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Transformational Leadership and Competency Effects on Sustainable Performance: The Mediating Role of Innovative Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of competency and transformational leadership on sustainable employee performance through innovative behavior at Politeknik Pelayaran Banten. The research addresses the challenge of sustaining employee performance amid dynamic organizational changes by emphasizing long-term capability development rather than short-term productivity. A quantitative approach was employed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 3.0. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to employees, measuring four constructs: competency, transformational leadership, innovative behavior, and sustainable employee performance. All indicators demonstrated strong validity and reliability (outer loadings > 0.70). The findings reveal that competency and transformational leadership positively and significantly affect sustainable employee performance, both directly and indirectly through innovative behavior. Transformational leadership shows a stronger influence in stimulating innovation and sustaining performance. Innovative behavior significantly mediates the relationship between competency, leadership, and sustainable performance. The study concludes that developing employee competencies and strengthening transformational leadership are strategic drivers for fostering innovation and ensuring long-term sustainable performance. Organizations are therefore encouraged to implement competency-based human resource development and promote visionary leadership to enhance organizational sustainability.

Keywords: Competency; Leadership; Behavior; Performance.

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INTRODUCTION

High-quality human resources are a strategic determinant of organizational success, particularly in service-oriented public institutions where effective HR practices enhance civil servant performance and public service quality (Ouabi et al., 2024). Sustainable organizational performance relies on HR capacity, including employee competence and engagement aligned with goals (Gustantini et al., 2026), as individual performance directly shapes overall effectiveness (Chatterjee, 2024). In Indonesia, bureaucratic reforms—strengthening the merit system, digitalizing civil service management, and increasing accountability—require adaptive, professional, and sustainable HR management (Maysura, 2025). Digital innovation and competency-based strategies are essential for building a

professional, service-oriented bureaucracy.

Politeknik Pelayaran Banten, a vocational higher education institution under the Ministry of Transportation, prepares competent, globally competitive maritime personnel. Its BLU financial management and performance-based remuneration systems demand improved productivity, service quality, and sustainable employee performance. However, evaluation data show fluctuations in “excellent” performance, and surveys reveal challenges in achieving targets, communication, and optimizing individual capacity.

Sustainability employee performance is influenced by competency, transformational leadership, and innovative behavior. Competency enables effective and adaptive task performance, transformational leadership fosters motivation, commitment, and alignment with institutional vision, and innovative behavior drives continuous improvement through creativity and problem-solving (Gustantini et al., 2026). Previous research reports inconsistent effects of transformational leadership on performance, highlighting the need to examine mediating mechanisms in different contexts (Lestariningsih et al., 2025).

This study examines the effects of competency and transformational leadership on sustainability employee performance, with innovative behavior as a mediator, at Politeknik Pelayaran Banten. It contributes to public sector HRM literature and offers practical insights for designing adaptive, innovative, and sustainability-oriented employee development strategies (Thao P.T. Pham et al., 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by United Nations member states in 2015 as a continuation of the MDGs, comprise 17 goals and 169 targets integrating economic, social, and environmental dimensions to achieve inclusive and sustainable development by 2030. At the organizational level, SDGs can be operationalized through Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), emphasizing productivity, decent employment, and human resource capacity development and innovation. Implementing SDGs requires organizations to foster sustainable employee performance that balances social, economic, and environmental aspects in line with the Triple Bottom Line (Naharuddin et al., 2024; Solovida & Latan, 2021).

Individual competency is a fundamental foundation for sustainable performance, encompassing technical, critical, collaborative, and adaptive skills that drive innovative behavior (Spencer & Spencer in Diwanti & Hariyanto, 2022; Martini et al., 2024). Transformational leadership inspires a sustainability-oriented vision, builds an innovative culture, and promotes positive organizational change (Bass & Riggio in Anggraini et al., 2025; Nabi et al., 2023; Amjad et al., 2025). Innovative behavior acts as a key mechanism linking competency and leadership to performance improvement by generating, developing, and implementing new ideas that enhance organizational effectiveness (Janssen in Jankelová et al., 2021).

SDGs in the Context of Organizations and Employee Performance

The SDGs, a global commitment of 193 countries, emphasize reducing inequality, protecting the environment, and promoting sustainable economic growth. From a Sustainable HRM perspective, sustainable employee performance focuses on long-term contributions

through efficiency, adaptability, and the creation of social and environmental value (Lu et al., 2023; Campos-García et al., 2024; Xiaoyan Liang & Jingwen Li, 2025).

