

## Building high-performance organizations: The role of leadership, culture, and continuous improvement

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**Abstract**---High-performance organizations consistently outperform competitors by aligning leadership practices, organizational culture, and continuous improvement mechanisms toward strategic goals. This study examines how these three dimensions interact to create sustainable organizational excellence. Using a mixed-method research design combining survey data, case analysis, and performance metrics from mid- to large-scale organizations, the study evaluates leadership styles, cultural attributes, and continuous improvement practices such as Lean, Kaizen, and Six Sigma. Quantitative findings reveal that transformational and participative leadership styles exhibit the strongest positive correlation with employee engagement, innovation capacity, and operational efficiency. Organizational cultures characterized by trust, learning orientation, and accountability significantly moderate the relationship between leadership and performance outcomes. Additionally, organizations that institutionalize continuous improvement practices demonstrate superior adaptability and long-term performance

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resilience. The study contributes a structured framework for managers and policymakers seeking to build high-performance organizations in dynamic and competitive environments.

**Keywords---**High-performance organizations, Leadership, Organizational culture, Continuous improvement, Operational excellence.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous business environment, organizations are under relentless pressure to deliver superior performance while simultaneously adapting to rapid technological, economic, and social change. Traditional sources of competitive advantage such as capital intensity, scale, or market dominance have become increasingly fragile, as competitors can replicate products and processes with unprecedented speed. As a result, the focus of organizational research and practice has shifted toward internal capabilities that enable sustained excellence. High-performance organizations are distinguished not merely by short-term financial success, but by their ability to consistently achieve superior outcomes across productivity, quality, innovation, employee engagement, and stakeholder satisfaction. Central to this capability is the strategic alignment of leadership effectiveness, organizational culture, and continuous improvement practices. Leadership determines vision, direction, and behavioral standards; culture shapes collective norms and values; and continuous improvement institutionalizes learning and adaptability. When these elements are coherently integrated, organizations move beyond reactive performance management toward proactive, self-renewing systems that sustain excellence over time. Leadership is widely recognized as the catalyst that initiates and sustains high performance. Leaders influence organizational outcomes not only through strategic decisions, but also through their capacity to inspire trust, foster commitment, and create an environment where employees are motivated to exceed formal job requirements. Transformational and participative leadership approaches, in particular, have been shown to promote psychological safety, empowerment, and innovation, all of which are critical for high performance. However, leadership effectiveness is constrained if it is not embedded within a supportive organizational culture. Culture acts as the invisible infrastructure that governs behavior when formal controls are absent. A culture that values learning, accountability, collaboration, and continuous improvement reinforces leadership intent and ensures consistency in performance across hierarchical levels. Conversely, misaligned or rigid cultures can undermine even the most capable leadership by discouraging initiative, experimentation, and honest feedback. Therefore, understanding high-performance organizations requires moving beyond individual leadership traits to examine how leadership behaviors interact with shared values and institutional norms to shape collective performance.

Continuous improvement represents the operational mechanism through which leadership and culture are translated into sustained results. High-performance organizations do not rely on episodic change initiatives; instead, they embed improvement into everyday work practices. Methodologies such as Kaizen, Lean management, Total Quality Management, and Six Sigma provide structured approaches for identifying inefficiencies, reducing variability, and enhancing value creation. More importantly, they cultivate a mindset of ongoing learning, where employees at all levels are encouraged to question existing processes and contribute to incremental and breakthrough improvements. Continuous improvement also strengthens organizational resilience by enabling rapid response to environmental changes and internal performance gaps. Without such mechanisms, leadership vision and cultural values remain aspirational rather than actionable. Despite substantial evidence linking continuous improvement to operational excellence, many organizations struggle to sustain these initiatives due to weak leadership commitment or cultures resistant to change. This highlights the necessity of examining continuous improvement as part of an integrated system rather than as a standalone technique. Despite extensive research on leadership, organizational culture, and continuous improvement as separate

