

**Boosting Performance through Shared Leadership: The Mediating Role of Trust in
Dutch Workplaces**

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Abstract

In response to growing organizational complexity, shared leadership has emerged as a decentralised alternative to traditional hierarchical models. Defined by the distribution of influence based on competence rather than formal authority, shared leadership is typically examined at the team level. This study extends the literature by investigating its effects within leader–follower dyads and examining trust as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between shared leadership and individual performance. Grounded in Social Exchange Theory and Self Determination Theory, the study employed a one-wave, multi-source field design comprising 133 Dutch leader–employee dyads. Employees assessed levels of shared leadership and trust, while leaders rated employee performance. The findings demonstrate that shared leadership is positively associated with trust, which in turn predicts individual performance. Importantly, the direct relationship between shared leadership and performance became non-significant when trust was included in the model, indicating a full mediation effect. These results contribute to a more granular understanding of shared leadership processes at the dyadic level and provide empirical support for trust as the central mechanism linking shared leadership and performance. The findings are particularly relevant in the Dutch context, where low power distance and egalitarian workplace norms may facilitate competence-based influence. Implications for leadership development underscore the importance of trust-building as an intentional and foundational component of shared leadership practices.

Keywords: shared leadership, trust, leader–follower dyads, individual performance

Boosting Performance through Shared Leadership: The Mediating Role of Trust in Dutch Workplaces

Leadership in modern workplaces is increasingly shifting away from traditional hierarchical models toward more decentralized forms of governance, particularly shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003). While much of the existing research has examined shared leadership within teams, this study focuses on how shared leadership functions in leader-follower dyads, where leaders and their direct subordinates jointly share leadership responsibilities. This evolution is driven by growing demands for flexibility, employee empowerment, and innovation, especially in knowledge-intensive or project-based environments (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). In such settings, shared leadership allows both parties to rotate leadership roles based on competence and situational needs, fostering agility and collaboration (Drescher et al., 2014). Unlike traditional leadership, shared leadership distributes influence bidirectionally between leader and follower, supporting adaptability and responsiveness in situations where singular authority may be insufficient (Pearce, 2004).

In the Netherlands, cultural characteristics such as egalitarianism and low power distance make organizations particularly receptive to shared leadership structures (Hofstede, 2011). Dutch employees typically value autonomy and informal power dynamics, increasing the likelihood of competence-based mutual influence rather than status-based authority. While shared leadership has been associated with positive team outcomes (Wang et al., 2014), its effects on individual-level performance within leader-follower relationships remains underexplored (Abson et al., 2024). A growing body of research suggests that trust functions as a central psychological mechanism through which shared leadership enhances motivation, initiative, and engagement (Drescher et al., 2014). Trust reduces interpersonal risk and enables leaders and followers to more fully invest in both collective and individual goals (De Jong et al., 2016), a process grounded in reciprocal social exchange. (Blau, 1964) This thesis

investigates these dynamics in Dutch workplaces, aiming to clarify how shared leadership—via trust—enhances individual employee performance within dyadic leader–follower relationships.

Although shared leadership has received increasing scholarly attention, several critical gaps remain. First, research seldom examines the Dutch context, despite its cultural characteristics—low power distance and high individualism—being theoretically aligned with shared leadership principles (Hofstede, 2011). Dutch workplaces emphasize autonomy and egalitarianism, which may shape how shared leadership is enacted and how it influences individual performance. Second, much of the existing literature focuses on team-level dynamics, often aggregating perceptions and outcomes while overlooking dyadic relationships such as those between leaders and individual employees (Drescher et al., 2014; D’Innocenzo et al., 2016). This is a significant limitation, as dyadic interactions may involve distinct interpersonal processes, particularly in the development of trust. Notably, Drescher et al. (2014) explicitly called for future research to adopt a dyadic lens to better capture the interpersonal mechanisms through which shared leadership operates. Third, although trust has been identified as a key mechanism linking shared leadership to performance (Drescher et al., 2014; Han et al., 2024), its mediating role has rarely been examined within dyadic relationships. Recent studies provide preliminary support for trust as a mediator at the individual level (Han, Kim & Beyerlein, 2024), but empirical validation in a dyadic context remains limited. Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how shared leadership translates into individual performance through trust in leader–follower relationships, particularly in culturally aligned yet understudied settings such as the Netherlands.

Hypotheses and Theory Development

Shared Leadership

Shared leadership is commonly defined as a dynamic, mutual influence process in which leadership roles are distributed based on expertise, task demands, or situational needs (Pearce & Conger, 2003; Pearce, 2004). Although the majority of research has examined shared leadership at the team level (e.g., Wang et al., 2014), its core mechanisms—reciprocal influence and rotating responsibility—can also manifest in leader–follower relationships (Drescher et al., 2014). Unlike traditional top-down leadership, which centralizes authority in a single individual, shared leadership emphasizes decentralized decision-making and influence based on competence rather than hierarchy. It emerges through interaction, allowing both parties to fluidly alternate between leading and following depending on contextual demands (Carson et al., 2007). This leadership form is especially well-suited to complex and fast-changing environments—such as agile IT projects—where individuals must respond to shifting client needs, high knowledge specialization, and pressure for innovation. In such contexts, shared leadership promotes adaptive collaboration, joint accountability, and informed decision-making, thereby reducing reliance on rigid hierarchies (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). From a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964), shared leadership builds trust through reciprocal investment in one another’s success. These exchanges reduce interpersonal risk, foster motivation, and promote accountability. Trust, therefore, may act as a central psychological mechanism that enables shared leadership in dyads to positively impact individual performance.

