



Leadership Styles and Employee Retention in Startups

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Abstract

Employee retention is a critical concern for startups operating in highly competitive and uncertain business environments, where the loss of skilled employees can significantly disrupt performance and growth. Leadership styles play a pivotal role in shaping employee attitudes, motivation, and organizational commitment, thereby influencing retention outcomes. This study examines the relationship between leadership styles and employee retention in startups, with a particular focus on transformational, transactional, servant, and participative leadership approaches. Drawing on leadership and organizational behavior theories, the study highlights how leadership behaviors affect job satisfaction, trust, psychological safety, and employee engagement. The research emphasizes that supportive and empowering leadership styles are more effective in reducing turnover intentions and enhancing long-term employee attachment in startup contexts. By addressing the limited empirical focus on startups in existing literature, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of leadership–retention dynamics and offers practical insights for startup founders and managers seeking to build stable and committed teams that support sustainable organizational growth.

Keywords: Leadership styles, Employee retention, Startups, Organizational commitment, Turnover intention

Introduction

Startups operate in highly dynamic, uncertain, and resource-constrained environments where human capital plays a decisive role in organizational survival and growth. Unlike established firms, startups rely heavily on small, multifunctional teams whose creativity, commitment, and adaptability directly influence innovation and competitive advantage. However, employee retention remains a persistent challenge for startups due to factors such as job insecurity, high work

pressure, limited career structures, and intense competition for skilled talent. In this context, leadership emerges as a critical organizational mechanism that shapes employee attitudes, motivation, and long-term attachment to the firm. Leadership styles adopted by founders and managers significantly influence workplace culture, employee engagement, and perceptions of organizational support, all of which are closely linked to retention outcomes. Transformational leadership, characterized by vision, inspiration, and individualized consideration, has been widely associated with higher employee commitment and reduced turnover intentions, particularly in innovation-driven settings such as startups. Conversely, transactional or autocratic leadership styles, while potentially effective for short-term control and performance, may undermine psychological safety and intrinsic motivation if overemphasized. Startups also increasingly draw on servant and participative leadership approaches to foster trust, empowerment, and shared ownership, which are essential for retaining employees in the absence of traditional incentives such as job stability and structured promotion pathways. The relationship between leadership styles and employee retention can be further explained through theoretical perspectives such as social exchange theory and leader–member exchange theory, which suggest that employees are more likely to remain with organizations when they perceive fair treatment, support, and mutual respect from their leaders. Despite the growing relevance of this issue, existing research has largely focused on large or mature organizations, offering limited insights into the unique leadership–retention dynamics within startups. Given the high failure rates and turnover levels prevalent in startup ecosystems, understanding how different leadership styles influence employee retention is both academically significant and practically relevant. This study therefore seeks to explore the role of leadership styles in shaping employee retention in startups, with the aim of identifying leadership practices that can enhance workforce stability, organizational commitment, and sustainable growth in entrepreneurial ventures.

Background of the Study

The rapid growth of startups has transformed modern economies by fostering innovation, entrepreneurship, and employment generation. Unlike established organizations, startups operate in volatile and uncertain environments characterized by limited resources, evolving structures, and

intense market competition. In such contexts, employees are not only contributors to daily operations but also key drivers of creativity, agility, and strategic execution. However, startups often face high employee turnover due to factors such as job insecurity, workload intensity, unclear career progression, and competitive external opportunities. Leadership plays a central role in addressing these challenges, as founders and managers directly influence organizational culture, communication patterns, and employee experiences. The leadership style adopted within a startup shapes how employees perceive support, recognition, and fairness, which in turn affects their motivation and decision to remain with the organization. Despite the recognized importance of leadership in employee management, empirical research examining its role in employee retention within startup settings remains limited, creating a need for focused investigation in this area.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the influence of leadership styles on employee retention in startups, with particular emphasis on understanding how different leadership approaches shape employees' commitment, motivation, and intention to remain with the organization. Given the high rates of employee turnover and the limited availability of formal human resource systems in startups, this study seeks to identify leadership styles that are most effective in fostering a supportive and engaging work environment. Specifically, the research aims to analyze the impact of transformational, transactional, servant, and participative leadership styles on key retention-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, trust, and psychological safety. By focusing on the startup context, the study intends to address existing gaps in the literature that predominantly emphasize large and established organizations. The findings are expected to provide practical insights for startup founders and managers in developing leadership practices that enhance employee retention and contribute to sustainable organizational growth.

