

A Configurational Approach to Leadership Styles and Conflict Outcomes in Public Universities: Exploring Institutional Mechanisms

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Article DOI: 10.48028/iiprds/ijsrssms.v9.i1.29

Abstract

Industrial action is one of the most entrenched issues of public university in developing countries and more so in Nigeria where the instability in the institution, inadequate funding, and governance challenges often disrupt academic activities. This study examines the relationship between leadership styles and conflict outcomes in public universities from a configurational perspective focusing the relationship between institutional processes and leaders' behaviors. It employed Mixed Methods research design, using structured questionnaires for data collection from selected public universities in the South-West region of Nigeria, both academic staff and non-academic staff. Data was analyzed descriptively and using correlation analysis, regression analysis and configurational analysis to identify combinations of leadership styles and institutional conditions that relate to conflict outcomes. Results indicate that transformational leadership, backed by participatory governance structures and transparency of institutions, has a significant impact on the decrease in industrial conflict and better conflict resolution results. But strong leadership and good institutions can result in enduring conflict, mistrust, and organizational instability, however, if leadership is autocratic and institutions are weak. The study also indicates that the actions of leaders are not always enough to predict outcomes of industrial conflict, but that institutional processes such as communication channels, disciplinary processes, collective bargaining processes, and administrative accountability mediate the effects of leadership on the outcomes of industrial conflict. Finally, the study concludes that sustainable industrial harmony in public universities involves the use of adaptive leadership practices in addition to supportive institutional systems. It is recommended to improve participatory governance, implement leadership development programmes, build up conflict management mechanisms, and implement transparent decision-making within public universities.

Keywords: *Industrial disputes, Public universities, Conflict outcomes, Transformational leadership, Configurational approach, Leadership styles*

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Background to the Study

Public universities play strategic role in the development of the nation as sources of skilled man power, source of knowledge production and promoters of socio-economic transformation (Okoro, 2020). But the ability of the universities to meet these goals has been endangered over time by regular industrial disputes between academic staff unions, non-academic staff unions, students and management bodies. Industrial relations in public universities in Nigeria, as in many developing countries, have become frequent occurrences marked by strikes, protests, work stoppages, and institutional instability (Okonkwo, 2025).

Within organizations, conflict can arise, intensify and be resolved in various ways, depending on the person who is in charge of the organization or a particular unit (Rahim, 2023). The challenges that University administrators face often involve balancing the institution's policy, the expectations of the staff, government directives and financial constraints to ensure the stability of an organization. Variations in leadership styles impact communication, employee morale, decision-making and conflict management (Atinuke et al., 2024). Therefore, the type of leadership is one of the most critical determinants of the outcomes of conflicts in HEIs.

Most research into leadership and industrial conflict has focused upon leadership types without considering the institutional environment in which leadership is exercised. But, the effectiveness of leadership is rarely divorced from institutional mechanisms like governance, accountability, collective bargaining, and organizational culture. A configurational approach is thus needed to understand the interaction between such different styles of leadership and institutional mechanisms and their impact on conflict outcomes (Uman et al., 2025). The configurational view considers that organizational effects are the result of a complex of conditions rather than simply a matter of changing variables. In the case of public universities, leadership styles can have varying effects on the nature of conflicts, depending on the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms (Yidana et al., 2025). For example, transformational leadership can have positive results in environments where there are good communication systems between individuals and institutions, but not if there are poor governance structures and administrative inefficiencies. This research examines the relationship between leadership styles and results of conflict in public universities by applying the configurational approach. The study in particular, investigates the effects of institutional mechanism on the effectiveness of leadership style in the management of industrial conflict in selected public universities in the South – West of Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Industrial action in public universities in Nigeria has been a recurring phenomenon, with the problems that have been unresolved ranging from insufficient funding, salary disputes, poor working conditions, irregular promotions, to governance problems. These conflicts frequently lead to long strikes, disruption of school calendars, decrease in school quality, and loss of the school's reputation. However, although there have been several interventions from government and university managements, industrial disputes are still becoming frequent (Taiwo et al., 2024). A key challenge in managing conflicts in public universities is the lack of effective institutional leadership in addressing the root causes of conflicts. The leadership

styles that university staff members experience are often found to be demoralizing to staff, especially if they feel their opinion is not being listened to, if they feel decisions are being made in a top-down, down-top, or opaque manner (Arowosafe et al., 2025).

