

Transformational, Values-Based, and Developmental Leadership as Pathways to Organizational Trust: The Mediating Role of Employee Engagement in Malaysian Private Higher Education

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100900116>

Received: 14 August 2026; Accepted: 19 August 2026; Published: 02 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Organizational trust is essential in private higher education because academic work depends on credible leadership, knowledge sharing, professional autonomy, and sustained cooperation across teaching, research, and service roles. Yet recent research often examines a single leadership approach or treats engagement and trust as parallel outcomes, leaving the process through which distinct leadership behaviors become institutional trust insufficiently explained. This conceptual article develops an integrated model in which transformational leadership, values-based leadership, and developmental leadership predict organizational trust directly and indirectly through employee engagement among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions. Social exchange theory explains reciprocal responses to supportive and principled leadership, while job demands-resources theory explains how vision, value congruence, coaching, autonomy, and growth support operate as motivational resources. The review synthesizes recent evidence published from 2020 to 2026 and distinguishes the three leadership styles by their primary mechanisms: transformational leadership creates shared purpose and intellectual energy, values-based leadership signals integrity and procedural consistency, and developmental leadership builds competence and career capability. Ten propositions specify direct paths from each leadership style to engagement and trust, the effect of engagement on trust, and three mediated paths. A cross-sectional, multi-institutional survey with partial least squares structural equation modeling is proposed for empirical validation. The model contributes a parsimonious leadership portfolio, positions engagement as an active trust-building mechanism rather than a simple attitude, and offers practical guidance for academic leaders seeking to strengthen credibility, retention, collaboration, and institutional resilience. It also specifies a rigorous measurement and analysis protocol that can guide subsequent multi-institutional testing and theory refinement.

Keywords: transformational leadership; values-based leadership; developmental leadership; employee engagement; organizational trust

INTRODUCTION

Private higher education institutions operate through a dense web of reciprocal relationships. Academic staff must trust that leaders will allocate workloads fairly, communicate priorities accurately, protect professional standards, and honor commitments concerning development and recognition. Leaders, in turn, depend on academics to contribute knowledge, adapt curricula, support students, participate in accreditation, and sustain institutional reputation. Organizational trust is therefore not an optional cultural benefit. It is an operating condition that reduces defensive behavior, supports collaboration, and enables people to accept vulnerability when outcomes depend on managerial decisions. Recent reviews show that trust in leaders and trust in the organization are related but distinct, and that both influence cooperation, retention, well-being, and productive behavior (Karikumpu et al., 2024; Schilke et al., 2023).

The challenge is especially important in Malaysian private higher education. Academics work in institutions that combine scholarly missions with competitive enrollment, service quality, digital delivery, regulatory compliance, and cost discipline. These simultaneous demands can amplify role overload and uncertainty, making day-to-day leadership behavior a visible signal of whether the institution is competent, benevolent, and principled. Malaysian evidence associates transformational leadership with positive academic outcomes, while research in private universities shows that leadership, human resource development, and organizational conditions are important antecedents of employee engagement (Al-Mamary, 2021; Arokiasamy & Tat, 2020; Mohd Seddikin et al., 2023; Ooi et al., 2022). However, the available evidence remains fragmented across leadership labels and outcome variables.

A single leadership style cannot fully represent what academics require from institutional leaders. Transformational leadership provides direction, inspiration, and intellectual stimulation. Values-based leadership establishes moral coherence by aligning decisions with declared institutional values. Developmental leadership focuses on coaching, feedback, skill development, and career progress. These styles overlap in their positive orientation, but they deliver different resources and different trust signals. Treating them as interchangeable obscures whether academics trust the organization because leaders inspire a meaningful future, behave consistently with shared principles, or invest in professional growth. A portfolio perspective can clarify their complementary contributions.

Employee engagement is proposed as the central conversion mechanism. Engagement refers to the energetic, dedicated, and absorbed investment of the self in work. Recent reviews show that leadership, developmental resources, meaningful work, organizational support, and trust are recurring antecedents, while engagement predicts performance, commitment, citizenship, and retention-related outcomes (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Kossyva et al., 2023; Mazzetti et al., 2023; Wittenberg et al., 2024; Zahari & Kaliannan, 2023). When academics experience leadership as purposeful, principled, and developmental, they are more willing to devote cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energy to institutional roles. Repeated experiences of meaningful participation then provide evidence that the organization is reliable and worthy of confidence.

Despite growing interest in leadership and employee engagement in higher education, existing research remains fragmented in three important respects. First, leadership studies frequently examine transformational, values-based, or developmental leadership independently, making it difficult to determine whether these approaches provide distinctive explanatory value when considered simultaneously. This is an important limitation because academics may experience several forms of leadership at the same time: they may require a clear sense of institutional direction, confidence that decisions are guided by consistent principles, and opportunities to develop their professional capabilities. Examining only one leadership style may therefore provide an incomplete explanation of how leadership contributes to organizational trust.

Second, previous research has often emphasized the direct relationship between leadership and trust or treated employee engagement and organizational trust as parallel outcomes. Less attention has been given to the process through which leadership behaviors may translate into organizational trust through employees' active involvement in their work. The present study addresses this issue by positioning employee engagement as a potential mechanism through which leadership experiences are converted into broader confidence in the organization.

