

DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP, DISCIPLINE, AND COMPETENCY: A MODERATED MEDIATION MODEL OF CIVIL SERVANT PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT: Public sector reform in Indonesia raises a persistent question: which internal mechanism converts leadership behavior into measurable performance gains among civil servants? This study develops and tests a moderated mediation model in which employee competency mediates the effects of democratic leadership style and work discipline on job performance, and in which discipline moderates the leadership–competency relationship. Data were collected from 139 civil servants working in a local government administration in South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia, using a structured questionnaire. Partial least squares structural equation modeling evaluated the measurement and structural models. Results show that democratic leadership style and discipline each predict competency, that competency predicts job performance, and that discipline strengthens the leadership–competency relationship. Competency mediates both direct effects on performance, and this indirect pathway is itself conditional on discipline. The findings extend the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity framework to bureaucratic settings and inform competency-based human resource strategy in local government.

Keywords: Democratic Leadership; Work Discipline; Employee Competency; Job Performance; PLS-SEM

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INTRODUCTION

Local government reform places sustained pressure on public organizations to convert administrative capacity into reliable service outcomes. Leadership matters in this setting because public managers must operate through formal rules, multiple accountabilities, and strong institutional constraints that differ from those in private firms (Orazi et al., 2013; Vogel & Masal, 2015). Evidence from public organizations also shows that employee perceptions of leadership are associated with organizational performance, while structural conditions shape whether leadership practices can take hold (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015; Wright & Pandey, 2010). These conditions make local government a useful setting for examining how leadership and employee conduct jointly translate into civil servant performance.

The literature offers two established but weakly integrated explanations for employee performance. One stream treats participative or democratic leadership as a central lever because voice, delegated responsibility, and shared decision-making can strengthen employee satisfaction, empowerment, and performance (Foels et al., 2000; Gastil, 1994; Huang et al., 2010). A second stream emphasizes disciplined, goal-directed conduct. Research on conscientiousness and work motivation shows that dependability, achievement striving, and persistent effort predict performance across occupations (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Dudley et al., 2006; Kanfer et al., 2017). Both streams converge on performance, but they rarely explain the mechanism that carries these effects. Competency offers that mechanism because it represents the applied knowledge, skills, and behaviors required for effective task execution (Campion et al., 2011; Shippmann et al., 2000). The literature also seldom tests whether discipline conditions the developmental value of democratic leadership. Without a mediator and moderator, the two relationships remain parallel associations rather than an integrated explanation.

This study addresses that gap through the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) framework. AMO theory explains performance as a joint product of employees' capacity, willingness, and opportunity to contribute (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). Strategic human resource research has used this architecture to explain how organizational practices influence proximal employee capabilities and motivation before producing more distal performance outcomes (Boselie et al., 2005; Jiang et al., 2012). Democratic leadership supplies opportunity because participation grants employees discretion to apply judgment. Discipline supplies motivation because self-regulated conduct reflects willingness to meet role standards. Competency supplies ability, while job performance represents the behavioral output. AMO research also treats these components as mutually reinforcing rather than mechanically additive (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013). The resulting proposition is that competency mediates the effects of leadership and discipline on performance, while discipline strengthens the process through which democratic leadership builds competency.

This study makes three contributions. First, it models employee competency as a common mechanism linking democratic leadership and discipline to job performance, rather than examining either antecedent alone. Second, it positions discipline as a boundary condition on the leadership-competency relationship. This view recognizes that participation can lose value when employees lack the sustained effort needed to use discretion constructively; participative leadership may also display threshold or context-dependent effects (Lam et al., 2015; Somech, 2006). Third, it tests moderated mediation to establish whether leadership's indirect effect on performance varies with discipline. The model therefore connects public leadership, work motivation, competency, and performance research within one conditional AMO explanation.

THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

The Ability-Motivation-Opportunity Framework

The Ability-Motivation-Opportunity framework provides the grand theory for this study. It holds that individual work behavior depends on ability, the capacity to perform; motivation, the willingness to exert effort; and opportunity, the situational conditions that permit capacity and effort to become behavior (Blumberg & Pringle, 1982). Research on HRM and performance places these components between organizational practices and outcomes, which makes AMO useful for explaining mechanisms rather than merely cataloging direct effects (Boselie et al., 2005; Jiang et

al., 2012). The framework also permits interaction because a weakness in one component can constrain the contribution of the others (Bos-Nehles et al., 2013).

