

Leadership Style, Training, and Work Ethics as Predictors of Work Performance among Customs Officers in Eastern Malaysia

Nasina Mat Desa^{*1.}, Muhammad Hasmi Abu Hassan Asaari^{2.}, Lister Dampa Edward Subeng³

^{1,2}Management Section, School of Distance Education, Universiti Sains Malaysia

³Narcotics Branch, Kuching, Sarawak, Royal Malaysian Customs Department

* Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500577>

Received: 22 April 2026; Accepted: 28 April 2026; Published: 08 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This study was carried out on public officers working in the eastern region of Malaysia that examines the relationship between leadership style, training, and work ethics toward work performance. It is significant to know the relationship and the impact between the independent variables toward the dependent variable in a public office officers. Self-administered questionnaire was distributed among public officers in the eastern region of Malaysia. The public officers were gathered based on simple random sampling. The data was analyzed using the SPSS. The study discovers a significant high relationship between leadership style, training, and work ethics toward work performance. Moreover, the study also discovers all hypotheses are supported in explaining the public officers on their organizational factors, namely leadership style, training, and work ethics toward work performance. The study contributes to the data collection in a restricted public office in the eastern region of Malaysia. Moreover, the study also contributes to the body of knowledge pertaining to leadership style, training, and work ethics toward work performance on officers of a public office.

Keywords: Customs officers, Eastern Region Malaysia, leadership style, training, work ethics, work performance

INTRODUCTION

The evaluation of government agencies relies on the performance system for Malaysian public service officers. In 2021 and 2022, work performance declined significantly, attributed to Malaysia's recovery from COVID-19. Post-pandemic evaluations highlight insufficient training, limited resources, and inconsistent ethical standards as key challenges, particularly in eastern Malaysia, where diverse administrative structures and resource constraints are common. Initial measures were hindered by inadequate training, limited equipment, and a low work ethic. Job rotations intended to build skills sometimes create operational gaps. Enhancing officer performance requires coordinated training, strong ethical standards, and positive attitudes. This study integrates leadership, training, and ethics for a broader perspective than prior research that examined these factors individually. Issues such as absenteeism, tardiness, online gambling, and corruption undermine officers' ability to perform their duties. West and Noel (2009) note that managers must ensure employee productivity aligns with organizational objectives, motivating this examination of leadership style, training, and work ethics as predictors of customs officer performance in eastern Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work Performance

Work performance reflects employees' behaviors, attitudes, and competencies that contribute to organizational objectives (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002). In public administration, work performance is closely tied to discipline, motivation, and alignment with service goals (Che Rose et al., 2010). Continuous improvement strategies and a supportive culture enhance employee engagement and work performance (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019).

However, regional variations in work culture necessitate localized inquiry to identify specific determinants influencing work performance among customs officers. Continuous strategic planning and a supportive culture are critical for organizational success. Top management should address performance factors. Zulkefli (2016) links employee performance and organizational strength through engagement. Che Rose et al. (2010) stated that attribute performance to skills, knowledge, motivation, and capability. Campbell and Wiernik (2015) view performance as actions that contribute to goals. Managing performance determinants is vital amid rising competition (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019). Evaluation measures achievement, and management should continually strive for improvement (Aziz, 2016).

Leadership Style

Leadership style determines how managers influence and motivate subordinates toward achieving organizational objectives. Transformational and participative leadership styles are particularly effective in the public sector (Abasilim et al., 2019; Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020). This study introduces novelty by contextualizing leadership effectiveness within the eastern region's public departments, where hierarchical structures and collective values intersect to shape leadership outcomes. Leadership style is essential for effective public service organizations. The approach of senior officers guides organizational direction. Abasilim et al. (2019) highlight leadership as a key function shaping commitment and goal achievement. Demir and Budur (2019) cite leadership as a major determinant of employee performance. Wijaya and Supardo (2006) describe leadership as influencing others to achieve objectives. Organizational performance closely follows senior officer leadership. Paais and Pattiruhu (2020) note its role in competitive advantage. Prior studies emphasize strong leadership for systematic operations and quality service. Effective leadership develops skilled staff.

