

# The Impact of Strategic Leadership on Operational Performance of Firms in the Haulage Transport Sector in Zimbabwe.

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of strategic leadership on the operational performance of firms in Zimbabwe's haulage transport sector. The sector, critical for the movement of goods and services, faces challenges such as infrastructural inadequacies and regulatory hurdles, which hinder efficiency and growth. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study reveals a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.875$ ) between strategic leadership and operational performance. Transformational leadership emerged as particularly effective in enhancing efficiency, customer satisfaction, and overall competitiveness. Findings highlight that strategic leadership practices, such as effective communication and employee development, are essential for fostering innovation and adaptability. The study emphasizes the need for investment in strategic leadership to enhance performance and ensure sustainability in this vital sector.

## INTRODUCTION

The haulage transport sector is a cornerstone of Zimbabwe's economy, facilitating trade and the movement of goods locally and internationally. However, the sector faces significant challenges, including economic instability, infrastructural deficiencies, and regulatory obstacles. Strategic leadership, which involves guiding an organization's vision and aligning resources to meet current and future needs, is essential to overcoming these issues.

This research examines how leadership styles, particularly transformational leadership, influence operational performance indicators such as efficiency and customer satisfaction. While prior studies suggest a link between effective leadership and improved outcomes, the role of strategic leadership in Zimbabwe's haulage sector remains underexplored. This study aims to bridge that gap, offering insights for industry stakeholders to enhance competitiveness and sustainability in a challenging environment.

## Statement of the Problem

A The ideal situation would reflect firms that leverage strategic leadership to align their operational capabilities with market demands, leading to improved efficiency, customer satisfaction, and profitability. However, the real situation reveals that many transport firms struggle with high operational costs, inefficient routes, and inadequate fleet maintenance, ultimately impacting their competitiveness in a dynamically changing environment (Alavi and Morteza, 2022).

The primary research problem under investigation is the apparent disconnect between leadership strategies and operational performance within firms in the haulage transport sector in Zimbabwe. Although strategic leadership is posited to enhance organizational effectiveness and responsiveness, a conspicuous lack of alignment can be observed between leadership practices and operational outcomes in this sector.

Critical questions arise: What specific aspects of leadership are missing or poorly executed? What strategies can be employed to bridge the gap between leadership and operational performance? Without rigorous exploration of these questions, firms may continue to operate sub-optimally, failing to harness their potential and

jeopardizing their sustainability in the long run.

If this study is not conducted, the consequences for the haulage transport sector in Zimbabwe could be significant. Firms may continue to operate on outdated or ineffective leadership models that do not align with contemporary challenges. This stagnant approach could result in exacerbated operational inefficiencies, leading to higher costs and lower service quality. Additionally, without the insights gained from understanding the interplay between strategic leadership and operational performance, firms may miss opportunities for innovation and growth. The broader economic implications are equally concerning. The inefficiency within the haulage transport sector could hinder the movement of goods, dampening economic development and trade prospects. According to recent research, sectors facing leadership deficits often report diminished performance metrics, which can contribute to wider economic stagnation (Mbeki, 2022).

### **Objective of the Study**

To assess the impact of strategic leadership on the operational performance of firms within the haulage transport sector in Zimbabwe

### **Research Hypothesis**

**H04:** There is no significant influence of strategic leadership on the operational performance of Haulage Transport Firms in Zimbabwe.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This study will focus exclusively on firms operating within the haulage transport sector in Zimbabwe, considering both large logistics companies and small enterprises. The research will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. However, the scope of this study will be limited to the perspectives of leaders and selected employees from a sample of firms, potentially impacting the generalizability of the findings. The limitations may also arise from time constraints and resource availability, which may restrict the sample size or the comprehensiveness of data analysis.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Transformational Leadership Theory**

Transformational Leadership Theory, proposed by Bass (1985), emphasizes that leaders can inspire and motivate followers to exceed expectations through vision, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation. This approach connects emotionally with followers, enhancing job satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

