

Leader Competencies and Organizational Effectiveness in Hospitality: Communication and Trust as Mediating Mechanisms

Morena Paulišić

Juraj Dobrila University of Pula
Faculty of Economics and Tourism “Dr. Mijo Mirković”,
Pula, Croatia
mpauli@unipu.hr

Patricia Zagorc Licul

PhD Candidate, Libertas međunarodno sveučilište
Zagreb, Croatia
patricia.zagorc.licul@libertas.hr

Boris Miletic

PhD Candidate, Libertas međunarodno sveučilište
Zagreb, Croatia
boris.miletic@libertas.hr

Abstract

This study examines how leader competencies contribute to organizational effectiveness through communication and trust, using employee satisfaction as a measurable organizational outcome. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 62 employees of a large hotel group operating across Croatian and Central European markets. Five constructs were measured using a 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire. Data were analysed using Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and bootstrap mediation analysis, while reliability and validity diagnostics were also performed. The results indicate that democratic leadership is strongly associated with employee satisfaction; however, this relationship is primarily indirect. Communication and trust jointly mediated 78% of the total effect of democratic leadership on employee satisfaction, whereas the direct effect became non-significant after the mediators were included. In contrast, autocratic leadership showed no significant relationship with employee satisfaction. The study contributes to leadership research by highlighting leader competencies as organizational capabilities and identifying communication and trust as the key relational mechanisms through which democratic leadership creates organizational value in a knowledge-intensive hospitality context. The findings emphasize the importance of developing communication and trust-building competencies through leadership selection, assessment, and development programmes to strengthen employee satisfaction and organizational effectiveness.

Keywords

Leader competencies, Communication, Trust, Employee satisfaction, Hospitality.

1. Introduction

Service organizations today operate under pressures that place leadership at the centre of organizational survival rather than at its periphery. Digital transformation is reshaping how work is coordinated and monitored, structural labour shortages have intensified competition for talent, and a younger workforce increasingly evaluates employers on autonomy, transparency and meaningful participation rather than on hierarchy alone (Deloitte 2025). In hospitality specifically, these dynamics are amplified by seasonality, high turnover, emotionally demanding guest interaction and thin operating margins, so that the quality of frontline leadership translates almost directly into the quality of service delivered. European evidence on rising work-related psychosocial strain (EU-OSHA 2025) reframes leadership not as a soft, discretionary asset but as a determinant of whether organizations retain, engage and mobilize the people on whom their performance depends.

Leadership scholarship, however, has not fully kept pace with this shift. For much of its history, leadership research has been organized around styles – democratic versus autocratic, transactional versus transformational – treating leadership as a relatively stable behavioural disposition of the individual leader (Yukl 2013). This style paradigm has produced robust findings, but it carries two limitations. First, style describes what leaders do rather than what capabilities the organization possesses; it locates value in the person rather than in a developable, transferable organizational resource. Second, the style literature has been better at documenting that leadership is associated with outcomes than at explaining how that association arises, so that the causal middle of the leadership effectiveness relationship often remains a black box.

A competency-based perspective offers a way to open that box. Building on McClelland's (1973) argument that performance is better predicted by specific, developable competencies than by global traits, and on subsequent competency frameworks (Yukl 2013; Korn Ferry 2020), this view treats effective leadership as a set of measurable capabilities that can be built through selection, training and organizational learning. Unlike leadership styles, which primarily describe behavioural orientations, competencies represent organizational capabilities that can be systematically assessed, developed, and transferred across managerial roles. They encompass not only communication skills but also emotional intelligence, ethical judgement, adaptability, conflict management, and the ability to motivate employees under changing organizational conditions. Because competencies are learnable rather than fixed personal attributes, they provide organizations with a practical mechanism for strengthening leadership effectiveness through targeted development initiatives. This perspective shifts attention from identifying successful leaders to developing leadership capacity as a sustainable organizational resource. Two competencies recur as especially consequential: the leader's communication competence – timely information sharing, goal clarity, openness to input and feedback quality – and the leader's capacity to cultivate trust, understood as employees' willingness to rely on the leader in the expectation of consistency and fairness (Mayer et al. 1995). Both are positioned as mechanisms rather than outcomes of leadership: communication is the medium through which participative leadership is enacted, and trust is the relational resource it generates. Social exchange theory (Blau 1964) and leader-member exchange theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995) predict that when leaders communicate openly and behave in trustworthy ways, employees reciprocate with engagement and discretionary effort, while the job demands-resources model (Bakker and Demerouti 2007) frames these competencies as job resources that buffer demands and drive positive attitudinal outcomes. Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that leadership competencies operate as strategic organizational resources that shape employees' cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses. Rather than influencing organizational effectiveness directly, leaders create value by fostering high-quality communication and trust-based relationships, which enable employees to contribute more effectively to organizational goals. From a resource-based perspective, communication and trust represent valuable, difficult-to-imitate organizational capabilities that strengthen relational capital and contribute to sustainable competitive advantage in service organizations. Consequently, communication and trust are conceptualized as complementary relational competencies through which leadership translates into higher organizational effectiveness.

