

## Transformational vs Transactional Leadership and Organizational Ambidexterity for Innovation : A Systematic Literature Review

*(Kepemimpinan Transformasional vs Transaksional dan Ambidexteritas Organisasi untuk Inovasi : Tinjauan Literatur Sistematis)*

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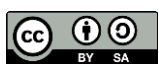
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### Abstract :

**Objective :** This study aims to analyze and compare the influence of Transformational Leadership (TL) and Transactional Leadership (TR) on organizational innovation and ambidexterity (exploration and exploitation) in the digital era.

**Methods :** Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA 2020 framework, this research reviewed 42 scholarly articles published between 2015 and 2025 from databases including Scopus, Web of Science, SAGE, and ScienceDirect.

**Results :** The results indicate that transformational leadership supports explorative innovation, while transactional leadership strengthens exploitative innovation. Together, they create organizational ambidexterity that enables sustainable innovation and adaptability in the digital era.

**Keywords :** Transformational Leadership, Employee Competence, Work Ethic, Employee Performance, Innovative Work Behavior

## 1. Introduction

In the era of accelerating digital disruption, organizations are required to be able to adapt dynamically to uncertain business environment changes. This change demands leadership that is not only capable of maintaining operational stability but also encourages the exploration of new opportunities.

The two most frequently studied leadership styles in the context of organizational innovation are transformational leadership (TL) and transactional leadership (TR). Transformational leadership is understood as a leader's ability to inspire, motivate, and build the organization's future vision, while transactional leadership emphasizes structure, control, and reward–punishment exchanges to achieve short-term performance ([Bass and Riggio, 2006](#)). However, in the context of innovation, the two cannot be viewed as mutually exclusive dichotomies. In fact, the balance between these two leadership styles is believed to be the key to achieving organizational ambidexterity the organization's ability to simultaneously explore new opportunities and exploit existing capabilities ([O'Reilly and Tushman 2013](#)).

Transformational leadership has been proven to have a positive influence on employee innovative behaviour because it can foster trust, commitment, and high emotional involvement ([García-Morales et al. 2012](#); [Gumusluoglu and Ilsev 2009](#)). Conversely, transactional leadership is often viewed as less supportive of innovation because it emphasizes compliance and procedures. However, recent studies show that TR still plays a significant role in supporting the efficiency and stability of exploitation processes ([Jansen et al. 2009](#)). In the context of organizational ambidexterity, TL plays a greater role in driving the exploration dimension (search for new ideas, experimentation, and organizational learning), while TR is more relevant for supporting exploitation (standardization, efficiency, and resource optimization) ([Rosing, Frese, and Bausch 2011](#)). Thus, the synergy between TL and TR is considered essential for building an organization that is both innovative and adaptive.

Although many studies have examined the influence of TL and TR on innovation separately, there is still limited research that explicitly compares the two within the framework of organizational ambidexterity ([Guo, Zhang, Yang, and Xia, 2025](#)). Most literature focuses on the direct impact of TL on innovation performance without investigating how the combination of both styles mediates the balance between exploration and exploitation ([Keller, 2020](#); [Ahmad and Gao 2018](#)). Consequently, a theoretical gap remains in understanding how leaders can simultaneously navigate

the paradoxical demands between stability and flexibility. In the context of the digital era, ambidexterity becomes increasingly important because digital technology accelerates innovation cycles and demands cross-functional integration within organizations (Li et al. 2022). Therefore, this research seeks to present a systematic literature review (SLR) that summarizes empirical and conceptual evidence on how TL and TR affect innovation and organizational ambidexterity.

From a practical perspective, organizations face significant challenges in balancing the focus on exploration (creating new products and services) with exploitation (optimizing existing processes and business models). In many cases, innovation failure is not caused by a lack of creative ideas, but by managerial inability to balance these two orientations (Birkinshaw and Gibson 2004). TL, with its visionary approach, tends to be effective in the early stages of innovation, when the organization needs new ideas and psychological support for change. Conversely, TR becomes important during the implementation stage, where control and efficiency determine the success of innovation (Lindebaum and Cartwright 2010). The integration of both supports the formation of ambidextrous leadership, which strategically blends strategic flexibility and operational control in a balanced manner (Rosing et al. 2011).

