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How Transformational Leadership Fosters Employee Work Performance: Examining the Role of Knowledge Sharing Behaviors of Employees in Vietnamese SMEs

Than Thanh Son
Hanoi University of Industry, Taytuu, Hanoi, Vietnam

Le Ba Phong
Hanoi University of Industry, Taytuu, Hanoi, Vietnam

Nguyen Thi Thu Ha
Hanoi University of Industry, Taytuu, Hanoi, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: Work performance is considered a critical factor for firms to sustain growth and maintain competitive advantage, especially in the context of SMEs. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impacts of transformational leadership on employees' work performance through the mediating role of knowledge sharing. The study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test the relationships among these constructs using survey data collected from 215 participants working in 136 Vietnamese small and medium-sized enterprises. The findings indicate that transformational leadership have a significant positive effect on both knowledge sharing and employees' work performance. In addition, knowledge sharing is found to significantly enhance employees' work performance and plays a crucial mediating role in the relationship between transformational leadership and work performance. Importantly, this study contributes to extending the existing literature by highlighting the mechanism through which transformational leadership practices influence employee outcomes, and provides practical implications for managers to foster knowledge sharing in order to improve work performance in Vietnamese SMEs.

KEYWORDS: Transformational leadership; Work performance; Knowledge sharing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Employee performance has long been a central concern and has attracted considerable attention from scholars, as it plays a vital role in ensuring organizational competitiveness and survival in today's dynamic and highly competitive environment (Iskamto, 2020; Ha et al., 2024; Abdelwahed et al., 2025). As noted by Ohemeng et al. (2018), in a rapidly changing context, effectively managing employee performance is not only essential but indispensable, particularly for organizations striving to adapt to ongoing environmental pressures. Consequently, leaders and organizations continuously seek effective approaches to enhance employee performance as a strategic response to competition and change.

Extant literature highlights leadership as a key determinant of employee performance due to its significant direct and indirect influences on employees' motivation and behaviors, including trust, job satisfaction, and work engagement (Ohemeng et al., 2018; Zeeshan et al., 2021; Rahal & Farmanesh, 2022). Among various leadership styles, transformational leadership (TL) has received substantial scholarly attention for its ability to inspire, intellectually stimulate, and individually consider employees, thereby fostering higher levels of motivation, commitment, and performance (Le Ba, 2018; Le & Lei, 2019; Son et al., 2020; Cao & Le, 2022). By articulating a compelling vision and encouraging knowledge exchange, transformational leaders create an environment conducive to enhancing both individual and organizational outcomes (Le & Tran, 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Riyanto et al., 2021).

Building on the pivotal role of TL in shaping employee performance and organizational effectiveness, this study aims to examine the impact of TL on employee work performance through the mediating role of knowledge sharing. Specifically, transformational leadership is expected to promote knowledge sharing behaviors among employees, which in turn enhance their work performance. This study is expected to provide deeper insights into the effective pathways through which organizations can enhance their employees' work performance for the following reasons.

First, existing literature has emphasized the prominent role of TL in improving various employee outcomes such as work engagement, motivation, and innovative behaviors, as well as promoting knowledge sharing within organizations (Son et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2020; Riyanto et al., 2021; Jabbour Al Maalouf et al, 2025). However, to the best of the author's knowledge, studies examining the simultaneous influence of TL on both knowledge sharing and work performance remain relatively limited (Le Ba et al., 2025; Tuyen & Phong, 2025). This gap constrains a comprehensive understanding of how TL shapes employee behaviors and performance outcomes through underlying mechanisms. Meanwhile, knowledge sharing is widely recognized as a critical factor that enhances individual effectiveness and contributes to organizational competitiveness

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(Wang & Noe, 2010; Le & Nguyen, 2025; Le et al., 2025). Therefore, investigating the interrelationships among TL, knowledge sharing, and work performance is both necessary and timely.

