge), human skills (interpersonal abilities), and conceptual skills (strategic thinking) (Northouse, 2021). This model or framework is relevant particularly for higher education institutions like public universities where leaders must navigate complex academic environments while fostering positive work attitudes among academic staff.

However,a concerning trend of widespread disengagement has been documented in Ethiopian higher educationn institutions. The Gallup (2023) survey revealed that, only 15% of employees were actively engaged in their work in the Middle East and Africa region. In Ethiopia specifically, Kassahun and Raman (2021) reported that, only 33% of the employees were fully engaged , 53% were partially engaged and 14% is totally disengaged. In addition to this, the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2023) report confirmed that there had been a noticeable decline in the academic staff workplace engagement, resulting in a decreasing retention rates and reduced morale of the academic staff.

In spite of the growing literature on workplace engagement, several critical gaps were remaining. First, there is limited empirical literature on the impact of leadership skills on workplace engagement particularly in African higher education contexts. Second, methodologica l approaches have predominantly employed descriptive designs, overlooking the explanatory power of sequential mixed-design. Third, theoretical applications of engagement frameworks by Kahn (1990) to explain how leadership skills enhance engagement are scarce in Ethiopian settings.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the relationship between leadership skills and workplace engagement among academic staff in Amhara public universities. The research is guided by the following questions: (1) to what extent do university leader's exhibit fundamental leadership skills? (2) Could there be any significant variation in perceptions of leadership skills based on gender? (3) What is the extent of workplace engagement among academic staff? (4) Does workplace engagement vary by gender? (5) Is there a significant relationship between leadership skills and workplace engagement? (6) To what extent do leadership skills predict workplace engagement?

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation of Workplace Engagement

Staff engagement is understood as complex interplay of psychological states, individual behaviours, and organizational practices that collectively enhance employee performance satisfaction (Bakker, 2022). Kahn (1990) defined engagement as the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles, highlighting cognitive, emotional, and physical aspects during role performance.

According to (Kahn), cognitive engagement pertains to the extent of one's rational awareness of role and purpose within the organization;emotional engagement relates to the degree of social connection with peers and superiors and physical engagement involves, the tangible expression of engagement through extra-role performance.

Alternative conceptualizations include the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), which captures engagement through vigour, deduction, and absorption (Merino-Soto et al., 2022). However, Rich et al. (2010) demonstrated that the Job Engagement Scale (JES), grounded in Kahn (1990) framework, has greater psychometric strength and is particularly effective in complex organizational environments. This study adopts Kahn (1990) framework and the JES measurement tool, as these dimensions provide a comprehensive understanding of staff engagement in academic settings (Kossyva et al., 2023).

Leadership Skills Approach

The skills approach to leadership focuses on a leader-centred perspective, emphasizing the acquisition and development of specific skills and abilities (Northouse, 2018; Sánchez et al., 2020). Northouse (2021) classifies leadership skills into three domains: technical (specialized knowledge and proficiency in specific methods or techniques), human (interpersonal abilities to work effectively with people), and conceptual (strategic thinking and ability to work with complex ideas) skills.

The leadership skills approach is fundamentally cognitive, emphasizing an individual's capacity to devise and implement solutions to complex social problems (Sacavém et al., 2025). This model is particularly applicable for higher education leadership, where leaders must navigate divers of stakeholder interests, manage different resources, and maintain academic institutions quality while promoting academic staff engagement (Hojeij, 2024; Rony et al., 2023).

Leadership Skills and Staff Engagement

Research has established a positive link between leadership capabilities and employee work engagement (Abun et al., 2020). In this case, effective leadership plays a vital role in promoting staff engagement by inspiring, strengthening, and connecting with employees, thereby fulfilling their fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Mazzetti et al., 2023; Rahmadani et al., 2020).

Findings from the empirical research shows the significant role of leadership skills specifically conceptual, technical and human leadership skills in enhancing academic staff engagement within the context of higher education institutions (Albrecht et al., 2023). Atiku et al. (2024), Gemeda and Lee (2020) and Wang et al. (2024) found that leadership behaviours such as transformational and authentictic leadership have proven particularly effective in influencing cognitive, physical, and emotional engagement in higher education settings.

The Job Demands-Resources model developed by Bakker and Demerouti (2017) states leadership as a key organizational resource that fosters employee motivation. When leaders provide adequate resources including strategic direction (conceptual leadership skills), interpersonal support (human leadership skills), and operational guidance (technicall leadership skills), employees are more likely to capitalize cognitive, emotional, and physical energy in their work roles.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study integrates skill-based leadership model developed by Northouse (2018) as the independent variables and Kahn (1990) workplace engagement model as the dependent variable. In detailed, leadership skill comprises three dimensions which is conceptual leadership skill (strategic thinking, problem solving and vision formulation), human leadership skill (interpersonal communication, empathy and conflict resolution), and technical leadership skill (procedural knowledge, tasks management and resources administration). While, workplace engagement was encompasses cognitive workplace engagement (mental focus and intellectual absorption), emotional workplace engagement (enthusiasm, pride and affective commitment), and physical workplace engagement (energy investment and sustained effort) dimensions.

Therefore, this conceptual framework of the study provides an organized approach to understanding how leadership skill affects to workplace engagement of the academic staff in public universities. This framework enhances the prominence of potential for leadership skill development interventions to enhance academic workplace engagement and improve institutional outcomes within public universities.

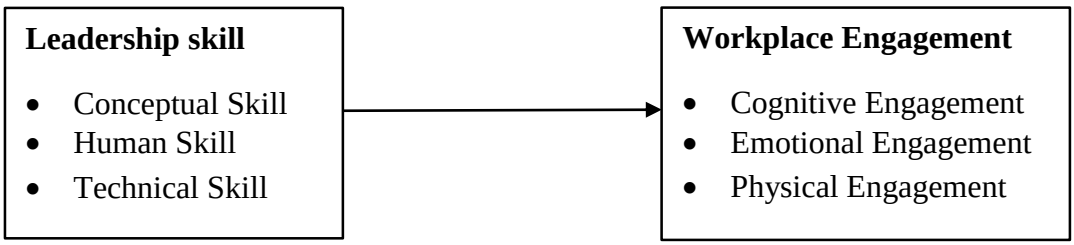


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Source: The conceptual framework was adapted from leadership skills model which was developed by (Northouse, 2018, 2021) and the workplace engagement scale adapted from

"Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement from the work of Kahn (1990).