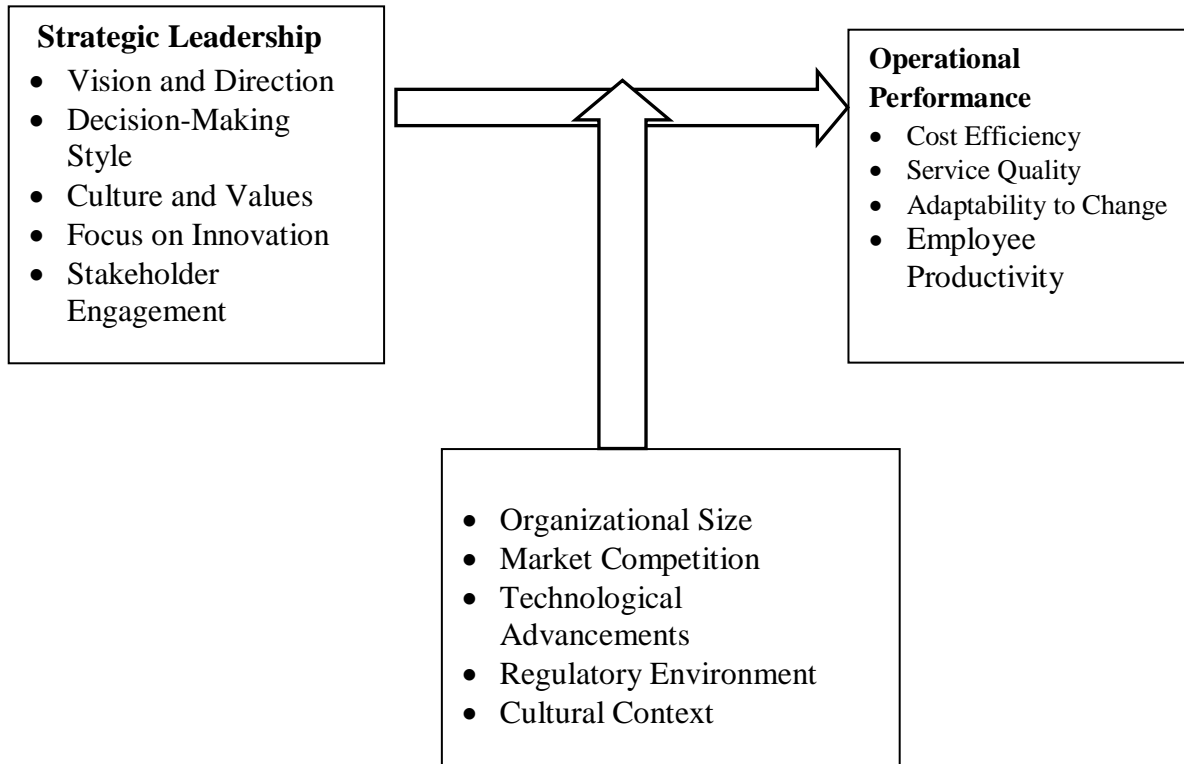
In the global haulage industry, rapid technological advancements, regulatory changes, and economic shifts demand flexible leadership. In Zimbabwe, these challenges are compounded by socio-economic instability. Transformational leaders, as noted by Kark and Shamir (2002), provide clarity and vision during uncertainty, encouraging adaptability and operational flexibility. Edmondson (1999) highlights that such leaders foster psychological safety, allowing employees to voice ideas and take risks, promoting creativity and innovation critical to the sector's demands (Berson & Linton, 2005).

Transformational leadership also aligns with Zimbabwe's cultural values of collectivism and collaboration, as per Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (1980). Leaders who inspire loyalty and collective success (Kaufman, 2008) can address economic challenges and drive operational performance by engaging employees and cultivating a culture of improvement. This style is particularly relevant in Zimbabwe's dynamic haulage sector, where creativity and adaptability are essential for sustained competitiveness.

**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework**

### Independent Variable

### Dependent Variable



## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, a descriptive correlational design was employed, which enabled the examination of relationships between strategic leadership and various aspects of operational performance within haulage firms. This choice of design is particularly beneficial as it allows researchers to collect data that can elucidate how different leadership strategies impact key operational metrics such as delivery times, cost efficiency, and customer satisfaction.

The study involved quantitative data collection through surveys distributed to employees and management in haulage firms. Quantitative analyses involved statistical techniques to gauge the strength and nature of relationships between strategic leadership variables and operational performance outcomes.