Training

Training enhances employees' knowledge, skills, and attitudes to meet organizational objectives. Effective training translates to improved performance and adaptability (Elangovan & Karakowski, 1999; Werner & DeSimone, 2006). Yet, the transfer of training effectiveness in regional public offices remains under examined. This study extends previous findings by situating training practices in the eastern region and emphasizing ongoing learning as a mechanism for sustaining performance. Training is crucial for organizations to improve employee performance. Effective programs are comprehensive. Broad and Newstrom (1992) note that training is ineffective if employees cannot apply it. Embi (2001) defines training as systematically enhancing skills for tasks. Elangovan and Karakowski (1999) show that employee behavior can change post-training. Ismail, Rahman, and Mohamad (2018) report improved task performance and active organizational roles. Training boosts individual, group, and organizational performance.

Work Ethics

Work ethics underpin professionalism, responsibility, and moral conduct in public service (Sapada et al., 2018). Ethical employees demonstrate higher discipline, reliability, and trustworthiness (Bertsch et al., 2021). However, ethical behavior can vary across cultural and regional contexts. This study uniquely examines work ethics as a moderating factor within leadership and training-performance relationships among eastern-region officers. In Greek, ethics means "ethos," denoting character (Arifin & Ahmad, 2017). Ethics now refers to principles governing behavior, positive or negative. Sapada et al. (2018) see work ethics as reflecting personality, beliefs, and character. Ethical employees are more valuable than those with only knowledge, as they carry out their duties honestly and strive to advance. Education alone does not ensure a high work ethic, increasing the value of ethical employees (Bertsch et al., 2021). The code of ethics is based on social work and public service values and practices. Key principles include ethics toward customers, colleagues, the department, oneself, and society. These guidelines standardize conduct, helping public officers act with dedication. The code creates a framework for professional relationships and decision-making within the department.

Relationship between Leadership Style and Work Performance

Hersey and Blanchard (1974) and Hsu (2000) stated that leadership can influence individual or group behavior to achieve organizational goals and improve work performance. The leadership style preferred by the

employees would be a source of inspiration to improve the quality of service and further achieve the goals set by the organization. Nam and Park (2019) reported a significant positive effect of leadership style on employee work performance. A significant value between the organizational factors of leadership style and work performance can be shown in past studies and proves a strong connection between these two things. In the study, demonstrating a high level of work culture intelligence could help them recognize their transformational leadership behavior and improve employee performance. Therefore, the factor was selected to examine whether organizational leadership style in the public department affects officers' work performance. In the context of leadership, it was found that the leadership style of non-governmental organizations is more efficient and effective than that of government organizations. It meant, from the perspective of productivity and quality management, that organizations were only concerned with profit. It differed from government organizations, which lacked emphasis on organizational achievement because most department heads and supervisors still did not fulfill their duties to ensure it at an important level of performance. Failure of leadership would hurt subordinates, as the success of a department depends on harmony among all staff. The leader should play a significant role in influencing subordinates to perform tasks more efficiently and with quality, ensuring the excellence of the department. Thus, the hypothesis developed is H1: Leadership style has a positive impact on work performance among customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia.

Relationship between Training and Work Performance

Yunus (2003) stated that training is a process closely related to the development of attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to enhance work performance. Although various training programs are offered, the organization's goal remains the same: to enhance employees' ability to perform tasks and improve their work performance. Performance improvement could be achieved through employees who gain knowledge, skills, and commitment to make their workplace organization successful and advanced (Yunus, 2003). Werner and DeSimone (2006) stated that training programs can create a competitive advantage for an organization and develop human resources that benefit it. Meanwhile, Khan, Ahmad, Iqbal, and Haider (2014) found that any organization or department that conducts a well-planned training program for employees can improve employees' work performance. Cascio (1989) said training is one of the programs designed to improve the performance of individuals, groups, or organizations. In an organization, training is one of the significant elements that is emphasized. Aziz (2016) stated that the training program is a mechanism that provides employees with updated knowledge, skills, and values to improve an organization's performance. The organization needs an effective training program that benefits all levels. Haryonoa, Supardib, and Udin (2020) argued that every company or organization is obliged to plan such training programs for its employees so that the abilities and competencies in the workplace can be used and improved, thereby enhancing employee performance. Thus, the hypothesis developed is H2: Training has a positive impact on work performance among customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia.