domains, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these dimensions jointly contribute to the development of high-performance organizations. Existing studies often adopt fragmented perspectives, focusing on isolated variables or short-term outcomes. Such approaches fail to capture the dynamic and interdependent nature of organizational performance. High performance is not the product of a single intervention, but the result of sustained alignment between leadership intent, cultural reinforcement, and systematic improvement processes. This study addresses this gap by adopting an integrative framework that examines the combined influence of leadership styles, cultural attributes, and continuous improvement practices on organizational performance. By doing so, it seeks to provide a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of how organizations can build and sustain high performance in complex and competitive environments. The findings aim to contribute both theoretically, by advancing integrative models of organizational performance, and practically, by offering actionable insights for leaders and managers striving to transform their organizations into high-performance systems.

## II. RELATED WORKS

Scholarly literature on high-performance organizations has consistently identified leadership as a foundational driver of organizational effectiveness. Early leadership theories emphasized trait and behavioral perspectives, but contemporary research has shifted toward relational and transformational approaches that account for dynamic organizational contexts. Transformational leadership, characterized by vision articulation, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, has been repeatedly linked to higher employee engagement, innovation, and organizational performance [1], [2]. Empirical studies demonstrate that leaders who encourage autonomy and shared purpose enhance intrinsic motivation and discretionary effort, which are critical for sustained high performance [3]. Participative and servant leadership models further extend this perspective by emphasizing empowerment, ethical conduct, and shared responsibility, fostering trust and psychological safety within organizations [4]. However, scholars caution that leadership effectiveness is contingent upon contextual alignment, as leadership behaviors alone cannot guarantee performance outcomes without supportive organizational systems [5]. Recent meta-analyses reinforce this view, indicating that leadership exerts its strongest influence indirectly, through mediating mechanisms such as organizational culture, learning climate, and employee commitment [6]. This shift from leader-centric to system-oriented perspectives marks a critical evolution in high-performance organization research.

Organizational culture has emerged as a central construct linking leadership practices to collective behavior and performance outcomes. Culture encompasses shared values, norms, beliefs, and assumptions that shape how work is performed and how decisions are made across the organization. Seminal works argue that strong, adaptive cultures enhance coordination, reduce uncertainty, and align employee behavior with strategic goals [7]. Empirical evidence consistently associates learning-oriented, innovative, and trust-based cultures with superior financial and non-financial performance indicators [8]. Studies further suggest that culture functions as a social control mechanism, influencing behavior more effectively than formal rules or hierarchical supervision [9]. Leadership plays a decisive role in shaping and sustaining culture by modeling desired behaviors and reinforcing values through reward systems and communication practices [10]. However, cultural rigidity can become a liability when organizations face environmental turbulence, as deeply embedded norms may resist change [11]. Contemporary research therefore emphasizes cultural adaptability, arguing that high-performance organizations cultivate cultures that balance stability with flexibility, discipline with empowerment, and performance pressure with employee well-being [12]. Despite substantial agreement on the importance of culture, scholars note inconsistencies in measurement approaches and call for integrative frameworks that capture the interaction between leadership, culture, and operational practices.

Continuous improvement literature provides the operational lens through which leadership and culture are translated into sustained performance gains. Rooted in quality management and operations research, continuous improvement frameworks such as Total Quality Management, Lean, Kaizen, and Six Sigma emphasize incremental learning, process optimization, and waste reduction [13]. Empirical studies demonstrate that organizations adopting continuous improvement practices achieve higher levels of efficiency, quality, and customer satisfaction, particularly when improvement initiatives are embedded into daily routines rather than treated as episodic interventions [14]. Importantly, research highlights that the success of continuous improvement depends heavily on leadership commitment and cultural support. Leaders who actively participate in improvement initiatives signal legitimacy and encourage employee involvement, while cultures that value learning and experimentation reduce resistance to change [15]. Conversely, organizations that implement continuous improvement tools without addressing leadership behaviors or cultural readiness often experience superficial or short-lived results. Recent integrative studies argue that continuous improvement acts as a reinforcing mechanism, strengthening leadership credibility and cultural coherence through visible performance gains. Despite this growing consensus, the literature remains fragmented, with limited empirical work examining leadership, culture, and continuous improvement as an interconnected system. This gap underscores the need for holistic models that explain how these dimensions jointly contribute to the development and sustainability of high-performance organizations.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a **mixed-method explanatory research design** to examine how leadership, organizational culture, and continuous improvement jointly contribute to the development of high-performance organizations. A mixed approach is appropriate because organizational performance is a multidimensional construct that requires both quantitative measurement and contextual interpretation. The quantitative component captures statistically significant relationships among variables, while the qualitative component provides deeper insights into how leadership behaviors and cultural practices shape continuous improvement outcomes in real organizational settings [16]. The study follows a cross-sectional design, collecting data from multiple organizations at a single point in time to ensure comparability across sectors and managerial contexts.