This reasoning motivates a shift in emphasis from asking which leadership style raises outcomes to asking how leader competencies contribute to organizational effectiveness, and through which mechanisms – a complement to, not a replacement of, the style paradigm. Two gaps remain underexplored. First, although communication and trust are each individually linked to employee outcomes, they are rarely modelled together as the sequential mechanisms that carry the effect of leadership onto organizationally relevant outcomes. Second, this mechanism-centred question has seldom been examined in hospitality, a knowledge-intensive service setting where the leadership-service quality link is unusually direct and where evidence remains fragmented. To address these gaps, this study examines whether communication and trust function as complementary mediating mechanisms linking leadership competencies to organizational effectiveness in the hospitality sector. Specifically, the study investigates whether the relationship

between democratic leadership competencies and employee satisfaction as an indicator of organizational effectiveness transmitted through leaders' communication competence and employees' trust. By doing so, the study extends competency based leadership research beyond behavioural styles and provides empirical evidence from a knowledge intensive service context.

1.1 Objectives

The objective of this study is to examine how leaders' competencies contribute to organizational effectiveness through communication and trust, using employee satisfaction as a measurable organizational outcome. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) test a competency-based conceptual framework in which competency-based democratic leadership influences employee satisfaction indirectly, through leader communication competence and trust in the leader; (2) quantify the extent to which communication and trust mediate the relationship between democratic leadership and employee satisfaction, using formal bootstrap mediation analysis; (3) establish whether autocratic leadership elements lie outside this value-creating pathway; and (4) provide a competency-based, mechanism-centred contribution to the leadership literature, with context-specific evidence and managerial guidance from a knowledge-intensive hospitality setting.

2. Literature Review

The literature review integrates four theoretical traditions competency theory, social exchange theory, leader member exchange (LMX) theory and the job demands–resources (JD-R) model around a single question: through what capabilities, and by what relational process, does leadership generate organizationally valuable outcomes?

2.1 From leadership styles to leadership competencies

The behavioural style tradition established that how leaders act matters, distinguishing participative from directive approaches and consistently linking participative leadership to more favourable employee attitudes and organizational outcomes (Yukl, 2013). Its explanatory power, however, is constrained by its unit of analysis. Leadership styles describe relatively stable behavioural orientations of individual leaders, but they provide limited guidance regarding the specific capabilities that organizations should develop to improve leadership effectiveness. Consequently, style-based approaches are valuable for describing leadership behaviour but offer less insight into the mechanisms through which leadership influences organizational outcomes. The competency perspective addresses this limitation. Originating in McClelland's (1973) proposition that job performance is better predicted by demonstrable competencies than by general traits, and further developed by Boyatzis (1982) and subsequent competency frameworks (Yukl, 2013; Korn Ferry, 2020), this perspective conceptualizes effective leadership as a set of measurable, observable, and developable capabilities. Unlike leadership styles, competencies (Sanghi, 2011) integrate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours into specific performance standards that can be systematically assessed, developed, and embedded in organizational processes such as recruitment, performance appraisal, leadership development, succession planning, and career management. From this perspective, competencies represent the operational expression of leadership. Whereas a participative leadership style describes a general managerial orientation, competencies specify the concrete behaviours through which that orientation is enacted. For example, communication competence is reflected in timely information sharing, goal clarity, constructive feedback, and openness to employee input, while trust-building competence is demonstrated through consistency, fairness, integrity, and reliability. These competencies therefore constitute the proximal mechanisms through which democratic leadership creates organizational value. Viewing leadership through a competency lens also shifts attention from identifying successful leaders to developing organizational leadership capacity. Because competencies are transferable and learnable, they become strategic organizational capabilities rather than merely individual characteristics. Accordingly, democratic leadership is best understood not as a direct predictor of organizational effectiveness, but as a distal behavioural orientation whose influence is transmitted through the relational competencies it mobilizes, particularly communication and trust.