Shared Leadership and Trust

To understand the mechanism through which shared leadership enhances trust, Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) offers an explanatory framework. SET conceptualizes trust as an emergent outcome of ongoing reciprocal and mutually beneficial exchanges. Shared

leadership behaviors closely reflect these conditions. Mutual influence and shared responsibility embody reciprocity, whereby individuals engage in bilateral exchanges of input and support (Drescher et al., 2014; Zeb et al., 2022; Imam & Zaheer, 2021). Transparent communication enhances perceptions of openness and fairness, reinforcing the principle of mutual benefit (Chen et al., 2022; Imam & Zaheer, 2021; Abson et al., 2024). Trust is further solidified when those engaging in shared leadership exhibit behavioral consistency and follow through on commitments—signals that increase perceived reliability (Drescher et al., 2014; Imam & Zaheer, 2021). These trust-building dynamics are likely amplified within the Dutch cultural context. Characterized by low power distance and strong egalitarian values (Hofstede, 2011), Dutch workplaces offer a sociocultural environment especially conducive to shared leadership. In such contexts, the behavioral cues inherent in shared leadership—such as transparency, fairness, and mutual respect—are not only culturally congruent but may be particularly effective in fostering interpersonal trust.

H1: Shared leadership is positively associated with trust.

Shared leadership and performance

Shared leadership has been increasingly recognized for its capacity to enhance employee performance by fostering core motivational mechanisms. Unlike hierarchical leadership, shared leadership distributes influence and decision-making authority based on competence, thereby creating conditions conducive to greater individual engagement. This relationship can be theoretically framed through Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that performance is intrinsically motivated when three basic psychological needs are fulfilled: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Shared leadership behaviors directly address these needs. Autonomy is supported through mutual influence (Drescher et al., 2014) and reduced power asymmetry (Chen et al., 2022), allowing employees to participate actively in decision-making processes. Competence is reinforced when leaders recognize and validate

employees' expertise, promoting confidence in their abilities and encouraging skill development (Abson et al., 2024). Relatedness emerges through transparent communication (Chen et al., 2022) and shared responsibility (Imam & Zaheer, 2021), which strengthen interpersonal bonds within the leader–follower relationship. In Dutch workplaces, where egalitarian norms encourage decentralized authority (Hofstede, 2011), shared leadership may be particularly conducive to individual performance by reinforcing mutual accountability and enabling effective leader–follower collaboration (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016).

H2: Shared leadership is positively associated with employee performance.

Trust and Performance

Trust is a foundational element in effective workplace functioning, particularly in settings that rely on collaboration and shared responsibility. It is commonly defined as a psychological state involving the willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of others' intentions and behavior (Rousseau et al., 1998). When interpersonal trust is present, leaders and followers are more likely to engage openly with colleagues, share information, and contribute to group efforts without fear of exploitation or failure (Dirks & Ferrin, 2002). Research shows that trust plays a significant role in enhancing individual performance by reducing interpersonal risk and allowing employees to focus their attention and energy on task completion rather than on self-protection or uncertainty (De Jong et al., 2016). Trust also encourages cooperation, knowledge exchange, and discretionary effort—factors closely tied to improved task performance and organizational citizenship behavior (Colquitt et al., 2007). These outcomes align with social exchange theory, which suggests that trust emerges through repeated, reciprocal interactions and motivates individuals to invest greater effort in their work relationships (Blau, 1964). As such, trust serves not only as a valuable relational outcome but also as a key psychological resource that enables higher

individual performance and may serve as the mechanism through which shared leadership exerts its influence.

H3: Trust is positively associated with employee performance.