Research Design and Methods

Research Paradigm and Approach

For this study pragmatism paradigm was selected as the research philosophy, because it focus on practical applications and consequences, emphasizing outcomes and solutions over antecedent conditions (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). This outcome-oriented nature was particularly suitable for investigating the practical application of leadership skills and workplace engagement for generating actionable insights to support public universities in enhancing academic workplace engagement.

Aligned with the paradigm of pragmatism philosophy, this research employed a mixed-methods approach. Because a single-method research approach was deemed insufficient to capture the full dimensions of leadership and workplace engagement phenomena. However, the mixed-methods research approach leverages complementary strengths of quantitative approach (providing generalizable data on relationship between variables) and qualitative approach (resulting complete insights into the underlying personal experiences and perceptions).

Research Design

This study employed an explanatory-sequential mixed-methods design, which was involving a sequential process. First the quantitative data was collected and analysed and followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data to elucidate and elaborate upon the initial quantitative findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The initial quantitative phase identified key patterns and trends in variable relationship; the subsequent qualitative phase explored the underlying reasons and contextual factors behind these statistical patterns.

Target Population and Sample

The target population of this study is comprised of academic staff from four public universities in the Amhara region, Ethiopia. These include, Bahir Dar University (first generation), Debre Markos University (second generation), Debre Tabor University (third generation), and Injibara University (fourth generation). The total academic staff population across these universities was 5,370 (MoE, 2023).

Sample Size

According to suggested formula of Cochran (1977) sample size of quantitative research is determined as $no= \frac{Z^2}{e^2} pq$ suggested by Cochran (1977). Accordingly, the sample size is calculated as $no=\frac{1.96^2}{0.05^2}(0.5)(0.5) = \frac{3.8416}{0.0025}0.25 = 384.16 \approx 384$. A preliminary sample size is

calculated with a confidence level of 95% (Z = 1.96), a maximum variability of p = 0.5 and q = 0.5, and a maximum margin of error of 5%. n_0 = 384. The sample size was n = 359, which was based on the finite population correction formula for a total of 5,370 faculty members. The design effect is 1.5 for the multi-stage sampling design. Therefore, the approximate number of samples to be collected was 539.

Sampling Techniques

In data collection, probability sampling and non-probability sampling techniques were used to ensure representativeness of the sample and to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the results. In particular, multi-stage sampling was used in which, first, the randomly selected four universities out of ten public universities in the Amhara region were selected based on their generation level. Then stratified sampling was adopted in which academic staffs of these universities were stratified in various campuses and colleges. Lastly, simple random sampling was conducted on each stratum (Rahman et al., 2022).

Furthermore, for qualitative part, purposive sampling was employed where the respondents were the ones who have good knowledge and experience in the topic of the study (Rahman et al., 2022). Therefore, 18 faculty members were selected for a deeper understanding from them through interviews. With this suite of methods, it has been possible to achieve not only the representativeness of the research but also that it has depth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Sample Size Determination

Table 1: Sample Size Determination

No	Strata	Academic Staff	Proportions	Sample size
1	Bahr Dar University	2507	46.8	252
2	D/Markos University	1586	29.5	159
3	D/Tabor University	720	13.4	72
4	Injibara University	560	10.3	56
5	Total	5,370	100	539

Source: Each University Websites Homepage (2024)

As shown in table 1, in total, there were 539 respondents for the research. The participants were selected from the universities in the research sample using proportional sampling. The participants of the study from Bahir Dar University were distributed into six campuses with 42 respondents in each campus. Fifty-three (53) respondents were attached per college in the three colleges of Debre Markos University. Likewise, the respondents of Debre Tabor University were grouped in three colleges with 24 respondents in each college. The same way, the respondents of Debre Tabor University were also classified based on three colleges (24 respondents in each

college). Lastly, the participants from Injibara University were distributed to four colleges with 14 respondents per college. Questionnaires were given out using systematic sampling.

Data Collection Instruments

The study was employed both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to collect data from academic staff and university leaders.

Questionnaires

In this research two standardized questionnaires were used. Leadership skills were measured using a questionnaire based on Leadership: Theory and Practice, an established tool for measuring leadership skills which is developed by Northouse (2018). It was selected because of its empirical validity and application outside of leadership style-specific measures such as transformational leadership measures (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Job Engagement Scale created by Rich et al. (2010) was used to measure the academic workplace engagement at work, being a product of work by Kahn (1990). This measure includes all three components of job engagement (cognitive, emotional, and physical), thus exhibiting superior psychometric characteristics and better validity than other tools, such as Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. Both tools had a Likert scale with options from “Not at all” to “Always.” To determine their validity, reliability, and suitability, both tools were subjected to a pilot study (Serenko, 2024). The researchers sought permission from the original developers to use these tools ethically.

Semi-Structured Interview

In-depth qualitative information was collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews allowed the researcher to gain deeper insight into the experiences, perceptions, and behaviors of the subjects (Dahal et al., 2024). The researcher picked up the verbal and non-verbal communication through the use of interviews which made the research data enriched. The interview was carried out individually in a suitable environment for the interviewee (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Engward et al., 2022)

Pilot Test, Validity and Reliability of the Study

Pilot Test

The pilot study was for this study was conducted as a preliminary investigation on a small scale study before the actual research to measure the reliability and validity of the instruments used in the research. According to Sallam et al. (2023), 10 percent (54) of the sample size was chosen randomly for the pilot test. The questionnaires were administered to the academic staffs of University of Gondar, and all the questionnaires were retrieved, giving a 100 percent response rate. The academic staff members that participated in the pilot test were not considered for the main study to maintain the independence of data. Moreover, triangulation methodology was

adopted through the inclusion of different sources of data, methods, and perspectives (Dawadi et al., 2021), improving the accuracy and validity of results (Valencia, 2022; Wasti et al., 2022).

Validity of the Instrument

The concept of validity concerns how accurately the instrument measures the variables that it aims to measure (Lim, 2024). This study was employed various types of validity in its measurement. Content validity was attained through expert evaluation to determine whether all aspects of leadership skills and workplace engagement had been adequately addressed (Juengst et al., 2019). The researchers also utilized item analysis and pretesting to determine whether each item reflected the constructs. Construct validity was achieved by evaluating convergent and discriminant validity. Strong associations with existing scales at tested to convergent validity, whereas minimal associations with other constructs demonstrated discriminant validity (Clark & Watson, 2019). For face validity, expert evaluation and respondents' feedback were used to make sure that the instrument is clear, consistent, relevant, and appropriate. Statistical validity was guaranteed by checking whether normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity existed before analysis. In addition, multicollinearity was checked.