Third, this issue is particularly relevant in Malaysian private higher education, where academic institutions must simultaneously manage professional autonomy, academic standards, student expectations, regulatory requirements, technological change, and competitive market pressures. These conditions create a setting in which different leadership resources may perform complementary functions. Transformational leadership provides direction and meaning, values-based leadership provides integrity and consistency, while developmental leadership provides competence-building and career support.

Therefore, the contribution of this study is not simply to add three leadership variables to an existing model. Rather, it develops a theoretically differentiated leadership portfolio in which each style addresses a distinct source of employee uncertainty: uncertainty about institutional direction, uncertainty about the consistency and fairness of organizational decisions, and uncertainty about one's capacity and future development. By integrating

these styles with employee engagement and organizational trust, the study provides a more process-oriented explanation of how leadership may contribute to trust in Malaysian private higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational Trust

Organizational trust is a willingness to accept vulnerability based on favorable expectations about the organization's intentions and conduct. In employment settings, the object of trust may be an immediate supervisor, senior management, a team, or the institution itself. Contemporary trust research distinguishes cognitive judgments, such as competence and predictability, from affective judgments, such as care and relational confidence. It also emphasizes that employees infer organizational trustworthiness from patterns of policies and from the actions of leaders who enact those policies (Karikumpu et al., 2024; Schilke et al., 2023). This distinction matters because a well-liked supervisor cannot fully compensate for an institution perceived as inconsistent, and a reputable institution may still lose trust through local leadership failures.

Trust develops through repeated interpretation of signals. Transparent explanations reduce uncertainty, fair procedures demonstrate impartiality, fulfilled promises indicate reliability, and supportive responses communicate benevolence. Conversely, value breaches, selective communication, and unexplained inconsistency can rapidly weaken integrity judgments. Experimental and field research shows that value congruence affects how followers interpret leader integrity, while recent work links transformational leadership and transparency to openness and trust during organizational change (Alarifi et al., 2024; Cha et al., 2020; Zainab et al., 2022). Trust should therefore be understood as a dynamic assessment rather than a static disposition.

For academics, vulnerability is embedded in routine work. Decisions about workload, promotion, research support, course ownership, contract renewal, and academic freedom affect professional identity and future opportunity. Trust permits academics to share untested ideas, challenge assumptions, disclose difficulties, and collaborate across disciplinary boundaries. Low trust encourages information withholding, surface compliance, and risk avoidance. Evidence from Malaysian organizations shows that transformational leadership can improve perceived trustworthiness and trust in team leaders, while work in higher education links supervisory trust to engagement and learning-oriented behavior (Lee et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2026).

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement captures a positive work-related state expressed through vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor reflects energy and persistence, dedication reflects significance and enthusiasm, and absorption reflects concentrated involvement. Although the literature uses work engagement, job engagement, and employee engagement in partially different ways, current reviews converge on the importance of active investment rather than passive satisfaction (Alluhaybi et al., 2023; Kossyva et al., 2023; Wittenberg et al., 2024). Engagement is especially relevant to academic work because many valuable behaviors, including mentoring, curriculum innovation, research collaboration, and student support, cannot be generated through formal control alone.

Engagement depends on the balance between demands and resources. Academic roles contain substantial cognitive and emotional demands, but autonomy, feedback, support, learning opportunities, and meaningful goals can sustain motivation. Meta-analytic evidence identifies personal and developmental resources as particularly strong correlates of engagement, and leadership research shows that constructive leadership functions as a higher-order job resource (Katou et al., 2022; Mazzetti et al., 2023; Pletzer et al., 2024). Higher education studies similarly indicate that leadership practices, job demands, leader-member exchange, and well-being shape faculty engagement (Atiku & Van Wyk, 2024; Hanley et al., 2024; Klahn Acuna & Male, 2024; Samad et al., 2022).

Engagement and trust can reinforce each other, but the present model gives engagement a specific mediating role. Leadership first changes the quality of employees' work experience by supplying purpose, moral coherence, and development. Academics who respond with greater energy and dedication interact more frequently with

colleagues and leaders, complete difficult tasks, and observe whether the institution reciprocates their effort. These enacted exchanges produce information from which trust is updated. Evidence that trust in leaders predicts engagement and that engagement participates in sequential mediation during change confirms close reciprocal links, but it does not eliminate the need to test a theoretically ordered pathway (Havold et al., 2021; Islam, 2024; Islam et al., 2020, 2021).

Transformational Leadership

Although transformational, values-based, and developmental leadership share a generally positive orientation toward employees, they should not be treated as interchangeable constructs. Their distinction lies in the primary organizational problem each leadership approach addresses. Transformational leadership is primarily concerned with direction and meaning, helping academics understand where the institution is going and why their work matters. Values-based leadership is primarily concerned with principles and consistency, shaping how decisions are made and whether leaders act in accordance with declared institutional values. Developmental leadership is primarily concerned with capability and future growth, focusing on how academics can acquire the skills, confidence, and career resources required to contribute effectively. Thus, the three styles represent complementary rather than redundant leadership resources: transformational leadership provides purpose, values-based leadership provides moral and procedural assurance, and developmental leadership provides growth-oriented support.