Competency encompasses knowledge, skills, and attitudes that foster creativity, effectiveness, and adaptability to sustainability demands. Transformational leadership builds vision, inspiration, and organizational values aligned with sustainability, enhancing innovative engagement and pro-environmental behavior (Zivkovic, 2024; Zacher et al., 2024; Junwei Zhang et al., 2021). Innovative behavior involves generating, promoting, and implementing new ideas to improve performance (Jankelová et al., 2021).

Sustainable employee performance reflects consistent long-term contributions while balancing productivity, well-being, and environmental sustainability. Organizations that align job demands with human capacity sustain performance more effectively (Pfeffer in Indrayanti, 2024). Integrating competency, transformational leadership, and innovative behavior is thus essential for supporting SDG achievement.

Competency

Competency is an individual's ability to perform tasks in a specific role through mastery of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that support effective job performance (Silitonga & Safaria, 2023). It is a critical component of human resource quality, as employee capability largely determines organizational success, and reflects the capacity to complete tasks accurately and demonstrate excellence (Edison, 2022).

In Indonesia's public sector, competency development is guided by the Regulation of the Minister of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform No. 38/2017, which mandates competency standards for merit-based personnel management. Civil servants are expected to possess technical competency (job-specific knowledge), managerial competency (leadership and management skills), and socio-cultural competency (skills and attitudes for effective societal interaction), ensuring professional and effective performance in line with organizational responsibilities.

Behaviorally, competency is multidimensional. Spencer and Spencer identify five key aspects: motives (drive to achieve and improve), traits (confidence, resilience, discipline, adaptability), self-concept (role perception and career goals), knowledge (theoretical and practical job understanding), and skills (communication, collaboration, problem-solving, and time management) (Edison, 2022).

Thus, competency is an integrated combination of personal attributes, professional capabilities, and behavioral readiness that underpins sustained performance and organizational effectiveness.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership shapes employees' attitudes, behaviors, and perspectives by strengthening trust in leaders, enhancing morale, job satisfaction, and reducing conflict (Podsakoff et al. in Lee et al., 2024; Lisa & Meldi Kesuma, 2021). It promotes commitment to organizational goals, empowering members to achieve them, and functions as a reciprocal process where leaders and followers elevate each other's morality and motivation (Lee, Mei-Hua Lin, et al., 2024; Hilton et al., 2024).

This leadership style guides employees from basic needs toward self-actualization, aligning with Maslow's hierarchy, and enhancing trust, motivation, satisfaction, self-efficacy,

psychological confidence, and commitment (Lee, Lin, et al., 2024; Teoh et al., 2022; Kim & Yoon, 2025). Transformational leaders inspire vision, empower individuals, and reinforce commitment to shared goals, emphasizing the importance of contributions and collective interests (Bass in Agung et al., 2024).

Bass identifies four core dimensions: Idealized Influence (trusted role model), Inspirational Motivation (compelling vision), Intellectual Stimulation (encouraging innovation), and Individualized Consideration (personalized mentoring) (Hamid et al., 2021).

Overall, transformational leadership builds trust, elevates moral and motivational capacities, fosters innovation, and inspires followers to transform vision into collective achievement and long-term organizational commitment.

Sustainability Employee Performance

Sustainability was first introduced by the World Commission on Environment and Development in *Our Common Future*, providing a foundation for global sustainability discourse (Hajian & Kashani, 2021). With the Fourth Industrial Revolution, organizations increasingly adopt sustainability to minimize ecological impact while balancing business goals with human welfare.

Sustainability Employee Performance is the consistent achievement of work goals while maintaining well-being, integrating resources and personal development for long-term performance (Ji et al., 2021; Jonge & Peeters, 2025; Feiqiang Fu et al., 2023). Preserving human capacity and energy links performance to business continuity (Alboliteh et al., 2023; Ji et al., 2021).

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework guides sustainable HRM strategies by integrating economic, environmental, and social dimensions (Mishra & Pandey, 2025; Soekotjo et al., 2025). Environmental performance involves waste management, emission reduction, green innovation, and eco-friendly practices, enhancing employee participation and sustainability awareness (Liu et al., 2024; Akma et al., 2024; Nart et al., 2024; Molina-Azorin et al., 2021; Kaixin Yang et al., 2024). Economic performance emphasizes resource efficiency, cost management, green technology, and digitalization (Liu et al., 2024; Hnin et al., 2025; Leesakul et al., 2022; Fan Li et al., 2024; Costa et al., 2022). Social performance focuses on equality, employee safety, and organizational relationships (Costa et al., 2022).