Table 2: Reliability of the Instruments

Constructs	Items	Cronbach Alpha	CR	Construct Validity	Discriminate Validity
Conceptual Skill	6	0.893	0.895	0.502	0.709
Human Skill	6	0.877	0.921	0.643	0.802
Technical Skill	6	0.809	0.875	0.491	0.701
Cognitive Engagement	6	0.790	0.759	0.242	0.492
Emotional Engagement	6	0.806	0.827	0.382	0.618
Physical Engagement	6	0.781	0.823	0.321	0.566
Leadership Skill	18	0.860		0.62	0.79
Workplace Engagement	18	0.819		0.58	0.76

Source: Survey Data (2025)

As shown in table 2, Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR) were used to determine the internal reliability of the study. Leadership skills dimensions had an internal consistency that surpassed the required minimum of 0.70 (Hair & Anderson, 2010). Conceptuall leadership skill achieved $\alpha = 0.893$ and CR = 0.895; human leadership skill had $\alpha = 0.877$ and CR = 0.921; while technical leadership skill recorded $\alpha = 0.809$ and CR = 0.875. Workplace engagement dimensions also revealed that adequate iinternal consistency; such as cognitivee workplace engagementt ($\alpha = 0.790$, CR = 0.759), emotional workplace engagement ($\alpha = 0.806$, CR = 0.827), and physicall workplace engagement ($\alpha = 0.781$, CR = 0.823) (Dwyer et al., 2023).

The result for convergent validity involved the calculation of Average Variance Extracted (AVE). Human skill (AVE = 0.643) and general leadership skill (AVE = 0.62) surpassed the 0.50 criterion, showing that there is sufficient convergence. Conceptual skill (AVE = 0.502) and technical skill (AVE = 0.491) barely reached the 0.50 level. In contrast, cognitive engagement at workplace (AVE = 0.242), emotional engagement at work (AVE = 0.382), and physical engagement at work (AVE = 0.321) all failed to meet the required criterion.

The discriminant validity was analyzed using the square root of the average variance extracted compared to the inter-construct correlations. The value of all constructs was higher than the minimum requirement of 0.50: conceptual leadership skill ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ =0.709) human leadership skill ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ = 0.802) and technical leadership skill ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ = 0.701), cognitive workplace engagement ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ = 0.492), emotional workplace engagement ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ = 0.618), and physical workplace engagement ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ = 0.566) (Cheung et al., 2023). For the second-order factors, the results for leadership skill ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ = 0.79) and workplace engagement ($\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$ = 0.76).

While the measurement model proved highly reliable, it also had good discriminant validity but partial support for convergent validity. Specifically, dimensions of work engagement had rather poor convergent validity. This outcome indicates the requirement to refine the items used to measure constructs. Previous studies also showed similar limitations and stressed the role of context-specific adjustments for better measurement (Albrecht et al., 2023; Bakker & Albrecht, 2018; Ergun et al., 2025; Kulachai, 2024).

Data Analysis

The SPSS Version 25 and IBM SPSS AMOS Version 25 were used to analyse the quantitative data. Consequently, descriptive analysis of frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation were employed to answer research Question 1 and Research Question 3. On the other hand, Research Question 2 and Research Question 4 were analysed through independent sample t-tests. Pearson Correlation and Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) had addressed Research Question 5 and Research Question 6. The model fit was assessed using CFI (>0.90), RMSEA (<0.08), and other fit indices.

Qualitative data was analysed using a six-phase framework for thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo14 software. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, thick description, audit trail, and reflexivity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Amhara State University. Participants were assured of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and that data would be used solely for academic purpose. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Results and Discussion

Response Rate

Table 3 below clearly shows that a total of 539 questionnaires were distributed to the academic staff, of which 488 were properly completed and returned, yielding a high response rate of 90.5%. This exceeds commonly accepted standards and indicates strong data reliability with minimal non-response bias. The high return rate was supported by trained data collectors, effective coordination, and timely follow-up during convenient working hours.

Table 3: Response Rate

Items	Total	%
Questionnaire distributed	539	100
Collected questionnaires	488	90.5

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 4 below shows that 488 participants of the study provide context for understanding the demographic profile of academic staff in public universities in the state of Amhara. As indicated in the table below, the majority of the study participants were male (69.7%), showing gender imbalance in the study area. This result indicating that the need for gender sensitive leadership development program in public universities. Most participants of the study were married (84.4%), which may influence the academic staff workplace engagement through work- life balance factors. In terms of educational background, most respondents holds Master's (65.2%) and Ph.D. degrees (31.8%). This indicates a well-qualified workforce in the academic staff. Academically, most respondents were Lecturers (46.1%) and Assistant Professors (38.5%), with few senior ranks, highlighting limited career development. The majority of respondents had 6-10 years of work experience, representing mid-career professionals, and most served primarily as teachers (68.9%), with some holding (31.1%) leadership roles, indicating potential dual-role demands affecting workplace engagement of the academic staff in the public universities.

Demographic characteristics condition the perception and impact of leadership skills on engagement in the workplace by means of opportunity, expectations, and constraints. Gender imbalance can influence engagement as perceptions of leadership and responsiveness can vary by gender and some research has indicated that women academics face structural barriers which can affect their engagement level and leadership participation (Alharthi, 2024; Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Marital status may influence engagement due to the impact of work–life balance, with married employees engaged in varying ways according to family pressures and organizational support (Mohammed et al., 2025).

Likewise, the more highly educated people are, the higher their expectations for autonomy and meaningful work are, the more impactful the leadership is on engagement outcomes (Wang et al., 2023). These differences in academic rank and experience influence engagement, ranging

from authority differences, career progression opportunities, and motivational differences, with mid-level staff engaging more to leadership practices than any other group (Huang et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). In summary, the demographic factors act as a moderator of the relationship between leadership skills and employees' workplace engagement, influencing their needs, opportunities, and organizational experiences.