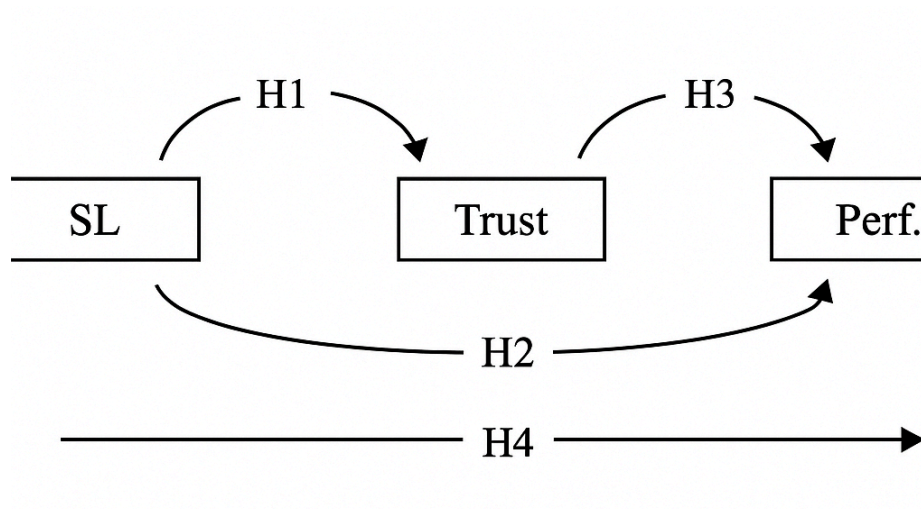
Mediating Role of Trust

Trust is widely recognized as the psychological mechanism through which shared leadership enhances employee performance. (Drescher et al., 2014; Han et al., 2024) In settings where leadership is distributed rather than centralized, individuals are expected to lead and follow based on expertise and situational demands—conditions that require a foundation of trust. As outlined in social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), trust reduces perceived risk in cooperative relationships, enabling individuals to invest effort, accept influence, and reciprocate responsibility. In leader-follower dyads where leadership is shared reciprocally, trust drives commitment and engagement, boosting individual performance (Abson et al., 2024). Empirical studies consistently support this mediating role. Drescher et al. (2014) found that trust partly mediates the relationship between shared leadership and performance, suggesting that interpersonal trust is not a secondary outcome but the key driver of individual effort, engagement, and task performance within leader-follower dyads. Zeb et al. (2022) similarly showed that trust emerges through peer feedback and informal delegation, enabling cooperation, initiative, and knowledge-sharing. Chen, Zhang, and Zhang (2022) further demonstrated that trust precedes learning behaviors in a sequential process leading to performance, reinforcing its role as an early-stage enabler. Qualitative evidence from Abson et al. (2024) adds that trust empowers participation and sustained influence in low-hierarchy, project-based teams, facilitating leadership behaviors and individual responsibility. This mechanism is especially critical in dyadic relationships, where shared leadership is enacted between leader and follower. Trust enables individuals to accept leadership from others, engage reciprocally, and rely on informal authority to guide action (Drescher et al., 2014;

Carson et al., 2007). Without trust, shared leadership lacks the foundation needed to elicit the discretionary effort and task commitment that drive individual performance.

H4: Trust mediates the relationship between shared leadership and employee performance.

Figure 1



Relationship of Shared Leadership With Performance Mediated by Trust

Methods

Participants

The study involved a total of 266 individuals, forming 133 leader–employee dyads, recruited via convenience sampling from undergraduate students at the University of Groningen. The recruitment targeted workplaces primarily in the Groningen area of the Netherlands. To ensure eligibility, only Dutch-speaking participants working at least 17 hours per week as part of a team within an organization were included. After removing participants with invalid data, such as matching codes that could not be linked, two dyads were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 133 dyads. Each dyad comprised one formal leader, defined as a supervisor responsible for overseeing tasks and decisions, paired with one direct subordinate. Leaders ($n = 133$) had an average age of 43.79 years ($SD = 11.38$), with 58.6% male and 41.4% female. Employees ($n = 133$) had an average age of 27.65 years ($SD = 8.25$), with 57.1% female and 42.9% male. The sample spanned across different sectors, with no specific industries prioritized. All participants gave informed consent.

Design and Procedure

The present study is a one-wave, multi-source field study utilizing a convenience sampling approach. In this research, participants were recruited through a formal invitation process conducted by bachelor students from the University of Groningen. The students utilized a standardized letter, written in Dutch, and in-person outreach to engage potential participants from various organizations. Each invited individual, whether in a leadership or employee role, was given the autonomy to select a colleague—either a leader or a direct report—to participate alongside them, ensuring a paired leader-employee dynamic. The survey instrument, administered exclusively in Dutch, focused on exploring interpersonal workplace relationships. The questionnaire consisted of 7 variables for leaders to evaluate and 11 variables for employees to evaluate their leader, with this study focusing solely on

employee-rated shared leadership and trust, and leader-rated performance. Completing the questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes. Prior to participation, all individuals received a detailed informed consent document outlining the study's purpose, participation criteria, and their rights, including privacy protections. Participation was entirely voluntary, with guarantees of anonymity to safeguard personal information. The research protocol received formal approval from the Ethics Committee of the Psychology Department at the University of Groningen. Data collection began on April 2, 2025, and concluded thereafter, adhering to the approved timeline.

Measures

Shared Leadership

Shared leadership was measured using an 18-item scale adapted from Hoch (2013) to fit a dyadic approach, completed solely by employees to assess the distribution of leadership responsibilities within their teams. The scale includes items from three subdimensions: transformational leadership (6 items), empowering leadership (8 items), and participative leadership (4 items). Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*), with higher scores indicating greater levels of perceived shared leadership. Example items include “My leader shows enthusiasm for my efforts” (transformational), “My leader encourages me to learn new things” (empowering), and “My leader advises me to align my work with others who are part of the team” (participative). The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$)

Trust

The mediating variable trust was measured using a 5-item scale adapted from De Jong and Elfring (2010). Employees rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 7 (*completely agree*), with higher scores reflecting greater perceived

trust in their leader. The scale captures key aspects of trust within leader–employee dyads, including reliability, support, and open communication. An example item is: “I can rely on my leader for help with work problems.” Internal consistency was high based on the data collected (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$).

Performance

Employee performance was evaluated by leaders using a 27-item composite measure, consisting of six performance indicators inspired by Van der Vegt and Bunderson (2005) and 21 items from Williams and Anderson (1991). Leaders rated their employee’s performance on six core dimensions—goal achievement, meeting deadlines, work speed, work quality, productivity, and effectiveness—using a 7-point scale (1 = *very poor performance* to 7 = *very good performance*). An example item is: “How does your employee score on achieving goals?” The remaining 21 items from Williams and Anderson (1991) assessed both in-role performance (e.g., “Adequately performs assigned tasks”) and extra-role behaviors, such as helping colleagues and adhering to informal norms, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*). This comprehensive approach captures both task-related and contextual performance within leader–employee dyads. Cronbach’s alpha indicated high internal consistency in this sample ($\alpha = .90$).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 30). Linear regression and mediation analyses were conducted to test the four hypotheses. Data were screened for missing responses and outliers, with incomplete surveys excluded. Assumptions for regression, such as normality and multicollinearity, were checked using diagnostic tests (e.g., histograms, Variance Inflation Factor).