This research also has theoretical relevance in enriching the discourse on leadership theory integration. Many modern leadership theories emphasize that leader effectiveness is not determined by one specific style alone, but by the ability to adjust leadership styles according to the organizational context and stage of innovation (Yukl 2013). By conducting a PRISMA-based SLR, this research will map trends, dominant themes, and research gaps in the relationship between TL, TR, innovation, and ambidexterity. The primary focus is directed at how the differences and interactions between these two styles support exploration (exploration-driven innovation) and exploitation (exploitation-driven innovation).

Furthermore, the relevance of this study is even higher in the digital era because digitalization has changed the landscape of leadership and organizational innovation. Digital technology demands leaders to become facilitators of adaptive and

collaborative learning ([Nambisan et al. 2019](#)). In this context, TL acts as a catalyst for change by fostering a digital vision and an experimental culture, while TR helps maintain discipline and structure in the implementation of digital strategy. The balance between the two will determine the extent to which an organization is able to undergo digital transformation without losing operational efficiency ([Zahra and George, 2020](#)).

Based on an initial literature review, it can be formulated that the research gap lies in the lack of a comparative approach that integrates both leadership styles within an ambidexterity model. Most studies tend to examine the linear relationship between TL and innovation, while TR's contribution to stability and exploitation is often overlooked ([Jansen et al. 2009](#); [Rosing et al. 2011](#)). Therefore, this research aims to: (1) summarize empirical evidence of the influence of TL and TR on organizational innovation; (2) identify how each style supports exploration and exploitation; and (3) formulate a conceptual model that explains the role of ambidexterity as a linking mechanism between leadership and organizational innovation.

Thus, this research not only contributes to the development of leadership and innovation theory but also provides practical guidance for organizations to build strategic balance in facing digital disruption. Through a PRISMA-based SLR approach, this research will present a comprehensive mapping of recent research results, while highlighting the need for the integration of TL and TR as the foundation of ambidextrous leadership in the era of sustainable innovation.

## 2. Methods

This research uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method with the guidance of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) to guarantee transparency, replication, and accountability of the review process. The research design focuses on a comparative study of the influence of transformational leadership (TL) and transactional leadership (TR) on organizational innovation and ambidexterity. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical evidence from various

relevant academic sources during the 2015–2025 period, a time when literature on ambidexterity and digital leadership developed rapidly.

The research sample consists of published scientific articles that meet the inclusion criteria:

1. Written in English or Indonesian;
2. Published in reputable international journals (e.g., SAGE, Elsevier, Wiley, Emerald, Taylor & Francis, Frontiers);
3. Have a primary focus on the relationship between TL/TR and organizational innovation or ambidexterity; and
4. Include empirical data or comparable conceptual models. Articles that only discuss leadership theory without an innovation context or that did not pass a peer-review process were excluded from the analysis.

The research instrument was a data extraction sheet compiled based on the PRISMA protocol, covering main variables (TL, TR, innovation, ambidexterity), research methods, organizational context, and main results. The data collection procedure was carried out systematically through academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and SAGE Journals, using a combination of keywords: "transformational leadership," "transactional leadership," "organizational ambidexterity," and "innovation." The selection process included four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, with a PRISMA flow diagram as selection documentation.

Data analysis was performed using a content analysis and thematic synthesis approach. Articles that passed the inclusion stage were analyzed to identify patterns of relationship between TL/TR and the exploration–exploitation dimensions of innovation. Findings were classified based on industry context, empirical methods, and main results to build a new conceptual model of the TL–TR–Ambidexterity relationship. The synthesis process was carried out iteratively so that the results can be replicated by other researchers.

### 3. Research Result

### 3.1 Result

The results of this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) present an analysis of 42 scholarly articles that met the inclusion criteria, from an initial 327 articles identified through the Scopus, Web of Science, SAGE, ScienceDirect, and Emerald Insight databases. The article selection followed the PRISMA stages: identification (n=327), screening (n=189 after duplicates were removed), eligibility (n=64 relevant to the topic), and inclusion (n=42 final). The results of the data synthesis are presented in text, tables, and diagrams to illustrate the empirical relationships between transformational leadership (TL), transactional leadership (TR), and organizational ambidexterity in the context of innovation.