Transformational leadership mobilizes followers around an attractive collective purpose. Its core behaviors include articulating a credible vision, acting as a role model, intellectually stimulating followers, and considering individual needs. In universities, these behaviors can connect routine teaching and administrative work to broader academic and social missions. Intellectual stimulation also legitimizes questioning and experimentation, while individualized consideration signals that leaders recognize diverse professional aspirations. Studies across sectors consistently associate transformational leadership with engagement, structural empowerment, and positive work outcomes (Amor et al., 2020; Fernando & Jayawardana, 2024; Gemedda & Lee, 2020).

The trust mechanism is equally important. A leader who communicates a stable direction, behaves consistently, and explains change reduces uncertainty about future action. Research during organizational change shows that transformational leadership strengthens engagement and trust, and Malaysian longitudinal evidence indicates that perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity transmit leadership effects to trust in team leaders (Islam et al., 2020, 2021; Lee et al., 2024). However, inspiration without execution can produce cynicism. Transformational leadership should therefore be judged by the alignment between vision, resourcing, and follow-through.

Recent evidence in Malaysian higher education supports the relevance of this style but also shows why engagement should be examined explicitly. Transformational leadership has been linked with work engagement, workplace spirituality, commitment, and citizenship among academic staff (Al-Mamary, 2021; Arokiasamy & Tat, 2020). These findings establish contextual plausibility, yet they do not compare transformational leadership with value-centered and development-centered alternatives. The present framework treats transformational leadership as the primary source of shared purpose and change energy.

Values-Based Leadership

Values-based leadership is the practice of grounding decisions, relationships, and institutional priorities in explicit moral and organizational values. The construct emphasizes congruence between what leaders say, what they reward, and how they act. Integrity, fairness, transparency, respect, stewardship, and accountability are therefore central. Recent reviews describe values-based leadership as an umbrella that intersects with authentic, ethical, servant, spiritual, and congruent leadership, while preserving a distinctive focus on values enacted in practice (Antoine et al., 2022; James et al., 2021; Lahmar et al., 2023).

Values-based leadership should strengthen engagement because intrinsic values make work meaningful and support autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Longitudinal evidence on engaging leadership shows that leaders shape employees' perceptions of intrinsic organizational values, which in turn satisfy psychological needs and support work engagement (Van Tuin et al., 2021). Research on moral norms further indicates that leaders

influence values through embodied practices and collective interpretation, not only through rational statements (Spinosa et al., 2023; Vu & Gill, 2023). For academics, leaders reinforce meaning when decisions visibly protect educational quality, scholarly integrity, student welfare, and fair treatment.

Values-based leadership is also a direct foundation for trust. Integrity is inferred when behavior remains consistent with declared principles under pressure. Procedural justice, transparent reasoning, and equal application of standards reduce the fear that decisions are arbitrary or self-serving. Evidence linking transformational leadership to trust climates through organizational justice reinforces the broader principle that moral consistency is a critical trust signal (Akter et al., 2024; Baquero, 2023). Conversely, a leader value breach can be interpreted harshly when employees see it as evidence of hypocrisy or betrayal (Cha et al., 2020). Values-oriented leadership may also connect trust-building decisions with wider responsibilities for sustainability and procedural fairness (Iqbal et al., 2025).

Developmental Leadership

Developmental leadership prioritizes followers' capacity to grow. It is expressed through coaching, mentoring, constructive feedback, challenging assignments, career dialogue, access to learning, and recognition of individual strengths. Unlike a general supportive style, developmental leadership is future-oriented: the leader actively expands the employee's competence and career adaptability. Empirical research links developmental leadership with skill development, work engagement, and career adaptability (Delle & Searle, 2022; Ryu & Shim, 2020).

Developmental leadership is particularly salient in universities because academic careers require continual learning. New pedagogies, digital platforms, research methods, accreditation standards, and industry expectations can quickly make existing capabilities insufficient. Developmental leaders help academics interpret these demands as opportunities for mastery rather than threats. Evidence that talent development mediates leadership effects on engagement and that development-oriented resources show strong associations with engagement supports this mechanism (Ali et al., 2023; Mazzetti et al., 2023).

Investment in development also signals a long-term relationship. Coaching time, access to training, sponsorship, and candid feedback are costly resources that demonstrate organizational commitment to the employee's future. Social exchange logic suggests that recipients reciprocate through engagement and trust. Malaysian evidence that training and employee development predict academic engagement strengthens the contextual basis for this proposition (Ooi et al., 2022). Developmental leadership may therefore be especially important where academics are concerned about career stagnation, contract insecurity, or the portability of their skills.

The rationale for examining transformational, values-based, and developmental leadership together lies in their functional complementarity rather than conceptual similarity. Transformational leadership provides direction, vision, and shared meaning; values-based leadership strengthens perceptions of integrity, fairness, transparency, and consistency; while developmental leadership supports employee competence, learning, and career growth. These distinct functions address different conditions through which academics evaluate their work environment and institution.

This combination is particularly relevant to private higher education, where academics must respond to institutional change while maintaining professional standards and continuously developing their capabilities. Vision alone may not build confidence when decision-making lacks consistency, while fair procedures may not equip employees to manage changing professional demands. Developmental support can strengthen competence and commitment, but its effects may be constrained when institutional direction is unclear.

Accordingly, the framework treats the three leadership styles as a differentiated leadership portfolio. Examining them simultaneously allows future research to determine whether each style provides unique and incremental explanatory value for employee engagement and organizational trust beyond the effects of the other leadership approaches.