The survey research design comprised of structured questionnaires that were distributed across a range of firms in the haulage transport sector. These questionnaires were designed to gather numerical data focused on key leadership practices, performance indicators, and various organizational metrics. Utilizing validated scales related to strategic leadership and operational performance (e.g., productivity rates, service delivery efficiency, and employee satisfaction) will aid in ensuring the reliability of the data collected. The quantitative approach supports the establishment of statistical relationships between leadership practices and operational outcomes, allowing for the generalization of findings across the sector (Creswell & Creswell, 2019).

The target population for this research comprised firms operating within the haulage transport sector in Zimbabwe. This include both small and large-scale transport companies that provide freight services across the nation's extensive road network. There are 110 employees and management from haulage transport firms.

To ensure robust and representative findings regarding the impact of strategic leadership on operational performance, the study employed a stratified random sampling method. The target population for this research comprised firms registered under the National Transport Authority, representing a broad spectrum of the industry. The stratification process categorised these firms into three distinct groups: small, medium, and large-sized haulage companies.

Using the formula for sample size calculation for finite populations, the determination of an appropriate sample size is essential to ensure the statistical power of the quantitative data collected. The formula used for a finite population is:

Using Yamane's formula for finite populations with a 5% margin of error (Israel, 1992), the calculated sample size is:

$$n = N / (1 + N(e)^2) \quad n = 73 / (1 + 73(0.05)^2) \quad n \approx 86$$

The calculated sample size is approximately 86 participants, ensuring representation across employees and management from haulage transport firms.

Data for this study was collected through surveys. Surveys were distributed via online platforms to reach a larger audience. Statistical analysis techniques including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression modelling were employed. SPSS v 27.0 was used to identify patterns and relationships between strategic leadership and operational performance metrics (Field, 2018).

This study adhered strictly to the principles of ethical research as outlined by established guidelines, such as those provided by the American Psychological Association (2020). Prior to commencing the research, all participants, including managers and employees within haulage firms, were clearly informed about the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights. This transparency assisted to build trust and promote an ethical research environment.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the study, 74 respondents filled-in and returned the questionnaires making a response rate of 86%.

### The relationship between strategic leadership practices and operational performance in the firms operating in the haulage transport sector.

The study aimed to determine the relationship between strategic leadership practices and operational performance in the firms operating in the haulage transport sector. The results are presented, discussed, and analysed in this section. The descriptive results for the challenges are summarised in Table 1. Descriptive

	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Firms with strong strategic leadership experience higher levels of operational performance.	3.91	1.207
2. There is a direct correlation between effective communication from leaders and team performance.	4.04	1.078
3. Innovation-led strategic leadership positively affects customer satisfaction in the haulage industry.	4.00	1.059
4. Strategic leaders who prioritize employee development enhance overall operational performance.	3.85	1.126
5. Risk-taking by strategic leaders contributes to improved service reliability in haulage firms.	3.39	1.108
6. The relationship between strategic leadership and cost efficiency is significant in the haulage transport sector.	3.92	.979
7. Collaboration fostered by strategic leadership influences operational outcomes in haulage firms.	3.78	1.079
8. Strategic decision-making processes directly impact the performance metrics used in haulage operations.	4.13	.576

Table 1 portrays the results of the survey, which are of great importance, as they relate to almost eight statements regarding the issue of strategic leadership and operational multiple performance. All the statements are rated on a 5-point scale in which a greater score bears higher endorsement of the statement in question. The average score in terms of the mean values explains the general or average position of the respondents regarding the issues at stake, whereas the standard deviation (Std. Dev.) explains the degree of spread or the distribution of the responses, thus enabling an understanding of the level of consensus or divergence among the respondents.

**Strategic Leadership and Operational Performance of Firms:** One of the respondents stated that high operational performance owners are strategically leading these firms and rated the above statement with a mean of 3.91 and a standard deviation of 1.207. That is to say, there is quite a strong tendency of respondents that strategic leadership enhances the operational performance of the organisations.

**Communication:** More than 50 percent of the employees satisfied the level of satisfaction that permeated through the top managers of the corporation, since it was in the form of communication; on average, when these teams were given a score on how well they were managed, the score was the highest at 4.04. The better news is the standard deviation is low at 1.078. This conforms with Boal and Hooijberg (2020)—that communication indeed is becoming an essential tool in any organisation with the aim of enhancing the performance of tactical teams that are working in the organisation.