Relationship between Work Ethics and Work Performance

Sapada et al. (2018) acknowledged that work ethics strongly influence an individual's work performance in an organization. A government official who practices an excellent work ethic always has high discipline in carrying out their duties. The work done is always neat and orderly. Apart from that, those who practice work ethics also have high morals and values. It can improve performance not only individually but also indirectly influence the department's performance. Bertsch *et al.* (2021) said that work ethics affects work performance and described it as a significant element in improving performance. Earlier studies have shown a positive relationship between work ethic and employee performance. Osibanjo, Akinbode, Falola, & Oludayo (2015) suggested that a strong work ethic results in excellent work performance. A study by Arifin and Putra (2020) supports that work ethic has a significant effect on employee performance. Managers identified work ethic as a key factor in subordinates' career choices, promoting and retaining employees. Like other government departments, civil servants of the public department were also subject to their code of ethics. Government officials with high character and moral values improve performance not only individually (intrapersonally) but also by influencing the department's performance (interpersonally). Thus, the hypothesis developed is H3: Work ethics have a positive impact on work performance among customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia.

Research Framework

The research framework integrates leadership style, training, and work ethics as predictors of work performance among customs officers in the eastern region. The hypotheses are:

- H₁: Leadership style has a positive impact on work performance among customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia.
- H₂: Training has a positive impact on work performance among customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia.
- H₃: Work ethics have a positive impact on work performance among customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia.

The research framework outlines the study's variables, with a focus on the relationships among leadership style, training, work ethics, and work performance among customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia. Figure 1 depicts the research framework.

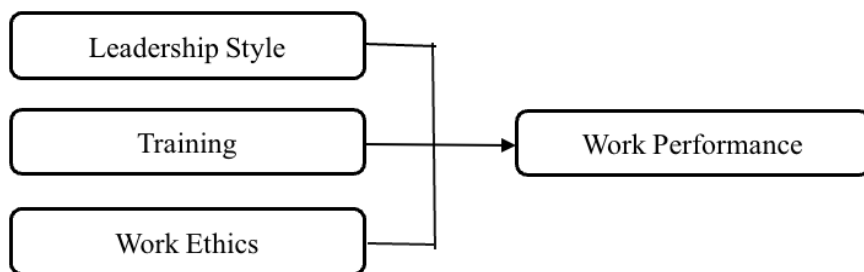


Figure 1. Research Framework

Source: Authors' own work

METHODS

A quantitative design was employed using a self-administered questionnaire distributed to 200 customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia. A simple random sampling method was employed. The novelty of the study's method is the data collected from customs officers. It took a considerable effort to get the customs authorities on board with allowing the distribution of the questionnaires. All officers in the customs office were given the self-administered questionnaires upon meeting with them at work. The completed questionnaires were collected from them before the end of the workday.

The leadership style research tool was adapted and adopted from the work of Zin and Ibrahim (2015), with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.80, which was good. Furthermore, the research tools for training were adapted and adopted from the work of Sherwani and Mohammed (2015), with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.76, which was good. The research tools for work ethics were adapted and adopted from the work of Komari and Djafar (2015), with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, which was good. Finally, the research tools for work performance were adapted and adopted from Zulkafli and Mahbob (2015), with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.95, which was excellent. Data reliability exceeded acceptable Cronbach's alpha thresholds (>0.70). SPSS was used for correlation and regression analyses to test hypotheses. Table 1 depicts the research tools construct.

