



Transforming Military Performance: A Study of Leadership, Organizational Ethics, and Commitment in the Air Force

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Abstract. This study examines the influence of transformational leadership, ethical climate, and organizational commitment on the performance of air force units. Data collected from 119 personnel in Makassar, Indonesia, were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results demonstrate that all three variables exert a positive and significant impact on unit performance. Specifically, transformational leadership ($\beta = 0.182$, $p < 0.05$), ethical climate ($\beta = 0.243$, $p < 0.01$), and organizational commitment ($\beta = 0.301$, $p < 0.001$) were found to enhance unit performance. These findings underscore the critical role of leadership, ethical standards, and commitment in promoting high-performing military units. The study contributes to the understanding of organizational behavior in military contexts, offering insights for enhancing leadership practices and team cohesion. Utilizing PLS-SEM, the analysis reveals positive associations between all three variables and unit performance, with organizational commitment exhibiting the most substantial effect ($\beta = 0.301$, $p < 0.001$), followed by ethical climate ($\beta = 0.243$, $p < 0.01$), and transformational leadership ($\beta = 0.182$, $p < 0.05$). These results highlight the significance of leadership styles, ethical standards, and employee commitment in augmenting military unit performance. The implications of this study extend beyond the Indonesian Air Force, providing insights into organizational behavior within military settings. By emphasizing the interconnectedness of these factors, the research lays the groundwork for developing strategies to enhance leadership practices, cultivate ethical work environments, and bolster organizational commitment, potentially leading to improvements in unit performance and military organizational effectiveness.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Ethical Climate, Organizational Commitment, Unit Performance.

1 Introduction

Today, military organizations operate in increasingly complex and high-pressure environments that demand tactical excellence and organizational resilience [1, 2]. While operational capabilities remain essential, human dynamics within military units particularly leadership, ethics, and commitment often determine mission success or

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failure [2, 4]. In high-stakes settings, such as the Air Force, the effectiveness of personnel depends greatly on how they are led, how they internalize ethical standards, and how deeply committed they are to their roles [3, 5].

Leadership, especially when characterized by the ability to inspire and transform subordinates, has become central to discussions on organizational performance [3, 6]. Military leaders are expected to motivate, empower, and serve as role models rather than merely issuing orders. This transformative approach fosters trust and a collective focus, enabling personnel to perform beyond standard expectations [4, 8]. However, although transformational leadership has been widely discussed in the general management literature, its direct application and impact within military structures remain relatively underexplored, particularly in Air Force units [4, 9].

Another critical dimension of performance is the ethical climate of an organization. In a military context, ethics are not merely organizational ideals; they are operational imperatives [6, 11]. The ethical standards upheld by a unit can influence everything from interpersonal conduct to decisions made under pressure [6, 12]. When the ethical climate is clearly defined and widely embraced, it helps create a cohesive environment in which personnel act with integrity, even in the absence of direct oversight [6, 14]. Despite its importance, empirical research on ethical climate in military units remains sparse and fragmented [8, 16].

The concept of organizational commitment is closely linked to both leadership and ethics. This refers to the emotional and psychological bond between personnel and the organizations they serve [10, 18]. In military settings, commitment is not only about job satisfaction; it is also about loyalty, sacrifice, and a deep sense of duty. Highly committed individuals are more likely to persist under stress, collaborate effectively, and contribute to unit cohesion and effectiveness [10, 20]. However, commitment as a distinct variable in military performance models has not been sufficiently integrated with leadership and ethics.

Existing studies tend to isolate these variables rather than examine them as interconnected performance drivers [10, 21]. This fragmented approach limits our understanding of how leadership, ethics, and commitment jointly contribute to the success of a unit. There is a growing need to build comprehensive models that can evaluate their combined effects, especially in structured and disciplined environments such as the air force [10, 23]. A unified model that assesses all three variables simultaneously can provide deeper insights into what drives performance in such institutions.