Comparative Synthesis

The three leadership styles should not be collapsed into a generic positive leadership factor. Transformational leadership answers the question of where the institution is going and why the journey matters. Values-based leadership answers how decisions should be made and which principles remain non-negotiable. Developmental leadership answers how academics will gain the capability and confidence to contribute. Their complementarity is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Distinctive Roles of the Three Leadership Styles

Leadership style	Primary question	Core behaviors	Main engagement resource	Primary trust signal
Transformational	Where are we going and why?	Vision, role modeling, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration	Meaning, optimism, challenge	Competence and credible direction
Values-based	How will we decide and act?	Integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability, value-action consistency	Moral meaning, psychological safety, value congruence	Integrity and procedural predictability
Developmental	How will people grow and contribute?	Coaching, feedback, mentoring, learning access, career support	Competence, mastery, future opportunity	Benevolence and long-term commitment

Theoretical Foundation

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory explains employment relationships as ongoing exchanges of material and socioemotional resources. Employees do not respond only to formal contracts. They also interpret whether leaders provide respect, support, fairness, information, and opportunities. Beneficial treatment creates an obligation to reciprocate, although the form and timing of reciprocity remain discretionary. Contemporary reviews of engagement show that social exchange theory is one of the most frequently used explanations for why positive leadership and organizational support elicit stronger involvement (Zahari & Kaliannan, 2023).

Each focal leadership style contributes a different exchange resource. Transformational leaders provide meaning, confidence, and collective identification. Values-based leaders provide justice, integrity, and moral predictability. Developmental leaders provide coaching, feedback, and future capability. Academics can reciprocate these resources by becoming more energetic, persistent, collaborative, and willing to go beyond minimum role requirements. Studies of humble and empowering leadership similarly show that feeling trusted, autonomy, and organizational identification connect employee-centered leadership to positive work behavior and engagement (Arshad et al., 2022; Cho et al., 2021).

Trust is both an evaluation of past exchanges and a willingness to continue exchanging under vulnerability. When leaders repeatedly deliver valuable resources and honor implicit obligations, academics obtain evidence of competence, benevolence, and integrity. Engagement intensifies this learning because engaged employees interact more deeply with institutional processes. Their discretionary investment creates opportunities for the organization to respond, thereby confirming or disconfirming trust. This process explains why engagement can transmit leadership effects rather than merely coexist with trust.

Job Demands-Resources Theory

Job demands-resources theory complements exchange logic by explaining motivation. Job demands require sustained effort, while job resources help employees achieve goals, regulate demands, learn, and grow. Leadership can itself be a higher-order resource and can shape the distribution of other resources. A recent meta-

analysis found that constructive leadership is strongly related to engagement and that the engagement pathway is central to performance (Pletzer et al., 2024).

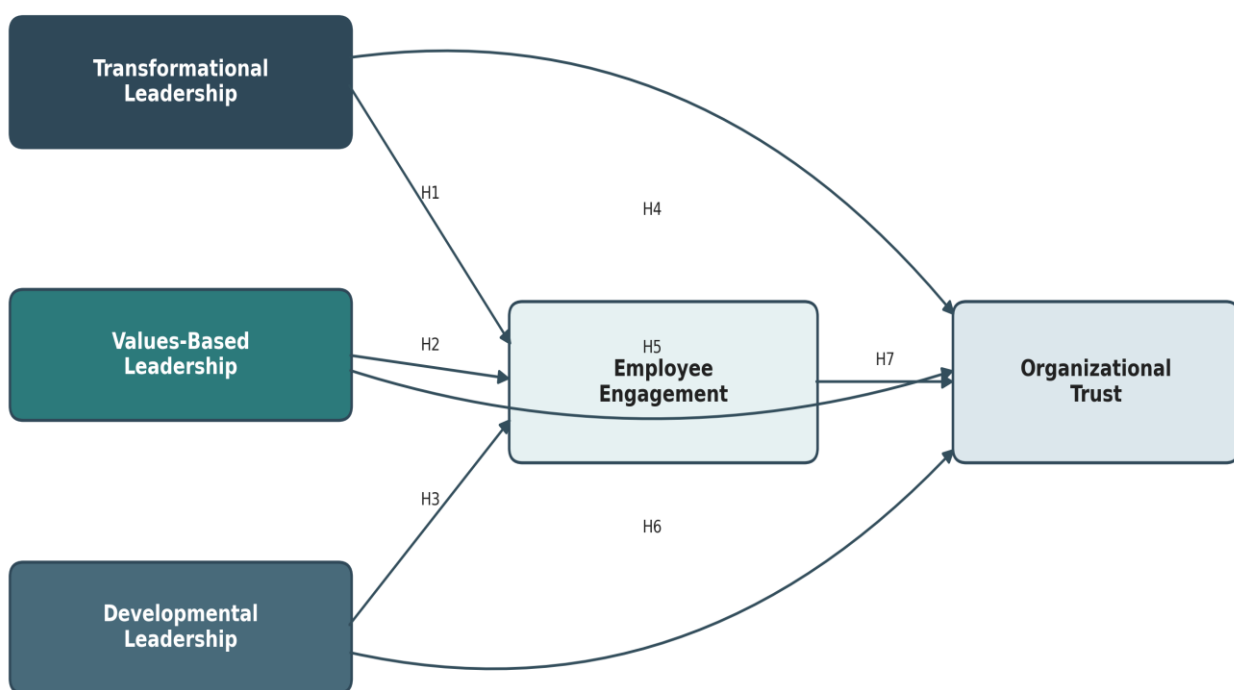
Transformational leadership supplies goal clarity, significance, optimism, and intellectual challenge. Values-based leadership supplies procedural predictability, psychological safety, and value congruence. Developmental leadership supplies feedback, competence support, learning access, and career resources. These resources are not equally substitutable. A compelling vision cannot replace unfair procedures, and fair procedures cannot replace missing capability. The integrated portfolio is expected to provide a richer resource environment than any style in isolation.

