



# How Does Authoritarian Leadership Influence Employees and Organisation?

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**Abstract.** Authoritarian leadership describes a model of management in which superiors hold absolute authority and demand obedience from their subordinates. There is a wide criticism of this leadership style due to its strict hierarchy and rules, but there is also positive research about authoritarian leadership. This paper presents the characteristics of authoritarian leadership and their impact on employees and organisations. It also discusses how authoritarian systems can be optimised by comparing other dominant leadership styles. The purpose of this research is to summarise the positive and negative effects of authoritarian leadership in order to correct the negative bias against this leadership style. At the same time, the article expects to provide authoritarian leaders with approaches to manage their teams better.

**Keywords:** Leadership style · Authoritarian leadership · Paternalistic leadership · Laissez-faire leadership · Transformational leadership

## 1 Introduction

Authoritarian leadership is a dominant leadership style in organisations in Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia-Pacific. According to authoritarian leadership, leaders manage their employees with authoritative power and demand absolute allegiance from their followers by emphasizing the hierarchical divide between superior and subordinate [1]. The authoritarian leadership style has been criticized by Western economists in recent years, primarily due to its centralization, strict regulatory framework, and controlling character. Although authoritarian leadership is often thought to be detrimental to employee performance and the benefits of the organisation, some researchers have suggested that it can actually have a positive influence on employee performance in particular work contexts. In fact, the impact of authoritarian leadership on employees is complex and is influenced by a variety of circumstances and individual differences. Under the influence of Western economics, research on authoritarian leadership is potentially misleading in terms of personal values and psychological factors, as authoritarian leadership does not conform to Western economic claims and culture. As a contentious leadership style, the study of authoritarian leadership must take into consideration the cultural background as well as the features of the organisation in order to utilise its strengths and avoid its weakness. This paper firstly examines the origin and features of

authoritarian leadership. It then discusses the impact of authoritarian leadership on a range of aspects that influence productivity, such as employee behaviour, organisation relationships, team atmosphere, and creativity. In addition, there is a paucity of comprehensive comparisons of the features of authoritarian leadership with those of other popular leadership styles. As a result, this study discusses how the other three leadership styles, paternalistic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, and transformational leadership, respectively, are both similar to and different from authoritarian leadership, as well as how these leadership styles address or neutralise the problems that authoritarian leaders cause.

## **2 Definitions, Characteristics, and Mainstream Evaluation of Authoritarian Leadership**

### **2.1 Definitions of Authoritarian Leadership**

Authoritarian leadership, also known as autocratic leadership, describes a model of management in which superiors hold absolute authority and demand obedience from their subordinates, which is the exact opposite of democratic leadership. A highly authoritarian leader completely controls the team and makes all decisions. The authoritarian leader manages the team by setting rules, introducing rewards and punishments, and reinforcing authority by emphasising the status of roles. Authoritarian leadership is considered to be a result of the development of Confucianism [2]. The values of Confucianism advocate leadership through authority and power. In traditional Chinese families, the family leader, usually the father, holds absolute control and decision-making power over family matters. Guided by this traditional value, many businesses in China and Asia continue this centralised leadership model today.

### **2.2 Characteristics and Mainstream Evaluation of Authoritarian Leadership**

Although authoritarian leadership may have been around since the Stone Age and is still practised in many modern companies, there is much mainstream literature that is critical of this leadership style. Most scholars argue that authoritarian leadership alienates employees from their superiors and inhibits employee emotions and creativity, while there is also research suggesting that authoritarian leadership is positively related to employee performance.

## **3 Defining and Describing the Factors that Employees and Organisations Reflected by Authoritarian Leadership**

### **3.1 Discussion on Organisational Citizenship Behaviour and Organisational Deviance Behaviour**

Through extensive research, leaders' managerial behaviours can have an impact on employees' autonomous behaviours, including organisational citizenship behaviours

[3] and organisational deviance behaviours [4]. In the workplace, employees' organisational citizenship behaviour varies depending on the working environment, such as expressiveness and the attitude of the leader. Authoritarian leadership has a vital link in enhancing employees' organisational citizenship behaviour. Similarly, organisational deviance behaviour, a significant factor in damaging teams and companies, is influenced by the behaviour of leaders [5].