2.2 Why communication and trust are mechanisms

If the competency perspective identifies what capabilities matter, social exchange theory (SET; Blau, 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) explains why they translate into employee outcomes. SET holds that relationships evolve through reciprocal exchanges governed by norms of obligation: when one party provides valued resources, the other is impelled to reciprocate (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Madison et al., 2025). Applied to leadership, a leader who communicates openly, shares information and behaves consistently supplies relational resources that employees repay with commitment, cooperation and discretionary effort (Liden and Sun, 2026; Xuecheng et al., 2022). LMX theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995) specifies this process at the dyadic level, describing how high-quality exchanges marked by mutual trust, respect and open communication yield superior outcomes, and makes explicit the ordering of

the mechanisms: communication is the behavioural input through which relationship quality is built, and trust is the relational state that results. Trust is the pivotal construct in this logic, since exchange relationships depend on the expectation that the other party will act reliably and fairly – the definition of trust advanced by Mayer et al. (1995). Trust therefore converts communicative behaviour into a durable, high-quality relationship; meta-analytic evidence confirms its strong association with satisfaction, commitment and performance (Dirks and Ferrin, 2002; Zheng et al., 2022).

LMX theory (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) specifies this process at the dyadic level, describing how high-quality exchanges marked by mutual trust, respect and open communication yield superior outcomes, and makes explicit the ordering of the mechanisms: communication is the behavioural input through which relationship quality is built, and trust is the relational state that results (Walumbwa, 2011). Recent work on relational dynamics of leadership corroborates this mediating role, showing that leader–member relationship quality frequently functions as an exchange-based mechanism between leadership behaviours and employee outcomes, while also arguing that LMX alone is not a complete theory of exchange processes (Scandura and Meuser, 2022; Liden and Sun, 2026). Recent research on communication and trust in leadership demonstrates that open and consistent leader communication fosters trust, which in turn enhances cooperation and organizational performance, reinforcing the view that communication and trust function as core relational mechanisms rather than merely desirable interpersonal attributes (Kuráth et al., 2023).

2.3 The job demands–resources model: from mechanism to outcome

Social exchange and LMX explain how leader competencies generate trust; the JD-R model (Bakker and Demerouti 2007) explains why the resulting relationship yields positive outcomes. JD-R distinguishes job demands, which deplete, from job resources, which motivate and buffer strain. Leader communication and trust are canonical job resources: they clarify expectations, provide feedback, signal support and reduce uncertainty. This is especially consequential in hospitality, where demands emotional labour, unpredictable guest interaction, shift work are chronically high, and where leader-provided resources plausibly determine whether the work environment is experienced as supportive or depleting (EU-OSHA 2025). JD-R thus positions employee satisfaction as a proximal, motivationally grounded indicator of the resource quality of the work environment, well established as a correlate of retention and service performance (Judge et al. 2001), which is the justification for adopting satisfaction as the study's measurable outcome.

2.4 Conceptual framework and hypotheses

Read together, the four traditions converge on a testable account: democratic, competency-based leadership contributes to organizational effectiveness indirectly, by building the communication and trust through which employee outcomes are shaped. Building on this synthesis, the study proposes an integrative conceptual framework (Figure 1) in which democratic, competency-based leadership influences employee satisfaction not directly, but through a sequence of relational mechanisms. The framework is offered as an authorial integration of established theories rather than as a new general theory of leadership. A democratic orientation supplies the conditions under which leaders enact communication competence; communication is the behavioural input that builds trust; and trust then shapes employee satisfaction, adopted as a proximal, measurable indicator of organizational effectiveness. Autocratic elements are included as a contrasting orientation expected to lie outside this value-creating pathway.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