Second, prior research has indicated that TL is among the most effective leadership styles in enhancing employee performance due to its ability to inspire a shared vision, intellectually stimulate employees, and foster a supportive work environment that encourages learning and collaboration (Son et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2022; Jabbour Al Maalouf et al, 2025). Through these mechanisms, transformational leaders are likely to facilitate knowledge sharing behaviors, which in turn improve employees' work performance. Nevertheless, empirical studies exploring the mediating role of knowledge sharing in the relationship between TL and work performance, particularly in the context of Vietnamese SMEs, remain scarce (Le Ba et al., 2025). Accordingly, to address these research gaps, this study aims to clarify the impact of TL on employees' work performance through the mediating role of knowledge sharing. Based on the above arguments, this study is conducted to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: Does TL positively influence employees' work performance?

RQ2: Does knowledge sharing positively affect employees' work performance?

RQ3: Does knowledge sharing mediate the relationship between TL and employees' work performance?

To address the identified theoretical gaps and clarify the proposed research questions, this study develops an integrated research model to examine the relationships among the latent constructs. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is employed to test the hypothesized relationships using survey data collected from 215 participants working in 136 Vietnamese small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The findings of this study are expected to provide both theoretical contributions and practical implications regarding transformational leadership practices, particularly in fostering knowledge sharing and enhancing employees' work performance in Vietnamese SMEs.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS

2.1 The effects of TL on work performance

TL is defined as a leadership style of managers who are capable of transforming employees' attitudes and behaviors in a positive manner toward achieving organizational goals and vision (Bass, 1990; Chen et al., 2013; Le & Lei, 2017; Le & Lei, 2019; Le et al.,, 2025). Transformational leaders are generally characterized by four essential attributes, including idealized influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1990; Van et al., 2018; Le & Lei, 2019; Le & Tuyen, 2025). Transformational leaders have a capability to inspire employees to transcend routine expectations and actively contribute to long-term development. Owing to these attributes, TL has been widely recognized as one of the most effective leadership styles in shaping critical organizational outcomes, including knowledge capital and human capital (Birasnav et al., 2011), organizational performance (Son et al., 2020), organizational justice (Phong & Son, 2020), organizational learning capability (Le & Tuyen, 2025); and innovation performance (Jia et al., 2018; Le & Vu). Given its pervasive influence across both behavioral and strategic dimensions, examining the relationship between TL and work performance has become a prominent and increasingly important focus in contemporary research.

Employee work performance is widely recognized as a critical determinant of organizational success, as it constitutes the aggregate performance of the organization (Berberoglu & Secim, 2015; Çetin & Aşkun, 2018; Nhu & Le, 2025). It reflects the extent to which employees accomplish assigned goals and contribute to organizational objectives (Cao et al., 2016; Çetin & Aşkun, 2018; Ha et al., 2024). From a behavioral perspective, work performance encompasses employees' actions and behaviors related to the production of goods and services, as well as their ability and effort in fulfilling job responsibilities (Zefeiti et al., 2017; Nguon, 2022). In addition, work performance is closely associated with job output and the effective utilization of individual skills to achieve desired outcomes. It also reflects the realization of both tangible and intangible results, which can enhance employees' sense of self-fulfillment and, in turn, contribute to overall organizational effectiveness. Overall, employee work performance can be understood as the capability of individuals to execute work-related activities and generate outcomes that directly and indirectly support the achievement of organizational goals (Zefeiti et al., 2017; Nguon, 2022).

Transformational leadership is widely recognized for its capacity to inspire, motivate, and support employees in achieving organizational goals through vision articulation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Prior research has demonstrated that this leadership style fosters stronger job commitment among followers, thereby serving as a critical foundation for enhanced work performance (Podsakoff et al., 1996). Evidence from meta-analytic studies further confirms that TL is positively associated with employee performance, as it shapes attitudes and behaviors that facilitate adaptation, learning, and performance improvement in dynamic organizational contexts (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang et al., 2011). In particular, employees' performance is closely linked to their behavioral responses to organizational changes, including the adoption of new ideas, processes, or technologies, which are often influenced by transformational leaders.