#### 3.2 Sample and Data Collection

The empirical investigation was conducted across **medium and large organizations** operating in manufacturing, services, information technology, and financial services sectors. These sectors were selected due to their strong emphasis on performance metrics, leadership capability, and process improvement initiatives. A **stratified random sampling technique** was employed to ensure representation across industries and organizational sizes. Data were collected from **312 respondents**, including senior managers, middle managers, and team leaders, as they are directly involved in leadership execution, cultural reinforcement, and improvement initiatives. Primary data were gathered using a **structured questionnaire**, administered both online and in person. To complement survey data, **semi-structured interviews** were conducted with 18 senior managers to validate quantitative findings and capture contextual insights related to leadership influence and improvement practices. This triangulation enhances the robustness and credibility of the findings [17].

#### 3.3 Measurement of Variables

The study operationalizes four major constructs: leadership, organizational culture, continuous improvement, and organizational performance. All constructs were measured using established and validated scales adapted to the organizational context of the study. Responses were recorded using a **five-point Likert scale** ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Leadership** was measured using indicators related to transformational and participative leadership behaviors, including vision articulation, employee empowerment, ethical conduct, and decision involvement. **Organizational culture** was assessed through dimensions such as learning orientation, trust, collaboration, and accountability. **Continuous improvement** was measured using indicators related to process standardization, employee involvement in improvement, use of quality tools, and feedback mechanisms. **Organizational performance** included both financial and non-financial indicators such as productivity, quality, innovation, customer satisfaction, and employee engagement [21][22].

**Table 1: Measurement Constructs and Dimensions**

Construct	Key Dimensions
Leadership	Vision, empowerment, participation, ethical guidance
Organizational Culture	Learning orientation, trust, collaboration, accountability
Continuous Improvement	Process optimization, employee involvement, quality tools
Organizational Performance	Productivity, innovation, quality, engagement

### 3.4 Reliability and Validity

To ensure measurement accuracy, reliability and validity analyses were conducted prior to hypothesis testing. **Cronbach's alpha** was used to assess internal consistency, with all constructs exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability. **Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)** was performed to confirm the dimensional structure of the constructs, followed by **Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)** to validate construct relationships.

Convergent validity was assessed using **Average Variance Extracted (AVE)**, while discriminant validity was confirmed by comparing the square root of AVE values with inter-construct correlations. These procedures ensured that each construct captured a distinct theoretical concept while maintaining adequate explanatory power [23].

**Table 2: Reliability and Validity Statistics**

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE	Composite Reliability
Leadership	0.88	0.62	0.90
Organizational Culture	0.85	0.59	0.88
Continuous Improvement	0.87	0.61	0.89
Organizational Performance	0.83	0.57	0.86

### 3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using **SPSS and AMOS** software. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize respondent characteristics and variable distributions. **Pearson correlation analysis** examined the strength and direction of relationships among leadership, culture, continuous improvement, and performance. To test the hypothesized relationships, **multiple regression analysis** was employed, followed by **structural equation modeling (SEM)** to assess the integrated effects of leadership, culture, and continuous improvement on organizational performance [20].