Table 4: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Gender	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Male	340	69.7
Female	148	30.3
Total	488	100.0
Marital Status	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Single	76	15.6
Married	412	84.4
Total	488	100.0
Educational level	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Degree	15	3.1
Masters	318	65.2
Ph.D.	155	31.8
Total	488	100.0
Academic Rank	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Assistant Lecturer	15	3.1
Lecturer	225	46.1
Assistant Professor	188	38.5
Associate Professor	55	11.3
Professor	5	1.0
Total	488	100.0
Teaching Experience	**Frequency**	**Percent**
1-5 Years	46	9.4
6-10 Years	221	45.3
11-16 Years	98	20.1
16-20 Years	100	20.5
Above 20 Years	23	4.7
Total	488	100.0
Academic Position	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Teacher Only	336	68.9
Department Head	69	14.1
Dean	25	5.1
Director	42	8.6
Executive Director	16	3.3
Deputy President	0	0
Total	488	100.0

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Gender Differences in Perceptions of Leadership Skills

Table 3 below clearly shows the independent sample t-test examining differences in the leadership skills by gender. The findings indicate that, male respondents reported higher mean across all the three leadership skills, where males had a mean score of 3.94 (SD=0.76) while females scored 3.68 (SD=0.82) for conceptual skills, with statistically significant differences (t=3.45, p=.001). A similar trend was also observed for the human skills, where males had an average score of 3.98 (SD = 0.71) compared to the female scores of 3.75 (SD = 0.78), which is statistically significant (t = 3.21, p=.001). Similarly, with respect to technical skills, males have a mean score of 3.78 (SD = 0.79) compared to the scores of females, which is 3.52 (SD = 0.84); again a statistically significant one.

Table 5: Independent Samples T-Test for Leadership Skills by Gender

Leadership Skill	Male (n=340) Mean (SD)	Female (n=148) Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Human Skills	3.98 (0.71)	3.75 (0.78)	3.21	.001
Technical Skills	3.78 (0.79)	3.52 (0.84)	3.32	.001
Conceptual Skills	3.94 (0.76)	3.68 (0.82)	3.45	.001

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Academic Staff Engagement at Work

Based on descriptive statistics, cognitive workplace engagement has a grand mean score of 3.8634 with a standard deviation of 0.51744 (N = 488), which indicates high consistency of the cognitive engagement. Regarding emotional workplace engagement, its grand mean score is somewhat lower (3.8429) than cognitive engagement, and its standard deviation is 0.52218 (N = 488). Thus, emotional workplace engagement has about the same degree of engagement with slight variation compared to cognitive engagement. As for physical workplace engagement, it demonstrates the lowest grand mean of all three indicators at 3.7688 with the standard deviation of 0.49856 (N= 488) indicating the lowest tangible expression of engagement through lack of extra-role performance.

Table 6: Level of Workplace Engagement Descriptive Statistics Result

Engagement Dimension	N	Grand Mean	Grand Std. Deviation
Cognitive Workplace Engagement	488	3.8634	.51744
Emotional Workplace Engagement	488	3.8429	.52218
Physical Workplace Engagement	488	3.7688	.49856

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Differences in Workplace Engagement by Gender

The results of independent sample t-test analysis concerning the differences in workplace engagement by gender are provided in table 7 below. According to the obtained findings, men

have slightly higher mean scores in terms of workplace engagement in comparison with women. For instance, in the case of cognitive engagement, men scored a mean score of 3.87 (SD = 0.53) as opposed to 3.84 (SD = 0.48) of women, which was demonstrated by the obtained t-value equal to 0.529 and p-value equal to .401, thus showing no statically significant difference. In addition, when it comes to emotional engagement, men achieved a score of 3.82 (SD = 0.70), while women had a score of 3.76 (SD = 0.73), having obtained a t-value of 1.02 and p-value of .308, which shows that there is no statistically significant difference. As for physical engagement, men scored 3.88 (SD = 0.71) as opposed to women who scored 3.81 (SD = 0.74) with t-value of 0.67 and p-value of .503.

Table 7: Independent Samples T-Test for Workplace Engagement by Gender

Engagement Dimension	Male (n=340) Mean (SD)	Female (n=148) Mean (SD)	t-value	p-value
Cognitive Engagement	3.87 (0.53)	3.84 (0.48)	0.529	.401
Emotional Engagement	3.82 (0.70)	3.76 (0.73)	1.02	.308
Physical Engagement	3.88 (0.71)	3.81 (0.74)	0.67	.503

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Relationship between Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement

The following Table 8 is an illustration of results from Pearson Correlation among leadership skills and workplace engagement dimensions.

Table 8: *Pearson Correlation Result*

		CLS	HLS	TLS	CWE	EWE	PWE
CLS	PC						
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
HLS	PC	.254**					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
TLS	PC	.205**	.293**				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000				
CWE	PC	.258**	.239**	.183**			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000			
EWE	PC	.269**	.361**	.169**	.260**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		
PWE	PC	.183**	.291**	.225**	.193**	.288**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	488	488	488	488	488	488

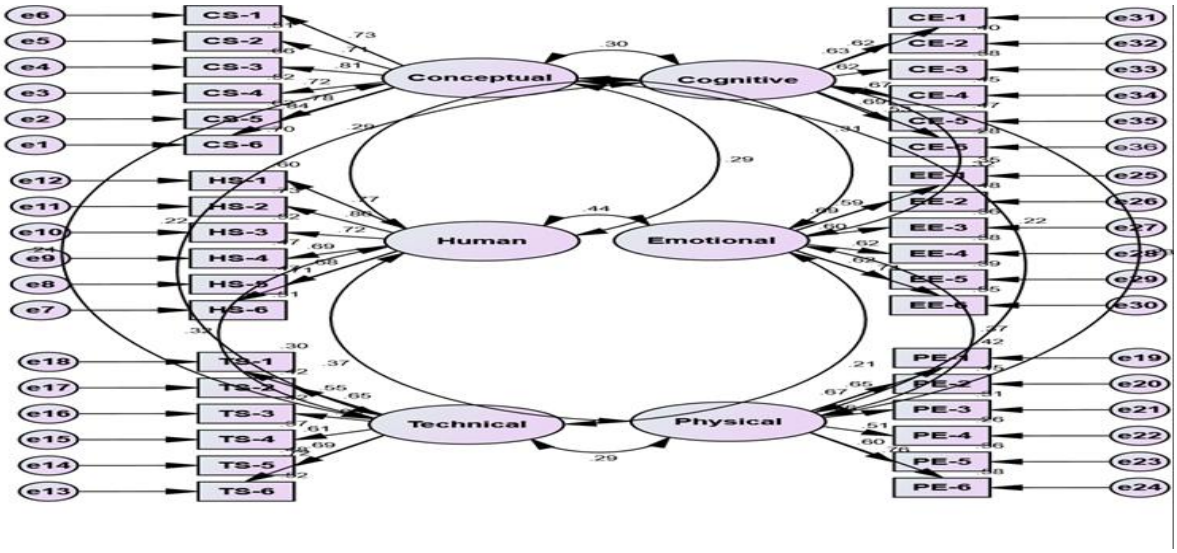
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: Survey Data (2025)

Conceptual skills indicated a positive and strong correlation with cognitive (r=0.258, p< 0.01), emotional (r= 0.269, p< 0.01) and physical workplace engagement (r = 0.183, p < 0.01). Similarly, human skills were correlated positively with cognitive (r=0.239, p < 0.01), emotional (r = 0.361, p< 0.01) and physical workplace engagement (r = 0.291, p < 0.01). Technical skills were positively correlated with cognitive (r = 0.183, p < 0.01), emotional (r = 0.169, p < 0.01) and physical workplace engagement (r = 0.225, p < 0.01). All the above relationships were found to be statistically significant at a p-value 0.001 with a sample size of 488 respondents.