Results

The mediation effect of PS on SL and performance was analyzed through the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2013) in SPSS 30. To verify the appropriateness of our results based on a mediation analysis, it is necessary to present the descriptive statistics and additional assumption testing beforehand.

Descriptives Statistics

Prior to analysis, two dyads were excluded due to incomplete responses on one or more of the core variables. The final sample consisted of 133 complete dyads. On a 7-point Likert scale, the mean score for shared leadership (employee-rated) was 5.41 ($SD = 0.87$), for trust (employee-rated) 6.21 ($SD = 0.98$), and for performance (leader-rated) 5.92 ($SD = 0.73$). Employee-rated shared leadership was significantly positively correlated with employee-rated trust ($r = .62, p < .001$) and leader-rated performance ($r = .27, p = .002$). Employee-rated trust also correlated significantly with leader-rated performance ($r = .37, p < .001$). All correlations were statistically significant and in the expected direction, providing preliminary support for Hypotheses 1 through 3.

Assumption Checks

To evaluate the assumptions for linear regression and mediation analysis, visual and statistical diagnostics were conducted (see Appendix A for all diagnostic plots). Visual inspection of the histogram of standardized residuals indicated an approximately normal distribution. This was further supported by the Q-Q plot, in which the majority of residuals followed the diagonal reference line, suggesting no substantial deviation from normality. One notable standardized residual was observed at the upper end of the distribution.

Linearity and homoscedasticity were assessed using a scatterplot of standardized residuals against standardized predicted values. The residuals appeared randomly and evenly dispersed around the horizontal axis, indicating that both the assumption of linearity and the

assumption of homoscedasticity were sufficiently met. One influential case was identified based on Cook's Distance ($D = 2.20$). However, as all other regression assumptions were met and the exclusion of the case did not meaningfully alter the results, it was retained in the analysis.

Multicollinearity was examined by calculating the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for the predictor variables. Both shared leadership and trust exhibited VIF values of 1.622, well below the commonly used threshold of 5, indicating no concerns regarding multicollinearity with two predictors included in the model.

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1 predicted that employee-rated shared leadership would positively predict employee-rated trust. A simple linear regression analysis was conducted with shared leadership as the predictor and trust as the outcome variable. The overall model was significant, $F(1, 131) = 81.51, p < .001$, and explained 38.4% of the variance in trust ($R^2 = .384$, Adjusted $R^2 = .379$). The regression coefficient for shared leadership was significant, $B = 0.70, SE = 0.08, \beta = .619, t(131) = 9.03, p < .001$, indicating that higher levels of shared leadership were associated with higher levels of trust. These results support Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that employee-rated shared leadership would positively predict leader-rated performance. A simple linear regression was performed with shared leadership as the predictor and performance as the outcome variable. The model was statistically significant, $F(1, 131) = 9.95, p = .002$, accounting for 7.1% of the variance in leader-rated performance ($R^2 = .071$, Adjusted $R^2 = .063$). Shared leadership significantly predicted performance, $B = 0.22, SE = 0.07, \beta = .266, t(131) = 3.15, p = .002$. These findings support Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 stated that employee-rated trust would positively predict leader-rated performance. A simple linear regression analysis revealed that the model was significant, $F(1,$

131) = 21.03, $p < .001$, and explained 13.8% of the variance in leader-rated performance ($R^2 = .138$, Adjusted $R^2 = .132$). Trust significantly predicted performance, $B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.06$, $\beta = .372$, $t(131) = 4.59$, $p < .001$. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that employee-rated trust would mediate the relationship between employee-rated shared leadership and leader-rated performance. A mediation analysis using PROCESS (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples was conducted. The total effect of shared leadership on performance was significant, $B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 3.15$, $p = .002$. When trust was included as a mediator, the direct effect of shared leadership on performance was no longer significant, $B = 0.05$, $SE = 0.09$, $t = 0.55$, $p = .581$.

The indirect effect of shared leadership on performance through trust was significant, $B = 0.18$, $BootSE = 0.08$, 95% $CI [0.03, 0.35]$. Because the confidence interval did not include zero, this indicates a statistically significant mediation effect. The completely standardized indirect effect was $\beta = .21$. These results provide support for Hypothesis 4, indicating that trust fully mediated the relationship between shared leadership and performance.

Discussion

This study examined whether trust mediates the relationship between shared leadership and individual employee performance within leader–follower dyads. Using data collected from 133 Dutch dyadic pairs, the analyses supported all proposed hypotheses. Shared leadership was positively associated with trust, and trust itself was positively linked to individual performance. Furthermore, shared leadership initially showed a direct relationship with individual performance. However, upon introducing trust into the model, this direct association became non-significant, thus confirming full mediation by trust. This finding aligns with previous literature that suggests trust is an essential mechanism underlying shared leadership's effectiveness (Chen et al., 2022; Drescher et al., 2014; Han et al., 2024; Zeb et al., 2022), yet empirical evidence explicitly demonstrating this mediation, particularly in leader–follower dyads, remains limited (Drescher et al., 2014). Thus, the present study contributes by explicitly validating trust's central mediating role, filling an important research gap. The detailed implications of these findings for theory and practice, as well as their limitations and suggestions for future research, are elaborated in the following sections.