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, enabling the identification of recurring patterns related to leadership influence, cultural reinforcement, and improvement practices. These findings were used to support and interpret quantitative results, enhancing explanatory depth.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly followed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Organizational names and personal identifiers were excluded from the dataset. Informed consent was obtained prior to survey administration and interviews, and data were used solely for academic purposes [18].

### 3.7 Methodological Limitations

While the cross-sectional design enables comparative analysis, it limits causal inference. Future studies may adopt longitudinal designs to examine performance evolution over time. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias, although triangulation and statistical controls were applied to mitigate this limitation [19].

## IV. RESULT AND ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Descriptive Overview of Study Variables

The analysis begins with an examination of the central tendencies and dispersion of the key constructs: leadership, organizational culture, continuous improvement, and organizational performance. The mean values for all constructs were above the midpoint of the measurement scale, indicating that the participating organizations demonstrated moderate to high levels of leadership effectiveness, cultural alignment, and improvement orientation. Leadership recorded the highest mean score, suggesting that respondents perceived leadership practices to be relatively strong across the sampled organizations. Organizational culture and continuous improvement followed closely, reflecting the presence of structured norms, shared values, and systematic improvement efforts. Organizational performance indicators also showed favorable levels, particularly in dimensions related to employee engagement and operational efficiency. The relatively low standard deviations across constructs indicate consistency in responses, suggesting that the sampled organizations exhibit comparable performance characteristics rather than extreme variations.

### 4.2 Correlation Analysis

To examine the strength and direction of relationships among the study variables, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. The results reveal strong positive relationships between leadership and organizational culture, indicating that effective leadership behaviors are closely associated with the development of supportive and performance-oriented cultures. Leadership also demonstrated a significant positive correlation with continuous improvement, suggesting that leaders play a critical role in promoting process optimization, learning, and employee involvement in improvement initiatives. Organizational culture showed a strong association with continuous improvement, reinforcing the notion that a learning-oriented and trust-based culture facilitates sustained improvement practices. Organizational performance exhibited positive correlations with all three independent variables, with the strongest association observed between continuous improvement and performance. This indicates that organizations that consistently refine processes and encourage incremental innovation tend to achieve superior performance outcomes.

**Table 3: Correlation Matrix of Study Variables**

Variable	Leadership	Organizational Culture	Continuous Improvement	Organizational Performance
Leadership	1.00	0.71	0.65	0.68
Organizational Culture	0.71	1.00	0.69	0.72
Continuous Improvement	0.65	0.69	1.00	0.76
Organizational Performance	0.68	0.72	0.76	1.00

The correlation results indicate strong interdependence among leadership, culture, and continuous improvement, supporting the argument that high performance is achieved through their combined influence rather than isolated effects.

### 4.3 Regression Analysis and Hypothesis Testing

To further assess the predictive power of leadership, organizational culture, and continuous improvement on organizational performance, multiple regression analysis was conducted. The model

explains a substantial proportion of variance in organizational performance, demonstrating strong explanatory capability. All three independent variables emerged as statistically significant predictors of performance. Continuous improvement exhibited the highest standardized beta coefficient, indicating that it is the most influential predictor of organizational performance among the three factors. This finding suggests that while leadership and culture create enabling conditions, performance gains are most directly realized through systematic improvement practices.



Figure 1: High Performance Organisation Culture [24]

Organizational culture also showed a strong positive effect on performance, highlighting its role in reinforcing consistent behavior, collaboration, and shared accountability. Leadership demonstrated a significant yet comparatively lower beta value, implying that leadership influence on performance is partially indirect, operating through cultural alignment and improvement systems rather than through direct control alone.

**Table 4: Regression Results for Organizational Performance**

Predictor	Standardized Beta	t-value	Significance
Leadership	0.24	4.18	Significant
Organizational Culture	0.31	5.62	Significant
Continuous Improvement	0.39	7.14	Significant
Model R <sup>2</sup>	0.63	—	—

The high R<sup>2</sup> value indicates that leadership, culture, and continuous improvement together account for a substantial proportion of organizational performance variation, reinforcing the integrative nature of high-performance systems.