The effect of leadership styles on organizational performance and conflict management has been studied. But few studies have focused on the relationship between leadership styles and institutional processes in influencing the nature of conflict. Most studies focus on the effect of leadership on organizational harmony without considering the factors that enhance or impede leadership effectiveness, particularly institutional structures. This void requires a configuration approach that considers the effects of conflicts within the industries in public universities based on their combination with different leadership styles. This is necessary in order to understand these interactions in the designing of suitable strategies for conflict management and institutional stability.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the configurational relationship between leadership styles and conflict outcomes in public universities.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the dominant leadership styles adopted by university administrators in public universities.
2. Identify major institutional mechanisms influencing conflict management in public universities.
3. Assess the relationship between leadership styles and industrial conflict outcomes.
4. Determine how institutional mechanisms mediate the relationship between leadership styles and conflict outcomes.
5. Propose strategies for improving conflict management through effective leadership and institutional reforms.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What leadership styles are commonly practiced in public universities?
2. What institutional mechanisms influence conflict management in public universities?
3. What is the relationship between leadership styles and conflict outcomes?
4. How do institutional mechanisms shape the effectiveness of leadership styles in managing conflicts?
5. What strategies can improve industrial harmony in public universities?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested:

- H01:** There is no significant relationship between transformational leadership style and positive conflict outcomes in public universities.
- H02:** Institutional mechanisms do not significantly mediate the relationship between leadership styles and conflict outcomes.
- H03:** Autocratic leadership style has no significant influence on industrial conflict escalation in public universities.

Literature Review

Concept of Leadership Styles

A leadership style is a way in which leaders behave when managing organizational members. A leadership style affects the way in which leaders interact with subordinates, make decisions, solve conflicts, and control organizational activities.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is characterized by motivating employees through common visions, motivation, stimulation, and personalized attention (Ali, 2026). The transformational leader fosters involvement, creativity, and cooperation. At universities, transformational leadership leads to greater levels of trust, commitment, and integration.

Transactional Leadership

Transaction-based leadership emphasizes interaction between the leaders and their followers. Conformity in transactional leadership is accomplished by using incentives, punishments, and performance controls (Ali & Khan, 2023). While transactional leadership helps to enhance managerial efficiency, too much emphasis on control measures can create stress within organizations.

Democratic Leadership

Democratic leaders involve their employees in the process of making decisions. This type of leadership is based on openness, inclusivity, and shared understanding. As Akpan & Afonyaa-Harry (2025) note, democratic leadership becomes especially important in universities where freedom of learning is highly esteemed.

Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leadership centralizes decision-making authority in the hands of leaders with minimal employee participation (Gbadebo, 2025). This leadership style often generates dissatisfaction, mistrust, and resistance among organizational members.

Industrial Conflict in Public Universities

Industrial conflict is any kind of conflict generated by a situation of having competing interests between parties involved within an organization. As per Adeyemo & Okeme (2021), in public universities, some of the problems that generate industrial conflicts include disparity in salaries, poor working conditions, promotions, policies, and financing. As per Okonkwo (2025), constant industrial conflicts can have adverse effects on teaching, research activities, employee morale, student academic performance, and productivity in general.

Institutional Mechanisms

Institutional mechanisms may be described as formal and informal systems of regulation of organizational activities. These are important determinants of decision-making processes, methods of grievance handling, and conflict management.