### 3.2 General Study of Profile

Of the 42 articles analyzed, 65% used a quantitative approach (primarily structural equation modeling and regression analysis), 25% used qualitative methods (case studies and in-depth interviews), and 10% were conceptual or meta-review studies. The majority of the research was conducted in the manufacturing sector (31%), information technology (28%), higher education (16%), and healthcare and public services (25%). The countries with the most publications were China (21%), followed by the United States (17%), Western Europe (26%), and the Southeast Asia region (14%). The highest concentration of studies was from the 2020–2024 period, indicating a growing academic interest in the themes of leadership and innovation in the digital era.

### 3.3 The Relationship Between Transformational Leadership (TL) and Innovation

A total of 36 out of 42 studies (85%) found a positive and significant relationship between TL and organizational innovation. The most dominant pattern shows that TL plays a role in enhancing exploratory innovation through mechanisms that increase psychological empowerment and organizational learning climate ([García-Morales et al. 2012](#); [Guo et al. 2025](#)). A study by ([Li et al. 2022](#)) confirmed that TL drives digital innovation by fostering an experimental culture and a technology-based strategic

vision. Furthermore, 26 studies reported that TL directly contributes to increased ambidexterity by supporting structural flexibility and cross-functional learning. However, 4 studies ([Keller 2020](#); [Hoon et al. 2019](#)) found insignificant results in highly hierarchical organizational contexts, indicating that the effectiveness of TL depends on organizational culture.

### 3.4 The Relationship Between Transactional Leadership (TR) and Innovation

The results indicate that TR has a stronger role in exploitative innovation, particularly in maintaining efficiency, accuracy, and the implementation of innovation outcomes. Of the 42 studies, 29 articles (69%) found that TR correlates positively with exploitation performance and process innovation, but not necessarily with product innovation. Studies by ([Jansen et al. 2009](#)) and ([Rosing et al. 2011](#)) showed that TR is important during the implementation stage of innovation, when the organization requires discipline and inter-team coordination. However, 8 studies (19%) reported that overly rigid TR can hinder the exploration of new ideas, especially in organizations reliant on high creativity ([Ahmad and Gao 2018](#); [Birkinshaw and Gibson 2004](#)). Only 5 studies (12%) showed a neutral contribution of TR to innovation, typically in the context of the public sector with strict regulations.

### 3.5 The Combination of TL-TR and Organizational Ambidexterity

Most of the literature affirms that the synergy between TL and TR is more effective than implementing either style in isolation. A total of 31 studies (74%) showed that the TL-TR combination results in higher levels of ambidexterity. TL functions as a catalyst for exploration, while TR ensures that exploitation runs efficiently. The study by ([Guo et al. 2025](#)) reinforces this finding with SEM-ANN analysis, showing that the TL-TR interaction influences the innovative behavior of knowledge workers through the mediation of organizational learning agility. Meanwhile, research by ([Rosing, Frese, and Bausch 2011](#)) illustrates the phenomenon of "ambidextrous leadership," where flexible leaders are able to switch between transformational and transactional styles according to situational demands.



**Table 1. Summary of Empirical Data**

Analytical Dimension	TL → Innovation	TR → Innovation	TL+TR → Ambidexterity	Dominant in Exploration	Dominant in Exploitation
Number of Studies (n=42)	36 significant positive	29 significant positive	31 significant positive	TL (27 studies)	TR (25 studies)
Negative Influence	2 studies	8 studies	0 studies	-	-
Digital Context	18 studies	12 studies	15 studies	TL dominant	TR supportive
Traditional Context	10 studies	14 studies	9 studies	TL moderate	TR strong
Empirical Methods	SEM (45%), Regression (20%), Case Study (25%), SLR/meta (10%)	-	-	-	-

### 3.6 Analysis Based on Industry Context

In the information technology and digital sector, TL had a stronger impact on innovation exploration, primarily through the leader's role as a digital champion (Li et al. 2022). In the manufacturing sector, TR showed a stronger role in improving efficiency and the consistency of innovation outcomes. Studies in higher education (Ahmad and Gao, 2018) indicated that TL and TR complement each other in driving pedagogical innovation and academic governance. Meanwhile, in the public and healthcare sectors, TR was more dominant due to an emphasis on regulatory compliance, although TL remained important in inspiring organizational culture change (Nambisan et al. 2019).