Another limitation of the current body of knowledge is the overemphasis on civilian or corporate organizations. Military units operate under vastly different norms, hierarchical structures, rigid codes of conduct, and unique stressors [11, 24]. Therefore, theories and findings from non-military contexts may not be directly applicable. Understanding how these organizational drivers function in Air Force environments can help bridge the gap between theory and military operational practice [11, 25].

Additionally, much of the available research is geographically concentrated in Western defence institutions. There is a noticeable lack of empirical studies focused on air force units in regions such as Southeast Asia, where cultural, political, and resource-related factors shape organizational behavior differently [11, 26]. By examining

leadership, ethical climate, and commitment in this underrepresented context, this study contributes to a more inclusive and globally relevant understanding of military performance.

Methodologically, many prior studies are limited by small sample sizes or by the use of descriptive approaches that cannot establish statistical relationships between variables. To advance this field, it is necessary to employ rigorous quantitative methods that can test multiple variables and determine their relative contributions [12, 27]. This requires robust models and validated instruments, particularly when applied in complex operational settings, such as the Air Force.

From a theoretical standpoint, models of behavioral learning offer a compelling lens through which to understand how leadership behavior influences performance outcomes. In environments where discipline and imitation are foundational, leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the norms and expectations. Understanding these processes can clarify how leadership indirectly influences performance through internalized values and attitudes, such as ethics and commitment.

This study aimed to examine the direct effects of transformational leadership, ethical climate, and organizational commitment on unit performance in air force units. By integrating these constructs into a single analytical model, this study seeks to fill the gap in military organizational research and offer actionable insights for enhancing leadership effectiveness, fostering ethical behavior, and strengthening institutional loyalty within high-demand operational environments.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory posits that human behavior is shaped not solely by internal dispositions or direct external reinforcement but significantly through observation within a social context [14, 29]. Individuals acquire new behaviors by observing others, interpreting their actions, and noting the consequences that follow [15, 30]. This vicarious learning allows a person to adopt, reject, or modify certain behaviors without direct experience. Therefore, learning is conceptualized as a social process in which environmental cues, modeled behavior, and perceived outcomes interact to inform one's conduct [15, 32]. The theory underscores the importance of symbolic modeling, in which individuals use observed experiences to guide their future behavior in similar contexts.

At the core of this theory lies a cognitive dimension that distinguishes it from purely behavioral models of learning. Individuals do not merely mimic what they observe; rather, they engage in a process of internal deliberation, assessing whether the behavior is applicable, beneficial, or congruent with their personal and situational goals. The theory outlines four primary components that facilitate learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation [15, 34]. Attention determines the degree to which an individual focuses on a model's behavior, retention involves encoding that information into memory, reproduction refers to the ability to replicate the observed behavior, and motivation influences whether the behavior is enacted. This multifaceted structure

reflects the dynamic interplay between personal agency and environmental influence [17, 36].

Another essential aspect of Social Learning Theory is the concept of the “model.” Models can be authority figures, peers, or individuals with social significance in a given context. Their effectiveness depends on the perceived competence, trustworthiness, and reliability of the source. Rather than viewing learning as a linear stimulus-response mechanism, the theory embraces a reciprocal causation model that involves personal factors, behavioral patterns, and environmental feedback [19, 38]. This framework provides a nuanced lens for understanding how individuals internalize social norms, construct ethical reasoning, and align their behavior with broader organizational or cultural expectations.

2.2 Unit Performance

Unit performance in military contexts refers to the collective ability of a defined group to execute assigned tasks efficiently, effectively, and consistently under varying operational conditions [19, 40]. It encompasses not only the outcomes achieved but also the processes through which the missions are carried out. Unlike civilian institutions, military unit performance is often evaluated using parameters such as the mission success rate, discipline adherence, operational readiness, and tactical precision [20, 42]. The unique structural and hierarchical nature of military organizations requires performance to be assessed not only by individual outputs but also by how well personnel function as an integrated, coordinated team within the command structure.