This study maps its constructs onto the AMO components. Democratic leadership operationalizes opportunity because consultation, delegated authority, and openness to employee input create space for judgment and learning. Discipline operationalizes motivation because punctuality, rule adherence, and responsibility reflect sustained goal pursuit and controlled effort (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Locke & Latham, 2002). Competency operationalizes ability through task-relevant knowledge, technical skill, and effective behavior, consistent with multidimensional accounts of competence (Boyatzis, 2008; Delamare Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). Job performance is the behavioral criterion produced when employees can, will, and are allowed to perform.

Democratic leadership gives employees a voice in decisions, distributes responsibility, and recognizes subordinate input as a legitimate basis for organizational choice (Gastil, 1994). This style differs from directive leadership in the discretion it extends to employees. Participation requires employees to diagnose situations, weigh alternatives, and justify choices, which can strengthen applied knowledge and skill. Studies of participative leadership connect these processes with empowerment, trust, team functioning, and performance, although effects depend on context and the quality of participation (Huang et al., 2010; Somech, 2005, 2006). Democratic leadership should therefore function as an opportunity structure through which latent capability becomes exercised competency.

H1: Democratic leadership style has a positive effect on employee competency.

Discipline, defined here as rule adherence, punctuality, and self-regulated responsibility for task outcomes, supplies the sustained effort that competency development requires. Competency accumulates through repeated task engagement, and repeated engagement depends on dependable conduct. Meta-analytic evidence identifies conscientiousness and its narrower facets, including dependability and achievement striving, as consistent predictors of task and training performance (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Dudley et al., 2006). Work-motivation research also shows that goals, autonomous regulation, and continued striving organize how effort is allocated over time (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Kanfer et al., 2017; Locke & Latham, 2002). Discipline should therefore determine how consistently employees convert training and task exposure into stable competency.

H2: Discipline has a positive effect on employee competency.

Competency is the applied capability that an employee brings to task execution. Competency models connect observable behaviors, knowledge, and skills to effective performance requirements (Campion et al., 2011; Shippmann et al., 2000). Training and development research further shows that acquired capabilities improve performance only when employees transfer learning to the job (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Blume et al., 2010; Salas et al., 2012). An employee with strong knowledge, procedural skill, and a task-appropriate attitude should complete assignments with fewer errors, require less supervision, and adapt more effectively to nonroutine demands. Competency should therefore operate as a proximal determinant of the quality and quantity dimensions of job performance (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015; Koopmans et al., 2011).

H3: Employee competency has a positive effect on job performance.

Discipline can also affect job performance beyond the capability captured by competency. Punctual attendance, adherence to deadlines, and reliable rule-following directly shape how supervisors and citizens experience employee output. This distinction matters because job performance is multidimensional: task execution, contextual contribution, and counterproductive behavior provide related but nonidentical information about overall performance (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002; Viswesvaran & Ones, 2000). Motivational investment can also connect employee conditions to both task and contextual performance (Rich et al., 2010). A technically competent employee who misses deadlines or disregards procedure can therefore receive a weaker performance evaluation than an equally competent but dependable counterpart.

H4: Discipline has a positive effect on job performance.

AMO treats ability, motivation, and opportunity as interdependent components. Democratic leadership extends discretion, but discretion builds competency only when employees invest disciplined effort in the opportunity. An employee with weak self-regulation may interpret participation as reduced oversight; a disciplined employee is more likely to use it for problem solving and learning. Participative leadership research supports this contingency logic by showing that participation does not produce uniform linear returns across all conditions (Lam et al., 2015). Discipline should therefore strengthen the positive relationship between democratic leadership and competency.

H5: Discipline positively moderates the relationship between democratic leadership style and employee competency, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of discipline.

Democratic leadership and discipline should influence performance partly through the competency they develop. Leadership creates the opportunity to practice judgment, while discipline sustains the effort required to convert that opportunity into ability. Competency then supplies the capability used in task execution. This sequential account follows the AMO logic that organizational and employee inputs affect performance through proximal human-capital and motivational mechanisms (Jiang et al., 2012). It also aligns with evidence that learning investments create value through the transfer of acquired capability into workplace behavior (Blume et al., 2010).

H6: Employee competency mediates the relationship between democratic leadership style and job performance.