Innovative Behavior

Innovative behavior refers to actions undertaken by individuals or groups to generate, introduce, and apply new ideas, methods, or practices that improve efficiency, effectiveness, or the quality of products, services, and organizational processes. Innovative Work Behavior (IWB) is defined as individual actions aimed at recognizing and proposing useful ideas within a job, team, or organization as De Jong et al. (Botha & Steyn, 2022). It involves the exploration of opportunities and the implementation of new knowledge to enhance both individual and organizational performance (Khan et al., 2021). Thus, innovative behavior is not limited to creativity alone; it represents a broader process of change in which ideas are transformed into practical solutions.

Innovation and innovative behavior are closely related, but innovation emphasizes the novelty of change, while innovative behavior highlights the human actions that initiate and implement that change. In healthcare contexts, innovative behavior includes initiating and applying new ideas, processes, and procedures designed to deliver benefits to patients,

reflecting a staged process that requires different activities at each phase (Ye et al., 2023). When carried out systematically, such behavior requires managerial commitment, engagement, and leadership support to build both technical and non-technical conditions that stimulate innovation across job roles.

Creativity primarily concerns generating novel ideas, whereas innovative work behavior extends further to include promoting and implementing those ideas in practice as De Jong & Hartog said (Pajuoja et al., 2025). Therefore, innovative behavior can be understood as a combination of creative thinking and concrete action that transforms ideas into value-adding work practices. It also reflects a shift from conventional thinking toward more progressive and modern approaches, with creativity serving as the foundation for organizational change (Khan et al., 2021).

Scholarly research identifies four core dimensions of Innovative Work Behavior—idea exploration, idea generation, idea promotion (championing), and idea realization—validated through the IWB framework developed by and supported by subsequent studies (Yan et al., 2023). Idea exploration involves actively seeking opportunities and new knowledge relevant to work improvement. Idea generation refers to developing novel and useful solutions, methods, or approaches. Idea promotion encompasses persuading and gaining support from colleagues and leaders to adopt new ideas. Finally, idea realization is the practical implementation, testing, and refinement of those ideas so they can be effectively applied in organizational settings.

Previous Studies

Previous studies show that competence and leadership are key drivers of sustainable employee performance, often operating through quality practices and innovative behavior. In manufacturing, competence directly enhances sustainable performance (Karim et al., 2025), while sustainability-related skills—interpersonal collaboration, stakeholder engagement, and trust-building—support long-term effectiveness (Venn et al., 2022). Competence also influences performance indirectly via mediators such as meaningfulness of work (Nardo et al., 2024) and innovative work behavior (Agustina et al., 2025; Suhartini et al., 2024).

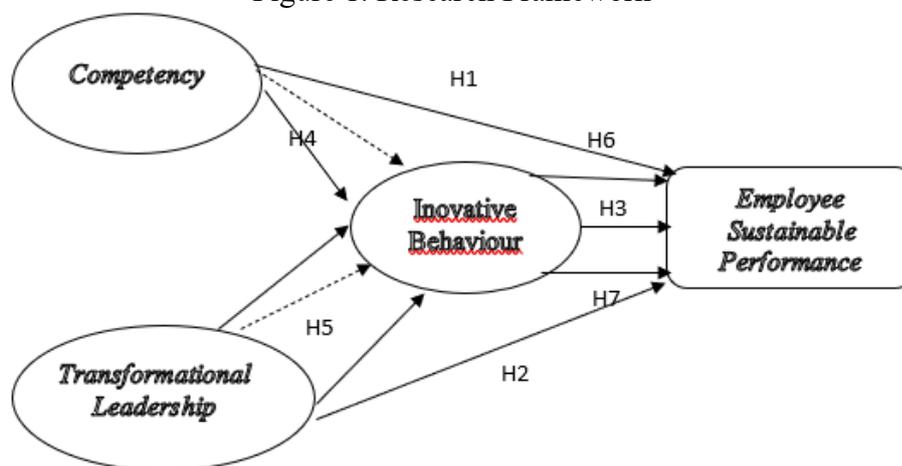
Transformational leadership is similarly recognized as a catalyst for sustainability-oriented performance, affecting outcomes through organizational commitment, green motivation (Averina et al., 2023), and work engagement (Helalat et al., 2025). Leaders shape job satisfaction, innovative behavior, and overall performance, while fostering supportive climates for innovation (Nguon, 2022; Qingjin Lin, 2023). Leadership, competence, and organizational factors jointly influence performance within institutional settings (Raisya et al., 2024).