Structural Equation Modelling Analysis of Leadership and Engagement Dimensions

Figure 2 below illustrates the relationships between leadership skills Conceptual (CS), Human (Hs), and Technical (TS) skills and workplace engagement dimensions of Cognitive (CWE), Emotional (EWE), and Physicall (PWE). Each construct is measured by six indicators, where each factor loadings reflecting the strength of the relationships. Conceptual Skills had shown strong factor loadings (0.72 to 0.81), indicating consistent measurement of vision, strategic thinking, and problem-solving (Fennell, 2021; Katz, 1974). Human Skills had also moderately shown strong factor loadings (0.61 to 0.78) and emphasizing interpersonal skills such as empathy and communication, which predicts the academic staff performance and employee satisfaction (Jo & Shin, 2025; Mazzetti et al., 2023). Technical skills showed slightly lower factor loadings (0.55 to 0.69) but remain important for operational problem- solving (Northouse, 2021).

Figure 2: SEM Path Diagram



Source: Survey Data (2025)

Covariance between Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement

Table 9 below shows the covariance estimates between leadership skills and workplace engagement, all significant at $p < 0.001$. Conceptual leadership skills are moderately associated with physical engagement (0.054), emotional (0.082), and cognitive (0.073) engagement, highlighting the role of strategic thinking and systems reasoning in fostering workplace engagement (Coronado-Maldonado & Benitez-Marquez, 2023). Human leadership skills shows that the strongest association, especially with emotional (0.099) engagement, followed by physical (0.079) and cognitive (0.060) workplace engagements, emphasizing the influence of empathy, communication, and mentoring on academic staff engagement. Lastly, technical leadership skill exhibits the smaller but significant covariance (0.048 to 0.064) indicating that, operational and procedural skills support workplace engagement but it is insufficient alone (Ly, 2024; Memon et al., 2022). Generally, the findings of this study suggest that balanced development of conceptual, human and technical leadership skills are essential to enhancing all dimensions of workplace engagement in the academic staff (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Kahn, 1990; Ly, 2024; Memon et al., 2022).

Table 9: *Covariance Result*

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Label
Conceptual	<-->	Physical	.054	.014	3.949	***	par_33
Conceptual	<-->	Emotional	.082	.016	5.312	***	par_34
Conceptual	<-->	Cognitive	.073	.014	5.121	***	par_35
Human	<-->	Physical	.079	.013	5.996	***	par_37
Human	<-->	Emotional	.099	.015	6.597	***	par_38
Human	<-->	Cognitive	.060	.012	4.804	***	par_39
Technical	<-->	Physical	.064	.013	4.815	***	par_40
Technical	<-->	Cognitive	.048	.013	3.748	***	par_42
Technical	<-->	Emotional	.049	.014	3.605	***	par_41

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Predictive Power of Leadership Skills on Workplace Engagement

Table 10 presents the multiple regression analysis examining the predictive effect of conceptual, human and technical leadership skills on workplace engagement of the academic staff. All the three leadership skills significantly contribute to workplace engagement, with a constant term ($B = 2.224$, $p < 0.001$) indicating that a positive baseline level. Conceptual leadership skill positively predicts workplace engagement ($B = 0.127$, $\beta = 0.227$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the role of strategic and analytical thinking in making work meaningful. Similarly, technical leadership skill also positively predicts academic workplace engagement ($B= 0.085$, $\beta = 0.230$, $p = 0.002$). Comparing to the other variables, human leadership skill shows as the strongest predictor ($B= 0.204$, $\beta = 0.325$, $p < 0.001$). This emphasizing that empathy, communication, and

relationship building as key factors of academic staff emotional, cognitive and physical engagement.

Table 10: Multiple Regression Analysis of Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.224	.131		16.922	.000
	Conceptual Leadership Skill	.127	.023	.227	5.52	.000
	Human Leadership Skill	.204	.026	.325	7.719	.000
	Technical Leadership Skill	.085	.027	.130	3.124	.002

a. Dependent Variable: Over All Workplace Engagement

Source: Survey Data (2025)

Overall, human skill exert the largest and strongest impact followed by conceptual and technical skills, underlining the need for balanced, human-centred leadership development to enhance workplace engagement of the academic staff.

With regard to the qualitative results, the thematic analysis result of 18 interviews revealed three major themes: Theme 1: Episodic and Reactive Leadership Support: Participants described leadership support as inconsistent, responding to immediate pressures rather than following a proactive philosophy.

Theme 2: Psychological safety as a critical mediator: Approximately 78% of the key qualitative data participants in this study confirmed that psychological safety is a key enabler of focused intellectual effort and innovation.

Theme 3: Barrier Removal through technical Skill: 85% of the academic staff key informant participants highlighted that leaders' technical skill is the key in removing operational barriers to enabling sustained physical engagement.

Discussion

The study was investigating the relationship between leadership skills and workplace engagement among academic staff evidence from public universities in the state of Amhara. Thus, the findings provide substantial empirical evidence that there is a significant and positive relationship between the leadership skills of university leaders and workplace engagement of the academic staff. This discussion interprets these findings in depth, integrating scholarly literature to explain why and how leadership skills relate to workplace engagement of the academic staff, and what these relationships mean for higher education institutions in Ethiopia and similar contexts.

The State of Leadership Skills in Ethiopian Public Universities

The findings of this study show that university leaders demonstrate conceptual, human and technical leadership skills only at moderate levels (over all M=3.82, SD=0.78). This is a critical

starting point to understanding the leadership-engagement relationship in the context of public universities. The moderate level indicates that leadership skills are applied only "sometimes" to "frequently" suggesting inconsistency that undermines their potential impact on academic staff workplace engagement. According to Northouse (2018), effective leadership requires not just the possession of skills but their consistent and adaptive application across varying situations. The inconsistency observed in this study suggests a gap between leadership knowledge and leadership practice in public university leaders.