Hypothesis 1 stated that shared leadership would be positively associated with trust, and this hypothesis was clearly supported by the data. This finding aligns closely with social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), which posits that trust emerges through ongoing reciprocal exchanges, whereby individuals mutually invest in one another's well-being and success. Within leader–follower dyads, shared leadership fosters repeated interpersonal interactions that encourage mutual support, shared accountability, and a sense of interdependence—conditions under which trust is likely to thrive (Drescher et al., 2014). These dynamics can be further understood through Mayer et al.'s (1995) model of trustworthiness, which conceptualizes trust as a function of perceived ability, benevolence,

and integrity. Specifically, shared leadership behaviors such as mutual influence and resource exchange (Drescher et al., 2014) directly signal benevolence, as they reflect care for the follower's input and well-being. Similarly, transparency and collaboration, along with consistent alignment between a leader's words and actions (Chen et al., 2022), foster perceptions of integrity, while recognition of expertise and repeated successful interactions (Abson et al., 2024) support perceptions of ability. Taken together, these behaviors not only promote positive reciprocal exchanges (as SET predicts) but also fulfill the psychological conditions necessary for trust to develop. Notably, the current study extends prior literature by examining shared leadership at the dyadic level—between individual employees and their direct leaders—rather than at the team level where such dynamics are often studied (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Drescher et al., 2014; Zeb et al., 2021). This more intimate analytical lens reveals that shared leadership significantly cultivates trust within leader–follower relationships, likely because the absence of broader peer-based support structures amplifies the relational dependency on the leader. While team-level studies may dilute the salience of interpersonal trust due to aggregated perceptions, the dyadic approach used here highlights trust as a central mechanism—offering insights that may inform both dyadic and broader team dynamics.

Hypothesis 2 was supported, indicating that employee-rated shared leadership significantly predicted leader-rated performance. This aligns with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that leadership behaviors supporting autonomy and relatedness can enhance intrinsic motivation and task engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, the dyadic context of this study likely constrains the scope for shared leadership to exert its full influence, as reciprocal leadership in one-on-one relationships lacks the broader synergy and peer reinforcement found in team environments. Moreover, because performance was leader-rated, the results may partially reflect subjective evaluations influenced by factors

beyond observable performance—such as prior impressions, personality compatibility, or alignment with leader expectations. Additionally, the modest direct effect on supervisor-assessed performance could be shaped by unmeasured moderating variables. Research in team settings, for instance, has shown that trust predicts performance more strongly under high task interdependence (De Jong et al., 2016) and that team cohesion amplifies the impact of shared leadership (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). While these findings stem from team contexts, they suggest important dynamics that may operate in dyads as well. The relatively small direct effect observed here may also indicate that trust, rather than shared leadership alone, is the more proximal driver of performance—an interpretation further supported by the full mediation effect found in Hypothesis 4. Notably, this study extends existing research by isolating shared leadership within dyadic relationships, showing that even one-on-one mutual influence—as perceived by employees—has a measurable and significant effect on individual performance. In contrast to prior studies that examined shared leadership as a collective, team-level phenomenon (e.g., Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Drescher et al., 2014; Zeb et al., 2021), this study offers a more granular view of how shared leadership functions within real-world hierarchical relationships.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that trust would positively predict employee performance, and the results indeed supported this expectation. This relatively stronger effect, compared to the direct influence of shared leadership, highlights the pivotal role of trust as a performance-enhancing psychological resource. These findings reinforce existing research (e.g., De Jong et al., 2016; Colquitt et al., 2007), which suggests that interpersonal trust reduces cognitive and emotional distractions stemming from self-protection, thereby enabling greater focus, initiative, and task engagement. Moreover, by encouraging open communication and discretionary effort, trust appears to foster the type of cooperative behavior that supervisors may reward in performance assessments. From a theoretical

standpoint, the result aligns closely with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that trust emerges through ongoing reciprocal interactions that promote relational commitment. In our context, employees who feel trusted and trusting are likely to reciprocate through heightened effort and accountability—an exchange dynamic visible even across hierarchical boundaries. Given the leader-rated nature of the performance measure, it is especially noteworthy that trust, as rated by employees, predicts outcomes as evaluated by supervisors, suggesting that trust may manifest in observable performance behaviors recognized by external raters.

Among all tested hypotheses, Hypothesis 4 yielded the most theoretically and empirically compelling result. The mediation analysis revealed that trust fully mediated the relationship between employee-rated shared leadership and leader-rated performance. While shared leadership initially had a significant direct effect on performance, this effect became non-significant when trust was included in the model. Indeed, the indirect effect via trust remained significant, indicating that the performance benefits of shared leadership operate primarily through the development of trust. This finding provides strong empirical support for the interpretation that trust functions as the key psychological mechanism by which shared leadership enhances performance. It offers a clear explanation for the more modest direct effect found in Hypothesis 2, suggesting that shared leadership alone may not drive performance unless it first builds a foundation of interpersonal trust. In dyadic relationships—where influence, accountability, and communication are concentrated in a single leader–follower pairing—this trust becomes especially critical. Without peer-based structures or distributed responsibility, the quality of this relationship plays an outsized role in shaping behavioral outcomes and perceived performance. The result aligns closely with social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that individuals reciprocate favorable treatment with increased effort and commitment. Shared leadership invites such reciprocity by fostering

mutual respect, shared accountability, and consistent interaction. When employees perceive this investment from their leader, they are more likely to respond with behaviors that contribute to organizational goals—creating a trust-based exchange that drives performance.

