Laissez-faire leadership: a comprehensive systematic review for effective education practices

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

This analysis addresses the knowledge gap on laissez-faire leadership in organizations. After reviewing 64 articles through the systematic literature review, the study finds that laissez-faire leadership, marked by minimal decision-making involvement, is generally associated with negative outcomes like reduced employee satisfaction and productivity. However, its impact can vary based on context, potentially fostering creativity in highly skilled and motivated teams. The study emphasizes the need for judicious application of this leadership style and suggests that school managers should discern when to use it, considering its suitability for different types of educators. Overall, the research contributes valuable insights for leaders aiming to optimize leadership strategies in diverse contexts.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Laissez-faire leadership, characterized by minimal guidance and autonomy provision to team members, can engender adverse outcomes within organizational settings [1], [2]. Despite potential advantages in select scenarios, this leadership approach is commonly linked to negative organizational consequences [3]. Critics vehemently oppose the adoption of laissez-faire leadership, citing various detrimental effects. One prominent concern is the lack of direction, wherein leaders fail to articulate clear objectives, fostering confusion and hindering productivity [4], [5]. Additionally, diminished motivation may result from employees feeling undervalued, leading to reduced job satisfaction and morale [6], [7]. Suboptimal decision-making may occur due to inconsistent choices stemming from insufficient guidance and expertise among team members [8].

Furthermore, a deficit in accountability may lead to quality control issues, missed deadlines, and substandard performance [9], [10]. Communication breakdowns exacerbate these challenges, fostering misunderstandings and impeding teamwork. Conflicts may escalate among team members with divergent objectives, exacerbated by the leader's non-interventionist stance [11]. Opportunities for professional development may be overlooked, impeding skill acquisition and career progression [12]. Negligence and complacency associated with laissez-faire leadership pose risks such as errors, safety concerns, and substandard work [13].

Contrary to unequivocal condemnation, the effectiveness of laissez-faire leadership remains subject to ongoing academic scrutiny [14]. This study aims to critically evaluate existing empirical evidence to elucidate the nuanced impact of laissez-faire leadership within organizational contexts. By systematically analyzing scholarly research, this comprehensive investigation seeks to address knowledge gaps and deepen understanding of the implications associated with this leadership style.

This study contributes to the discourse by examining the effects of laissez-faire leadership on organizational outcomes. While prior research has predominantly emphasized its negative impact, some studies have highlighted potential benefits. This investigation endeavors to elucidate the "pros and cons" of laissez-faire leadership as an exogenous variable affecting indigenous variables, thus enriching understanding of it is multifaceted impact.

2. METHOD

The compilation of a comprehensive dataset was undertaken through a meticulous systematic review of scholarly articles disseminated in peer-reviewed academic journals. This scholarly endeavor was initiated with a thorough query of Google Scholar, focusing specifically on publications available in the public domain, with the restriction of search results to the top 10 pages. To enhance the scope and depth of our search, prominent academic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, JSTOR, WSEAS, and the academy of management journal, were integrated into our research methodology. The search strategy was rooted in the deliberate and targeted utilization of the search term "the effect of laissez-faire leadership". It is essential to emphasize that this scholarly pursuit yielded a corpus of academic papers spanning the temporal spectrum from 1993 to 2023. The criteria for inclusion of articles in this study were as follows: i) publication in the form of journal articles, ii) articles written in English, iii) a primary focus on the effect of laissez-faire leadership, iv) incorporation of empirical research methods, and v) the utilization of both quantitative and qualitative research designs.