Comparing these findings with international benchmark provides reference of leadership-engagement development program in higher education institutions. For instance, a study by Abun et al. (2020) on higher education institutions in Philippine found that the mean value of leadership skill ratings above 4.2 on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating more consistent application. Similarly, a research by Heinen et al. (2019) on healthcare organizations in Dutch reported that leadership skill the means exceeding 4.0. The lower scores in Ethiopian universities may reflect several contextual factors of limited formal leadership training opportunities, appointment of academic leaders based on scholarly achievement rather than leadership skills, and resource constraints that force leaders to focus on operational survival rather than strategic leadership skills development.

The study result shows that human leadership skills scored highest (M=3.91) among the three dimensions. The finding aligns with research by Gemeda and Lee (2020) who found that Ethiopian leaders in academic settings tend to emphasize interpersonal relationships. This may reflect cultural values in Ethiopian society that prioritize communal relationships and respect for hierarchy. However, the qualitative finding of the study shows that human leadership skills are applied reactively rather than proactively tempers. This reactive pattern is consistent with what Kahn (1990) described as "psychological presence" that varies based on situational demands rather than being consistently available.

The relatively lower mean score for technical leadership skills (M=3.70) is particularly concerning. Technical leadership skills including budget management, data analysis, strategic planning, and regulatory compliance are essential for creating the conditions that enable academic staff engagement. The study by Mazzetti and Schaufeli (2022) show that leaders with weak technical capabilities create operational bottlenecks that irritate employees and drain their energy. The qualitative theme of "barrier removal" directly supports this finding. When leaders lack technical skills, staff must expend extra effort to navigate bureaucratic hurdles, leaving less energy for productive academic work.

The findings of this study are interpreted through Kahn (1990) three psychological conditions of engagement in order to address the third research gap mentioned in this study: Employee engagement as explained by Kahn three psychological conditions of engagement (meaningfulness, safety, and availability) and how leadership skills impact it. This theoretical mapping offers a more detailed account of how leadership skills influences various aspects of workplace engagement, and goes beyond just only reporting on statistical relationship.

The showed results that "human skills" has the most positive relationship with "emotional engagement" (β = 0.44) can be explained using the concept of psychological safety. Kahn (1990) defines psychological safety as the capacity of workers to bring their true selves to work freely without the fear of negative repercussions to their self-image, status or career. Empathy, active listening, interpersonal sensitivity and genuine concern of faculty for employees create a supportive and trusting workplace where academic staffs feel valued and respected. Because of the relatively high path coefficient, it can be concluded that the emotional attachment, enthusiasm, and pride of academic staff are very high due to the ability of the leaders to establish psychologically safe environments. It is important to highlight that this finding is relevant to Ethiopian public universities, where organizational structures are hierarchical, which can restrict the ability to communicate openly and express oneself. The connection between human skills and emotional engagement, therefore, is evident, and psychological safety is a key link between leadership and employee engagement.

Likewise, with conceptual skills the positive effect on cognitive engagement (β = 0.30) is an indicator of psychological meaning. In Meaningfulness, Kahn (1990) used the term to describe when a person feels that what he or she does is worthwhile and worth his or her personal investment. Leaders with good conceptual skills can develop strategic visions, articulate organisational objectives clearly and develop staff awareness of the bigger picture of their roles. These actions help leaders foster a greater level of meaning and mental engagement for employees. While the effect size is not as strong as for psychological safety, this is still a theoretically significant finding. Teaching, research, and community service activities can have inherent meaning for academic staff. Hence, conceptual skills contribute to employees' work meaningfulness in another way: It adds to their cognitive investment in their jobs without providing them with meaningfulness. This finding agrees with the premise that leadership skills can positively impact academic staff engagement by affirming employee's sense of how work relates to institutional goals and society contributions.

The technical skills and physical engagement relationship (β = 0.29) is consistent with that of Kahn's psychological availability. Psychological availability is about the physical, emotional and psychological resources available to an employee to be able to be fully present in their work (Kahn, 1990). Technical skills are those that enable leaders to handle the processes of their operations, allocate resources properly, resolve administrative issues and keep organizational activities moving smoothly. By leading well in these areas, leaders lower the barriers for bureaucracy and avoid workplace frustrations that eat up employees' energy and attention. The positive coefficient signifies that an increase in leaders' technical skill is related to an increase in employees' physical exertion, perseverance, and enthusiasm in work tasks. Technically competent leadership has a positive effect on the capacity of employees to engage with academic activities where there is a lot of burden on the university to perform its duties and functions due to resource scarcity and poor administration among public universities in Ethiopia.

The three path coefficients give a complete Kahn-based interpretation of the pathways through which leadership skills affect workplace engagement. Psychological safety (β = 0.44),

psychological meaningfulness (β = 0.30), and psychological availability (β = 0.29) are the three components of engagement that are enhanced by human skills, conceptual skills, and technical skills, respectively. In learning environments that are hierarchically organized and have limited resources, the perception of emotional safety and academic trust in the relationships might be more salient to influence them than the perception of meaningfulness and availability of resources. The interpretation of these theoretical aspects gives insights which are not just available in the statistical results. In this way, the study has made an explicit link between elements of leadership and Kahn's psychological factors, extending the effect of leadership beyond simply highlighting to the reader the importance of leadership, and the processes through which leadership becomes associated with workplace engagement.

In a theoretical sense, this explicit mapping of a coefficient to a condition helps with the operationalization of the engagement model proposed by Kahn (1990). While the theory of Kahn is frequently quoted in the literature on organizational engagement, some of the elements of the theory have not yet been examined in detail in empirical studies on the relationship between the elements of the psychological state and organizational characteristics. This current study adds quantitative evidence to the importance of meaningfulness, safety, and availability as separate mechanisms that impact employee engagement.

The State of Workplace Engagement: A Systematic Crisis

The low to moderate workplace engagement scores (overall M=3.81, SD=0.69) confirm and extend the findings ofprevious studies in Ethiopian higher education. Kassahun and Raman (2021) reported that only 33% of employees were fully engaged, and the findings of this study suggested the persistence of this pattern. Accordingly, the mean score of 3.81 indicates that on average academic staff were reported being engaged only "sometimes", which is insufficient for the high level of discretionary effort required for the research productivity, teaching innovation, and community service.

Notably, physical engagement scored highest (M=3.86) while cognitive engagement scored lowest (M=3.76). This pattern is consistent with a research by Schaufeli (2021), who found that physical engagement (showing up, completing tasks) is easier to achieve than cognitive engagement (mental absorption and deep focus) because physical engagement is externally observed and subject to supervision, while cognitive engagement requires intrinsic motivation and psychological safety. Therefore, this low academic cognitive mean score of workplace engagement is a great concern for Academic Institutions where the creation and development of knowledge and critical thinking demands mental engagement. According to Bakker (2022), the cognitive dimensions of workplace engagement are the most vital dimensions for academic staff workers as they are the dimensions that directly predict the dimension of creativity and problem solving skills and directly affect learning outcomes.