This study meaningfully extends existing literature by empirically confirming a full mediation effect—a finding that extends and clarifies Drescher et al. (2014), who observed partial mediation in a team-level context. While their results imply that other mechanisms beyond trust also contribute to performance in teams, the current findings suggest that when leadership and influence are confined to a single relationship, trust may serve as the dominant conduit. Moreover, although prior studies have separately established links between shared leadership and trust (e.g., Bergman et al., 2012; Han et al., 2024) and between trust and performance (Colquitt et al., 2007; De Jong et al., 2016), few have directly tested this mediation pathway—especially in a dyadic, cross-rater design. By addressing this gap, the present study contributes novel insights into the interpersonal dynamics of shared leadership and offers a more refined understanding of its operative mechanism at the individual level.

Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of designing leadership models that do not merely decentralize authority, but also foster the psychological conditions—especially trust—that enable high performance in settings where leader–follower interactions are the primary site of influence.

Strengths and Limitations

A notable strength of the present study lies in its dyadic design, which responds directly to Drescher et al. (2014), who called for more fine-grained investigations into the mechanisms through which shared leadership influences outcomes. While Drescher and colleagues found that trust partially mediated the relationship between shared leadership and performance at the team level, the current study demonstrates full mediation in a leader–follower dyadic context. This offers a meaningful extension of existing theory by

showing that trust may play an even more central role in settings where leadership dynamics are confined to one-on-one interactions, free from broader group-level processes.

The study further benefits from a cross-source design, which reduces the risk of common method bias by combining employee-rated predictors (shared leadership and trust) with leader-rated outcomes (performance). Additionally, all constructs were assessed using validated and multidimensional instruments with high internal consistency (e.g., Hoch, 2013; De Jong & Elfring, 2010; Williams & Anderson, 1991), enhancing measurement reliability. The use of a composite performance measure, capturing both in-role and extra-role behaviors, provides a nuanced and ecologically valid assessment of workplace performance. The data collection was ethically approved and procedurally rigorous, ensuring informed consent, participant anonymity, and adherence to academic standards.

Nonetheless, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of the design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions, particularly in the context of mediation, which ideally requires temporal separation between predictor, mediator, and outcome variables. Second, the study employed convenience sampling among Dutch-speaking employees, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other cultural contexts, particularly those with higher power distance or different leadership expectations. Third, although the use of leader ratings mitigates common rater bias, shared leadership and trust were measured via employee self-report, potentially introducing subjective bias.

Furthermore, unmeasured moderators may have influenced the observed relationships.

Research in team settings, for instance, has shown that task interdependence strengthens the link between trust and performance (De Jong et al., 2016), while team cohesion enhances the impact of shared leadership (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). These contextual dynamics were not assessed in the current dyadic framework but may also operate, albeit differently, in one-on-one workplace relationships. Finally, although performance was rated by leaders, such

evaluations may still be shaped by relational or perceptual biases, such as prior impressions or alignment with the leader's interpersonal expectations, rather than purely objective performance behaviors.

Future Directions

To deepen understanding of the mechanisms underlying shared leadership, future studies should employ longitudinal or multi-wave designs to better establish causal direction and capture performance trends over time. This would help disentangle the temporal sequence by which shared leadership behaviors cultivate trust and ultimately influence performance. Additionally, while trust emerged as a central mediator in this study, future research could explore complementary psychological mechanisms such as psychological empowerment, which aligns with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and may further explain how shared leadership enhances motivation and task ownership. Another promising mediator is role clarity, which could be linked to the integrity component of Mayer et al.'s (1995) trustworthiness model. Specifically, when leaders demonstrate transparency and collaboration—key shared leadership behaviors—this may reduce ambiguity, foster perceptions of integrity, and thus facilitate trust formation. Beyond mediation, scholars should examine moderating variables that may either amplify or attenuate the effects observed. For instance, prior research has shown that task interdependence strengthens the trust–performance link (De Jong et al., 2016) and that team cohesion magnifies the benefits of shared leadership (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). At the same time, role overload or high time pressure might suppress the cognitive and relational bandwidth necessary for shared leadership behaviors to translate into trust or observable performance improvements.

To extend generalizability, future studies should investigate these dynamics across different cultural contexts, particularly in high power distance cultures where decentralized leadership may be less intuitive but potentially transformative. Moreover, studying