Following an exhaustive search of available literature, researchers successfully gathered a total of 64 articles utilizing the designated keywords, "the effect of laissez-faire leadership". These articles subsequently underwent rigorous screening to ensure alignment with the predetermined criteria, ultimately resulting in the inclusion of all 64 articles. Among these, a subset of 53 articles emerged as highly specific and systematically expounded upon the concept of "toponyms". To provide a visual representation of the sequential stages involved in the literature screening process, Figure 1 has been included for reference. This comprehensive and methodical approach serves to maintain the academic rigor and integrity of the research endeavor.
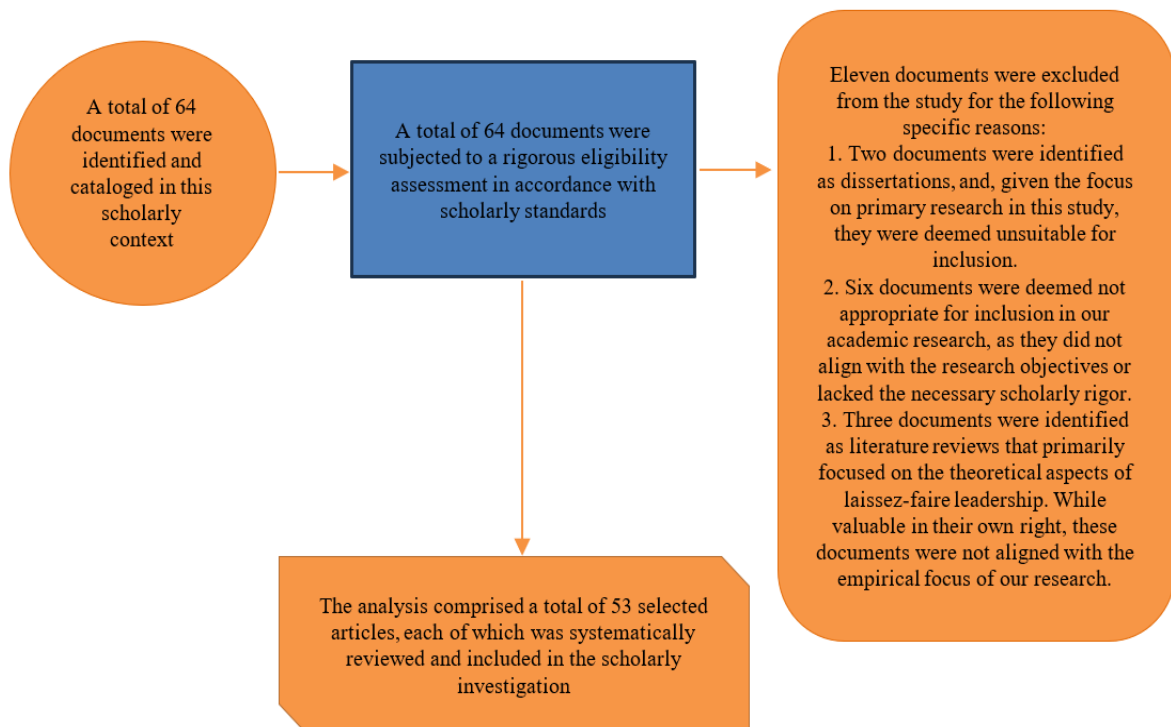

Figure 1. Diagram of the review procedure

The selection of this timeframe was judiciously made to encompass contemporary dynamics in the organizational landscape, thereby ensuring the relevance and timeliness of the collected literature for our research endeavor. It is noteworthy that among the retrieved papers, 52 adopted a quantitative research design, while one paper adhered to a qualitative approach, as delineated in Table 1. Table 1 presents a comprehensive overview of the outcomes derived from a thorough investigation carried out through unrestricted access to scholarly research papers spanning from the year 1993 to 2023. The table meticulously delineates the annual distribution of research papers, encapsulating the number of papers unearthed for each respective year within this temporal spectrum. Notably, the data reveals a nuanced trend, with variations in the number of papers discovered over time, exemplified by the discovery of a mere two papers in 2006, juxtaposed with a more prolific finding of six papers in 2018. The cumulative representation, showcased through the "Total" row after the table, consolidates the collective impact of this research endeavor, disclosing a total of 53 papers that were successfully retrieved during this extensive search. This tabulated record provides a valuable resource for the academic community, offering insights into the evolution of research output across the specified time frame and underscores the invaluable contribution of open access to the dissemination of knowledge.

Table 1. The result of search by free access

No	Year	∑ Paper/s
1	1993	1
2	2000	1
3	2006	2
4	2007	1
5	2008	2
6	2009	1
7	2010	1
8	2012	8
9	2013	1
10	2014	3
11	2015	2
12	2016	2
13	2017	4
14	2018	6
15	2019	5
16	2020	6
17	2021	5
18	2022	1
19	2023	1
	Total	53

Source: Data search on Google Scholar top ten pages

3.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
3.1. Results
The research coverage on laissez-faire, as outlined in Table 2 (see in appendix), encompasses the examined countries, research domains, and the variables impacted. Based on Table 2, within the domain of leadership studies, an extensive corpus of research has delved into the concept of laissez-faire leadership, typified by minimal intervention and decision-making by the leader. A comprehensive review of the literature uncovers a heterogeneous spectrum of findings. Of the 30 scrutinized papers, a significant majority, precisely 75%, accentuates the adverse ramifications of laissez-faire leadership. These findings indicate that, in numerous instances, this laissez-faire modus operandi can precipitate diminished organizational efficacy, reduced employee contentment, and diminished productivity. Moreover, 10 papers posit that the effects of laissez-faire leadership may be contingent upon specific circumstances or contexts, intimating that this leadership style may not universally prove detrimental but rather contingent upon the circumstances of its application. Conversely, 13 papers purport a favorable impact of laissez-faire leadership on predicted variables, spotlighting scenarios where this hands-off leadership methodology can yield positive outcomes. Thus, the data portrays a nuanced vista of laissez-faire leadership, suggesting that its efficacy is contingent upon various factors, including organizational milieu and the specific outcome variables under scrutiny. This plethora of research findings underscores the necessity of accounting for the multifaceted nature of leadership and its ramifications within both academic discourse and pragmatic leadership implementations.