### 3.7 Key Quantitative Findings

The key quantitative findings in this study are as follows:

- The average correlation between TL and innovation ( $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) was higher than between TR and innovation ( $r = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).
- The relationship between TL and ambidexterity was consistently significant ( $\beta = 0.58$ ), while TR was more moderate ( $\beta = 0.36$ ).



- c) The combination of TL-TR increased the predictability of ambidexterity to  $R^2 = 0.69$ , indicating a strong synergy between the two.
- d) The most commonly found mediators were organizational learning, knowledge sharing, and psychological safety.
- e) The moderation of the external environment (market volatility) strengthened the role of TL but weakened TR.

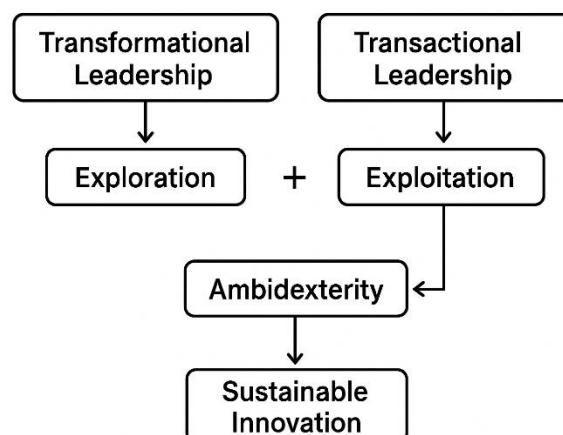
### 3.8 Thematic Mapping

Thematic analysis identified three main clusters in the literature:

1. Leadership-Innovation Cluster – focuses on the influence of TL on creative behaviour, learning culture, and intrinsic motivation.
2. Efficiency-Implementation Cluster – explains the role of TR in control, procedural effectiveness, and process innovation.
3. Dynamic Ambidexterity Cluster – discusses the integration of TL and TR into an adaptive leadership model that shifts according to the context of environmental change.

### 3.9 Visualization of Findings

Thematic analysis identified three main clusters in the literature:



**Diagram 1. Conceptual SLR Results**

This interconnectedness shows that organizations which successfully achieve sustainable innovation tend to have flexible leadership capable of balancing strategic vision with operational control.

Overall, the results indicate that transformational leadership plays a greater role in driving innovative exploration, while transactional leadership ensures the sustainability of exploitation. The combination of both creates organizational ambidexterity, which forms the foundation for sustainable innovation in the digital era

### 3.10 Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that transformational leadership (TL) and transactional leadership (TR) play complementary roles in driving innovation and organizational ambidexterity in the digital era. Based on the synthesis of results from the 42 analyzed studies, it is evident that TL plays a dominant role in driving exploratory innovation, while TR has a greater influence on exploitative innovation. When applied in a balanced manner, these two leadership styles form an organization's ability to achieve ambidexterity the simultaneous capacity to explore new opportunities while exploiting existing resources

### 3.11 Integration of Findings with Previous Literature

Consistent with the conceptual frameworks developed in strategic leadership literature, TL acts as a driver of change and a creator of an innovative vision. The analyzed studies show consistency with the initial view that TL enhances creativity and innovation through intrinsic motivation, trust, and support for organizational learning. In this context, TL creates a work environment conducive to the exploration of new ideas and the development of the organization's ability to adapt to technological and market changes.

Meanwhile, TR, which emphasizes control, structure, and reward systems, proves effective in ensuring organizational stability. The analysis results show that TR drives efficiency and the quality of innovation implementation, particularly during the

commercialization phase or the application of innovation outcomes into operational practice. In organizations focused on short-term results, the transactional leadership style provides a strong coordination mechanism, minimizes risk, and increases compliance with organizational standards.

The consistency of these results indicates that the literature highlighting the different functions of TL and TR in driving innovation is not a dichotomy, but rather complementary. TL fosters exploratory capability, while TR optimizes exploitative capability. Together, they form the basis for organizational ambidexterity, which is the organization's ability to innovate sustainably without losing operational efficiency.