A distinguishing feature of performance in military units is its alignment with command intent and organizational values. Performance is not simply a function of output volume or speed but of conformity to protocols, execution under stress, and contribution to broader strategic objectives. In high-risk environments, such as air force operations, performance indicators may include mission planning accuracy, communication effectiveness, safety compliance, and adaptability to unanticipated events [21, 44]. Performance also reflects a unit's internal cohesion, synchronization of actions, and degree of responsiveness to orders under time-critical circumstances.

Importantly, unit performance is dynamic and situational, often influenced by environmental volatility, geopolitical developments and technological complexity. Military organizations must frequently recalibrate their assessment standards to reflect evolving mission requirements and threats. High-performing units demonstrate consistency in operational delivery, resilience under pressure, and the ability to innovate within established frameworks. Thus, unit performance functions as a multidimensional construct that combines procedural discipline, mission capability, and the collective psychological readiness of its members to respond to institutional demands.

2.3 Transformation Leadership

Transformational leadership is a leadership style characterized by the ability to inspire, energize, and intellectually stimulate followers to achieve goals beyond their immediate

self-interest. Rather than relying on transactional exchanges or rigid authority, transformational leaders engage with their subordinates at a deeper psychological level, aiming to instill a shared sense of vision, intrinsic motivation, and moral purpose [21, 46]. This leadership approach transcends traditional command-and-control paradigms, focusing on value alignment, personal development, and long-term organizational improvement.

Four key dimensions are central to transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence refers to a leader's ability to act as a role model, earning trust and admiration through consistent ethical conduct and high standards. It involves articulating a compelling vision that encourages followers to transcend challenges and embrace collective objectives [23, 48]. Intellectual stimulation fosters a culture of innovation and critical thinking, wherein followers are encouraged to question assumptions and explore novel solutions. Individualized consideration reflects leaders' attentiveness to individual needs, aspirations, and growth opportunities, promoting a supportive and empowering environment.

Transformational leadership is often associated with positive outcomes in various organizational settings because of its emphasis on motivation, engagement, and empowerment. Leaders who adopt this style are typically proactive, visionary, and emotionally intelligent, making them effective in guiding teams through uncertainty, change, and complexity. This style requires a high degree of interpersonal competence, self-awareness, and ethical grounding, as it operates through influence and example rather than coercion. Consequently, transformational leadership is considered a dynamic and adaptive form of leadership that is especially relevant in environments that demand innovation, cohesion, and resilience.

2.4 Ethical Climate

Ethical climate refers to the collective perceptions shared by members of an organization regarding what constitutes ethically appropriate behavior and how ethical issues are addressed in the work environment [24, 50]. It represents an informal yet powerful moral framework that guides daily decision-making and interpersonal interactions. Unlike formal codes of conduct, ethical climate emerges from organizational culture and is continuously reinforced through policies, leadership behavior, peer norms, and organizational responses to ethical dilemmas. It functions as a psychological atmosphere in which members interpret right and wrong based on their observed expectations and actions.

This climate typically manifests in various dimensions, such as rule-based, law and code, caring, and instrumental climates. A rule-based ethical climate emphasizes adherence to internal regulations and procedures, whereas a law-and-code climate reflects alignment with external legal or professional standards [25, 51]. In contrast, a caring ethical climate is grounded in mutual concern and prioritizes collective well-being over personal gain. However, an instrumental climate is characterized by self-interest and opportunistic behavior, often at the expense of shared ethical norms. These

dimensions help categorize the moral priorities and informal values upheld within an organizational setting.

A strong ethical climate is essential for fostering consistency, integrity, and accountability across organizational roles. It not only shapes how individuals approach ethical challenges but also influences their perceptions of justice, fairness, and legitimacy in the workplace. An ethical climate develops gradually through the reinforcement of ethical behavior, reward systems, and modeling of appropriate conduct by key figures within the organization. When well established, it can reduce ambiguity in complex situations and support a culture of responsibility and trust among members.