high-stakes industries such as the healthcare sector—where interpersonal trust is critical to ensuring patient safety and coordinated care—could reveal how these dynamics operate when trust failures carry more severe consequences. Lastly, to reflect the evolving nature of work, it would be valuable to examine how shared leadership and trust unfold in remote or hybrid job settings, where interpersonal trust must develop in the absence of physical proximity and where digital collaboration tools mediate most interactions. Such research would not only enhance theoretical insight but also adapt the study of shared leadership to contemporary organizational realities.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for organizations seeking to enhance individual performance through leadership development. Most notably, they suggest that shared leadership behaviors—such as mutual influence, resource exchange (Drescher et al., 2014), transparency, collaboration, and consistency between words and actions (Chen et al., 2022)—are instrumental in cultivating trust within dyadic leader–follower relationships. Organizations can foster these behaviors by training leaders to actively seek employee input, share decision-making authority, and recognize employees’ unique expertise, even in settings that are traditionally hierarchical. For example, structured feedback loops, co-created action plans, and inclusive problem-solving meetings can serve as practical tools to operationalize mutual influence and collaboration. Trust-building should not be treated as a by-product but rather as a strategic focus in leadership development programs, given that trust fully mediated the effect of shared leadership on performance in this study. Managers should be encouraged to demonstrate behavioral integrity—aligning their stated values with consistent actions—and to engage in regular resource and information sharing, thereby reinforcing the perception of benevolence and ability, hallmarks of trust. Furthermore, organizations may consider incorporating cross-source performance reviews into their

performance management systems, as the study design highlights the value of distinguishing between employee perceptions and supervisor-assessed outcomes. By explicitly targeting these relational and behavioral dimensions of shared leadership, organizations can create environments in which trust naturally develops—ultimately unlocking higher levels of individual performance.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how shared leadership influences individual employee performance and whether trust serves as the underlying mechanism in this relationship. Drawing on data from leader–follower dyads within Dutch workplaces, the findings offered consistent and compelling support for all four hypotheses. Shared leadership was found to enhance trust, which in turn significantly predicted employee performance. Notably, the direct effect of shared leadership on performance became non-significant when trust was introduced into the model, confirming full mediation. This result underscores the idea that the true performance benefits of shared leadership are realized not merely through structural or behavioral change, but through the cultivation of trusting relationships. These findings carry important implications for how leadership is both conceptualized and enacted in contemporary work environments. Rather than positioning trust as an abstract outcome or optional soft skill, this study highlights its functional role as a performance-enabling force. In doing so, it challenges organizations to think beyond traditional hierarchies and consider how influence can be shared in ways that motivate, empower, and engage employees more deeply. Beyond advancing theoretical understanding, the study responds to growing demands for leadership models that are more collaborative, adaptive, and psychologically attuned. Ultimately, by validating trust as the key mechanism linking shared leadership to enhanced performance, this study adds to a more nuanced and human-centered vision of organizational success—one in which leadership is distributed, relationships matter, and performance

emerges not from control, but from mutual respect and influence. This shift has the potential to shape more sustainable, empowering workplaces for the future.

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Appendix A - Scale Measures

Items about Shared Leadership from the Employee questionnaire

Geef alstublieft aan in hoeverre u het eens bent met de stellingen.

[1 Helemaal mee oneens; 7 Helemaal mee eens; 4 niet mee eens, niet mee oneens]

1. Mijn leidinggevende geeft een duidelijk beeld van waar ons team voor staat.
2. Mijn leidinggevende is gedreven door hogere doelen of idealen.
3. Mijn leidinggevende laat waardering zien voor mijn inspanningen.
4. Mijn leidinggevende moedigt mij aan om ideeën te heroverwegen die nooit eerder in twijfel getrokken zijn.
5. Mijn leidinggevende maakt gebruik van veel verschillende perspectieven om problemen op te lossen .
6. Mijn leidinggevende moedigt mij aan om meer te doen dan alleen dat wat van mij verwacht wordt (bijv. extra inspanning).
7. Mijn leidinggevende moedigt mij aan om zelf oplossingen te zoeken voor mijn problemen in het werk.
8. Mijn leidinggevende dringt aan om zelf verantwoordelijkheid voor het werk te nemen.
9. Mijn leidinggevende moedigt mij aan om nieuwe dingen te leren.
10. Mijn leidinggevende moedigt mij aan om mezelf een schouderklopje te geven wanneer ik een nieuwe uitdaging heb behaald.
11. Mijn leidinggevende moedigt mij aan om samen te werken met andere teamleden.
12. Mijn leidinggevende adviseert mij om mijn werk af te stemmen met anderen, die onderdeel uitmaken van het team.
13. Mijn leidinggevende dringt erop aan om als een team samen te werken met anderen, die deel uitmaken van het team.

14. Mijn leidinggevende verwacht dat de samenwerking met de andere teamleden goed verloopt.
15. Mijn leidinggevende besluit samen met mij wat mijn prestatiedoelen zijn.
16. Mijn leidinggevende en ik werken samen om te kiezen wat mijn prestatiedoelen moeten zijn.
17. Mijn leidinggevende en ik gaan samen om de tafel om overeenstemming te krijgen over mijn prestatiedoelen.
18. Mijn leidinggevende werkt met mij samen om mijn prestatiedoelen te ontwikkelen.

Items about Performance from the Leader Questionnaire

Geef alstublieft aan in hoeverre u het eens bent met de stellingen.

[1 Helemaal mee oneens; 7 Helemaal mee eens; 4 niet mee eens, niet mee oneens]

Mijn medewerker:.....