### **3.1.1 Definition of Organisational Citizenship and Organisational Deviance**

In organisational psychology, organisational citizenship behaviour is defined as the behaviour in which employees voluntarily contribute positively to the team and the company without the restrictions on organisation contracts. Therefore, organisational citizenship behaviour is also considered pro-social behaviour [3]. With the saturation of society's labour market, organisational citizenship behaviour has become more frequent in order to increase individual competitiveness, and employees are more willing to donate extra time and effort to the company without formal rewards, such as volunteering to work overtime. However, as organisational citizenship behaviour tends to be common, some unethical leaders would take advantage of employees' organisational citizenship behaviour to claim free extra labour.

In contrast to organisational citizenship behaviour, employees' organisational deviant behaviour is detrimental to the interests of the organisation, such as stealing, sexual harassment, and violence. In some studies, organisational deviant behaviour is considered to be voluntary behaviour against organisational norms that threatens the well-being of the organisation and its members.

### **3.1.2 How Authoritarian Leadership Affects Organisational Citizenship Behaviour**

Despite the fact that authoritarian leadership has been shown in certain studies to be harmful to organisational interests, authoritarian leaders' centralising behaviour aims to achieve collective goals in an efficient manner, not at the expense of individual and group well-being. Collectivism is characterised by an emphasis on the priority of collective interests over individual interests.

Under the influence of collectivism, in order to adapt to the social work environment and develop harmonious interpersonal relationships, employees are more likely to obey their leaders rather than raise objections [6]. Employees are relatively more convinced that maintaining a healthy relationship with their superiors is more important than defending their rights. In particular, when the power gap between leaders and employees is wider, employees are more likely to comply actively and respond to the instructions of their superiors. Thus, employees in a collectivist context will succumb to authority and try to make extra efforts to meet the expectations of their superiors, which creates a positive relationship between a compliant authoritarian workforce and organisational citizenship behaviour [5].

However, while collectivist employees tend to maintain good interpersonal relationships, authoritarian leaders are more focused on the efficiency of their work. As a result,

excessive authoritarian leadership can cause a worsening of the organisational citizenship behaviour trend. In other words, under the pressure of extreme authoritarianism, employees may lose the motivation to reward the organisation positively.

### **3.1.3 How Authoritarian Leadership Affects Organisational Deviant Behaviour**

Organisational deviant behaviour, such as inefficient working and tardiness, is typical in organisations with incomplete or undisciplined management systems. Therefore, under the management model of authoritarian leadership, employee attendance, efficiency, and behavioural norms are defined, and a corresponding reward and punishment system is established. In a harsh organisational system and authoritarian atmosphere, employees are more likely to comply with ethical norms and avoid organisational deviant behaviour, even if they can escape the punitive mechanisms of their contracts [4]. Thus, in organisations with high power differentials, authoritarian leadership promotes positive work behaviour and the fulfillment of non-obligatory positive behaviours. In contrast, laissez-faire leadership may not ensure employee productivity and behavioural norms.

In contrast to the negative impact of extreme authoritarian leadership on organisational citizenship behaviour, high-intensity authoritarian leadership does not cause employees' organisational deviant behaviour to rebound. However, employees may perceive this management style as controlling [5].

## **3.2 Discussion on Employees' Organisational Relationships Identification**

The organisation provides a particular context for employees to work in and gives the individuals a new social identity - that of employees. For this new identity, the leader acts as the employee's guardian and nurturer, whose decisions and actions influence the employee's identification of his or her identity and the team's relationships.

### **3.2.1 Definition of Relationship Identification**

Relational identification integrates the characteristics of the person and their acquired role, which reflects the relationship with the environment and the team when the individual is in this role. Relationship identification in the workplace can be reflected in the employee's sense of belonging and engagement with the work environment as well as the team.

Belonging refers to the positive feelings employees gain in the workplace through positive connections with the team, such as feeling accomplished or valued. Positive relationship recognition means that employees have a strong sense of belonging to the team and that they feel part of the team, which increases work engagement. Therefore, a sense of belonging is essential for organisational development [7].