2.5 Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment refers to the psychological attachment and emotional involvement of an individual toward the organization they are a part of. It reflects the extent to which members identify with organizational goals, feel a sense of belonging, and are willing to exert effort on behalf of the organization [26, 53]. Unlike temporary motivation or job satisfaction, commitment encompasses a deeper, long-term orientation toward the institution, marked by loyalty, intention to remain, and willingness to endure adversity for organizational success [27, 55]. It is a critical component of organizational behavior that influences how individuals respond to challenges, fulfill responsibilities, and align their personal values with institutional priorities.

Organizational commitment is commonly conceptualized into three dimensions: affective, continuance, and normative commitment. Affective commitment arises from emotional attachment; employees remain with an organization because they want to. Continuance commitment is based on the perceived costs of leaving employees stay because they need to, often due to investments made or benefits at stake. Normative commitment stems from a sense of obligation; employees remain because they ought to, driven by personal ethics or social norms. These dimensions reflect different motivational roots and help explain variations in behavior, especially under conditions of stress or organizational change.

The development of organizational commitment is influenced by several factors, including leadership practices, organizational culture, perceived fairness, and employees' personal values. When individuals perceive their contributions as valuable and aligned with the institution's mission, their commitment tends to grow stronger. In environments that demand high levels of discipline, coordination, and shared purpose, such as hierarchical organizations, organizational commitment serves as a stabilizing force. It not only supports consistency in performance but also encourages cooperative behavior, trust, and a willingness to go beyond formal obligations for collective goals.

2.6 Hypothesis Development

Transformational Leadership on Unit Performance. Transformational leadership is a leadership paradigm that emphasizes inspiration, influence, and individual

development over authority and control. Leaders who demonstrate transformational qualities typically foster trust, articulate a clear and compelling vision, and encourage team members to exceed conventional expectations [36, 55]. In performance-oriented environments, such as military organizations, where coordination, discipline, and mission clarity are vital, this leadership style offers a framework for promoting not only task completion but also motivation, morale, and operational excellence [28, 56]. Transformational leaders can often align personal goals with collective objectives, leading to enhanced commitment and execution at the unit level.

From a behavioral standpoint, transformational leadership facilitates performance by activating internal drivers such as self-efficacy, organizational citizenship behavior, and proactive problem-solving. Units led by transformational leaders are more likely to exhibit adaptability, cohesion, and innovation, which are essential in dynamic and high-stress operational settings [30, 58]. Moreover, when leaders serve as ethical role models and demonstrate individualized attention, personnel tend to feel valued and empowered, which encourages discretionary effort and consistent performance. This influence is particularly salient in hierarchical structures, where leadership presence directly affects team dynamics and output quality.

Despite extensive studies on leadership in general organizational settings, there remains a noticeable gap in the research that empirically connects transformational leadership with unit-level performance outcomes in military contexts. Much of the existing literature is concentrated in corporate or civilian institutions, leaving limited insight into how this leadership style operates in structured, high-stakes environments such as the military. Testing this relationship within a military framework provides contextual relevance and extends the theoretical understanding of leadership effectiveness across sectors.

- **H1:** Transformational leadership positively and significantly affects unit performance.

Ethical Climate on Unit Performance. Ethical climate represents a shared understanding among organizational members regarding appropriate ethical behavior and the processes through which ethical decisions are made [30]. It forms an implicit system of norms and values that guides individual conduct within the organization, often exerting a stronger influence than written codes or formal regulations. In environments where precision, discipline, and trust are critical, such as military units, a strong ethical climate creates a foundation for predictable and responsible behavior that supports the fulfillment of operational objectives [31].