1. Voert de opgedragen taken naar behoren uit
2. Voldoet aan de verantwoordelijkheden vermeld in de functiebeschrijving
3. Voert de taken uit die van hem/haar verwacht worden
4. Voldoet aan de formele prestatie-eisen van de functie
5. Houdt zich/haar bezig met activiteiten die rechtstreeks van invloed zijn op zijn/haar prestatiebeoordeling
6. Verwaarloost aspecten van het werk dat hij/zij verplicht is uit te voeren
7. Faalt in het uitvoeren van essentiële taken
8. Helpt anderen die afwezig zijn geweest
9. Helpt anderen die een zware werklast hebben
10. Assisteert mij bij mijn werkzaamheden (wanneer niet gevraagd)

11. Neemt de tijd om te luisteren naar problemen en zorgen van collega's
12. Doet zijn/haar uiterste best om nieuwe medewerkers te helpen
13. Heeft persoonlijke belangstelling voor andere werknemers
14. Geeft informatie door aan collega's
15. Aanwezigheid op werk is boven de norm
16. Geeft van te voren aan wanneer hij/zij niet kan komen werken
17. Neemt te veel werkpauses
18. Besteed veel tijd aan persoonlijke telefoongesprekken
19. Klaagt over onbelangrijke dingen op het werk
20. Bewaart en beschermt eigendommen van de organisatie
21. Houdt zich aan informele regels die zijn opgesteld om de orde te handhaven

Items on Trust from the employee questionnaire

De volgende vragen gaan over uw leidinggevende.

Geef alstublieft aan in hoeverre u het eens bent met de stellingen.

[1 Helemaal mee oneens; 7 Helemaal mee eens; 4 niet mee eens, niet mee oneens]

Ik kan op mijn leidinggevende rekenen voor hulp als ik problemen heb met mijn werk.

Ik heb er vertrouwen in dat mijn leidinggevende rekening met mijn belangen houdt bij het nemen van werk-gerelateerde beslissingen.

Ik heb er vertrouwen in dat mijn leidinggevende mij op de hoogte brengt van onderwerpen die belangrijk zijn voor mijn werk.

Ik reken erop dat mijn leidinggevende zich aan zijn/haar woord houdt.

Ik vertrouw mijn leidinggevende.

Appendix B - Regression Assumptions

Figure 1

Linearity and Homoscedasticity Assumption Check

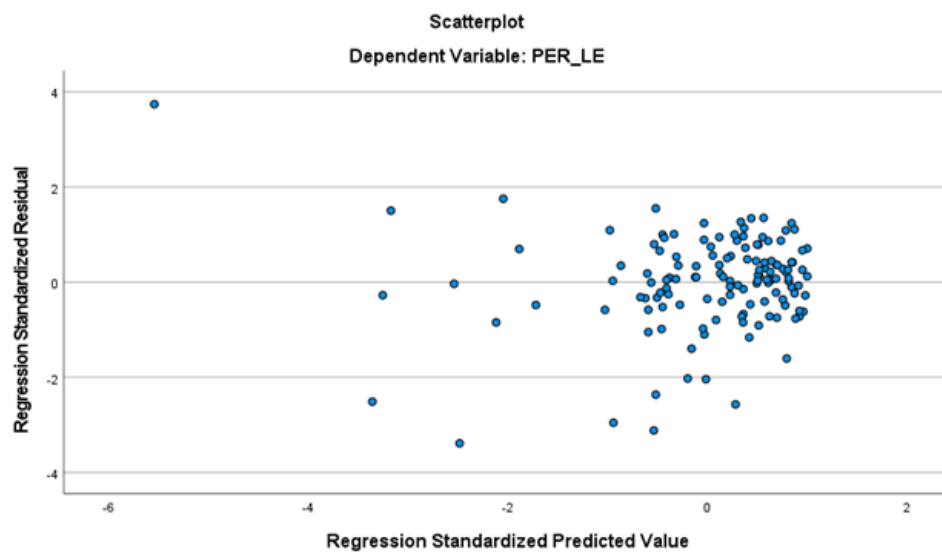
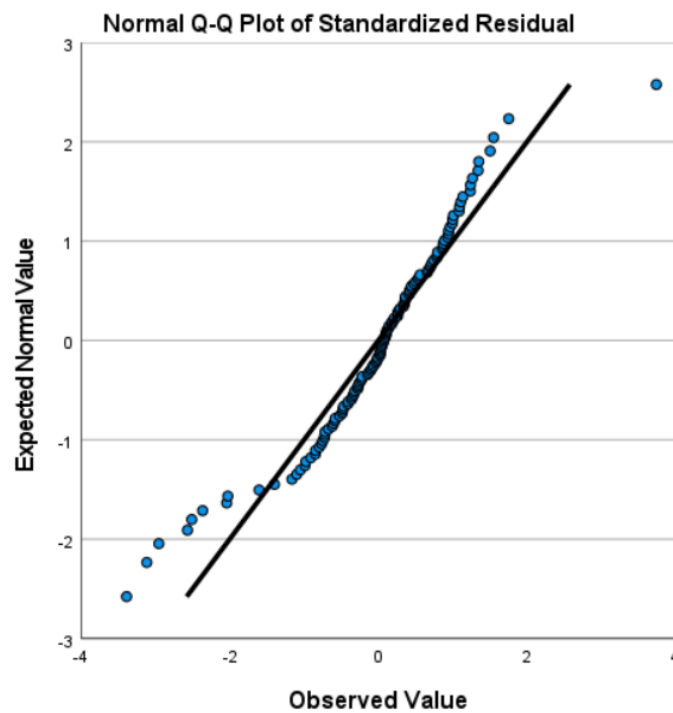


Figure 2*Q-Q Plot Indicating Normality***Standardized Residual****Figure 3***Histogram Indicating Normality*