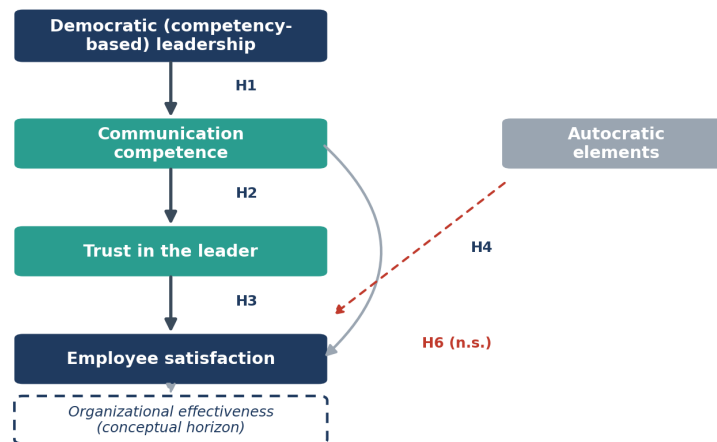


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking democratic leadership, communication, trust and employee satisfaction

Democratic leaders operate through participation, two-way communication, and openness. Consequently, a participative leadership orientation should be reflected in higher leader communication competence.

H1. Democratic leadership is positively related to leader communication competence.

According to Social Exchange Theory and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory, open and consistent communication provides the foundation for developing trust between leaders and employees.

H2. Leader communication competence is positively related to trust in the leader.

Trust reduces relational uncertainty and functions as a job resource that promotes positive employee attitudes. Consequently, higher trust in the leader is expected to increase employee satisfaction.

H3. Trust in the leader is positively related to employee satisfaction.

Communication also contributes directly to employee satisfaction by providing goal clarity, constructive feedback, and opportunities for employee voice.

H4. Leader communication competence is positively related to employee satisfaction.

The competency based framework proposes that the positive effect of democratic leadership on employee satisfaction is transmitted through communication and trust rather than occurring directly.

H5. Communication and trust mediate the relationship between democratic leadership and employee satisfaction.

Because value creation is expected to occur through relational competencies rather than directive leadership behaviours, autocratic leadership is not expected to contribute positively to employee satisfaction.

H6. Autocratic leadership is not significantly related to employee satisfaction.

Overall, H1–H4 examine the individual relationships among the constructs, H5 tests the proposed mediation model, and H6 provides a contrasting leadership perspective. Given the close conceptual relationship between communication and trust, the framework is examined using two complementary mediation models: a primary model combining communication and trust into a single mediating capability and a supplementary sequential model in which communication precedes trust.

3. Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional, survey-based correlational design to examine the proposed mediation model. Data were collected from employees of a large hotel group operating across Croatian and Central European markets. This knowledge-intensive service context provides an appropriate setting for examining how leadership competencies influence organizational effectiveness through communication and trust. Given the cross-sectional design, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of associations rather than causal relationships.

Data analysis was conducted in four stages. First, descriptive statistics and reliability analyses were performed. Second, Pearson correlation analysis was used to test the relationships proposed in H1–H4 and H6. Third, multiple regression analysis examined the predictors of employee satisfaction, with variance inflation factors (VIF) used to assess multicollinearity. Finally, mediation analysis (H5) was conducted using ordinary least squares (OLS) path analysis with standardized coefficients and bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5,000 resamples. An indirect effect was considered significant when its 95% confidence interval did not include zero. Two mediation models were estimated: a primary model combining communication and trust as a single mediating capability and a supplementary sequential model in which communication preceded trust. All analyses were performed using Python.

4. Data Collection

Data were collected in September 2025 through an anonymous online questionnaire administered to employees of a large hotel group operating in Croatia and Central Europe. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. A convenience sample of 62 employees ($N = 62$) was obtained. The sample consisted primarily of women (67.7%), employees aged 25–35 years (45.2%), and respondents with more than five years of work experience (50.0%). Most participants worked in the food and beverage department (40.3%), followed by administration, housekeeping, reception, and other departments. The questionnaire comprised 20 items measuring five constructs on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree): democratic leadership (4 items), autocratic leadership (2 items), communication (4 items), trust in the leader (5 items), and employee satisfaction (5 items). Communication and trust were jointly conceptualized as leader competencies in the primary mediation model. Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The four multi-item reflective constructs demonstrated excellent reliability ($\alpha = .899-.919$), whereas the two-item autocratic leadership scale showed lower reliability ($\alpha = .560$) and was therefore interpreted with caution. Common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test, while discriminant validity was evaluated using the HTMT criterion. Participation was based on informed consent. No personally identifiable or sensitive data were collected, and all results were analysed and reported only in aggregate form.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Results

Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients are presented in Table 1. Communication received the highest mean score ($M = 3.90$), followed by trust ($M = 3.85$), employee satisfaction ($M = 3.81$), and democratic leadership ($M = 3.64$), whereas autocratic leadership received the lowest mean score ($M = 3.02$). The four reflective constructs demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .899 to .919.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and reliability ($N = 62$)

Scale	M	SD	α
Team communication	3.90	0.84	.919
Trust in leader	3.85	0.87	.916
Employee satisfaction	3.81	0.91	.907
Democratic style	3.64	0.84	.899
Autocratic elements	3.02	1.00	.560

Correlation analysis (Table 2) showed that democratic leadership was strongly and positively associated with communication ($r = .81$, $p < .001$), supporting H1. Communication was, in turn, strongly associated with trust ($r = .88$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. Both communication and trust were strongly and positively correlated with employee satisfaction ($r = .88$, $p < .001$), providing support for H3 and H4. In contrast, autocratic leadership showed no significant relationship with employee satisfaction ($r = .12$, $p = .336$) or with any of the remaining study variables, supporting H6.

Table 2. Pearson correlations among constructs (N = 62)

	Dem.	Aut.	Sat.	Trust	Comm.
Democratic style	—	.05	.83***	.86***	.81***
Autocratic elements	.05	—	.12	-.01	.04
Satisfaction	.83***	.12	—	.88***	.88***
Trust	.86***	-.01	.88***	—	.88***
Communication	.81***	.04	.88***	.88***	—

Multiple regression analysis (Table 3) explained 82.9% of the variance in employee satisfaction ($R^2 = .829$, adjusted $R^2 = .821$, $F(3, 58) = 94.04$, $p < .001$). Both communication ($\beta = .39$, $p = .002$) and trust ($\beta = .37$, $p = .009$) emerged as significant positive predictors of employee satisfaction, whereas democratic leadership was no longer a significant predictor after controlling for the mediating variables ($\beta = .19$, $p = .087$). This pattern of results is consistent with the proposed mediation model. Variance inflation factor (VIF) values, with a maximum of 6.47, indicated substantial overlap between communication and trust, supporting their conceptualization as a combined mediating capability in the primary mediation analysis.

Table 3. Standardized regression predicting employee satisfaction ($R^2 = .829$; adjusted $R^2 = .821$; $F(3, 58) = 94.04$, $p < .001$)

Predictor	β	p	VIF
Team communication	.39	.002	4.72
Trust in leader	.37	.009	6.47
Democratic style	.19	.087	4.05

5.2 Mediation model

The primary mediation analysis showed that democratic leadership was a strong positive predictor of the combined communication and trust mediator ($\beta = .86$, $p < .001$). In turn, the combined mediator significantly predicted employee satisfaction after controlling for democratic leadership ($\beta = .75$, $p < .001$). Although democratic leadership had a strong total effect on employee satisfaction ($\beta = .83$, $p < .001$), its direct effect became non-significant after communication and trust were included in the model ($\beta = .18$, $p = .097$). Bootstrap analysis confirmed a substantial indirect effect ($\beta = .65$, 95% CI [.51, .78]), indicating that communication and trust jointly accounted for approximately 78% of the total effect. These findings provide strong support for the proposed mediation mechanism and for Hypothesis 5 (Table 4, Figure 2).