Table 1 Research Tool Constructs

Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Sources
Leadership Style	9	0.800	Zin and Ibrahim (2015)
Training	12	0.757	Sherwani and Mohammed (2015)
Work Ethics	8	0.820	Komari and Djafar (2015)
Work Performance	10	0.950	Zulkafli and Mahbob (2015)

Source: Authors' own work

RESULTS

Demographic Analysis

The response rate among customs officers was 94.5% of the 200 questionnaires distributed. Most of the customs officers were male (72.4%, n=123) as compared to female (27.6%, n=47). Moreover, most of the respondents were married (n=123; 71.4%) as compared to single (n=40; 23.5%) and other status (n=7; 4.1%). Ethnicity, Malay respondents were the majority (n=74; 43.5%). This was followed by Sarawakian (n=62; 36.5%), Chinese (n=14; 8.2%), and other ethnicities (n=11; 6.5%), and finally, Indian (n=9; 5.3%). Age-wise, senior respondents were aged 31 to 40 years (n=82; 48.2%), followed by 41 to 50 (n=30; 17.6%), 21 to 30 (n=29; 17.1%), and over 51 (n=29; 17.1%). Academically, most respondents held Malaysian certificates (n=71; 41.8%) rather than degrees (n=49; 28.8%), diplomas (n=36; 21.2%), or master's degrees (n=14; 8.2%). Furthermore, regarding respondents' length of service, the majority were more than 10 years (n=108; 63.5%), followed by respondents with 7 to 10 years (n=27; 16.5%), 4 to 6 years (n=18; 10.6%), 1 to 3 years (n=13; 7.6%), and, finally, less than a year (n=3; 1.8%). Table 2 depicts the demographic analysis.

Table 2 Demographic Analysis

Items	n	%
Gender		
• Male	123	72.4
• Female	47	27.6
Marital Status		
• Married	123	72.4
• Single	40	23.5
• Others	7	4.1
Ethnicity		
• Malay	74	43.5
• Chinese	14	8.2
• Indian	9	5.3
• Iban	36	21.2
• Bidayuh	26	15.3
• Others	11	6.5
Age (year-old)		
• 21 to 30	29	17.1
• 31 to 40	82	48.2
• 41 to 50	30	17.6
• Above 50	29	17.1
Academic Qualifications		
• Certificate	71	41.8
• Diploma	36	21.2
• Degree	49	28.8
• Masters	14	8.2
Service Length (years)		
• Below 1	3	1.8
• 1 to 3	13	7.6
• 4 to 6	18	10.6
• 7 to 10	28	16.5
• Above 10	108	63.5

Source: Authors' own work

Descriptive Analysis

Table 3 shows the mean scores for each dependent variable (work performance) and each independent variable (leadership style, training, and work ethics). Work ethics recorded the highest mean score of 4.343, with a standard deviation of 0.478, while the mean score for training was 4.212, with a standard deviation of 0.502. The mean leadership style score was 4.178, with a standard deviation of 0.520. Work performance, the dependent variable in this study, had a mean of 4.646 and a standard deviation of 0.397. Overall, the results indicate that each variable is at a tendency level that does not differ significantly among the study respondents. Based on the descriptive analysis, most of the mean scores are at a high tendency level. The highest tendency level is recorded for work performance, with a mean score of 4.645, while the lowest is for leadership style, with a mean score of 4.177. It can be concluded that the high mean tendency indicates that almost all respondents understood the requirements of the researcher's questions.

Table 3 Descriptive Analysis

Variables	Mean	SD
Leadership Style	4.178	0.520
Training	4.212	0.502
Work Ethics	4.343	0.478
Work Performance	4.646	0.397

Source: Authors' own work

Reliability Analysis

The questions that were adapted and adopted demonstrated their reliability. The leadership style scale comprised 9 items, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.871, indicating reliability. Training had 12 items, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.911, indicating reliability. Work ethics had 8 items with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.782, which is reliable. Finally, the work performance scale had 10 items, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.917, indicating reliability.

Correlations Analysis

Table 4 depicts the correlation analysis. Firstly, work ethic had the highest relationship with work performance ($r=0.683$; $p=0.000$). This was followed by a relationship between training and work performance ($r = 0.542$; $p = 0.000$). Finally, the relationship between leadership style and work performance ($r=0.551$; $p=0.000$). Thus, all independent variables, namely leadership style, training, and work ethics, showed a strong relationship with work performance.