Innovative Work Behavior (IWB) mediates the effects of leadership and competence on performance, with employees engaging in IWB achieving higher outcomes when supported by conducive environments (Reza, 2024; Adu et al., 2024; Futri et al., 2023; Anom & Gustomo, 2023). Organizational learning, career growth, and human capital development further enhance innovation, which in turn drives sustainable performance (Soelistya et al., 2024; Puspitaningtyas et al., 2023; Wishnumulya, 2024; Fani et al., 2024; Reftiani Tico et al., 2023; Adilla et al., 2025; Agustina et al., 2025).

Overall, the literature consistently shows that competence, transformational leadership, and supportive organizational contexts foster innovative behavior, which serves as

a central mechanism translating individual and organizational resources into sustainable employee performance, that show figure below:

Figure 1. Research Framework



METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine relationships among variables (Zainuri et al., 2024), using measurable data analyzed statistically (Creswell & J. David Creswell, 2022). A cross-sectional survey was conducted at Politeknik Pelayaran Banten to assess how competency and transformational leadership affect sustainability employee performance, with innovative behavior as a mediator (Creswell & J. David Creswell, 2022).

Variables were conceptually and operationally defined for empirical testing (Sugiyono, 2024; Creswell & J. David Creswell, 2022). Competency was measured through motives, traits, self-concept, knowledge, and skills (Nuranti et al., 2026), while transformational leadership included idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Hamid et al., 2021; Basaffar, 2022). Sustainability employee performance was assessed via environmental, economic, and social indicators (Setiawati et al., 2025), and innovative behavior through idea exploration, generation, promotion, and realization (Saleh et al., 2025), all using an ordinal Likert scale.

The population consisted of 145 employees, with 107 respondents sampled using Slovin's formula at a 5% error rate (Nalendra et al., 2021; Sugiyono, 2024). Data were collected via questionnaires and interviews (Sugiyono, 2024). SEM-PLS was applied using SmartPLS to analyze complex causal relationships, including mediation (Zheng, 2025; Schubert et al., 2022; Singha, 2024; Hair Jr. et al., 2021). Measurement models were evaluated for validity and reliability, and structural models for R^2 , Q^2 , and GoF. Hypotheses were tested through bootstrapping, considering $t \geq 1.96$ and $p \leq 0.05$ (Hair Jr. et al., 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study used SmartPLS 3.0 to analyze measurement and structural models, examining predictive relationships among constructs, as PLS tests the influence and relationships between latent variables via outer and inner model evaluation (Ghozali & Kusumadewi, 2023). The measurement (outer) model confirmed that all indicators accurately represented their latent constructs, with validity assessed through convergent and discriminant validity, and reliability evaluated using Composite Reliability and Cronbach’s Alpha (Yarsasi et al., 2025). Convergent validity showed all indicators had outer loadings above 0.70, meeting PLS confirmatory analysis benchmarks (Hair Jr. et al., 2021), following the two-stage reflective approach recommended in PLS-SEM (Ghozali & Kusumadewi, 2023).

Discriminant validity was confirmed via cross-loadings and AVE, with all AVE values above 0.50, ensuring constructs explained their indicators more strongly than others (Rasoolimanesh, 2022). Fornell–Larcker and HTMT criteria further validated construct distinctiveness (Hair Jr. et al., 2021). Reliability testing indicated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach’s Alpha above 0.60 and Composite Reliability exceeding 0.70 (Ghozali & Kusumadewi, 2023).

The structural (inner) model showed substantial explanatory power. R^2 indicated that Sustainability Employee Performance was explained by 68.2% of variance from Competency, Transformational Leadership, and Innovative Behavior, while Innovative Behavior was explained by 61.3% of variance from Competency and Transformational Leadership, demonstrating moderate-to-strong predictive capacity (Ghozali & Kusumadewi, 2023). Predictive relevance ($Q^2 = 0.877$) and Goodness of Fit ($GoF = 0.687$) confirmed very strong predictive capability and overall model fit (Hair Jr. et al., 2021; Ghozali & Kusumadewi, 2023).