For a detailed exposition of findings, authors present a comprehensive analysis from papers 1 to 53, as follows. The first study type elucidates that the laissez-faire leadership style, characterized by minimal guidance and a hands-off approach, has been scrutinized across diverse contexts, unveiling adverse impacts

on completion times, outcomes, and organizational quality [15], [16]. It is posited that effective leadership in high-technology research and development necessitates deliberate delegation of authority and team empowerment to achieve shared objectives [17]. Additionally, personality traits wield a substantial influence on perceptions of laissez-faire leadership, with neuroticism displaying a positive correlation and agreeableness exhibiting a negative correlation [18], [19]. Furthermore, studies have correlated laissez-faire leadership with diminished satisfaction, perceived leader efficacy, role clarity, and subordinate performance [3]. This leadership paradigm has been discerned to have detrimental effects on workplace dynamics, employee engagement, and role clarity within the workplace, exhibiting negative correlations with workplace flourishing and self-efficacy among high school educators [20], [21].

The synthesis of the second study type suggests that the impact of laissez-faire leadership fluctuates across different contexts and investigations [22]. While its influence on academic performance remains unpredictable, military performance showcases a negative association with it, albeit explaining only a marginal portion of its variance [23]. Transformational leadership emerges as predominant in higher education and agriculture, indicating potential enhancements in efficacy and the significance of varied leadership approaches [24], [25]. In Kenyan state-owned enterprises, laissez-faire leadership fails to exert a significant impact on organizational efficacy, yet its practice is discouraged due to its dearth of active guidance [26]. Additionally, it contributes to role ambiguity stress and can engender negative workplace behaviors if not balanced with structure and support [27], [28]. Overall, laissez-faire leadership evinces minimal impact on organizational outcomes, warranting further exploration to comprehend its relationship with delegation, leader competence, and employee performance.

Furthermore, we found that the third study type unveils that research on laissez-faire leadership delineates both positive and negative associations with workplace dynamics [29]. While it has been associated with predicaments such as role conflicts and task ambiguity, it can also augment employee performance, particularly in certain contexts such as the medical and service sectors [27]. However, its impact on job satisfaction, motivation, and anxiety levels among subordinates fluctuates across investigations. Robust self-leadership skills are observed to exhibit a negative correlation with laissez-faire leadership, suggesting that alternative leadership styles may prove more efficacious in fostering employee motivation [30], [31]. Additionally, contextual factors and follower perceptions play a pivotal role in delineating the overall impact of laissez-faire leadership [32], [33].

3.2. Discussions

The academic discourse on laissez-faire leadership highlights its adverse effects on organizational outcomes. This leadership style, characterized by minimal involvement in decision-making, has been widely criticized for its negative impact [34]. Studies consistently link laissez-faire leadership to lower employee satisfaction, reduced productivity, increased turnover rates, and suboptimal organizational performance [35]–[37]. Employees under laissez-faire leadership often feel unsupported, leading to decreased motivation and engagement. Additionally, the lack of clear direction can cause confusion and inefficiency within teams [38].

However, research suggests that the impact of laissez-faire leadership depends on specific conditions. In situations where employees lack skills and motivation, laissez-faire leadership can lead to disengagement and decreased performance [39]. Conversely, in teams with highly skilled and motivated members, it can foster creativity and innovation [40]. Hence, contextual factors, such as subordinate competence and motivation, play a crucial role in determining the suitability of laissez-faire leadership [22].

Despite predominantly negative views, some studies indicate potential benefits of laissez-faire leadership. It has been associated with increased employee autonomy, job satisfaction, team performance, creativity, and innovation [40], [41]. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of laissez-faire leadership varies based on situational and individual factors, and it may not be suitable for all organizational cultures [22].

In comparing findings, this study aligns with existing literature, acknowledging the negative consequences of laissez-faire leadership [34]. However, it also emphasizes the importance of contextual factors, consistent with previous research [38], [40]. Furthermore, it contributes by highlighting potential positive outcomes associated with laissez-faire leadership, fostering a more balanced understanding [40], [42]. Overall, this study underscores the need to consider contextual factors in evaluating the effects of laissez-faire leadership [43]. While acknowledging its drawbacks, it also recognizes its potential benefits in specific situations, urging future research to explore its nuanced effects across diverse organizational contexts and individual characteristics.