The finding that engagement did not differ significantly by gender ($p > .05$) is a powerful indication that disengagement is a systemic institutional issue rather than problem affecting specific subgroups. This aligns with the Job Demand-Resource model (Bakker & Demerouti,

2017), which posits that organizational factors such as workload, resources constraints and leadership quality affect all employees regardless of individual characteristics. When systematic conditions are poor, no group is immune to disengagement. This finding contradicts some studies in Western contexts that have found gender differences in engagement. Alharthi (2024), in his study suggests that in the Ethiopian higher education context, universal pressure underfunding Ethiopian higher education context, excessive workload, and limited career progression overshadow any gender-specific effects.

Leadership Skills and Workplace Engagement: Theoretical Explanation

The study findings show that a significant positive relationship between all leadership skill dimensions and workplace engagement dimensions ($p<0.01$) provide strong evidence that leadership skills matter for academic staff workplace engagement. The correlation coefficient ranging from $r=0.169$ to $r=0.361$ indicate moderate to moderately strong relationships. A meta-analysis study done by Mazzetti and Schaufeli (2022) found an average corrected correlation of ($r=0.35$) between leadership quality and employee workplace engagement across 47 studies, placing our findings within the expected range.

Human Leadership Skills and Emotional workplace Engagement: The strongest relationship observed was between human leadership skills and emotional workplace engagement ($r=0.361$, $\beta = 0.44$ in SEM). This finding aligns with Kahn (1990) theoretical propositions that emotional workplace engagement elements such as feeling enthusiastic, proud and connected to one's work is primarily driven by social relationships and psychological safety. When leaders demonstrate empathy, active listening, and genuine concern for academic staff well-being, they fulfil their duties, roles, commitments and responsibilities. The qualitative finding indicated that psychological safety mediates the relationship between human leadership skills and emotional workplace engagement by providing explanatory depth. This result is consistent with Kahn (1990) work on philological safety, which demonstrated the team members who felt safe from interpersonal risk to being more likely to engage emotionally and contribute fully. In the Ethiopian academic context, where hierarchical relationship can sometimes inhabit open communication, leaders who actively work to create psychological safety may be particularly effective at promoting emotional workplace engagement.

Conceptual Leadership Skill and Cognitive Workplace Engagement: The significant relationship between conceptual leadership skill and cognitive workplace engagement ($r=0.258$, $\beta=0.30$) supports the view that strategic thinking and vision articulation enhances academic staff mental absorption in their work. Research done by Bass and Riggio (2006) on transformational leadership identified "intellectual stimulation " as a key dimensions that encourages followers to think creatively and engage deeply with complex problem. Thus, leaders with strong conceptual skills can articulate a compelling vision that gives meaning to routine tasks, thereby increasing cognitive engagement. A study by Wang et al. (2024) in Korean universities found similar results to this finding: leaders' strategic communication was positively associated with faculty members in cognitive engagement to research activities.

The moderate strength of this relationship (comparing human skills with emotional engagement) may reflect the nature of academic work. Academics are already highly educated professionals who derive cognitive engagement from the intrinsic nature of their disciplinary work. As noted by Albrecht et al. (2021), knowledge workers often have high baseline cognitive engagement because their tasks are inherently and intellectually demanding. Therefore, the incremental contribution of leaders' conceptual skills while significant, may be smaller than the contribution of human skills, which address the relational need that are not automatically satisfied by academic work itself.

Technical Skills and Physical Engagement: The significant relationship between technical skills and physical engagement ($r=0.225$, $\beta=0.29$) provides empirical support for what Kahn (1990) called "availability", the sense of having the physical and emotional resources engagement. When leaders demonstrate technical leadership skill efficiently such as managing budgets, managing procurements, work scheduling, and regulatory compliance they remove barriers that would otherwise drain academic staff's energy. This finding aligns with the Job Demand-Resource model of Bakker and Demerouti (2017), which identifies job resources of leadership support as key enablers of workplace engagement.

The qualitative data of "barrier removal" also illustrates this mechanism. Interview participants stated that when the leader efficiently handles procurement processes, we can get lab equipment, it saves days of frustration and allows me to channel physical effort into actual research. This echoes research by Zamiri and Esmaeili (2024) who found that technical leadership skill was a significant predictor of employee workplace engagement and effort in technical way. In the Ethiopian public universities context, where bureaucratic ineffectiveness is common, technical leadership skills may be particularly important physical engagement dimension.

The Relative Importance of Different Leadership Skills

The finding of multiple regression ($R^2=0.42$) indicates that leadership skills collectively explain 42% of the variance in workplace engagement of the academic staff. This is a substantial proportion, given that workplace engagement is influenced by multiple factors including individual differences, job characteristics, and organizational culture. For comparison, a meta-analysis by Schaufeli (2021) found that leadership accounted for approximately 30% of variance in workplace engagement across studies, making our finding of 42% notably high. This may reflect the centralized nature of decision making in Ethiopian public universities where leaders have significant effect over resource allocation, workload distribution, and recognition and career development.

Human leadership skill emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta=0.34$), followed by conceptual leadership skills ($\beta=0.28$) and technical leadership skills ($\beta=0.19$). This hierarchy is consistent with the nature of academic work in public universities. Academics are professional who value autonomy, respect, and collegiality. As noted by Atiku et al. (2024), human skill are paramount in professional service organizations because employee have needs for relatedness and esteem.

Technical skills, while necessary, are often delegated to administrative staff in universities, reducing their impact on faculty engagement.

However, finding showed that technical leadership skill still significantly predict workplace engagement (β=0.19) and should not be dismissed. In resource constrained environment like Ethiopian public universities, leader's ability to navigate bureaucratic systems, secure funding, and manage resources efficiently directly affects whether staff have materials, time, and support needed to engage in their workplace. Research by Gede and Huluka (2024) in Ethiopian universities found that lack of resources and administrative support were among the reasons for academic staff disengagement, underlining the importance of technical leadership skills.

The Synergistic Effect of Multiple Leadership Skills

The Structural Equation Modeling analysis finding shows that the overall leadership skills construct has a large total effect on workplace engagement of the academic staff (β=0.51), suggesting that the combination of conceptual, human, and technical leadership skills is more powerful than any single dimensions alone. This aligns with Northouse (2018) assertion that affects leader's need for all three skill domains and that weakness in one domain cannot be fully compensated by strengths in others.