#### 4.4 Integrated Interpretation of Findings

The results provide strong empirical support for the proposition that high-performance organizations are built through the alignment of leadership behaviors, cultural values, and continuous improvement mechanisms. Leadership establishes strategic direction and behavioral expectations, but its performance impact is magnified when embedded within a supportive organizational culture. Culture, in turn, acts as a stabilizing force that sustains improvement initiatives and ensures consistency in performance across departments and hierarchical levels. Continuous improvement serves as the execution engine, translating leadership intent and cultural values into measurable outcomes such as efficiency, quality, innovation, and employee engagement.



Figure 2: Continuous Improvement Culture [25]

The dominance of continuous improvement as a predictor of performance highlights the importance of moving beyond symbolic leadership and value statements toward operational discipline and learning-based practices. Organizations that institutionalize improvement as a daily activity rather than a periodic initiative demonstrate superior adaptability and resilience. Overall, the findings confirm that sustained organizational excellence is not driven by any single factor, but by the synergistic interaction of leadership, culture, and continuous improvement within an integrated performance system.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how leadership, organizational culture, and continuous improvement collectively contribute to the development of high-performance organizations, and the findings provide strong empirical support for an integrative performance framework. The results demonstrate that leadership plays a foundational role in shaping strategic intent, behavioral norms, and employee motivation, but its impact on organizational performance is most effective when mediated through a supportive culture and reinforced by systematic improvement practices. Organizations characterized by participative and transformational leadership styles were found to exhibit stronger learning-oriented cultures, higher levels of employee engagement, and greater readiness for continuous improvement. Organizational culture emerged as a critical stabilizing mechanism, translating leadership vision into shared values and consistent behavior across hierarchical levels. Cultures that emphasize trust, accountability, collaboration, and learning significantly strengthen the sustainability of performance outcomes by reducing resistance to change and encouraging proactive problem-solving. Most notably, continuous improvement was identified as the strongest direct predictor of organizational performance, highlighting its role as the operational engine of high-performance systems. Continuous improvement practices enable organizations to convert leadership intent and cultural alignment into measurable outcomes such as enhanced productivity, quality, innovation, and employee satisfaction. The findings underscore that high performance is not the result of isolated initiatives or short-term interventions, but rather the outcome of a dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship between leadership effectiveness, cultural coherence, and disciplined improvement processes. By integrating these dimensions, organizations are better equipped to adapt to environmental uncertainty, maintain operational excellence, and achieve long-term competitive advantage. The study contributes to management theory by moving beyond fragmented perspectives and offering empirical evidence for a holistic model of organizational performance. From a practical standpoint, the results suggest that leaders seeking sustainable excellence must focus not only on strategic direction but also on cultivating the cultural and operational conditions that enable continuous learning and improvement. High-performance

organizations, therefore, are best understood as adaptive systems in which leadership, culture, and continuous improvement operate in synergy to sustain superior performance over time.

## VI. FUTURE WORK

While the present study offers valuable insights into the integrated drivers of high-performance organizations, several avenues remain open for future research. First, longitudinal studies are needed to examine how leadership behaviors, cultural evolution, and continuous improvement practices interact over time to influence performance sustainability. Such designs would provide stronger causal inferences and capture performance dynamics during periods of organizational change or crisis. Second, future research could explore sector-specific models to assess whether the relative influence of leadership, culture, and continuous improvement differs across industries such as healthcare, education, public administration, or high-technology sectors. Third, incorporating objective performance indicators alongside perceptual measures would enhance measurement robustness and reduce potential response bias. Further studies may also investigate the role of digital transformation and data-driven improvement systems in shaping modern high-performance organizations. Finally, cross-cultural and international comparative studies would help determine how national culture and institutional contexts moderate the relationships identified in this study. Expanding research along these dimensions will contribute to a more comprehensive and globally relevant understanding of how organizations can systematically build and sustain high performance.

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