Some key examples of institutional mechanisms within university settings include:

- i. Collective bargaining structures
- ii. Communication channels
- iii. Disciplinary procedures
- iv. Administrative accountability systems
- v. Participatory governance frameworks
- vi. Grievance handling mechanisms
- vii. Organizational culture

Strong institutional mechanisms promote fairness, transparency, and trust, thereby improving conflict management outcomes (Ebohon, 2024).

Configurational Theory

Configurational theory is based on the assumption that organizational outcomes emerge from the interaction of interdependent factors as opposed to individual variables. In the view of this theory, leadership effectiveness is determined by context and institutions. The configurational theory is based on equifinality, whereby various combinations of leadership styles and institutional structures can have similar effects on conflict (Islam et al., 2025). For example, democratic leadership together with good communication structures can lead to similar positive results as transformational leadership coupled with grievances procedures.

Empirical Review

A number of empirical analyses have been conducted on the subject of leadership and conflict management within higher education organizations. According to Taiwo et al., (2024), a participatory style of leadership helped in significantly minimizing industrial conflicts among Nigerian universities, emphasizing the significance of communications and employee participation in decision-making processes. Ngwama & Ogaga-Oghene (2022) found that transformational leadership had a positive impact on organizational commitment and minimized grievances within public universities. Gana (2022) concluded that the poor institutional structure was one of the factors that made effective leadership challenging within the process of managing industrial conflicts in tertiary institutions. However, existing literature lacks evidence on mediating factors between leadership and industrial conflict management. This research aims to bridge this gap by taking into consideration the configurational approach.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Contingency Theory of Leadership and the Institutional Theory.

Contingency Theory

The contingency approach postulates that there is no one size fits all type of leadership style because different situations require different approaches (Amanawa, 2022). The approach is relevant due to the fact that institutions of higher learning, especially public universities are situated within very complex organizational environments.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory looks at the way that organizational behaviour is determined by formal structure, norms, and rules. Institutions affect leadership and conflict management through the establishment of appropriate organizational behavior. Contingency and institutional theories offer an appropriate perspective to analyze the impact of both leadership style and institutions on conflict outcomes.

Methodology**Research Design**

The research methodology used a mixed-method descriptive survey design. The quantitative and qualitative research methods were used simultaneously to gain detailed understanding about the leadership styles, organizational structures, and results of conflicts.

Research Location

This research was carried out at selected public universities located in South-Western Nigeria.

Target Population

The target population comprised of academics, administrative and non-administrative staffs, union leaders, and university administrators.

Sample Size and Sampling Method

The research used stratified random sampling to select a sample of 400 respondents.

Source of Data Collection

Primary data was collected by means of questionnaires and interviews while secondary data was sourced from journals, books, reports from universities and government documents.

Instrument for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale was used.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using:

- i. Descriptive statistics
- ii. Mean scores
- iii. Pearson correlation analysis
- iv. Multiple regression analysis
- v. Configurational interpretation

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Male	238	59.5%
Female	162	40.5%
Academic Staff	240	60%
Non-Academic Staff	110	27.5%
Administrators	50	12.5%