Table 4. Mediation of the democratic leadership–satisfaction relationship (bootstrap: 5,000 resamples; proportion mediated = 78%)

Path / effect	β	p / 95% CI
a: democratic style $\rightarrow$ communication & trust	.86	$p < .001$
b: communication & trust $\rightarrow$ satisfaction X	.75	$p < .001$
c: total effect	.83	$p < .001$
c': direct effect (controlling for M)	.18	$p = .097$ (n.s.)
a·b: indirect (mediated) effect	.65	95% CI [.51, .78]

Figure 2. Mediation model (standardized coefficients, N = 62)

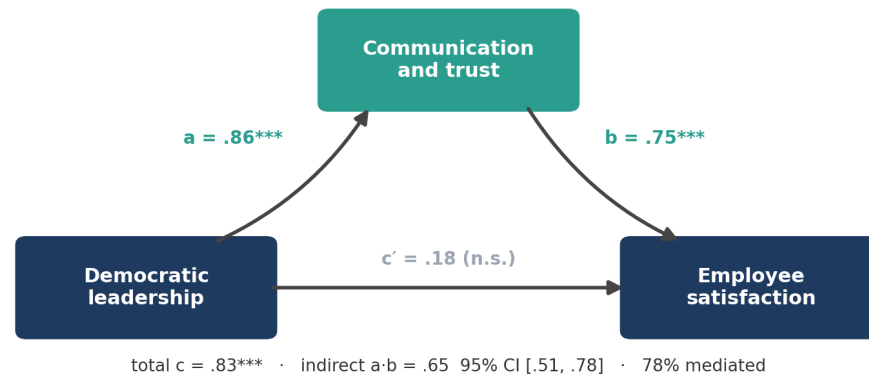


Figure 2. Mediation of the democratic leadership–satisfaction relationship through communication and trust

In the supplementary sequential mediation model, all hypothesized relationships were statistically significant. Democratic leadership positively predicted communication competence ($\beta = .81$), communication competence positively predicted trust ($\beta = .54$), and trust, in turn, positively predicted employee satisfaction ($\beta = .37$), with all effects significant at $p < .01$. Furthermore, the serial indirect effect of democratic leadership on employee satisfaction through communication and trust was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = .17$, 95% CI [.03, .38]), corroborating the proposed sequential mechanism while indicating that the combined mediation model provides a more stable representation of the relationships among the constructs given their conceptual overlap.

5.3 Proposed Improvements

The findings suggest that democratic leadership creates organizational value only when translated into concrete relational competencies. First, leadership development should prioritize communication competence by strengthening information sharing, goal clarity, employee voice, and feedback quality, as communication represents the primary pathway through which leadership influences employee satisfaction. Second, organizations should foster trust by promoting consistency, fairness, transparency, and regular feedback practices. Third, communication and trust should be integrated into competency frameworks, leadership assessment, and development programmes, enabling organizations to manage these competencies as strategic organizational capabilities rather than individual attributes. Finally, although not formally tested, the descriptive results indicate that younger employees and staff in the food and beverage department reported comparatively lower perceptions of democratic leadership and satisfaction, suggesting these groups may benefit most from targeted leadership development initiatives.

5.4 Limitations

Given the single-source, self-report design, common method bias and discriminant validity were assessed. Harman's single-factor test indicated that the first factor accounted for 61.8% of the variance, suggesting the presence of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). In addition, HTMT values between communication, trust, and employee satisfaction exceeded the recommended threshold, indicating substantial conceptual overlap among these constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). Accordingly, the results are interpreted as supporting a coherent communication-and-trust mechanism rather than fully independent constructs. Several additional limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference, and the proposed temporal sequence is theoretically rather than empirically established. Furthermore, the convenience sample from a single hotel group (N = 62) limits the generalizability of the findings and precludes subgroup analyses. Finally, the autocratic leadership scale demonstrated relatively low reliability ($\alpha = .560$) and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how leader competencies contribute to organizational effectiveness through communication and trust, using employee satisfaction as an indicator of organizational effectiveness in a large Central European hotel group. The findings support the proposed competency-based framework. Democratic leadership influenced employee satisfaction primarily through communication and trust, while its direct effect became non-significant once these

mediating mechanisms were included. Together, communication and trust accounted for 78% of the total effect, whereas autocratic leadership showed no significant relationship with employee satisfaction.