H7: Employee competency mediates the relationship between discipline and job performance.

The moderation proposed in H5 and the mediation proposed in H6 combine into a conditional process. If discipline strengthens the leadership-competency path and competency carries leadership's effect into performance, the indirect effect of democratic leadership should vary across discipline levels. This proposition follows the index-of-moderated-mediation logic, which evaluates whether a linear indirect effect changes as a function of a moderator (Hayes, 2015). It distinguishes the model from an additive account in which leadership and discipline contribute separately to performance.

H8: Discipline positively moderates the indirect effect of democratic leadership style on job performance through employee competency.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study applies a quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory design. The design suits the research objective because the study tests directional and conditional relationships among four latent constructs specified in advance by theory, rather than exploring an undefined construct space. Data were collected at a single point in time from respondents nested within one local government administration, which controls for organizational-level confounds that would otherwise vary across agencies.

The population comprised civil servants employed in a local government administration in South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia. The study used a census, or saturated, sampling procedure among structural and functional civil servants who met two inclusion criteria: at least one year of tenure in the current position and active employment during data collection. The tenure criterion ensured sufficient exposure to the supervising leader's behavior. A total of 139 questionnaires were complete and usable. The sample was treated as adequate for the specified PLS-SEM model because adequacy was evaluated against model complexity and the prediction-oriented purpose of the analysis rather than a universal sample-size rule (Hair et al., 2019).

All four constructs were measured reflectively with multi-item scales grounded in established construct definitions. Democratic leadership style was measured with five items addressing participative decision-making, delegation, and openness to subordinate input (Gastil, 1994; Somech, 2005). Discipline was measured with four items addressing rule adherence, punctuality, and responsibility, consistent with the dependability and achievement-striving facets of conscientious work conduct (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Dudley et al., 2006). Competency was measured with three items covering task-relevant knowledge, technical skill, and work attitude (Campion et al., 2011; Delamare Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). Job performance was measured

with five items covering work quality, work quantity, timeliness, initiative, and reliability (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015; Koopmans et al., 2011). Items used a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was translated into Indonesian and back-translated into English to assess semantic equivalence. The moderation term was estimated with the two-stage approach for reflective constructs (Becker et al., 2018).

A structured, self-administered questionnaire was distributed to eligible civil servants during regular working hours, following coordination with each unit head to minimize disruption to service delivery. Respondents completed the questionnaire independently, without supervisor presence, to reduce social desirability pressure in responses to the leadership items. Completed questionnaires were screened for missing values and straight-lining response patterns before entry into the analytic dataset; no cases required exclusion on these grounds, and the retained sample of 139 represents the full set of usable responses.

Partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) was implemented in SmartPLS because the model emphasized prediction and combined direct, mediated, and moderated relationships (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis first assessed the measurement model. Indicator reliability was evaluated through outer loadings; internal consistency through Cronbach's alpha, ρ_a , and ρ_c ; and convergent validity through average variance extracted. Thresholds were 0.70 for loadings and reliability coefficients and 0.50 for AVE. Discriminant validity was assessed with the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations, using 0.85 as a conservative criterion and 0.90 for conceptually close constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). Collinearity was inspected through VIF values. The structural model then evaluated path coefficients, R^2 , f^2 , and Q^2 . Statistical significance was assessed with 5,000 bootstrap subsamples and 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence intervals. Indirect effects were evaluated directly rather than through the causal-steps method (Nitzl et al., 2016). Moderation followed established PLS-SEM interaction procedures (Becker et al., 2018), while moderated mediation was interpreted through the conditional indirect-effect logic described by Hayes (2015). Predictive relevance was considered alongside explanatory fit in line with current PLS-SEM reporting guidance (Shmueli et al., 2019).