Empirical studies have consistently supported the significant role of TL in driving performance outcomes. For instance, research by Zhu et al. (2005) highlights that TL at the top management level, particularly from CEOs, exerts a strong positive influence on organizational and employee performance. From a cognitive perspective, transformational leaders enhance performance by shaping followers' perceptions, values, and problem-solving capabilities (Yukl, 2006; Le Ba et al., 2025), thereby increasing their overall contribution to the organization. Moreover, transformational leaders have been found to influence a wide range of behavioral outcomes, including work performance, organizational citizenship behavior, voice behavior, and service behavior (Mi et al., 2019; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Phong & Do, 2023; Le Ba et al., 2025). By providing a clear vision and fostering a supportive and empowering environment, transformational leaders create pathways for employees to develop and achieve higher levels of performance. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed (Figure 1):

H1: TL i is positively related to employees' work performance.

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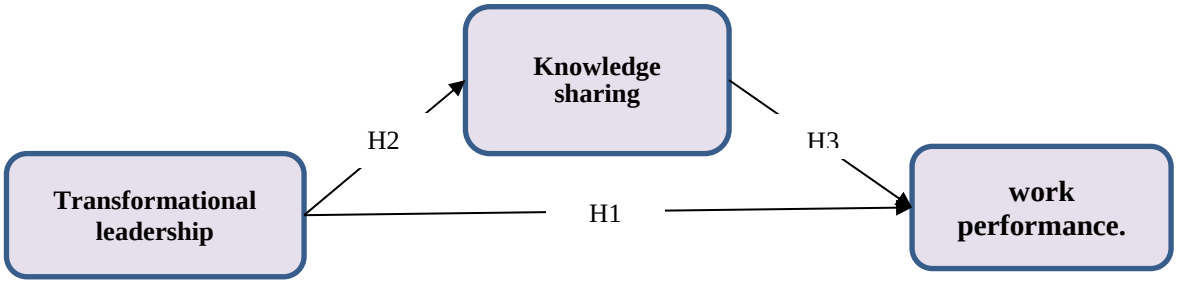


Figure 1. The proposal research model

2.2 Knowledge sharing mediates the effect of TL on work performance

Knowledge sharing is broadly defined as the process through which employees exchange knowledge, information, and experiences within an organization (Le & Lei, 2019; Ha & Le, 2023; Le & Ha, 2023; Le, 2024; Le & Nguyen, 2025). This process facilitates the dissemination of valuable insights that enable employees to support one another, solve work-related problems, generate new ideas, and collaborate more effectively (Lei et al., 2024; Le & Le, 2025; Le & Le, 2026). Engaging in knowledge sharing not only allows individuals to acquire and integrate new and useful knowledge for task completion but also fosters creativity by encouraging the development of innovative ideas and solutions. As a result, knowledge sharing plays a pivotal role in enhancing key organizational outcomes (Phong et al., 2018; Le & Le, 2023; Son & Phong, 2023; Tran et al., 2023; Le & Son, 2024), employees' work performance (Kang et al., 2008; Henttonen et al., 2016; Deng et al., 2023), and organizational performance (Le & Tran, 2020; Son et al., 2020; Le & Le, 2021).

Leadership behaviors and characteristics play a crucial role in either promoting or inhibiting employees' knowledge sharing behaviors. Leadership support is essential for fostering and sustaining a positive knowledge sharing climate within organizations (Le & Lei, 2019). Prior studies consistently demonstrate that TL creates a supportive work environment and provides necessary resources that facilitate KS activities (Le et al., 2018; Le & Lei, 2019; Le & Nguyen, 2025). Specifically, key attributes of TL (such as charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) encourage employees to communicate and share knowledge more actively (Xiao et al., 2017; Le & Lei, 2019; Le & Nguyen, 2025). Birasnav et al. (2011) indicated that under a TL climate, employees are more creative and willing to contribute their knowledge, as transformational leaders emphasize building a supportive and knowledge-oriented culture. By enhancing trust, fairness, and a shared vision, TL further strengthens employees' engagement in KS behaviors (Le & Lei, 2017; Le et al., 2018). Consequently, TL is widely regarded as an effective leadership style in promoting knowledge sharing within organizations (Le et al., 2018; Le & Lei, 2018; Phong & Thanh, 2023; Phong & Tuyen, 2025). Following these discussions, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: TL is positively related to knowledge sharing.