The resource perspective also establishes boundary conditions. Positive leadership may fail when workload is extreme, institutional systems contradict leader messages, or employees lack discretion to use offered resources. Higher education research demonstrates that leadership effects operate alongside job demands, resources, and well-being (Atiku & Van Wyk, 2024; Samad et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2026). The proposed model therefore focuses on expected average relationships while recognizing that future empirical work should test workload, contract status, and institutional consistency as contingencies.

Integrated Explanatory Logic

Together, the theories describe a resource-to-reciprocity sequence. Leadership behaviors first alter the work environment by creating meaning, moral coherence, and growth support. These resources satisfy motivational needs and encourage academics to invest themselves more fully in their roles. Through that investment, academics accumulate evidence about whether the institution values contributions, behaves predictably, and responds fairly. Organizational trust becomes the relational consequence of a repeatedly validated exchange. Figure 1 presents this sequence while preserving direct leadership-to-trust paths.

Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Framework



Employee engagement mediates the three leadership-trust relationships (H8-H10)

CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Leadership Styles and Employee Engagement

Transformational leaders create an emotionally and cognitively compelling frame for work. By connecting individual tasks to a shared future, they strengthen dedication; by expressing confidence, they strengthen vigor; and by encouraging intellectual challenge, they support absorption in complex work. Empirical studies link transformational leadership to engagement directly and through structural empowerment, talent development, and other resources (Ali et al., 2023; Amor et al., 2020; Fernando & Jayawardana, 2024; Geibel & Otto, 2023; Gemedda & Lee, 2020). In academic settings, the effect should be particularly strong when leaders frame institutional change as an opportunity to improve teaching, research, and student impact.

H1: Transformational leadership is positively related to employee engagement among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions.

Values-based leaders foster engagement by making the institution's moral priorities visible and dependable. Employees are more willing to invest themselves when they perceive congruence between personal and organizational values, when fair procedures protect dignity, and when meaningful goals extend beyond narrow financial outcomes. Research on engaging leadership demonstrates a pathway from leadership to intrinsic value perceptions, need satisfaction, and engagement, while values-based leadership research emphasizes integrity and consistency (Antoine et al., 2022; James et al., 2021; Van Tuin et al., 2021).

H2: Values-based leadership is positively related to employee engagement among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions.

Developmental leaders increase engagement by expanding competence and future opportunity. Coaching clarifies how performance can improve, feedback reduces uncertainty, and challenging assignments make growth visible. Longitudinal public-sector evidence links developmental leadership and skill development to engagement, while research on career adaptability and development resources confirms broader motivational effects (Delle & Searle, 2022; Mazzetti et al., 2023; Ryu & Shim, 2020). Academics should respond positively because professional growth is integral to disciplinary credibility and career sustainability.

H3: Developmental leadership is positively related to employee engagement among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions.

Leadership Styles and Organizational Trust

Transformational leadership should directly strengthen trust when leaders demonstrate competence, communicate a credible future, act as role models, and remain consistent during uncertainty. Evidence from organizational change research supports links from transformational leadership to trust and openness, and Malaysian research identifies trustworthiness judgments as important mediators of leader effects (Islam et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2024; Zainab et al., 2022). Vision alone is insufficient, but vision combined with credible action signals that the institution can be relied upon.

H4: Transformational leadership is positively related to organizational trust among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions.

Values-based leadership should have a strong direct relationship with trust because integrity and fairness are central to trustworthiness. Employees monitor whether stated principles survive pressure, whether decisions can be explained, and whether similar cases receive similar treatment. Evidence on value breaches shows that perceived inconsistency can damage integrity judgments, while research on justice and trust climates shows that principled leadership helps construct shared trust (Akter et al., 2024; Cha et al., 2020).

H5: Values-based leadership is positively related to organizational trust among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions.

Developmental leadership should directly strengthen trust because investment in growth communicates benevolence and long-term commitment. Employees can observe whether leaders allocate time, feedback, learning opportunities, and sponsorship fairly. These behaviors provide evidence that the organization values their future rather than only extracting present performance. Research on developmental leadership, employee development, and felt trust supports this logic (Cho et al., 2021; Delle & Searle, 2022; Ooi et al., 2022; Ryu & Shim, 2020).

H6: Developmental leadership is positively related to organizational trust among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions.