RESULTS

Table 1 reports the demographic composition of the 139 respondents. Respondents were concentrated in the 41–50 age bracket (54 respondents, 38.8 percent), followed by the 51–56 bracket (38 respondents, 27.3 percent), the 24–30 bracket (34 respondents, 24.5 percent), and the 31–40 bracket (13 respondents, 9.4 percent). The sample skews male (76 respondents, 54.7 percent) relative to female (63 respondents, 45.3 percent). Educational attainment is concentrated at the bachelor's degree level (82 respondents, 59.0 percent), followed by master's degree holders (45 respondents, 32.4 percent), diploma holders (7 respondents, 5.0 percent), and doctoral degree holders (5 respondents, 3.6 percent). This profile is consistent with a career civil service workforce in which formal tertiary qualification is a standard entry condition and mid-to-senior career respondents predominate.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 139)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Age (years)	24–30	34	24.5
	31–40	13	9.4
	41–50	54	38.8
	51–56	38	27.3
Sex	Male	76	54.7
	Female	63	45.3
Education	Diploma (D3)	7	5.0
	Bachelor's degree (S1)	82	59.0
	Master's degree (S2)	45	32.4
	Doctoral degree (S3)	5	3.6

Measurement Model Assessment

Table 2 reports the outer loadings, collinearity statistics, and reliability and validity coefficients. All indicator loadings exceed 0.70, ranging from 0.750 to 0.869. Indicator VIF values range from 1.373 to 2.461. Cronbach's alpha ranges from 0.722 to 0.867, while composite reliability rho_c ranges from 0.843 to 0.904. Average variance extracted ranges from 0.642 to 0.666. These values satisfy commonly applied PLS-SEM criteria for indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and collinearity (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2. Measurement Model: Validity and Reliability

Construct	Item	VIF	Loading	α	rho_a	rho_c	AVE
Competency	Comp1	1.443	0.781	0.722	0.728	0.843	0.642
	Comp2	1.373	0.798				
	Comp3	1.447	0.824				
Democratic Leadership Style	DLS1	2.071	0.836	0.867	0.875	0.904	0.653
	DLS2	2.076	0.837				
	DLS3	2.461	0.796				
	DLS4	1.694	0.793				
	DLS5	1.738	0.814				
Discipline	Disc1	2.115	0.815	0.833	0.835	0.888	0.666
	Disc2	2.013	0.869				
	Disc3	1.768	0.750				
	Disc4	1.664	0.787				
Job Performance	JP1	1.820	0.797	0.863	0.871	0.901	0.645
	JP2	2.132	0.816				
	JP3	1.857	0.812				
	JP4	1.835	0.772				
	JP5	1.890	0.818				

Table 3 reports the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations among the four first-order constructs and the interaction term. Most first-order HTMT values are below the conservative 0.85 criterion. The Competency-Job Performance value is 0.894, which exceeds 0.85 but remains below the 0.90 criterion often accepted for conceptually related constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). HTMT values involving the Democratic Leadership Style by Discipline interaction term range from 0.053 to 0.244. Discriminant validity is therefore acceptable under the 0.90 criterion, although the competency-performance distinction warrants cautious interpretation.

Table 3. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Construct	Competency	DLS	Discipline	JP
Competency				
Democratic Leadership Style	0.841			
Discipline	0.838	0.706		
Job Performance	0.894	0.787	0.791	
DLS x Discipline	0.061	0.244	0.053	0.089

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model explains substantial variance in the endogenous constructs, with R^2 values of 0.583 for Competency and 0.612 for Job Performance. Q^2 predict values are 0.351 and 0.387, which indicate predictive relevance because both exceed zero (Shmueli et al., 2019). The saturated-model SRMR is 0.062. Table 4 reports the path coefficients, t-values, and p-values obtained from 5,000 bootstrap subsamples, consistent with current PLS-SEM reporting practice (Hair et al., 2019).

Democratic leadership style has a significant positive effect on competency ($\beta = 0.471$, $t = 5.299$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Discipline has a significant positive effect on competency ($\beta =$

0.383, $t = 4.273$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. Competency has a significant positive effect on job performance ($\beta = 0.476$, $t = 5.184$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3. Discipline has a significant positive effect on job performance ($\beta = 0.372$, $t = 4.086$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4. The interaction term, Democratic Leadership Style x Discipline, has a significant positive effect on competency ($\beta = 0.121$, $t = 2.082$, $p = 0.037$), supporting H5 and indicating that discipline strengthens the positive relationship between democratic leadership and competency.

The indirect effect of democratic leadership style on job performance through competency is significant ($\beta = 0.224$, $t = 3.154$, $p = 0.002$), supporting H6. The indirect effect of discipline on job performance through competency is also significant ($\beta = 0.182$, $t = 3.353$, $p = 0.001$), supporting H7. The moderated indirect effect, the effect of the Democratic Leadership Style x Discipline interaction on job performance through competency, is significant ($\beta = 0.057$, $t = 2.042$, $p = 0.041$), supporting H8 and confirming that the strength of the indirect leadership-to-performance pathway through competency is itself conditional on the level of discipline. All eight hypotheses receive empirical support.