Regarding the relationship between knowledge sharing and employees' work performance, prior literature provides several compelling arguments supporting a positive association at the individual level. First, the act of sharing substantial and relevant knowledge is often indicative of employees' expertise and competency (Khanh & Le, 2021; Le, 2024). By disseminating valuable knowledge to colleagues, individuals demonstrate the effective utilization of their skills, which in turn contributes to improved work outcomes and performance (Henttonen et al., 2016; Hoang & Le, 2025). Moreover, knowledge sharing within and beyond organizational boundaries can enhance individuals' professional visibility and create additional opportunities to apply their expertise in ways that further improve job performance. Second, engaging in knowledge sharing enhances an individual's embeddedness and influence within the organization. In knowledge-driven environments, employees who actively engage in knowledge exchange often become central sources of knowledge, gaining greater legitimacy and stronger positions within organizational networks (Kang, 2008; Wang & Noe, 2010). This increased social and professional influence enables them to access critical resources and support, thereby enhancing their capacity to achieve higher levels of work performance (Henttonen et al., 2016; Shaikh et al., 2023). Third, grounded in social capital theory, knowledge sharing fosters reciprocal exchanges among employees. Individuals who actively share knowledge are more likely to receive valuable information and insights from others, which can be leveraged to improve task execution and overall performance. Such reciprocal knowledge flows create a reinforcing cycle that enhances both individual effectiveness and collective outcomes (Kang, 2008; Henttonen et al., 2016). Empirical evidence has further confirmed the positive effects of knowledge sharing on employee-related outcomes, including work engagement and performance (Kang, 2008; Henttonen et al., 2016; Deng et al., 2023; Alyouzbaky et al., 2024). Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Knowledge sharing positively affects employees' work performance.

The above discussion supports the mediating role of knowledge sharing in the relationship between TL and employees' work performance. Specifically, TL fosters a supportive and trust-based environment that encourages employees to share knowledge (Bass, 1999; Birasnav et al., 2011; Le & Lei, 2017). In turn, knowledge sharing enhances employees' capabilities, problem-solving, and task efficiency, thereby improving work performance (Henttonen et al., 2016; Deng et al., 2023). In other words, knowledge sharing acts as a key mechanism through which TL indirectly influences work performance. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between TL and employees' work performance.

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3. RESEARCH METHODOLOTY

3.1 Sample and measures

This study employed a survey method to collect data from Vietnamese SMEs between September and November 2025, covering firms across diverse industries and sizes. Data were gathered with support from HR representatives, targeting heads of departments and key employees in major functional areas to ensure informed responses. A total of 350 questionnaires were distributed, with 283 returned and 215 valid responses retained (validity rate: 76.0%). To assess non-response bias, the study followed Armstrong and Overton (1977) by comparing early and late respondents using chi-square and t-tests on age and gender. The results showed no significant differences ($p > 0.05$), indicating that non-response bias is unlikely to affect the findings.

3.2 Measurement

To ensure validity and reliability, all constructs were measured using established scales from prior studies. Each variable was assessed with multiple items on five-point Likert scales ranging from "1" (strongly disagree/unwilling) to "5" (strongly agree/willing).

TL was measured using eight items adapted from Dai et al. (2013), capturing employees' perceptions of leaders' behaviors (Masa'deh et al., 2016; Le et al., 2018). Knowledge sharing was assessed with 10 items from Cheng and Li (2001), reflecting employees' knowledge exchange behaviors; and Employee work performance was measured using six items adapted from Kuvaas (2011).

3.3 Data analysis methods

To control for common method bias, Harman's single-factor test was conducted. The results indicated that the total variance explained by a single factor was below the 50% threshold, suggesting that common method bias is not a serious concern. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test the proposed hypotheses and examine the relationships among constructs. In addition, a bootstrapping procedure was applied to assess the significance of the estimated effects. The data collected from 215 respondents in 136 Vietnamese SMEs were analyzed using SPSS 22 and AMOS 22.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Measurement model

This study conducted a series of tests to evaluate the reliability and validity of the constructs prior to hypothesis testing (Table 1). Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, with all values exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Convergent validity was examined through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), while discriminant validity was assessed by comparing the squared inter-construct correlations with the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE), following Fornell and Larcker (1981).