Bootstrapping at a 5% significance level showed all proposed relationships were positive and significant. Competency significantly influenced Sustainability Employee Performance ($\beta = 0.271$, $p < 0.001$), Transformational Leadership positively affected it ($\beta = 0.298$, $p < 0.001$), and Innovative Behavior had the strongest impact ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting innovation as key to sustained productivity. Competency also significantly enhanced Innovative Behavior ($\beta = 0.365$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that employee knowledge, skills, and attributes foster innovation capacity.

Table 1. Summary of Hypothesis Testing

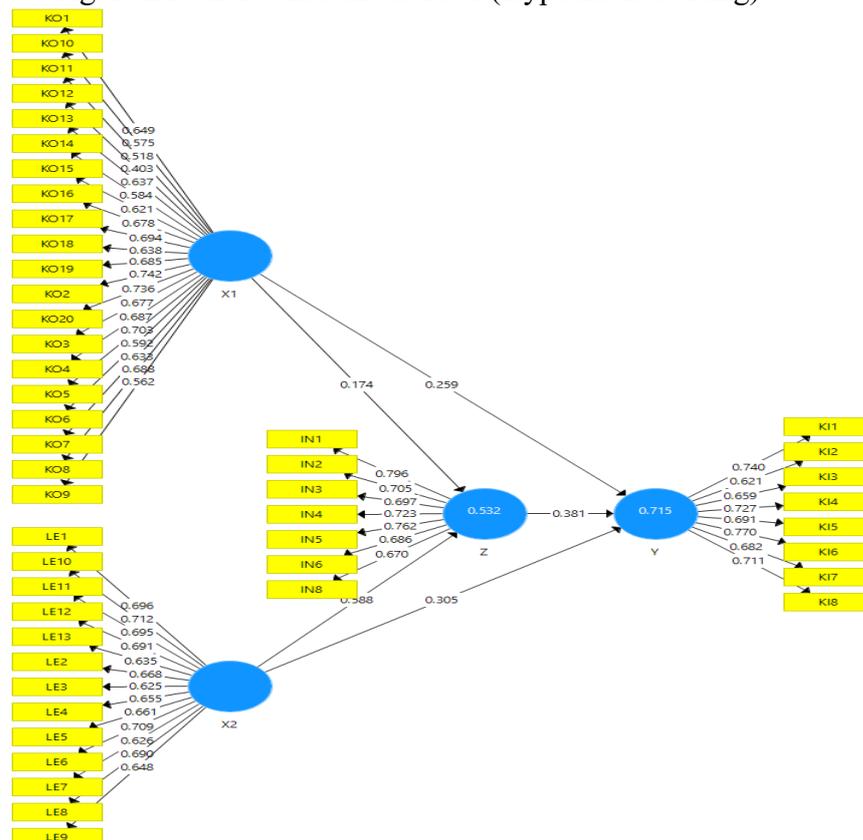
Code	Hypothesis	Type of Effect	Coefficient Value	Test Result	Description
H1	X1→Y	Direct	0.271	Sig.	Accepted
H2	X2→Y	Direct	0.298	Sig.	Accepted
H3	Z→Y	Direct	0.372	Sig.	Accepted
H4	X1→Z	Direct	0.365	Sig.	Accepted
H5	X2→Z	Direct	0.421	Sig.	Accepted
H6	X1→Z→Y	Indirect	0.136	Sig.	Accepted
H7	X2→Z→Y	Indirect	0.157	Sig.	Accepted

Source: Data processed by the researcher

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the validated and reliable PLS-SEM model possesses strong explanatory and predictive power, confirming that competency and transformational leadership drive sustainability employee performance both directly and indirectly through innovative behavior, thereby supporting the model's theoretical robustness and empirical relevance (Hair Jr. et al., 2021).

The results of the above hypothesis testing, obtained using SmartPLS 3 software, can be briefly seen in Figure 1 below:

Figure 2 Path Coefficient Results (Hypothesis Testing)



Source: Processed by author, 2026

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that competency has a positive and significant effect on sustainability employee performance, indicating that stronger employee competencies lead to more consistent and long-term performance outcomes. Core competencies—such as technical expertise, task effectiveness, and professional capability—emerge as the strongest drivers of sustainable performance, contributing directly by 25.9%. Employees with higher knowledge, skills, and professional attitudes are better able to work efficiently, adapt to organizational change, and generate innovations that support long-term productivity. These results align with the competency theory of Spencer & Spencer (Moradi et al., 2021), which emphasizes individual characteristics as determinants of superior performance, as well as empirical findings from (Supriya et al., 2023), and Badarita et al. (2025), all of which highlight competency as a key predictor of sustainable organizational outcomes. Practically, this implies the need for continuous training, competency assessments, and organizational learning systems to strengthen human capital.