Table 4. Structural Model Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing

Path	β	t-value	p-value
Democratic Leadership Style → Competency	0.471	5.299	<0.001
Discipline → Competency	0.383	4.273	<0.001
DLS x Discipline → Competency	0.121	2.082	0.037
Competency → Job Performance	0.476	5.184	<0.001
Discipline → Job Performance	0.372	4.086	<0.001
DLS → Competency → Job Performance (indirect)	0.224	3.154	0.002
Discipline → Competency → Job Performance (indirect)	0.182	3.353	0.001
DLS x Discipline → Competency → Job Performance (moderated indirect)	0.057	2.042	0.041

DISCUSSION

The findings support the AMO mapping of democratic leadership, discipline, competency, and job performance. Democratic leadership predicts competency, which is consistent with participative leadership research showing that discretion and involvement can foster empowerment, knowledge exchange, and performance (Huang et al., 2010; Somech, 2006). Discipline predicts competency and job performance, which aligns with evidence that conscientious, goal-directed conduct supports both skill application and dependable task behavior (Dudley et al., 2006; Kanfer et al., 2017). Competency then predicts performance, consistent with competency models that treat applied knowledge, skill, and behavior as proximal performance requirements (Boyatzis, 2008; Campion et al., 2011).

The moderation result challenges an additive treatment of leadership and discipline as parallel predictors. Discipline operates as a boundary condition: democratic leadership converts into competency more strongly when employees maintain dependable, self-regulated conduct. This interpretation fits research showing that participative leadership can have contingent or threshold effects rather than uniform benefits (Lam et al., 2015). It also responds to public-leadership scholarship that calls for closer attention to institutional context, employee perceptions, and implementation conditions (Tummers & Knies, 2016; Vogel & Masal, 2015). An agency that expands participation without strengthening baseline discipline should therefore expect a weaker competency return than an agency that develops both.

The mediation findings explain why leadership and discipline predict performance. Both antecedents operate partly through the competency they build, which identifies a shared developmental pathway. This result is consistent with AMO evidence that organizational practices influence performance through proximal employee states and capabilities (Jiang et al., 2012). The moderated mediation result extends that account: leadership's indirect contribution to performance rises with discipline. Capability development therefore depends not only on access to developmental opportunity but also on the effort used to exploit it. This conclusion accords with training-transfer research, which treats the work environment and learner motivation as conditions

for converting acquired capability into performance (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Blume et al., 2010; Salas et al., 2012).

Local government HR managers should design leadership, discipline, and competency systems as one portfolio. Participative-leadership development should teach supervisors how to delegate judgment, invite useful dissent, and connect employee input to decisions. Agencies should pair these practices with transparent conduct standards, consistent enforcement, and feedback that supports autonomous goal pursuit rather than mere compliance (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Competency programs should then use job-relevant practice and transfer support because training alone does not ensure applied capability (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009). This combined design fits public-sector evidence that leadership effectiveness depends on employee perceptions and administrative context (Jacobsen & Andersen, 2015; Wright & Pandey, 2010).

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER STUDY

This study shows that democratic leadership and work discipline improve civil servant performance through employee competency, while discipline also strengthens the extent to which democratic leadership develops competency. The findings extend the AMO framework by demonstrating that ability, motivation, and opportunity operate as an interdependent performance mechanism rather than as isolated determinants. Competency emerges as the central pathway through which participative leadership and disciplined behavior are converted into stronger performance. This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional, single-source design supports theory-consistent association but cannot establish temporal precedence; reciprocal relationships between competency and its antecedents remain possible. Procedural safeguards and collinearity diagnostics reduce concern about common method bias, but they do not eliminate it.

ETHICAL DISCLOSURE

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles for research involving human participants. The research protocol received ethical approval from the institutional research ethics committee prior to data collection. All respondents were informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence for their employment status, and each respondent provided informed consent before completing the questionnaire. Responses were collected and stored anonymously, with no identifying information linked to individual questionnaires, and data were used solely for the aggregate statistical purposes reported in this study.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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