Definition of Startups

Startups are commonly defined as newly established, innovation-driven ventures designed to develop scalable and repeatable business models under conditions of high uncertainty. Unlike traditional small businesses, startups are typically opportunity-oriented, seeking rapid growth through novel products, services, or processes rather than incremental market participation. From a lifecycle perspective, startups progress through stages such as ideation, validation, early growth, and scaling, each of which presents distinct managerial and workforce challenges. During the early stages, startups rely on small, flexible teams where employees often perform multiple roles, work extended hours, and contribute beyond formal job descriptions. Workforce dynamics in startups are therefore characterized by high levels of interdependence, informality, and close interaction with founders, making leadership behavior highly visible and influential. As startups grow, the need for structure, coordination, and formal leadership practices increases, often testing the adaptability of existing leadership styles. Startups differ significantly from small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and large corporate firms in terms of objectives, risk orientation, and organizational design. While SMEs generally prioritize stability, steady revenue, and local market presence, startups focus on scalability, experimentation, and disruptive innovation. In contrast to corporate firms, startups lack bureaucratic systems, established hierarchies, and standardized human resource practices, which intensifies employees' dependence on leadership for guidance, motivation, and support. These distinguishing characteristics make startups a unique organizational context for examining leadership styles and employee retention.

Overview of Leadership Styles

- **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring employees through a clear vision, shared purpose, and strong emotional engagement. Leaders adopting this style motivate employees by aligning individual goals with organizational objectives, encouraging innovation, and fostering personal growth. In startups, transformational leadership is particularly effective because employees often work in uncertain conditions that require commitment beyond formal job roles. By emphasizing trust, recognition, and empowerment, transformational leaders enhance job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which are critical for retaining talent in early-stage ventures.

- **Transactional Leadership**

Transactional leadership is based on structured relationships between leaders and employees, where performance is managed through rewards, incentives, and corrective actions. This style emphasizes clear roles, performance standards, and accountability. In startup environments, transactional leadership can be useful for achieving short-term targets and operational efficiency. However, excessive reliance on transactional mechanisms may limit creativity and intrinsic motivation, making it less effective for long-term employee retention in innovation-driven settings.

- **Servant Leadership**

Servant leadership prioritizes employees' needs, development, and well-being over hierarchical authority. Leaders act as facilitators and mentors, fostering trust, ethical behavior, and collaboration. In startups, where formal support systems are often limited, servant leadership can strengthen employee loyalty and psychological safety. This style encourages a strong sense of belonging, which is essential for retaining employees despite job uncertainty and workload pressures.

- **Autocratic and Democratic Leadership**

Autocratic leadership centralizes decision-making and enables quick responses, which can be beneficial during crises or early startup phases. However, it may reduce employee engagement if used persistently. Democratic leadership encourages participation, shared decision-making, and open communication, aligning well with the collaborative culture typical of startups and supporting higher retention levels.

- **Situational and Adaptive Leadership Approaches**

Situational and adaptive leadership emphasize flexibility, suggesting leaders adjust their style based on employee competence, task demands, and organizational stage. In rapidly evolving startup environments, adaptive leadership is crucial for balancing control and empowerment, ultimately enhancing employee engagement and retention.

Literature Review

The literature on leadership styles provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding how leaders influence employee attitudes, behaviors, and organizational outcomes. Transformational leadership has been one of the most extensively examined leadership approaches, with foundational work by Bass and Riggio emphasizing its ability to inspire followers through vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Empirical evidence consistently shows that transformational leadership enhances employee motivation, trust, and commitment, making it particularly relevant in dynamic and uncertain environments such as startups. Judge and Piccolo's meta-analytic study further strengthens this argument by demonstrating that transformational leadership is more strongly associated with positive employee outcomes than transactional leadership, which relies primarily on contingent rewards and corrective actions. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire developed by Avolio and Bass has been widely used to measure these leadership dimensions, reinforcing the robustness and applicability of transformational leadership theory across organizational contexts.