Consider a leader who has a human leadership skill (emphatic and supportive) but weak in technical leadership skills (inefficient and disorganized), such a leader may create psychological safety but will frustrate staff through operational inefficiencies and this leading to reduced physical workplace engagement. Conversely, a leader who has technically leadership skill but lacks human leadership skills may remove technical barrier efficiently but create an emotional cold environment that reduces emotional workplace engagement. Thus, only leaders who have simultaneously demonstrate all three leadership skills set can enhance cognitive, emotional, and physical workplace engagement dimensions.

This synergistic perspective has important implications for leadership development program. Training programs that focus narrowly on skill domain (e.g., communication) neglecting others (e.g., strategic thinking) are unlikely to produce leaders who can enhance high level academic staff engagement. Similarly, Liden et al. (2025) found that leadership development program that integrated multiple competency domains were more effective than single domain programs.

The Role of Leadership Consistency

Findings from the qualitative data were the inconsistency of leadership support in public universities. Interview participants in this study described those leaders who were sometimes supportive but often unavailable or unsupportive. Study by Mazzetti and Schaufeli (2022) on trust in leadership found that consistency is a key drivers of trustworthiness. When leaders are inconsistent, employees cannot predict how they will respond, leading to stressed and reduced workplace engagement. The finding that leadership skills are applied at moderate levels (M=3.82) rather than high levels (above 4.5) likely reflects this inconsistency. Leaders may possess the skills but fail to apply them consistently across situations and over time. This

inconsistency was describe in a research by Kragt and Day (2020) who found that leadership development programs often increase skill and/or knowledge but fail to change behavioural consistency because they do not address the contextual and motivational factors that influence skills application.

Comparison with International Research

Placing these findings in international context provides important perspectives. The correlation between leadership and engagement (r values ranging from 0.17 to 0.36) is comparable to findings in developed countries. A meta-analysis by Hallo et al. (2020) found an average correlation of r=0.35 between manager quality and employee engagement across 1.8 million employees in 84 countries. Our findings are slightly lower for some dimensions (technical skills at r=0.225) but comparable for others (human skills at r=0.361).

However, the mean engagement (M=3.81 on a 5-point Likert scale) is lower than in many developed countries. Gallup (2023) survey reported average engagement score of 4.1 in the United States of America and Western Europe. The score in Ethiopian universities likely reflects the cumulative impact of multiple systematic challenge underfunding, large class sizes, limited research support, and political instability lingering effect on academic institutions. In such challenging environments, Ethiopian public universities leadership may even be more critical because staff have fewer alternatives resources to draww upon.

Conclusion

This study investigated the relationship between leadership skills and workplace engagement of academic staff in Amhara public universities. The findings provide comprehensive evidence that there is a significant positive relationship between leadership skills and workplace engagement.

The study concludes that university leaders demonstrate human, conceptual, and technical skills only at a moderate and inconsistent level, insufficient for effective academic governance. Human skills applied relatively are stronger but reactively, conceptual skills are inconsistently applied with short-term operational focus; technical skills are demonstrated, but creating a credibility gap. Having leadership skills is not enough as they must be applied habitually and interactively.

The academic staffs of the institutions display low to moderate level of engagement on the cognitive, emotional and physical dimensions. The cause of which has been the systemic one like an excess of administrative loads, lack of recognitions, lack of autonomy, limited resources, etc. The withdrawal directly endangers the performance, quality and innovation capacity of the institution.

Despite variations in leadership perceptions by gender and position, engagement does not differ significantly across these demographics, demonstrating that engagements are a universal institutional issue requiring systematic solutions.

Leadership skills have a significant positive relationship with workplace engagement, with each skill uniquely relating to different engagement dimensions: human skills strongly relate to

emotional engagement through psychological safety; conceptual skills relate to cognitive engagement through intellectual simulation; technical skills relate to physical engagement through barrier removal.

Thus, leadership skills are strong and significant predictors of workplace engagement, with human skills being the most powerful individual predictor. The synergistic applications of conceptual, human, and technical skills are essential for fostering a highly engaged academic workplace in the Ethiopian public universities.

Finally, looking at the observed gender imbalance in the sample (69.7% male) and statistically significant difference in leadership perceptions, the results call for greater attention to gender transformative leadership development in Ethiopian public universities. The Regional Leadership Academies in Amhara and Oromia which have been set up to develop leadership capability among civil servants are important institutional platforms that could be further utilized through collaboration with universities.

A critical gap exists however, because there is no national policy focusing on women academic leadership development. To address this, the Ministry of Education should set up a national "Women Academician Leadership Academy" for structured context-specific and gender-transformative training for female academics. This would be in addition to the regional effort on women empowerment in leadership and decision making.

As such, the Ethiopian public universities need to work together with the regional academies and the proposed national academy in order to ensure continuity and synergy of the leadership development process. Such initiatives would directly tackle the gender gap documented and would help to foster more inclusive and equitable leadership in higher education.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations were identified in this study that must be taken into account in the interpretation of the results. First, the study used a cross sectional research design, with data collected at one time. Therefore, the analysis provides only association, but not causal, information about the relationship between leadership skills and the academic staff engagement. While there was some evidence of relationships between leadership behaviours and levels of engagement, it is not certain whether leadership skills have a direct impact on increases in engagement, or whether increases in engagement are likely to result in positive perceptions of leadership. With this in mind, the results presented should be examined with caution in terms of cause and effect and the direction of causality.

Future studies should tackle this by using a longitudinal research design which would examine changes in leadership practices and employee engagement over the period of time. These would be valuable in setting up temporal connections and would be more definitive proof of cause and effect. Furthermore, experimental and quasi-experimental designs should be employed to assess the effectiveness of leadership development interventions more critically. In addition, future research might investigate how digital transformation of remote working systems

and technology-based communication channels affects leadership-employee engagement relationship.

One of the limitations of this study is that it is limited to academic staff only which involves faculty members of assistant lectures, lectures, assistance professors, associate professors and professors. This limits the validity of the findings because the engagement, work attributes and motivators can vary between academic and non-academic staffs in public university context. Future studies should thus involve the entire academic and administrative staff to better understand the leadership and workplace engagement in public university setting.

Finally, the study was conducted in public universities which are found in the state of Amhara Ethiopia, which limited external validity of the result. Differences in governance structures, resource availability and socioeconomic conditions may make for regional differences in practice of leadership, institutional culture and academic staff engagement levels within different universities. Future studies should involve universities from other parts of the country as well as private universities. Furthermore, contextual variables that might have an impact on or moderate the findings between leadership skills and academic staff engagement would result in more contextually specific implications for policy and practice in higher education leadership.

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