### **3.2.2 How Authoritarian Leadership Affects Relationship Identification**

Authoritarian leaders tend to reinforce the power distance and emphasise the hierarchy between leaders and employees in order to consolidate the leader's position and authority. As a result, authoritarian leaders make their own decisions and direct their employees

through orders to achieve work goals quickly, rather than expending energy on building relationships between employees and superiors or listening to their suggestions [8].

In addition, authoritarian leaders ignore the achievements of their employees and punish poor performers through harsh performance systems. Such a hierarchy between superiors and employees leads to a lack of mutual respect between employees and leaders and a loss of loyalty to the team and the leader among followers. This hierarchy creates a sense of distance and mistrust between superiors and subordinates, which in turn reduces employee performance.

Because authoritarian leaders focus on results rather than developing employees, they may neglect to communicate with employees and empower them with stress and fear. Since authoritarian leaders are unwilling to share information with employees, employees are unable to learn on the job, which is adverse to the long-term development of employees and the organisation [2].

For more severe authoritarian leadership, employees may show intense fear or resentment towards the leader, thus ignoring the collective benefits and caring only about their own part of the work. When individuals face stress or fear, it may stimulate their silent defence mechanism. To avoid mistakes, employees tend to focus more on their interests, choosing low-risk options and not initiating new ideas, even though the potential benefits of these options are considerable. Some employees who have long experienced the tyranny of their superiors may even become vindictive, deliberately disrupting company plans or failing to provide complete and adequate business information.

In addition to the silent defence mechanisms that accompany employees' fears, many studies have suggested that authoritarian systems are damaging to employees' creativity. Under the constraints of a draconian system, employees are reluctant to come up with creative or unproven ideas, thus reducing the long-term creativity and motivation of the team [8]. However, despite widespread criticism of authoritarian leadership for its negative impact on creativity, research has shown that employees in authoritarian systems are likely to violate the authoritarian and rigid rules of their leaders and show exceptional creativity to gain the leadership's impression [9].

### **3.3 Discussion on Team Emotion Suppression Climate and Organisational Cynicism**

It is the responsibility of the leader to manage the atmosphere of the team, as it affects the attitude of the team and the employees to work and thus the efficiency and quality [10]. A strong working atmosphere stimulates employees to integrate into the team by changing their own behaviour and attitudes.

#### **3.3.1 Definition of Team Emotion Suppression Climate**

Team emotional climate is defined as the attitude towards work and relationships that employees as a whole display in an organisation [11]. Team climate is the shared experience of all people in the work environment and represents the long-term working tone of that team. Team climate affects employees' attitudes and emotions at work. For teams

with a poor team climate, employees will spontaneously develop a protective mechanism of team emotion suppression, such as self-regulation of emotions. Employees will exhibit inhibited or amplified emotions to feedback into the poor team climate.

### **3.3.2 How Authoritarian Leadership Affects Team Emotion Suppression Climate**

When authoritarian leaders expect high productivity and strict work systems, employees tend to conform to their leaders' demands and hide their personal emotions. When more individuals choose to avoid expressing their genuine emotions, a team emotion suppression climate can emerge. This is a manifestation of emotional inhibition not only in terms of employees' reluctance to express their negative emotions but also in terms of employees' loss of motivation to express positive emotions. As employees are only expected to obey their superiors and are not given the opportunity to express themselves, an authoritarian leader's emphasis on hierarchical differences can intensify the suppression of team emotions. Some authoritarian leaders may even deliberately suppress employees' positive emotions in order to emphasise their authority, for example by restricting non-work-related celebrations. Even when leaders do not actively reinforce an emotionally inhibited atmosphere in the team, employees may have a reduced desire to express their emotions or even ignore their repressed or positive emotions in order not to take risks in the face of authoritarian regimes [28]. Employees in an authoritarian system will pay more attention to changes in their superiors' emotions in order to infer what the leader is thinking to please the leader. However, leaders may also restrain their emotional expressions for the purpose of presenting an authoritative image of their own calmness or emotional stability. This pattern leads employees to believe that inhibiting emotions is the potential rule of the workforce and reinforces their own inhibiting behaviour. However, emotional inhibition can reduce the experience of positive emotions and cause emotional fatigue because individuals lack emotional interaction. When the level of emotional inhibition increases for both authoritarian leaders and employees, team performance decreases.