4.   CONCLUSION

Laissez-faire leadership, marked by limited involvement in decision-making, is frequently linked to negative organizational outcomes such as diminished employee satisfaction, decreased productivity, and increased turnover rates. This study reveals that the influence of laissez-faire leadership varies based on the

situation, potentially fostering creativity and innovation in settings where employees exhibit high skills and motivation. However, its effectiveness depends on specific conditions, emphasizing the need for careful application in leadership contexts. In the field of education, it is crucial for school managers to discern when to employ this approach. While it may be suitable for outstanding teachers, it may not be advisable for mediocre or exemplary educators. This highlights the significance of strategic implementation to harness the potential benefits of laissez-faire leadership in the education sector.

APPENDIX

Table 2. Coverage study/ies

Paper	Country/field study	Predicted variable/s	The effect types	
1	US/Military	Academic performance and military performance		II
2	Sweden/Doctoral student	Doctoral students' performance	I	
3	High-tech research and development	Organization quality, innovation, and effectivity	I	
4	Medical (nurse)	Personality aspects of neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness	I	
5	Norway/OCB	Role conflict, ambiguity in tasks, and conflict with coworkers		III
6	Higher education	Leadership type preferences		II
7	Hotels' workers	Follower satisfaction with leaders, leader effectiveness assessed by subordinates, role clarity as perceived by subordinates, subordinate performance assessed by supervisors	I	
8	Chancellor's leadership	Leadership type preferences		III
9	Higher education students	Followers' behavior	I	
10	Bangkok/	employee job satisfaction		III
11	Pakistan/Bank manager	Innovative behavior of bank managers	I	
12	Pakistan/Employee motivation	employee motivation level		III
13	Austria/Bank	employee motivation		III
14	USA/Ritel managers'	Handling conflict	I	
15	Kenya/State-owned enterprises	Organizational performance		II
16	Theory review	Bad impacts that managers are not aware of	I	
17	Turkey/Supervisory Commitment	Company performance	I	
18	Pakistan/Job satisfaction	Organizational commitment	I	
19	Ghana/Firm performance	Job satisfaction	I	
20	Pakistan/Banking employees motivation	Organization goals	I	
21	Norway/Subordinate stress	Stress and role ambiguity		II
22	Norway/Manufacturing company	Assessment of leader effectiveness	I	
23	Theory REVIEW	Laissez-faire can have positive uses in certain situations		III
24	Turkey/A public organization, conducting scientific and technological research on mineral exploration and geology	Employee perceptions of superiors	I	
25	Germany/Health employees of a services company	Leader emotional exhaustion	I	
26	Vietnam public sector/Bullying	Psychological health		II
27	Colombo Sri Lanka/Insurance sector	Employee commitment		II
28	Vietnam/Higher education	Improving the quality of education	I	
29	Malaysia/Private sector	Employee performance		III
30	Norway/Workplace	Bullying	I	
31	Saudi Arabia/Companies' employees	Role ambiguity and role conflict		III
32	Greek/Public procurement	Job satisfaction and perceived leader effectiveness	I	
33	Norway/Co-worker conflicts	Co-worker conflicts and new cases of workplace bullying	I	
34	Pakistan/Doctor's commitment	Commitment to service quality		III
35	Dutch/Large international brewer	Leaders' trust and effectiveness	I	
36	Bangladesh/Employees of various popular Mymensingh district restaurants	Organizations outcomes		II
37	Indonesia/Head of kindergarten	Teacher discipline	I	
38	Norway/Follower anxiety	State anxiety		III
39	India/Leader in B school	Effective leadership	I	
40	China/Organizations and industries	Trust		III
41	Germany/Mix of organizations	Stress	I	

Table 2. Coverage study/ies *(continue)*

Paper	Country/Field study	Predicted variable/s	The effect types		
42	China/92 firms across different service and manufacturing sectors	Job burnout	I		
44	French/The alumni association of a French business school	Affective commitment and self-concept	I		
43	Ghana/Ghanaian public sector employees	Organizational commitment			III
44	French/The alumni association of a French business school	Affective commitment and self-concept	I		
45	Norwegian naval cadets/Military University College crossing the Atlantic Ocean in a tall ship	Work pressure and bullying at work	I		
46	Turkey/Who work in different industries	Dark triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy)	I		
47	USA/Care services to individuals with mental health issues	Dysfunctional resistant		II	
48	India/Sindh education foundation	Employee involvement and performance		II	
49	Kenya/Kenyan SME leaders	Burnout and related stressors		II	
50	Pakistan/School system with its branches	Thrive at work	I		
51	Sweden/Process-industry site	Role clarity	I		
52	Indonesia/High school teacher	Self-efficacy	I		
53	Bangladesh/Pharmaceutical company	Talent management			III
		Total	30	10	13

Notes: (I: negative effect; II: under certain conditions; and III: positive effect)

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