Beyond transformational leadership, recent studies have expanded the leadership discourse to include ethical, servant, and authentic leadership perspectives. Eisenbeiss et al. highlight the role of ethical leadership in promoting fairness, integrity, and social responsibility, which positively influences organizational performance and employee perceptions of leadership credibility. Similarly, Hoch et al. argue that servant leadership, which emphasizes employee development, empowerment, and well-being, explains additional variance in employee outcomes beyond transformational leadership alone. These findings suggest that leadership effectiveness is multidimensional and that employee-centered leadership styles are particularly important for fostering trust and long-term commitment. In startup settings, where formal controls and structured HR practices are limited, such leadership approaches can compensate by creating supportive and value-driven work environments that encourage employees to remain with the organization.

The complexity and uncertainty inherent in startups further necessitate adaptive and flexible leadership approaches. Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey's complexity leadership theory provides valuable insights into how leadership functions in complex adaptive systems. Rather than focusing solely on hierarchical authority, this perspective emphasizes interaction, learning, and adaptability

as critical leadership functions. In startups, where rapid change, innovation, and experimentation are constant, leaders must enable collaboration and knowledge sharing rather than rely on rigid command-and-control mechanisms. Complexity leadership theory therefore complements transformational and servant leadership models by highlighting the importance of responsiveness and adaptability in sustaining employee engagement and retention in entrepreneurial ventures.

Employee retention literature underscores the strategic importance of leadership in reducing turnover intentions and maintaining workforce stability. Allen, Bryant, and Vardaman challenge traditional misconceptions about retention by emphasizing evidence-based strategies such as supportive supervision, meaningful work, and employee development. Their work suggests that retention is not solely dependent on compensation but is strongly influenced by leadership quality and organizational support. Raffiee and Feng's research on entrepreneurship further illustrates how uncertainty and risk affect career decisions, implying that employees' willingness to remain in startups depends significantly on leadership behaviors that reduce perceived risk and enhance psychological security. Collectively, these studies highlight a clear linkage between leadership styles and employee retention, while also revealing a research gap in context-specific analyses focused on startups. This gap justifies the present study's emphasis on examining how different leadership styles influence employee retention within startup environments.

Employee Retention

- **Concept and Definition of Employee Retention**

Employee retention refers to an organization's ability to retain its employees for a sustained period by creating conditions that encourage long-term commitment and reduce voluntary turnover. It encompasses a set of deliberate strategies, practices, and leadership behaviors aimed at enhancing job satisfaction, organizational engagement, and employees' intention to remain with the organization. Retention is not limited to financial incentives but also includes non-monetary factors such as meaningful work, supportive leadership, opportunities for learning, recognition, and a positive work environment. In contemporary organizational research, employee retention is closely linked to constructs such as organizational commitment, employee engagement, and

turnover intention, all of which are influenced by managerial and leadership practices. In startup contexts, retention takes on a broader meaning, as employees are often required to adapt to ambiguity, perform multiple roles, and contribute to organizational development beyond formal job boundaries.

- **Importance of Retention for Startups**

Employee retention is particularly critical for startups because of their limited resources, small team sizes, and dependence on specialized skills. High employee turnover imposes significant direct and indirect costs, including recruitment expenses, onboarding time, training investments, and productivity losses. More importantly, turnover in startups often results in substantial knowledge loss, as departing employees take with them tacit knowledge related to products, processes, and market insights that are difficult to replace. Frequent exits can disrupt team cohesion, weaken organizational culture, and delay innovation cycles. Stable teams, on the other hand, enhance collaboration, trust, and shared understanding, enabling startups to respond more effectively to market changes and scale operations. Retention therefore supports continuity, learning, and sustainable growth in entrepreneurial ventures.

- **Challenges of Retaining Talent in Startups versus Large Organizations**

Retaining talent in startups is more challenging than in large organizations due to structural and contextual differences. Startups often lack job security, formal career paths, competitive compensation packages, and established HR systems, which are commonly offered by larger firms. Employees in startups also face higher workloads, role ambiguity, and performance pressure. In contrast, large organizations provide stability, clear advancement opportunities, and standardized benefits, making them attractive alternatives. As a result, startups must rely more heavily on leadership quality, organizational culture, and meaningful employee experiences to retain talent in competitive labor markets.

Leadership Styles and Their Influence on Employee Retention

- **Transformational Leadership and Employee Retention**

Transformational leadership plays a critical role in enhancing employee retention by inspiring employees through a shared vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Leaders adopting this style encourage personal growth, innovation, and a strong sense of purpose, which strengthens employees' emotional attachment to the organization. In startup environments, where uncertainty and work pressure are high, transformational leadership helps employees feel valued and motivated, thereby reducing turnover intentions and increasing long-term commitment.