### **3.3.3 Definition of Organisational Cynicism**

If an organisation's emotionally repressive atmosphere is considered an internal drain on the individual, then organisational cynicism is an exhaust on the external work environment and collaborators. Organisational cynicism is the behaviour of employees who are strongly dissatisfied with their work team and environment. Whereas organisational repression represents one extreme of reluctance to express emotions, organisational cynicism is the other extreme under authoritarian leadership, where employees intensively express anger and dissatisfaction. Organisational cynicism includes malicious or non-malicious criticism, sarcasm, and disinformation about the organisation and leaders. Organisational cynicism has become a new challenge for contemporary businesses [11].

### **3.3.4 How Authoritarian Leadership Influences Organisational Cynicism**

Because authoritarian leaders tend to hold information rather than share it, employees will lose trust and confidence in leaders. With the intense pressure of an authoritarian

system, employees are kept in a state of anxiety for fear of being punished, creating a sub-healthy psychological state. Under prolonged negative emotions and fatigue, employees tend to complain about the organisation and vent their emotions by spreading information that might be harmful to the organisation, resulting in organisational cynicism. Organisational cynicism has been shown to be negatively associated with employee performance and reduces productivity and commitment [13].

## **4 Discussion of Other Leadership Styles and Comparing with Authoritarian Leadership**

### **4.1 Discussion on Paternalistic Leadership**

#### **4.1.1 Definition of Paternalistic Leadership and the Difference Between Authoritarian Leadership**

Paternalistic leadership is a leadership model that originated in Chinese society. It is constructed by Confucianism, which emphasises a top-down system. Paternalistic leadership refers to the influence of Confucian collectivism, where the leader acts as a parent and the employees act like children. Paternalistic leaders want employees to follow them like children to parents, but at the same time care about their well-being [2].

Paternalistic leadership is considered to be authoritarian leadership with elements of benevolence and morality. Paternalistic leadership has been referred to as the “benevolent dictator.” Many studies have shown that the benevolent characteristics of paternalistic leadership can neutralise the adverse effects of authoritarian leadership.

#### **4.1.2 How Paternalistic Leadership Can Solve the Problems Faced by Authoritarian Leaders**

Benevolent and ethical leadership increases employees’ trust in their superiors as well as their emotional attachment. While authoritarian leadership has a negative impact on employee relationship identification, paternalistic leadership is positively associated with employee-superior relationships. This trend may occur because it is paternalistic leaders who are more concerned about the welfare and development of their employees and are willing to provide assistance to them, which leads to an increased sense of belonging and thus a more active commitment to their job role as an employee [2]. In addition to this, because benevolent paternalistic leaders are more willing to communicate and share information with their employees, employees have an increased sense of respect and identification with their superiors and teams, as well as lower levels of organisational deviance behaviour relative to employees under authoritarian leadership, and higher levels of job satisfaction. Because paternalistic leaders try to build a good relationship with their employees, employees are also more deliberate in their choice to leave, leading to lower turnover rates. Benevolent leaders create a sense of appreciation among employees, who are then more motivated to work and improve their performance as a reward to their superiors and teams.

## **4.2 Discussion on Laissez-Faire Leadership**

### **4.2.1 Definition of Laissez-Faire Leadership and the Difference Between Authoritarian Leadership**

Laissez-faire leadership is reflected in the leadership style that leaders do not interfere with the personal choices and behaviour of their employees, leaving decision-making to their followers totally. Laissez-faire leaders usually do not establish strict performance systems or use authority to discipline employees. In general, a laissez-faire leader simply builds a team and sets goals, gives employees complete freedom to work, does not control the details and processes of their work, and even avoids discussing work topics with them [14].

In many studies, laissez-faire and authoritarian leadership have been analysed as opposing leadership models because they are the exact opposite of employees' desire for control. However, laissez-faire leaders and authoritarian leaders are consistent in their apparent or potential refusal to communicate with employees. Despite their different purpose - laissez-faire leaders aim to let employees make decisions entirely independently, while authoritarian leaders aim to let the leaders themselves make decisions entirely - both types of leadership have been criticised by mainstream evaluations based on this characteristic [15]. Because of the lack of interaction with employees by the laissez-faire leader, subordinates lack feedback and recognition from their superiors, which may lead to lower employee satisfaction and performance.