A well-established ethical climate fosters psychological safety, clarity in decision-making, and internal accountability, all of which are fundamental to consistent performance. When unit members perceive that ethical standards are upheld and supported by leadership, they are more likely to act in alignment with organizational expectations, even when under pressure [58]. Ethical climates reduce ambiguity in complex situations and encourage personnel to report misconduct, support each other, and maintain integrity during high-stress missions. These dynamics directly contribute to unit cohesion, operational efficiency, and effectiveness.

Although ethical climate has been widely examined in sectors such as healthcare, education, and corporate management, its role in performance outcomes in military structures remains underexplored. Studies on military ethics often focus on compliance or training but rarely examine how the prevailing ethical atmosphere influences real-time unit effectiveness [59]. Addressing this gap is essential, particularly in air force units, where the cost of ethical lapses can be severe. By investigating the impact of ethical climate on performance, this study adds empirical depth to ethical theories in high-stakes organizational settings.

- **H2:** Ethical climate has a positive and significant effect on unit performance.

Organizational Commitment on Unit Performance. Organizational commitment reflects the emotional and psychological attachment that individuals have to the institution they serve. In highly structured environments, such as the military, this attachment often translates into loyalty, perseverance, and a profound sense of responsibility. Individuals committed to their organization tend to internalize its goals and values, becoming more willing to invest time, energy, and effort beyond what is formally required [32]. This intrinsic motivation serves as a powerful driver of consistent behavior and contributes to the stability and cohesion of the operational teams.

In the context of performance, commitment functions as a stabilizing factor. Committed members are less likely to disengage or deviate from mission objectives, especially when faced with stress or uncertainties. They are more inclined to maintain discipline, cooperate with teammates, and comply with procedures that enhance unit functions [33]. Moreover, commitment fosters a proactive mindset, encouraging individuals to resolve problems, take the initiative, and ensure that tasks are completed efficiently and with quality. These behaviors are especially valuable in high-demand environments, such as air force units, where reliability and operational continuity are critical.

Despite its acknowledged relevance in organizational behavior research, the relationship between commitment and unit-level performance in military organizations remains underrepresented in the empirical literature. Prior literature has often focused on commitment as a predictor of retention or job satisfaction, overlooking its direct impact on collective effectiveness. By exploring this linkage within a military context, particularly in the Air Force, this study addresses a critical gap and enriches our understanding of how psychological bonds with the organization influence mission success and team outcomes.

- **H3:** Organizational commitment has a positive and significant effect on unit performance.

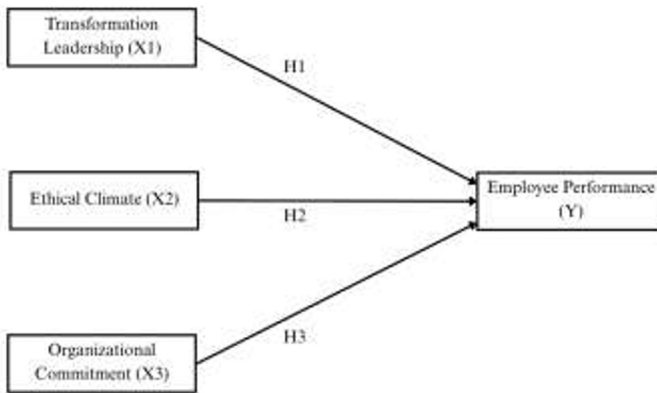


Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

3 Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design utilizing a survey-based approach to investigate the relationships among transformational leadership, ethical climate, organizational commitment, and unit performance. Data were collected from active personnel in military units located in Makassar, Indonesia, using a structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and alignment with the study's objectives. All measurement items were adapted from established instruments and assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The collected data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) through SmartPLS software, which is appropriate for testing complex models involving latent constructs, particularly in social and organizational research with moderate sample sizes. The methodology allowed for simultaneous assessment of measurement validity and hypothesis testing, ensuring the robustness of the findings.