The study contributes to the leadership literature by shifting attention from leadership styles to the competencies through which leadership creates organizational value. Rather than viewing democratic leadership as a direct predictor of employee outcomes, the findings demonstrate that its effectiveness depends on leaders' ability to communicate openly and build trust. By integrating competency theory, Social Exchange Theory, Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), and the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, the study provides a mechanism-centred explanation of how leadership influences organizational effectiveness in a knowledge intensive hospitality context. From a practical perspective, organizations should invest in developing communication, trust-building, and other relational competencies through leadership selection, assessment, and development programmes. Treating these competencies as strategic organizational capabilities may strengthen employee satisfaction and, ultimately, organizational effectiveness.

Future research should validate the proposed framework using larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and structural equation modelling to examine the relationships between leadership competencies, organizational climate, service quality, and organizational performance.

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Biographies

Morena Paulišić is a Full Professor at the Faculty of Economics and Tourism "Dr. Mijo Mirković", Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Croatia, where she serves as the Head of the Department of Management. Her teaching and research activities focus on human resource management, leadership, organizational behaviour, strategic management, and tourism management, with particular emphasis on sustainable organizational development and employee performance. She holds a Ph.D. in Economics and has extensive academic and professional experience in both higher education and the private sector. She teaches undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral courses in management while actively contributing to curriculum development, international academic cooperation, and knowledge transfer between academia and industry. Her current research interests include leadership competencies, human resource management, employee well-being, organizational sustainability, artificial intelligence in management, ESG, and sustainable productivity. She has participated in several national and international scientific projects. She has published scientific papers in peer-reviewed journals and conference proceedings and has presented her research at international conferences across Europe and beyond. She has also participated in Erasmus teaching mobility programmes at universities in Italy, Portugal, France, Spain, and Armenia, strengthening international collaboration in management research and education. She continuously enhances her professional competencies through executive education and specialized training, including certification as an NLP Master, Wingwave Coach and other professional development programmes. Through her research, teaching, and industry collaboration, she promotes evidence-based management practices that bridge academic knowledge and organizational practice while fostering innovation, responsible leadership, and sustainable organizational development.

Patricia Zagorc Licul is a senior public administration professional with extensive experience in regional government in Croatia. She currently serves as the Head of the Department for General Affairs of Istria County, based in Pula, where she coordinates administrative, technical, information technology, logistical, and general support services for the county administration. Before assuming her current position, she held the role of Head of the Accounting Division within the County's financial administration, where she was responsible for public financial management and accounting operations. Earlier in her career, she gained valuable managerial experience in the private sector, holding executive positions in business organizations. In late 2025, she was appointed to the Governing Board of the Istrian Health Centers, where she has contributed to the governance and organizational development of the regional public healthcare system during a period of institutional transformation. She graduated in Economics from the Faculty of Economics and Tourism "Dr. Mijo Mirković" at Juraj Dobrila University of Pula in 1999 and has continuously pursued professional development and currently is a doctoral student at Libertas International University. Her scientific interests focus on the effective application of management and leadership practices in the public sector, with particular emphasis on improving public governance, enhancing organizational effectiveness, and ensuring the efficient and sustainable management of public resources for the benefit of the community.

Boris Miletić is the Prefect of Istria County, Croatia, a position he has held since 2021. As the head of the regional government, he is responsible for the strategic development of one of Croatia's most economically developed regions, overseeing policies related to economic development, tourism, infrastructure, education, healthcare, and sustainable

development. Since 2022, he has served as an independent Prefect, and since 2025, he has also been Vice President of the Croatian County Association. Previously, Mr. Miletić served as Mayor of the City of Pula from 2006 to 2021, leading the city's strategic development for fifteen years. He was also President of the Pula Tourist Board (2009–2021) and has been President of the Istria County Tourist Board since 2021. In addition, he served three terms as a Member of the Croatian Parliament and held positions on supervisory and governing boards in the fields of healthcare, water management, regional development, and public enterprises. He graduated in Economics from the Faculty of Economics and Tourism "Dr. Mijo Mirković" at Juraj Dobrila University of Pula in 1999 and completed executive education at Cleveland State University (USA), the University of Zagreb, and the University of Split. He is currently a doctoral student at Libertas International University. Before entering executive political office, he worked in regional economic development at the Department of Economy of Istria County, the Istrian Development Agency (IDA), and the Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development (HBOR). His current research interests focus on the intersection of management, finance, and sustainable development, with particular emphasis on bridging theory and practice to support regional competitiveness and long-term sustainable growth.