**Leadership Based on Innovation:** This is further supported by the views of the 4.00 mean score of the respondents who also viewed that the firm's target strategy is more customer-orientated if it incorporates a carefully crafted innovation vision into it. This directs to the logistics aspects that need to be enhanced creatively as well as Tjahjono et al. (2021), where the improvements are mainly related to the innovativeness of the firms.

**Career Development:** As provided by the mean score of 3.85 with regard to the level of importance that employees attached to leaders in making employee development of high importance, it underlines the importance that human capital has on operational performance. This concurs with the work of Hargis et al. (2020), where they claim that such organisations improve the organisational performance through proactive ways of developing talent.

**Risk Taking:** When it comes to the point on how risk taking is the third indicator, a mean score of 3.39 should be interpreted as a slight agreement. It would seem, however, that opinions on the effect of risk-taking are diverse among the participants, as the measure of dispersion, a standard deviation of 1.108, has been computed. This finding resonates with the caution that has already been addressed in the research on risk assuming prescriptions of growth to be promoted (Mitchell et al., 2021).

**Cost Efficiency:** The mean score with a standard deviation is 3.92 concerning the importance of cost efficiency to the strategic leaders. The above illustrates strong agreement and a belief that leadership informs financial performance. This agrees with Sweeney and Soutar (2021), who indicated that the strategic framework of leaders affects the cost control strategies and the allocation of resources.

**Collaboration and operational outcomes:** Strategic leadership contribution to collaboration. A mean score of 3.78 was obtained, but the statement was worded in a way that there was a moderate level of agreement with the standard error of 0.164.

As can be seen in the above findings, collaborative leadership practices are appreciated because of their influence on operational performance (Dev. 1.079). What dominated the graph was the aspect that had also the lowest standard deviation, which was high (4.13), and this was the decision-making and performance relation, whereby most respondents voted in its favour in the relation to the performance matrix. This is also affirmed in the findings of Elenkov (2020) who emphasises that among the tasks of strategic leaders is to make key decisions that enable the performance to be defined, controlled, and achieved.

A pearson correlation test was conducted to determine the correlation between strategic leadership and operational performance. The hypothesis was tested using a Pearson correlation test. The results are presented in Table 2 below.



**Table 2 Correlation between Strategic leadership and Operational performance**

		Strategic leadership	Operational performance
Strategic leadership	Pearson Correlation	1	0.875
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	74	74
Operational performance	Pearson Correlation	0.875	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	74	74
. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).			

Table 2 presents a robust positive correlation coefficient of 0.875 for strategic leadership within the context of operational performance in the haulage transport sector. This correlation is statistically significant at the 5% level ( $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ ), suggesting that strategic leadership plays a crucial role in enhancing operational performance in this industry. These findings indicate that there is a substantial positive relationship between the practices of strategic leadership and the operational efficacy of haulage transport companies. Consequently, the hypothesis asserting that strategic leadership significantly influences operational performance within the haulage transport sector is supported by these results. This evidence aligns with the insights from numerous studies that emphasize the importance of strategic leadership in driving operational success. For example, Brown et al. (2022) highlighted that strategic leadership characterized by collaborative decision-making and effective communication significantly enhances operational performance by fostering a culture of teamwork and innovation. Such findings underscore the vital role that strategic leadership plays in shaping the performance outcomes for organizations in the haulage transport sector, facilitating their ability to navigate challenges and seize opportunities in a competitive landscape.

### Effects of strategic leadership and Operational performance

A significant overall regression indicates that a linear combination of strategic leadership predicts operational performance. Table 3 below illustrate the model summary, the ANOVA table and Coefficients.

#### Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.862	0.743	0.718	0.214

As observed in Table 3, the model summary demonstrates a strong correlation ( $R = 0.862$ ) with a substantial proportion of variance ( $R^2 = 0.743$ ) in operational performance explained by strategic leadership practices. The adjusted  $R^2$  value of 0.718 indicates that the model holds firm even when accounting for the number of predictor variables, suggesting that strategic leadership makes a considerable contribution to operational efficiency within this sector.

#### Statistical Significance

The performance of the regression model can further be validated through an ANOVA table. This table would report the F-ratio, which tests whether the overall regression model is statistically significant.

#### ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	4186.474	4	1045.137	28.674	.000
Residual	3066.562	70	32.294		
Total		74			

The high F-ratio (28.674) signifies that at least one of the independent variables is significantly related to the dependent variable. The highly significant p-value ( $< 0.0005$ ) further reinforces that the overall regression model holds statistical significance, confirming that the independent variables systematically predict the dependent variable.