4 Results

4.1 Data

Based on the survey conducted with 119 usable responses were obtained from military personnel assigned to various units operating under the regional command in Makassar. The data collection process was conducted over a four-week period, allowing adequate time for targeted participants to complete the online instrument amidst their operational

duties. To ensure data quality, all submitted responses were reviewed for completeness and consistency, with cases exhibiting excessive missing values or response bias being removed from the dataset. The final sample size was deemed sufficient for multivariate analysis using SmartPLS, as it meets the criteria for model complexity and statistical reliability in reflective measurement models.

4.2 Validity and Reability Test

Table 1. Validity and Reability Test

Variable	Indicator	Outer Loading	AVE	Description
Transformational Leadership (X1)	TL1	0.812	0.688	√
	TL2	0.879		√
	TL3	0.867		√
	TL4	0.844		√
Ethical Climate (X2)	EC1	0.793	0.641	√
	EC2	0.812		√
	EC3	0.754		√
	EC4	0.826		√
	EC5	0.801		√
Organizational Commitment (X3)	OC1	0.866	0.712	√
	OC2	0.834		√
	OC3	0.879		√
Unit Performance (Y1)	UP1	0.791	0.684	√
	UP2	0.827		√
	UP3	0.871		√
	UP4	0.805		√

Source: Data Processed 2025.

From the table, it can be observed that the outer loading values and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all variables are above the threshold, indicating that the constructs and their respective indicators are valid.

4.3 Hypotheses Test

Table 2. T-statistics and P-values of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Original Sample (O)	T-Statistic	P-Values	Result
H1: Transformational Leadership (X1) → Unit Performance (Y1)	0.182	2.523	0.012	Accepted

Hypothesis	Original Sample (O)	T-Statistic	P-Values	Result
H2: Ethical Climate (X2) → Unit Performance (Y1)	0.243	3.118	0.003	Accepted
H3: Organizational Commitment (X3) → Unit Performance (Y1)	0.301	4.012	0.000	Accepted

Source: Primary Data (2025)

5 Discussion

The findings presented in the table demonstrate that each of the independent variables significantly influences unit performance within a military setting. Hypothesis H1, which tests the effect of Transformational Leadership (X1) on Unit Performance (Y1), reveals a positive and statistically significant relationship, with an original sample value of 0.182, a t-statistic of 2.523, and a p-value of 0.012, thus affirming the hypothesis. Similarly, Hypothesis H2, which examines the impact of Ethical Climate (X2) on Unit Performance (Y1), also shows a significant positive association, with an original sample of 0.243, a t-statistic of 3.118, and a p-value of 0.003, further supporting the hypothesis. Additionally, Hypothesis H3, investigating the influence of Organizational Commitment (X3) on Unit Performance (Y1), demonstrates the most substantial effect, with an original sample of 0.301, a t-statistic of 4.012, and a p-value of 0.000, solidifying the hypothesis. Consequently, all hypotheses are supported, emphasizing the crucial roles that leadership, ethical climate, and organizational commitment play in improving the performance of military units.

6 Conclusions

This study highlights the significant role of transformational leadership, ethical climate, and organizational commitment in improving unit performance within air force units. The findings demonstrate that all three independent variables transformational leadership, ethical climate, and organizational commitment positively and significantly influence unit performance, emphasizing the importance of leadership qualities, ethical standards, and strong organizational loyalty in driving operational success. These insights offer practical implications for enhancing military leadership and fostering cohesive, high-performing units, especially in high-stakes environments like the air force.

However, the research has several limitations. The study was conducted within a single geographic region, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other military settings or regions. Additionally, the cross-sectional design may not capture the dynamic nature of leadership and organizational commitment over time. Future research could expand the scope of this study to other regions or conduct longitudinal research to examine how these factors evolve and interact in different contexts. Further

studies could also explore additional variables or utilize qualitative methods to gain deeper insights into the mechanisms behind these relationships.

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