### **4.2.2 How Laissez-Faire Leadership Can Solve the Problems Faced by Authoritarian Leadership**

Laissez-faire leadership provides the underlying environmental conditions for organisational innovation. Laissez-faire leaders often do not set strict performance requirements or deadlines, which provides the basis for employees to try out new ideas. When employees no longer have to worry about using unproven methods, they are entirely innovative and provide long-term corporate dynamism to the organisation. At the same time, trust in the team promotes a sense of self-determination and self-confidence.

In addition to this, an interesting study shows that while authoritarian leadership is the dominant leadership style in Asian firms, laissez-faire leadership is considered more appropriate for organisation in Asian countries [16]. Although laissez-faire leadership is considered to be "zero leadership," in Asian countries with a high power distance context, strong centralised collectivism can substitute for leadership to compensate for the lack of laissez-faire leadership towards employee management. This means that a cohesive team can take over the responsibilities of the leader, even if the leader's "inaction" is seen as a sign of authority or respect for subordinates. The lack of consideration for reward and punishment by laissez-faire leaders also helps to alleviate some of the stress on employees to avoid mental health problems.



### **4.3 Discussion on Transformational Leadership**

#### **4.3.1 Definition of Transformational Leadership and the Difference Between Authoritarian Leadership**

Transformational leadership refers to a leadership style in which leaders motivate their employees through personal charisma and organisational culture [17]. Unlike the strict rules of authoritarian leaders, transformational leaders stimulate employee motivation by describing the importance and intrinsic meaning of tasks and company goals, thus allowing employees to create more value on their own. Authoritarian leaders work to increase employees' hierarchy of needs and motivation to work. Transformational leaders focus on communicating with their employees and coaching and guiding them in any situation to enhance their capabilities. In contrast to authoritarian leaders, transformational leaders are willing to share information and treat employees as equals. Although both transformational and authoritarian leaders have a tendency to transmit leadership values and ideas to their employees, the former uses a positive personal charisma and wisdom that inspires employees to follow them, while the latter enforces compliance through authority [18].

#### **4.3.2 How Transformational Leadership Can Solve the Problems Faced by Authoritarian Leadership**

Given the characteristics of transformational leaders who actively communicate with those they lead, employees have an increased sense of belonging and dependence on their leaders. Employees have access to equal information in the work environment and receive learning support from their superiors, which leads to lower turnover and higher satisfaction rates among employees under transformational leadership. Transformational leaders focus on developing employees' work competencies; this leads to improved performance. Team cohesion is also improved in an atmosphere of good organisational culture, and employees' organisational deviant behaviour improves.

More importantly, numerous studies have found a positive correlation between transformational leadership and employee creativity [19]. Transformational leadership is considered to be a source of creativity and a driving force for employees. This is because transformational leaders support employees to come up with creative ideas while giving them analysis and advice and guiding them to identify problems and refine solutions. Instead of avoiding the risks associated with new ideas, transformational leaders encourage employees to introduce new models and challenges and promote critical thinking. This kind of moral trust and support makes employees more willing to come up with creative ideas without the pressure of being punished, thus promoting organisational creativity.

## **5 Conclusion**

The impact of authoritarian leadership on the performance of employees and organisations is complex. Under strict institutions, the authority and rules of authoritarian leadership assist in guaranteeing the effectiveness of employees and managing their

behaviour at work. This counters the research that criticises authoritarian leadership as entirely harmful. However, due to the high power distance inherent in authoritarian leadership, it has a negative relationship with interpersonal relationships, works climate and creativity. By comparing and analysing other dominant leadership styles, the paper finds that the benevolent and ethical characteristics of paternalistic leadership can alleviate the stress and burden that authoritarian leadership places on employees. Laissez-faire leadership allows cohesive teams to discipline behaviour autonomously in an already established high-ranking gap work environment. Transformational leadership characteristics can help authoritarian leaders to conquer followers through positive charisma and entrepreneurial spirit rather than through strict regimes.

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