### Regression analysis results

	Unstandardized Coefficients			
Intercept	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	Standard Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Strategic leadership	1.35	0.20	6.75	0.0001

The significant regression analysis conducted provides insightful findings regarding the effect of strategic leadership on operational performance. As illustrated in Table 3, the model summary indicates that strategic leadership acts as a strong predictor of operational performance within this sector. The unstandardized coefficients reveal that a unit increase in strategic leadership corresponds to a 1.35 increase in operational performance metrics, underscoring the substantial impact that effective leadership can have on organizational outcomes. The t-statistic of 6.75 and p-value of 0.0001 further reflect the strong statistical significance of this relationship, indicating that as leaders implement strategic initiatives—such as optimizing supply chains, enhancing fleet management technologies, and improving workforce training—operational performance is likely to see considerable improvement. This dynamic suggests that organizations in the haulage transport sector should prioritize strategic leadership development to foster an environment that not only promotes efficiency but also enhances overall operational outcomes.

## DISCUSSION, SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section entails the discussion of the findings in relation to the research objectives that guided the research. The discussion is followed by conclusions, recommendations and areas for further research.

The findings of this study underscore the significant impact that strategic leadership has on the operational performance of firms within Zimbabwe's haulage transport sector. The robust positive correlation (0.875) between strategic leadership and operational performance suggests that effective leadership practices are instrumental in enhancing various performance metrics, such as efficiency, customer satisfaction, and cost management. These results reinforce the discourse on the critical role of strategic leadership in navigating complex and changing environments, which is particularly relevant in Zimbabwe's challenging economic landscape.

Moreover, the qualitative insights gathered through respondent feedback emphasized the necessity of strong strategic leaders in fostering a culture of communication, innovation, and employee development. Leaders who engage in effective communication, prioritize the development of their employees, and leverage innovation can create an environment that promotes high performance and responsiveness to market demands. Politically and economically, Zimbabwe's haulage sector faces continual threats from regulatory burdens, infrastructural inadequacies, and fluctuating market conditions. Consequently, the capacity of leaders to adapt their strategies and foster operational excellence could mean the difference between success and stagnation.

The transformative influence of leadership styles, particularly the traits associated with transformational leadership, emerged as particularly beneficial for stakeholder engagement. Transformational leaders, by inspiring and motivating their teams, have the ability to cultivate an environment characterized by higher engagement levels and a greater collective commitment to organizational success. This fact is critical not just for immediate operational performance but also for long-term sustainability and resilience.

### Summary

This study examined the relationship between strategic leadership practices and the operational performance of firms in Zimbabwe's haulage transport sector. Key findings highlighted the strong correlation between effective

leadership and improved operational performance metrics, substantiated by quantitative data and qualitative feedback from industry stakeholders. Results revealed that elements of strategic leadership, such as effective communication, innovation, employee development, and collaboration, significantly contribute to operational success. The transformational leadership style was particularly emphasized as a crucial mechanism through which leaders can enhance engagement and adaptability within their organizations.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that a strategic leadership framework significantly influences the operational performance of firms in the haulage transport sector of Zimbabwe. Given the sector's unique challenges, including economic instability and regulatory pressures, the ability of leaders to implement innovative, communicative, and adaptable practices is critical for achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. The findings suggest that organizations with strong strategic leadership capabilities are more likely to experience higher levels of operational efficiency, customer satisfaction, and overall performance.

Furthermore, the research affirms the theory that transformational leadership styles can effectively respond to sector dynamics, enabling firms to navigate challenges while capitalizing on new opportunities. The evidence obtained from this study underscores the necessity for firms to prioritize strategic leadership development as a pathway to enhancing operational performance.

## Recommendations

1. **Leadership Development:** Invest in training programs on transformational leadership, focusing on communication, innovation, and risk management to improve performance.
2. **Employee Engagement:** Foster a culture of open feedback and idea-sharing to boost productivity and satisfaction.
3. **Encourage Innovation:** Promote adoption of new technologies and processes to enhance service delivery and adaptability.
4. **Strengthen Communication:** Ensure clear communication of organizational goals to align team efforts effectively.
5. **Monitor External Changes:** Regularly assess regulatory and market changes to adapt leadership practices and maintain profitability.

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