Employee Engagement and Organizational Trust

The relationship between employee engagement and organizational trust is theoretically reciprocal. Employees who trust their organization may be more willing to invest energy, demonstrate commitment, and participate actively in organizational activities (Rachmaningrum & Handini, 2024; Yustica Ilhamsyah & Hayati, 2026). Conversely, engaged employees may develop stronger organizational trust because their deeper involvement provides repeated opportunities to observe how the organization responds to their contributions, concerns, and discretionary effort (Liu et al., 2025; Yustica Ilhamsyah & Hayati, 2026).

The present study focuses specifically on the latter direction because employee engagement is proposed as a mechanism of mediating between leadership and organizational trust. The theoretical ordering begins with leadership behavior, which alters the employee's work experience by providing purpose, moral consistency, and developmental resources (Diep & Hai, 2025; Bashir, 2025). These resources are expected to stimulate greater vigor, dedication, and absorption in academic work (Hameli & Aktaş, 2026). Through greater participation, academics obtain more frequent and richer information about organizational practices, including whether leaders and institutional systems respond consistently, fairly, and supportively to employee contributions (Madison et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025).

This process is consistent with social exchange theory. When academics experience beneficial leadership behaviors and respond through greater engagement, they participate more deeply in the organizational relationship (Madison et al., 2025). Continued exchanges provide evidence regarding the institution's reliability, benevolence, competence, and integrity. Over time, these repeated experiences may strengthen generalized confidence in the organization (Madison et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). Thus, engagement is conceptualized not merely as an outcome of leadership but as a potential experience-based pathway through which leadership effects become organizational trust (Diep & Hai, 2025; Liu et al., 2025).

Importantly, this proposed direction does not imply that trust cannot influence engagement. Previous research provides support for trust as an antecedent of engagement (Rachmaningrum & Handini, 2024; Diep & Hai, 2025), and the two constructs may reinforce each other over time (Madison et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2025). However, because the present conceptual model examines how leadership resources are converted into organizational trust, engagement is positioned as the theoretically ordered mediator. The reciprocal relationship should therefore be examined empirically through alternative model specifications in future research. A competing model in which organizational trust precedes employee engagement can provide a useful robustness test (Madison et al., 2025; Yustica Ilhamsyah & Hayati, 2026).

H7: Employee engagement is positively related to organizational trust among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions.

Mediating Role of Employee Engagement

Mediation is expected because each leadership style first changes academics' motivational experience and that experience then contributes to trust. Transformational leadership energizes participation through purpose and challenge. Values-based leadership encourages authentic investment by creating moral safety and value

congruence. Developmental leadership supports engagement through mastery and future opportunity. Once academics invest more fully, repeated constructive exchanges provide evidence that the institution is dependable. Leadership and engagement research increasingly favors such explanatory mechanisms over simple bivariate associations (Decuyper & Schaufeli, 2020; Islam, 2024; Pletzer et al., 2024).

H8: Employee engagement mediates the positive relationship between transformational leadership and organizational trust.

H9: Employee engagement mediates the positive relationship between values-based leadership and organizational trust.

H10: Employee engagement mediates the positive relationship between developmental leadership and organizational trust.

Table 2 consolidates the ten hypotheses and identifies the dominant mechanism represented by each path.

Table 2. Summary of Proposed Hypotheses

Hyp.	Proposed relationship	Dominant mechanism
H1	Transformational leadership → Employee engagement	Shared purpose and intellectual energy
H2	Values-based leadership → Employee engagement	Intrinsic values and moral safety
H3	Developmental leadership → Employee engagement	Competence and growth resources
H4	Transformational leadership → Organizational trust	Credible direction and competence
H5	Values-based leadership → Organizational trust	Integrity, fairness, and consistency
H6	Developmental leadership → Organizational trust	Benevolence and future investment
H7	Employee engagement → Organizational trust	Experience-based relational confidence
H8	Transformational leadership → Engagement → Trust	Motivational conversion of vision
H9	Values-based leadership → Engagement → Trust	Motivational conversion of value congruence
H10	Developmental leadership → Engagement → Trust	Motivational conversion of development support

PROPOSED METHODOLOGY FOR EMPIRICAL VALIDATION

Research Design and Unit of Analysis

The framework can be tested through a quantitative, cross-sectional, explanatory survey. The unit of analysis should be the individual full-time academic employed by a Malaysian private university or university college. Respondents should have sufficient tenure, preferably at least six months, to evaluate recurring leadership behavior and organizational practices. The proposed design is suitable for estimating simultaneous direct and indirect relationships and for comparing the relative contribution of three conceptually adjacent leadership constructs. Because cross-sectional data cannot establish temporal causality, a time-lagged follow-up should be treated as a desirable extension rather than implied by the initial test.

A multi-institutional design is necessary to avoid confounding leadership with the culture of a single university. Institutions should be selected to represent variation in size, program portfolio, ownership, and market position. Within participating institutions, proportional stratified sampling can reflect faculties and academic ranks. The sampling frame should include only eligible academics, and invitations should be distributed through channels that protect voluntary participation from managerial pressure. A target of at least 340 usable responses is

reasonable for a model of this complexity, but the final minimum should be established through an a priori power analysis based on the smallest effect of substantive interest.

Measurement Strategy

All five constructs should be modeled reflectively unless item development reveals a defensible formative specification. Transformational leadership items should capture vision, role modeling, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Values-based leadership should capture integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability, and value-action consistency. Developmental leadership should capture coaching, feedback, learning opportunity, career support, and strength development. Employee engagement should capture vigor, dedication, and absorption. Organizational trust should capture reliability, competence, benevolence, integrity, and confidence in institutional action.