In contrast, transformational leadership was found not to have a direct significant influence on sustainability employee performance, although certain leadership dimensions—particularly inspirational motivation and vision—remain important contributors. This suggests that leadership alone may not automatically translate into sustainable performance without supporting behavioral mechanisms. Nevertheless, theoretical perspectives from Bass & Avolio (Ren et al., 2024) and empirical studies by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer (Agag et al., 2025), (Ferdiana & Kasmir, 2025), and Avolio & Bass (Tovan et al., 2022) emphasize that transformational leadership builds trust, engagement, and commitment, which indirectly sustain performance through motivational and cultural pathways. Organizations are therefore encouraged to strengthen leadership development, empowerment, and recognition systems to enhance long-term employee engagement.

The study further reveals that innovative behavior has the strongest direct influence on sustainability employee performance (38.1%). Employees who actively generate, promote, and implement ideas contribute more effectively to continuous improvement, service quality, and organizational adaptability. This supports Janssen's individual innovation model (Parnitvitidkun et al., 2024) which conceptualizes innovation as a multi-stage process, and is reinforced by empirical evidence from De Jong & Den Hartog (Thao. P.T. Pham et al., 2024); (Jankelová et al., 2021) all identifying innovative behavior as a strong predictor of sustainable productivity. Building an innovation-oriented culture—through collaboration, experimentation, and recognition—thus becomes essential.

Competency also significantly influences innovative behavior (17.4%), confirming that knowledgeable and skilled employees are more capable of problem-solving, adapting, and proposing new ideas. This finding is consistent with Spencer & Spencer's competency framework (Martini et al., 2024) and empirical work by Janssen (2000), Zhiguo Chen & Yi Shen (2025), and Fan Li et al. (2024), which identify technical competence and proactive behavior as major antecedents of innovation. Similarly, transformational leadership positively affects innovative behavior (38.8%), as inspirational and visionary leaders create environments that stimulate creativity and psychological empowerment. This supports the transformational leadership perspective of Bass & Avolio (Giang Thi Huong Vu et al., 2025); (Mansaray & Atan, 2025) and findings by Rahmani et al. (2025) and Jameel et al. (2025), which show that intellectual stimulation fosters employee innovation.

Importantly, mediation analysis confirms that innovative behavior acts as a critical bridge linking both competency and transformational leadership to sustainability employee performance. Competency affects sustainable performance indirectly through innovative behavior (6.6%), indicating that skills and knowledge translate into long-term outcomes when employees apply them creatively. This supports Human Capital Theory and findings from Masyhuri et al. (2024) and Park et al. (2021), which highlight innovation as the mechanism converting human capability into performance sustainability. Likewise, transformational leadership influences sustainability performance indirectly through innovative behavior (14.8%), showing that leaders enhance long-term outcomes primarily by fostering an innovative climate. This aligns with transformational leadership theory (Karimi et al., 2023) and empirical studies by Purwanti & Sari (2024) and Piri & Abdi (2025) emphasizing innovation as the mediating pathway between leadership and performance.

Overall, the research underscores that sustainable employee performance is not driven by competency or leadership alone but by their ability to cultivate innovative behavior.

Competency provides the foundation, transformational leadership supplies motivational direction, and innovative behavior becomes the operational mechanism translating both into sustained organizational performance. Consequently, organizations should integrate competency development, innovation-oriented culture, and transformational leadership practices into a unified strategic framework to ensure adaptability and long-term competitiveness.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that competency positively and significantly affects sustainable employee performance, with strong technical skills, discipline, and professionalism forming the foundation for high productivity and organizational resilience. Transformational leadership also positively influences sustainable performance, as effective leaders inspire and motivate employees to maintain consistent performance, making leadership a strategic factor in adaptive, growth-oriented organizations.

Innovative behavior further enhances sustainable performance, driving continuous productivity, effectiveness, and work quality, while also linking competency and transformational leadership to improved outcomes. Employees with strong skills tend to be more creative and improvement-oriented, and transformational leaders foster innovation through inspiration and intellectual stimulation.

Mediation analysis confirms that innovative behavior is a key intervening variable: competency and transformational leadership influence sustainable performance indirectly by promoting innovative behavior. Overall, integrating competency development and transformational leadership with innovation initiatives provides the most effective strategy for achieving long-term, sustainable employee performance.

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