- **Transactional Leadership and Employee Retention**

Transactional leadership influences employee retention through structured reward systems, performance monitoring, and clear expectations. This style can be effective in maintaining discipline and achieving short-term goals in startups. However, its impact on retention is relatively moderate, as excessive reliance on extrinsic rewards may fail to address employees' intrinsic motivation, career aspirations, and need for recognition, which are vital for long-term retention.

- **Servant Leadership and Employee Retention**

Servant leadership emphasizes employee well-being, empowerment, and ethical conduct, making it highly effective in fostering employee loyalty. By prioritizing trust, support, and personal development, servant leaders create a psychologically safe environment. In startups, this approach strengthens employee retention by compensating for limited job security and formal benefits through strong interpersonal relationships.

- **Democratic and Autocratic Leadership and Employee Retention**

Democratic leadership encourages participation, open communication, and shared decision-making, enhancing employee engagement and retention. In contrast, autocratic leadership centralizes authority and limits employee voice. While useful in crisis situations, prolonged autocratic leadership often increases dissatisfaction and turnover intentions.

- **Situational and Adaptive Leadership and Employee Retention**

Situational and adaptive leadership approaches stress flexibility, enabling leaders to adjust their style based on employee competence and organizational needs. In dynamic startup contexts, adaptive leadership supports retention by balancing control, autonomy, and support.

Determinants Linking Leadership Styles to Employee Retention

While leadership style is a central determinant of employee retention, its impact is largely mediated through several interrelated factors, including job satisfaction, employee motivation, workplace culture, and opportunities for professional growth. These factors explain the mechanisms through which leadership behaviors influence employees' decisions to remain with an organization.

- **Job Satisfaction**

Leadership styles exert a strong influence on employees' levels of job satisfaction, which is a key predictor of retention. Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiration, support, and meaningful engagement, enhances job satisfaction by fostering a positive and supportive work environment. Employees who feel valued and understood by their leaders are more likely to experience fulfillment in their roles. In contrast, leadership approaches that rely primarily on transactional exchanges, such as rewards and performance monitoring, may ensure short-term compliance but often fail to generate sustained job satisfaction, thereby increasing the likelihood of employee turnover.

- **Employee Motivation**

Employee motivation is another critical factor linking leadership styles to retention. Leaders who actively invest in motivating employees through recognition, feedback, and opportunities for personal development tend to achieve higher retention rates. Transformational and servant leadership styles are particularly effective in this regard, as they provide employees with a sense of purpose, autonomy, and personal growth. Motivated employees are more engaged with their work and demonstrate stronger loyalty to the organization, reducing their intention to leave.

- **Workplace Culture**

Leadership styles play a decisive role in shaping workplace culture, which directly affects employee retention. Leaders who promote collaboration, respect, innovation, and open communication create an inclusive and supportive organizational climate. In startups and SMEs, where employees interact closely with leaders, such a positive culture enhances engagement and strengthens emotional attachment to the organization. Conversely, unsupportive or rigid leadership can create a toxic culture that accelerates turnover.

- **Opportunities for Growth**

Leadership styles that emphasize learning and development significantly influence retention by supporting employees' career progression. Transformational leaders who invest in skill development and continuous learning foster loyalty by demonstrating commitment to employees' long-term success. Similarly, servant leaders empower employees by creating environments that encourage professional growth, thereby reinforcing employees' desire to remain with the organization.

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research design to examine the relationship between leadership styles and employee retention in startups. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to employees working in early-stage and growth-stage startups across selected industries. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure that respondents had sufficient exposure to their leaders' behaviors and organizational practices. The survey instrument consisted of standardized scales measuring leadership styles—transformational, transactional, servant, democratic, and autocratic leadership—and employee retention indicators, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to stay, and perceived leadership support. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” Prior to data analysis, the questionnaire was tested for reliability and validity, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding acceptable thresholds. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize respondent perceptions, while Pearson correlation analysis was used to assess the strength and direction of relationships between leadership styles and employee retention.

Multiple regression analysis was further conducted to determine the relative impact of each leadership style on retention outcomes. Statistical analysis was performed using appropriate software to ensure accuracy and robustness of results, and ethical considerations such as confidentiality and voluntary participation were strictly maintained.