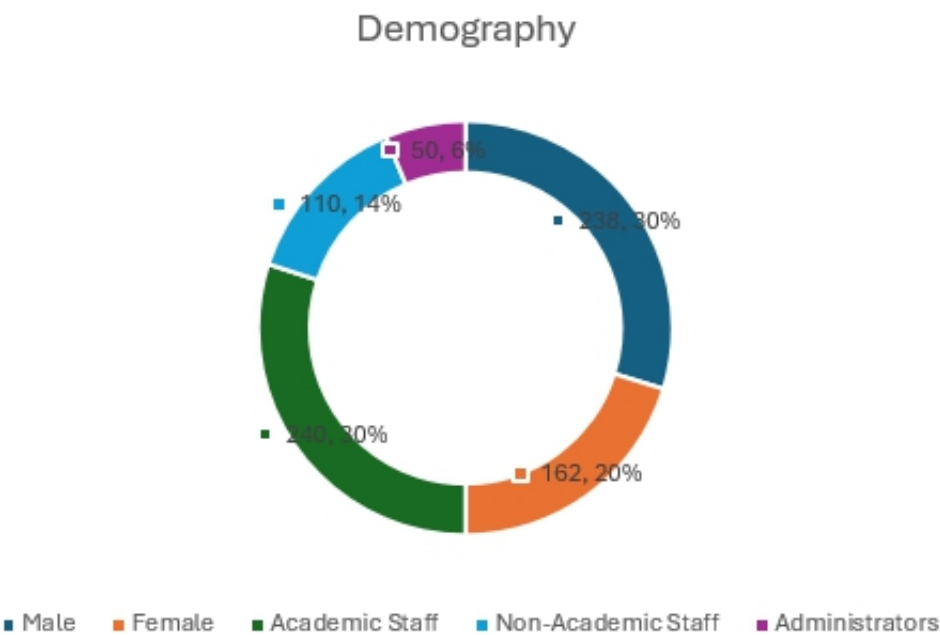


Figure 1: Demography

Table 2: Dominant Leadership Styles in Public Universities

Leadership Style	Mean Score	Interpretation
Transformational Leadership	4.12	High
Democratic Leadership	3.95	Moderate
Transactional Leadership	3.41	Moderate
Autocratic Leadership	2.76	Low

The findings indicate that transformational leadership is the most dominant leadership style among university administrators.

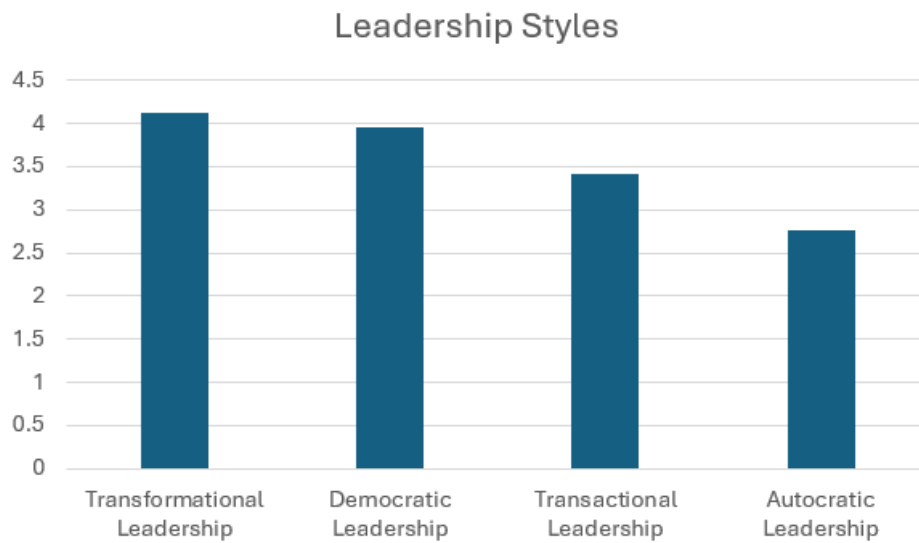


Figure 2: Leadership Styles

Table 3: Institutional Mechanisms Influencing Conflict Management

Institutional Mechanism	Mean Score
Communication Systems	4.05
Participatory Governance	3.98
Grievance Procedures	3.81
Administrative Accountability	3.74
Collective Bargaining Structures	4.10

The results show that collective bargaining structures and communication systems significantly influence conflict management.