Table 1 reports AVE, CR, mean, SD, and Cronbach's alpha, providing evidence of reliability and convergent validity. Discriminant validity is also confirmed, as squared correlations are lower than the square root of AVE (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Furthermore, CFA results indicate that the measurement model achieves a good fit (Table 2).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and average variances extracted from constructs

Construct	AVE	CR	Cα	Mean	SD	TL	KS	WP
Transformational leadership (TL)	0.70	0.95	0.95	3,31	0.59	***0.83***		
Knowledge sharing (KS)	0.78	0.95	0.95	3.72	0.64	*0.69*	***0.88***	
Work performance (WP)	0.83	0.96	0.92	3.55	0.73	*0.68*	*0.72*	***0.91***

Note: *Cα ≥ 0.7; CR ≥ 0.7; AVE ≥ 0.5; Diagonal elements (in bold) are the square root of the AVE.*

Table 2. Overall fit index of the CFA model

Fit index	Scores	Recommended value
Absolute fit measures		
CMIN/df	1.750	≤ 2[a]; ≤ 5[b]
GFI	0.856	≥ 0.90[a]; ≥ 0.80[b]
RMSEA	0.059	≤ 0.8[a]; ≤ 0.10[b]
Incremental fit measures		
NFI	0.921	≥ 0.90[a];
AGFI	0.823	≥ 0.90[a]; ≥ 0.80[b]
CFI	0.971	≥ 0.90[a];

Notes: *a Acceptability: acceptable; b Acceptability: marginal*

4.2 Findings

The study employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation to test the proposed hypotheses. The model demonstrated a satisfactory fit ($\chi^2 = 427.053$; df = 244; RMSEA = 0.059; GFI = 0.856; CFI = 0.971; TLI = 0.968), indicating good alignment with the data. Key results are presented in Table 4 and Figure 2.

The direct effect analysis: Table 3, Figure 2 shows that all hypothesized relationships (H1, H2, and H3) are supported. Specifically:

The findings show that TL has a strong and significant positive effect on the work performance ($\beta = 0.358$; $p < 0.001$), supporting H1.

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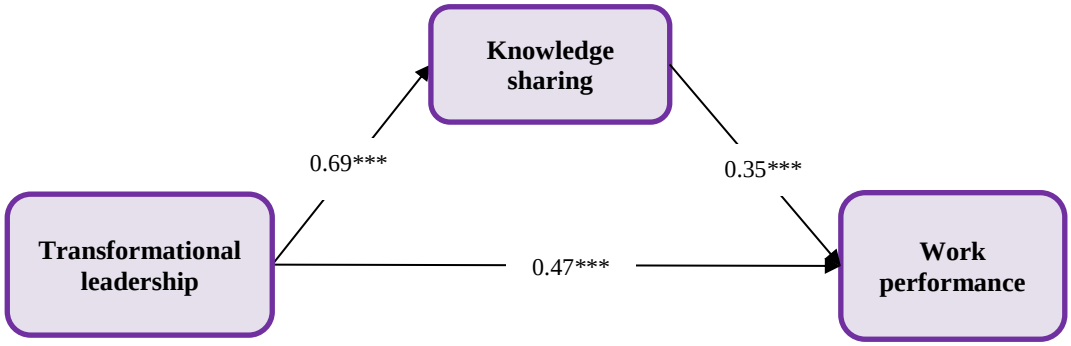


Figure 2: Path coefficients of the structural model

As shown in Table 3, the influence of TL on knowledge sharing is also statistically significant and quite large ($\beta = 0.694$; $p < 0.001$), so hypothesis H2 is supported.

The results in Table 3 also confirmed the positive effect of knowledge sharing on work performance ($\beta = 0.478$; $p < 0.001$). Hypothesis of H3 is, therefore, also supported.

Table 3. Structural model results

Hypotheses	Effect	Estimate	*t*-value	Results
H1. Transformational leadership → Work performance	+	0.358***	5.092	Accepted
H2. Transformational leadership → Knowledge sharing	+	0.694***	11.085	Accepted
H3. Knowledge sharing → Work performance	+	0.478***	6.873	Accepted

Notes: ****P < 0.001.*

The indirect effect analysis: The paper does not just give evidence about the direct influence of TL on product innovation capability. It also demonstrates how collaborative culture mediate the relationship between TL and product innovation ((Table 4).