A concise instrument of approximately 35 substantive items, with seven indicators per construct, balances content coverage and respondent burden. Items should be adapted from recent empirical work and reviewed for the academic context (Antoine et al., 2022; Arokiasamy & Tat, 2020; Lee et al., 2024; Ryu & Shim, 2020; Tan et al., 2026). A five-point agreement scale can be used consistently. Wording should identify the relevant referent clearly: supervisor-level language for leadership behavior and institution-level language for organizational trust. Mixing referents would create ambiguity and inflate apparent construct overlap.

Table 3. Proposed Measurement Blueprint

Construct	Operational focus	Proposed dimensions	Items
Transformational leadership	Leader behavior that mobilizes academics toward a shared future	Vision, role modeling, stimulation, consideration	7
Values-based leadership	Consistency between principles, decisions, and treatment	Integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability	7
Developmental leadership	Leader investment in academic capability and career growth	Coaching, feedback, learning, career support	7
Employee engagement	Active investment of energy and self in academic work	Vigor, dedication, absorption	7
Organizational trust	Willingness to accept vulnerability to the institution	Reliability, competence, benevolence, integrity	7

Instrument Refinement and Data Collection

Instrument refinement should proceed in three stages. First, a panel of organizational behavior, higher education, and research methods experts should assess content validity, construct distinctiveness, wording clarity, and contextual relevance. Second, cognitive interviews with a small group of academics should identify ambiguous terms and confirm the intended referent. Third, a pilot test of 30 to 50 eligible respondents should assess completion time, missing responses, preliminary reliability, and unexpected item redundancy. Revisions should be documented before the main survey.

Data collection should use an anonymous online questionnaire with an information sheet and explicit consent. Procedural remedies for common method bias should include neutral instructions, separation of predictor, mediator, and outcome sections, varied item ordering, assurance that there are no right answers, and protection from supervisor access. The invitation should avoid claims that imply expected positive relationships. Nonresponse patterns should be monitored across institutions and academic ranks, and late respondents can be compared with early respondents as a limited diagnostic rather than definitive proof of absence of bias.

Data Analysis

Partial least squares structural equation modeling is appropriate because the study emphasizes prediction, compares several related antecedents, and estimates specific indirect effects. Current guidance requires more than reporting path significance. The analysis should begin with data screening, descriptive statistics, missing-

value treatment, and assessment of suspicious response patterns. The measurement model should then be evaluated through indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Confirmatory composite analysis and contemporary PLS-SEM guidance provide the relevant standards (Benitez et al., 2020; Hair et al., 2020; Sarstedt et al., 2022).

For reflective measures, indicator loadings, composite reliability, ρ_A , and average variance extracted should be reported. Discriminant validity should be assessed with the heterotrait-monotrait ratio and bootstrap confidence intervals, with special attention to the three leadership styles. The structural model should report collinearity diagnostics, standardized paths, bootstrap confidence intervals, explained variance, effect sizes, and out-of-sample predictive assessment where feasible. Mediation should be tested through bootstrapped specific indirect effects rather than causal-step rules. Direct and indirect effects should be interpreted together to distinguish complementary, indirect-only, or unsupported mediation.

Robustness analysis should address alternative model ordering because engagement and trust may be reciprocal. A competing model that positions organizational trust before engagement can be estimated and compared on predictive performance and theoretical coherence. Measurement invariance should precede any multi-group comparison by generation, contract type, academic rank, or institutional category. Figure 2 summarizes the empirical validation workflow.

Figure 2. Proposed Empirical Validation Workflow



Ethics, anonymity, data quality, transparent reporting, and robustness checks apply throughout

Table 4. Proposed PLS-SEM Validation and Reporting Plan

Analytical stage	Required checks	Reporting expectation
Data screening	Eligibility, missingness, straight-lining, outliers, response time	Exclusion rules and final analytic sample
Measurement model	Loadings, ρ_A , composite reliability, AVE, HTMT	Values, confidence intervals, and decisions
Structural model	VIF, path coefficients, R-squared, f-squared, predictive assessment	Effect sizes and bootstrap intervals
Mediation	Specific indirect, direct, and total effects	Type and magnitude of mediation
Robustness	Alternative ordering, endogeneity sensitivity, subgroup invariance	Comparison with theoretically plausible models

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

A theoretical contribution lies in positioning employee engagement as a potential explanatory mechanism linking leadership to organizational trust. Although prior research has provided substantial support for the proposition that organizational trust fosters employee engagement, the present framework does not challenge this established

direction. Rather, it advances a complementary perspective in which employee engagement may also contribute to the formation of organizational trust. The theoretical distinction concerns the process through which these constructs are connected: organizational trust may create conditions that encourage employees to engage, whereas sustained engagement exposes employees to repeated organizational interactions through which institutional practices and responses can be observed, evaluated, and interpreted.

This perspective extends social exchange theory by conceptualizing employee engagement not merely as an attitudinal or motivational outcome, but also as an active relational process through which employees accumulate information about their organizational environment. When academics respond to leadership resources with greater energy, dedication, and involvement, they participate more extensively in organizational exchanges. Such interactions provide opportunities to assess whether the institution recognizes employee contributions, fulfils implicit and explicit expectations, applies policies consistently, and responds to employee concerns in a fair and dependable manner. Over time, these accumulated experiences may shape employees' broader evaluations of organizational reliability and benevolence. Accordingly, employee engagement is conceptualized as a potential conversion mechanism through which leadership-related experiences may develop into broader organizational trust.