Table 4: Correlations Analysis

Variable	2	3	4
1. Leadership Style	0.536**	0.504**	0.551**
2. Training	1	0.453**	0.542**
3. Work Ethics		1	0.683**
4. Work Performance			1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Authors' own work

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 5 depicts the multiple regression analysis. The respondents reported an R^2 of 54.8% for work performance, which was explained by leadership style ($\beta=0.142$, $p<0.01$), training ($\beta=0.174$, $p<0.001$), and work ethics ($\beta=0.406$, $p<0.000$). Furthermore, the multiple regression model ($F=69.266$, $p<0.000$) was

significant, indicating that the F ratio was significant in predicting work performance among customs officers. In conclusion, leadership styles, training, and work performance were significant predictors of work performance among customs officers. Thus, hypotheses H₁, H₂, and H₃ were supported in explaining the customs officers' organizational factors, namely leadership styles, training, and work ethics, as predictors of work performance.

Table 5 Regression Analysis

Variable	Work Performance	
Variable	β	Sig.
Leadership Style	0.142	0.005
Training	0.174	0.001
Work Ethics	0.406	0.000
R	0.556	
R ²	0.548	
F-Change	69.266	
Sig. F-Change	0.000	

Source: Authors' own work

DISCUSSION

This study finds that the leader should be a strong motivator to ensure staff and members deliver excellent results. The quality of a department head is measured by the results of their work. The leader inspires and motivates customs officers to be more enthusiastic about their work and tasks every day, helping them feel satisfied with the results. Leadership style is important because it can foster satisfaction among subordinates and the leader. It is said that the employee's trust in the leadership style of the organization's leader can help the organization achieve its set goals and positively affect the relationship between employers and employees. Leadership style is an effort to influence individuals, in which power and influence are distributed unequally, so that an individual can direct and control the actions of others more than they are controlled. From another perspective, Drzewiecka and Roczniowska (2018) explained that leaders can increase work-related stress, for example, by increasing the ambiguity of employees' roles and the workload.

Furthermore, training is a process of acquiring and developing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to enhance work performance. Although training takes various forms, the goal is the same: to improve a person's ability to perform tasks and enhance work performance. This performance improvement is achieved when customs officers have the skills, knowledge, and commitment to advance workplace organization. Therefore, training is considered important for problem-solving and improving work performance. Interestingly, work ethic is an important trait that customs officers must possess. Work ethic has been proven to contribute to work performance, according to the place or department an officer is assigned to. Although work ethics has several elements, the goal in the organization is to discipline a person to control behavior to improve work performance. This performance improvement is achieved when customs officers practice a code of work ethics within each officer. Therefore, work ethics is considered important for maintaining good behavior and improving work performance.

The study proves a significant relationship between leadership style and work performance. The leader's leadership style fosters a positive relationship between the department head and staff, resulting in excellent work quality for the organization. Excellent communication between the department head and staff should be maintained to ensure good relations at all times. According to Simon, Christie, Graham, and Call (2014), employees will obey their superiors' instructions if the instructions seem reasonable and the leadership style is democratic. The study also found that training received during the course significantly influenced work performance. This means that officers' achievements during training can improve workplace performance. The training provided to customs officers indeed provides many benefits, such as improving competence and improving work performance. As work performance improves, job satisfaction also increases. According to Wright and Geroy (2001), training programs should be carefully designed, based on scientific methods, and

guided by the skills required by an organization in the present and the future. Training also aims to improve officers' technical, theoretical, conceptual, and moral abilities, ensuring good work performance and achieving the best results. This is also supported by the view of Knoke and Kalleberg (1994), who argue that training is one of the factors in the development of human capital that can not only improve officers' knowledge but also enhance skills, with implications for improving officer work performance.