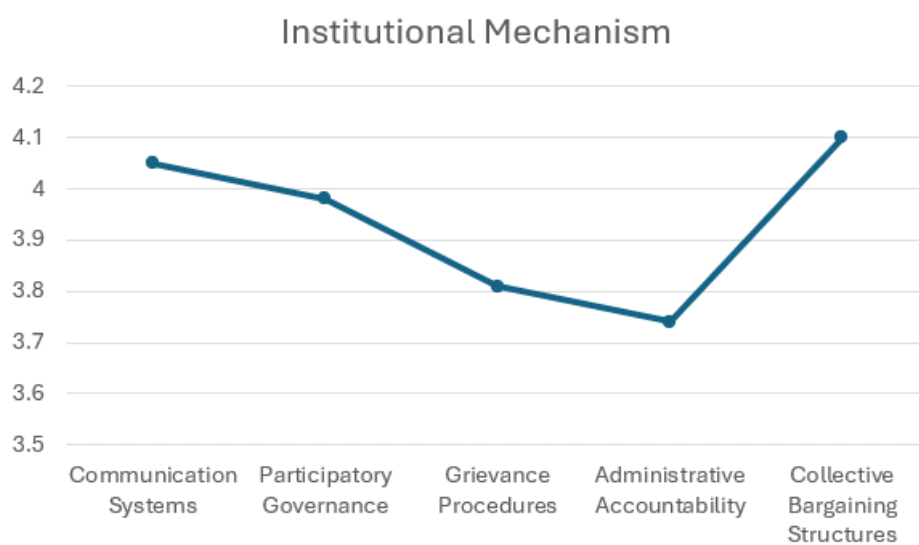


Figure 3: Institutional Mechanism

Table 4: Correlation Analysis

Variables	r-value	Significance
Transformational Leadership and Positive Conflict Outcomes	0.721	0.000
Democratic Leadership and Conflict Resolution	0.684	0.000
Autocratic Leadership and Conflict Escalation	0.632	0.000

The findings reveal significant relationships between leadership styles and conflict outcomes.

Table 5: Regression Analysis

Variable	Beta	t-value	Sig.
Transformational Leadership	0.481	6.234	0.000
Democratic Leadership	0.365	4.882	0.001
Institutional Mechanisms	0.512	7.101	0.000
Autocratic Leadership	-0.401	-5.214	0.000

The regression analysis indicates that institutional mechanisms significantly mediate the relationship between leadership styles and conflict outcomes.

Discussion of Findings

From the findings of this study, it can be argued that leadership style is an important determinant of the results of conflicts in public institutions of higher education. First, it was proven that transformational leaders promote cooperation, inspire trust, and achieve positive outcomes from the process of conflict resolution because such leaders consult and motivate their subordinates. The same effect is produced by democratic leadership because it creates opportunities for involving employees in the process of decision making.

On the other hand, autocratic leadership facilitates conflict because decisions are centralized and employees have little input in them. Consequently, when they are under authoritarian leadership, employees feel that managers make unjustified decisions. It should also be noted that the results show that institutions are mediators of leadership influence on conflict processes. Good communication systems, grievance systems, and collective bargaining mechanisms allow for better handling of conflicts. Configurational approach to analysis helped reveal that positive conflict outcomes result from specific combinations of leadership styles and institutional factors.

Conclusion

The study focused on the role of configuration of leadership styles in industrial relations and the outcome of the conflicts within the institutions of higher learning with special reference to institutional factors. Results indicate that for the leaders to be effective in handling disputes, not only does the leader matter, but the institutional environment that makes the organization

run smoothly is important. For transformational and democratic styles of leadership to enhance industrial relations, there must be an effective institutional factor such as effective means of communication, participation in governance, and dispute handling system. Autocratic style and poor institutional factor result in industrial disharmony. Conclusion from the above discussion shows that sustainable conflict management calls for combination of adaptation and institutional change.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Transformational and democratic leadership styles must be encouraged by university administration.
2. Institutions like communication channels and complaints must be improved in public universities.
3. The governance structure that promotes participation of employees in decision-making must be institutionalized.
4. Government must provide adequate funding to public universities to minimize conflicts due to inadequate resources.
5. Training programmes for managing conflicts must be organized for university administrators.
6. Collective bargaining agreement must be established to prevent industrial disputes.
7. University should have independent committees to manage conflicts.

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