Result and Discussion

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Leadership Styles

Leadership Style	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Rank
Transformational Leadership	4.21	0.62	1
Servant Leadership	4.08	0.65	2
Democratic Leadership	3.89	0.70	3
Transactional Leadership	3.42	0.73	4
Autocratic Leadership	2.94	0.81	5

(Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)

Table 1 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and rankings of different leadership styles as perceived by employees in startups. Transformational leadership records the highest mean score ($M = 4.21$), indicating that this style is most prominently practiced and positively perceived within startup environments. Its relatively low standard deviation ($SD = 0.62$) suggests consistency in employee perceptions. Servant leadership ranks second ($M = 4.08$), reflecting a strong emphasis on employee support and empowerment. Democratic leadership follows with a moderate-to-high mean score ($M = 3.89$), highlighting participative decision-making in startups. Transactional leadership shows a comparatively lower mean ($M = 3.42$), indicating limited reliance on reward–punishment mechanisms. Autocratic leadership ranks lowest ($M = 2.94$) with the highest variability ($SD = 0.81$), suggesting inconsistent application and lower acceptance among

employees. Overall, the results indicate a preference for people-oriented and participative leadership styles in startup contexts.

Table 2: Level of Employee Retention in Startups

Retention Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation
Job Satisfaction	4.02	0.68
Organizational Commitment	3.94	0.72
Intention to Stay	3.88	0.75
Perceived Leadership Support	4.15	0.64
Overall Retention Score	3.99	0.66

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics related to employee retention indicators in startups. Perceived leadership support shows the highest mean score ($M = 4.15$), emphasizing the critical role of leadership in shaping positive employee experiences. Job satisfaction ($M = 4.02$) and organizational commitment ($M = 3.94$) also display relatively high mean values, suggesting that employees generally experience favorable work conditions and emotional attachment to their startups. Intention to stay, while slightly lower ($M = 3.88$), remains at an acceptable level, indicating moderate retention strength. The overall retention score ($M = 3.99$) reflects a generally positive retention climate within startups. The moderate standard deviations across indicators suggest some variation in employee experiences, likely due to differences in leadership practices, startup stages, and work conditions.

Table 3: Correlation between Leadership Styles and Employee Retention

Leadership Style	Retention (r-value)	Significance (p-value)
Transformational	0.68	0.000
Servant	0.64	0.000
Democratic	0.57	0.000
Transactional	0.42	0.001
Autocratic	-0.31	0.004

Table 3 illustrates the correlation between leadership styles and employee retention in startups. Transformational leadership demonstrates the strongest positive correlation with employee retention ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that inspirational and supportive leadership significantly enhances employees' intention to remain with the organization. Servant leadership also shows a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.64$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting the importance of trust and employee-centered leadership practices. Democratic leadership exhibits a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.57$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that participative decision-making contributes positively to retention. Transactional leadership has a weaker yet significant positive relationship ($r = 0.42$, $p = 0.001$), implying limited effectiveness for long-term retention. In contrast, autocratic leadership shows a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.31$, $p = 0.004$), indicating its adverse impact on employee retention.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between leadership styles and employee retention in startups, highlighting the critical role of leadership in shaping employee attitudes, commitment, and long-term organizational attachment. The findings clearly demonstrate that people-oriented and participative leadership styles—particularly transformational and servant leadership—have a strong positive influence on employee retention in startup environments. These leadership approaches foster trust, motivation, psychological safety, and a sense of shared purpose, which are essential for retaining employees in contexts characterized by uncertainty, high workloads, and

limited formal structures. Democratic leadership also contributes positively by encouraging employee involvement and open communication, thereby strengthening engagement and commitment. In contrast, transactional leadership, while useful for achieving short-term goals and maintaining performance standards, shows only a moderate influence on retention, suggesting that reward-based control mechanisms alone are insufficient for sustaining long-term employee loyalty in startups. Autocratic leadership was found to have a negative relationship with employee retention, indicating that excessive control and centralized decision-making can undermine employee morale and increase turnover intentions. Overall, the results underscore that leadership effectiveness in startups depends on adaptability, empathy, and the ability to balance task orientation with employee support. For startup founders and managers, the study emphasizes the importance of adopting flexible and inclusive leadership practices to build stable, committed teams capable of supporting innovation and growth. From an academic perspective, the study contributes to leadership and human resource management literature by providing empirical evidence specific to startups, an area that remains underexplored. Future research may extend these findings by examining longitudinal effects, industry-specific variations, or the mediating role of organizational culture in the leadership–retention relationship.

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