Finally, the study found that the public department's management needs to pay attention to officers' work ethics, as they affect their performance. To improve work performance, special attention must be given. The management should assess employees' attitudes towards their work, specifically how they view it in their daily lives and activities, to increase employee motivation. Regarding the effect of factors related to attitude or work ethics on work performance, Cabrera and Estacio (2022) found a correlation between the two variables. These findings support the current proposition that management needs to improve employees' attitudes toward work ethics and their work performance. The current study also asserts that not only are work attitude and motivation important to employees, but so is their moral view of work. Their moral views can influence their work performance, especially in terms of counterproductive behavior. In other words, the more ethical an employee is, the less they engage in counterproductive behavior. This shows that management needs to strengthen employees' moral values, especially those that affect their work behavior.

The findings affirm that leadership style, training, and work ethics significantly influence work performance. The novelty of this study lies in its regional empirical evidence and integrated framework. The results validate that effective leadership fosters motivation and collaboration, while consistent training enhances competency and ethical behavior. Importantly, work ethics emerged as the strongest predictor, suggesting that moral discipline and integrity are central to performance in public institutions. Compared to previous national-level studies, these findings highlight the distinct leadership and ethical dynamics in the eastern region. The results indicate that leadership in this region functions not only as a managerial tool but as a cultural bridge fostering trust and accountability. Similarly, continuous training acts as a mechanism for maintaining ethical standards and operational excellence. Thus, the study provides a novel contribution by linking leadership-driven ethics to sustainable public performance.

This study contributes to the literature by offering contextual and conceptual novelty in examining work performance among customs officers in Malaysia's eastern region. The findings confirm that leadership style, training, and work ethics collectively enhance public service efficiency and employee motivation. Theoretically, the study enriches the leadership and ethics literature by introducing a triadic model that emphasizes interaction effects. Practically, it offers policymakers actionable insights to design regionally responsive leadership and training programs grounded in ethical governance. Future research should extend the comparative analysis across Malaysia's northern, central, and southern regions to generalize the findings and explore cross-cultural variations in leadership.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the three research objectives formulated were achieved through the study conducted. The first objective was to determine the relationships among leadership style, training, and work ethic in influencing the work performance of customs officers. The study demonstrated a significant relationship between leadership style, training, and work ethics in influencing work performance. The second objective was to determine the effects of leadership style, training, and work ethics on the work performance of customs officers. Through this study, the researcher found a powerful relationship and effect between leadership style, training, and work ethics on work performance. In addition, the three research hypotheses were supported by the findings of this study. The researcher found that all three independent variables, leadership style, training, and work ethics, have a significant relationship with the dependent variable, namely work performance. In conclusion, leadership style, training, and work ethics have a strong positive influence on the work performance of customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia. Last but not least, the leaders of a public office should be good motivators for their staff toward excellent work performance. The training needs to be implemented as an ongoing process to improve officers' problem-solving performance. Work ethics need to be cultivated among officers to enhance their discipline and improve their work performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The constraints encountered in completing this study should not be regarded as obstacles; instead, they should be viewed as positive challenges that offer opportunities to enhance this study's potential as a valuable reference in the future. To improve sustainability, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the study's findings. This research may be continued with a focus on customs officers in the eastern region of Malaysia, and on the overall work performance of administrative staff. The recommendation is to ensure a balanced allocation of tasks by department heads to customs officers. The researcher believes that balanced distribution of tasks or work scope among staff can enhance work motivation, as employees perceive equitable task allocation as a factor that can improve service quality. Second, total population sampling is recommended. The researcher believes that adopting total sampling, involving all staff members across divisional levels, including officers and members, would yield more varied findings and more accurate, robust results.

Limitation

The limitation of this study is its focus on the restricted public office in the eastern region of Malaysia. It is best to include the remaining officers of the restricted public office in other regions of Malaysia, namely the northern, central, southern, and eastern. This will provide a comprehensive generalization of their leadership style, training, and work ethic regarding work performance among customs officers in Malaysia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Funding: This work was supported by Universiti Sains Malaysia, Bridging Grant with Project No: R501-LR-RND003-0000002049-0000.

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