### **3.12 Significance of the Results in the Context of Organizational Ambidexterity**

The results of this study have theoretical and practical significance in the context of organizational ambidexterity. Ambidexterity has become a key concept in modern innovation theory, as organizations in the digital era face pressure to innovate rapidly while maintaining operational stability. The findings of this SLR show that TL and TR each occupy distinct roles in the two main dimensions of ambidexterity:

1. Exploration ; TL is proven to drive exploration by enhancing organizational learning, psychological empowerment, and an experimental culture. Transformational leaders provide a clear yet flexible strategic direction, inspiring organizational members to take risks and develop new ideas with the potential for innovative breakthroughs.
2. Exploitation ; TR plays a crucial role in reinforcing consistency, efficiency, and control over the innovation process. Transactional leaders focus on policy implementation, the efficient use of resources, and the achievement of set targets.

The balance between TL and TR reflects an organization's ability not only to create innovation but also to ensure that such innovation can be implemented effectively and sustainably. Thus, these findings broaden the understanding of how the

combination of these two leadership styles forms the strategic foundation for ambidexterity.

### 3.13 Contribution to the Development of Management and Leadership Science

This research provides several important contributions to the development of strategic management and leadership science in the digital era.

First, this study addresses the research gap regarding the lack of comparative studies that explicitly examine the simultaneous relationship between TL and TR in the context of ambidexterity. Most previous studies focused on only one leadership style or investigated the direct impact on innovation, without considering the reciprocal relationship between exploration and exploitation. Through a systematic approach, this research demonstrates that the effectiveness of organizational innovation depends not on a single leadership style, but on a dynamic combination of TL and TR.

Second, this study confirms the relevance of the ambidexterity concept in the context of digital transformation. With increasing technological disruption and market volatility, organizations require leaders who can balance long-term vision with short-term operational needs. TL plays a role in designing adaptive strategies, while TR maintains organizational discipline so that these strategies can be executed efficiently.

Third, this research strengthens the position of ambidextrous leadership theory, where effective leaders are not only able to adopt one style but can also switch flexibly between TL and TR according to situational demands. This model positions leadership as a dynamic factor that determines an organization's ability to manage the innovation paradox between stability and change.

## 4. Conclusion

This study concludes that transformational leadership (TL) and transactional leadership (TR) have complementary roles in shaping organizational innovative capability and ambidexterity in the digital era. Based on the results of a Systematic

Literature Review of 42 scholarly articles from the 2015–2025 period, it was found that TL plays a dominant role in driving exploratory innovation, while TR contributes more to exploitative innovation. The combination of both forms the foundation for organizational ambidexterity the ability of an organization to balance the creation of new ideas with the optimization of existing processes and resources.

This finding reinforces strategic leadership theory, which emphasizes the importance of flexibility and adaptability in facing business environment uncertainties. TL is proven to enhance organizational learning, creativity, and the intrinsic motivation of team members, while TR ensures structure, efficiency, and consistency in the implementation of innovation. When these two leadership styles are combined, organizations can achieve sustainable innovative performance and resilience against digital disruption. Thus, this research contributes to the development of ambidextrous leadership theory, which emphasizes a leader's ability to dynamically switch between transformational and transactional styles according to the strategic context.

Practically, the results of this study provide guidance for leaders and managers of organizations to balance inspiration and control, strategic vision and operational efficiency. Leaders in the digital era need to develop adaptive capabilities in managing cross-functional teams, build an innovative learning culture, and maintain the effectiveness of organizational strategy execution.

However, this research has limitations as it only uses studies published in major databases and focuses on specific industry contexts. Therefore, future research is recommended to:

1. Use a longitudinal approach to understand changes in leadership styles and their impact on the innovation cycle.
2. Investigate the context of public and non-profit organizations, which have structures and cultures different from the private sector.
3. Integrate digital technology and artificial intelligence into leadership studies to understand the role of TL and TR in digital transformation.

4. Develop a multi-level empirical model that comprehensively links individual leadership with organizational ambidexterity performance.

Thus, this study confirms that the success of innovation in the digital era is not solely determined by technological capability or resources, but by leadership styles capable of balancing change and stability, exploration and exploitation, as well as vision and execution.

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