Table 4. Test for indirect effects

Path	Direct effects	Indirect effects	Total effects	Bias-corrected confidence intervals	
				Lower confidence level	Upper confidence level
TL→KS→WP	0.358**	0.332***	0.690***	0.247	0.424

Note: ****P < 0.001.*

Table 4 showed indirect effect of TL on work performance ($\beta = 0.332$; $p < 0.001$) is statistically significant and lies in the confidence interval (from 0.247 to 0.424). Consequently, hypothesis H4 is significantly supported. In other words, the result of testing in Table 4 has confirmed that knowledge sharing significantly mediates the effects of TL on work performance. This reveals that TL significant affect work performance directly or indirectly via mediating role of knowledge sharing.

5. DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Work performance is widely regarded as a core determinant of organizational effectiveness, as it directly reflects employees' contributions to achieving organizational goals and sustaining competitive advantage (Lin et al., 2020; Kadarusman & Bunyamin, 2021; Srimongkolkul et al., 2025). In knowledge-driven environments, organizational success increasingly depends on leadership practices that effectively leverage human and knowledge resources, foster knowledge exchange, enhance employees' capabilities and motivation, and create compatitive advantage (Le & Lei, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019; Sarwar et al., 2020; Srimongkolkul et al., 2025). By integrating these perspectives, this study provides meaningful insights into how TL enhances employees' work performance through knowledge sharing as a key underlying mechanism. Overall, the findings contribute to identifying effective managerial pathways to promote knowledge sharing behaviors and improve work performance based on internal organizational resources, thereby addressing both theoretical and practical gaps in leadership and organizational behavior research within the context of Vietnamese SMEs.

The findings of this study contribute to advancing the understanding of TL practices in fostering knowledge sharing and improving employees' work performance for several reasons.

First, this study confirms that TL has a significant positive effect on employees' work performance ($\beta = 0.358$, $p < 0.001$). This result reinforces prior research suggesting that transformational leaders enhance employee outcomes by inspiring vision, fostering intrinsic motivation, and encouraging employees to exceed expected performance levels (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), suggesting that employees reciprocate supportive and inspiring leadership by

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exhibiting higher levels of effort and performance. Practically, this implies that managers and directors in organizations should prioritize TL practices to enhance employee effectiveness in dynamic business environments.

Second, the study demonstrates that transformational leadership strongly promotes knowledge sharing (β = 0.694, p < 0.001). This finding is consistent with prior studies indicating that transformational leaders create a supportive climate characterized by trust, openness, and collaboration, which encourages employees to share knowledge (Birasnav et al., 2011; Le & Lei, 2017). In practice, this suggests that leaders should actively foster communication, intellectual stimulation, and a shared vision to reduce knowledge hoarding and promote collaborative learning within organizations.

Third, knowledge sharing is found to have a significant positive effect on work performance (β = 0.478, p < 0.001), highlighting its critical role as a performance-enhancing mechanism. This supports existing literature emphasizing that knowledge exchange enables employees to improve problem-solving, task efficiency, and innovation (Henttonen et al., 2016; Deng et al., 2023; Nhung et al., 2024: Tuyen et al., 2025). More importantly, the indirect effect analysis confirms that knowledge sharing partially mediates the relationship between TL and work performance (β = 0.332, p < 0.001). This finding provides a deeper theoretical explanation of how leadership translates into performance outcomes, indicating that TL not only directly enhances performance but also indirectly does so by facilitating knowledge sharing behaviors.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships over time. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to better capture dynamic relationships among variables. Second, although the sample includes 215 respondents from Vietnamese SMEs, the generalizability of the findings may still be limited. Future studies are encouraged to use larger and more diverse samples. Finally, while knowledge sharing is identified as a key mediator, other potential mediating mechanisms (e.g., work engagement, organizational learning) should be explored to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of transformational leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature by developing and validating a research model that explains the relationship between TL, knowledge sharing, and employees' work performance. The findings confirm both direct and indirect effects of TL on work performance, with knowledge sharing serving as a significant mediating mechanism. Importantly, the study offers valuable implications for managers in Vietnamese SMEs by identifying TL and knowledge sharing as key drivers for improving work performance of employee and organizational effectiveness.

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