Importantly, this framework does not assume that the relationship between employee engagement and organizational trust is unidirectional. Instead, it acknowledges the possibility of a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationship in which trust facilitates engagement while engagement, through repeated experience-based exchanges, may subsequently strengthen trust. The proposed directional ordering therefore represents a theoretically specified mechanism rather than an empirically established causal sequence. This conceptualization creates an important avenue for future research to compare competing structural models and determine whether the engagement-to-trust pathway provides incremental explanatory value beyond the established trust-to-engagement relationship.

Expected Pattern of Relationships

The strongest path to engagement may come from transformational or developmental leadership. Transformational leadership directly energizes meaningful collective action, while developmental leadership provides concrete growth resources that are highly salient to academics. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that developmental resources have strong associations with engagement (Mazzetti et al., 2023). Values-based leadership may show a comparatively stronger direct path to trust because integrity and consistency closely match the content of trustworthiness. These expected differences are theoretical predictions, not findings, and should be evaluated through relative effect sizes and confidence intervals.

Partial mediation is more plausible than complete mediation. Transformational leaders can directly establish confidence through competent change communication. Values-based leaders directly signal integrity. Developmental leaders directly signal benevolence and long-term commitment. Engagement adds an experiential route, but it is unlikely to absorb every trust-relevant signal. A model that reports only the total indirect effect would obscure these different mechanisms, so specific indirect paths and residual direct paths should be retained.

Practical Implications

Private university leaders should develop a balanced leadership portfolio rather than rely on inspirational communication alone. Transformational practice requires a clear account of institutional direction, visible role modeling, and protected space for academic experimentation. Values-based practice requires explicit decision principles, transparent workload and promotion criteria, consistent policy enforcement, and willingness to explain difficult tradeoffs. Developmental practice requires regular career conversations, useful feedback, mentoring, access to learning, and assignments that build capability.

Engagement should be managed as a relational indicator, not merely as a productivity score. Low engagement may indicate that leadership resources are not reaching academics or that institutional systems contradict leader messages. Pulse surveys can track vigor, dedication, perceived fairness, development access, and confidence in

institutional follow-through. Results should be discussed with faculty groups and linked to visible corrective action. Collecting engagement data without response may further damage trust.

Leadership development should be behavior-based. Programs can use case simulations involving workload allocation, research support, student complaints, promotion decisions, and digital change. Participants should practice articulating purpose, applying values consistently, and coaching staff through capability gaps. Multi-source feedback can reveal whether leaders' self-perceptions match academics' experiences. Evaluation should measure changes in behavior and faculty perceptions over time rather than only participant satisfaction with training.

Table 5. Leadership Portfolio for Private Higher Education Institutions

Leadership portfolio	Institutional practice	Observable indicator
Transformational	Quarterly academic direction dialogue linked to teaching, research, and student outcomes	Academics can explain priorities and their contribution
Values-based	Published principles for workload, promotion, resource, and recognition decisions	Comparable cases receive explainable and consistent treatment
Developmental	Structured development conversation and individual learning plan	Feedback, mentoring, and growth opportunities are recorded and reviewed
Engagement to trust	Close the loop on faculty input and report actions taken	Academics see how participation influences decisions

Limitations And Future Research

As a conceptual paper, this article proposes relationships but does not claim empirical confirmation. The model's parsimony also excludes potentially important variables such as psychological safety, organizational justice, perceived support, workload, professional identity, and contract security. Some may function as antecedents, mediators, or boundary conditions. Future research should compare theoretically justified alternatives instead of expanding the model indiscriminately.

Cross-sectional self-report testing would create common method and temporal-order limitations. A stronger design would measure leadership at Time 1, engagement at Time 2, and organizational trust at Time 3, supplemented by supervisor or institutional indicators where appropriate. Experience-sampling could examine whether daily leader behavior changes engagement and trust within persons. Qualitative interviews could clarify which leadership signals academics use when distinguishing trust in a supervisor from trust in the university.

The Malaysian private higher education context may limit generalization. Comparative research should test public and private institutions, university colleges and universities, and institutions with different ownership structures. Multi-group analysis could examine whether generational cohort, academic rank, tenure, contract type, discipline, or managerial responsibility changes the strength of the proposed paths. Such comparisons should follow measurement invariance testing and should be theoretically motivated rather than conducted as unrestricted searches.

Construct distinctiveness is another concern. Transformational, values-based, and developmental leadership share positive relational content, and high correlations may arise. Future studies should refine items to focus on the defining mechanism of each style, assess cross-loadings and heterotrait-monotrait ratios, and compare a three-factor model with a higher-order positive leadership model. If the constructs do not demonstrate empirical distinctiveness, the theory should be simplified rather than protected through cosmetic measurement changes.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual article advances a differentiated leadership portfolio to explain organizational trust among academic staff in Malaysian private higher education institutions. Rather than conceptualizing positive

leadership as a unitary construct, the framework distinguishes transformational leadership as a source of strategic direction and shared meaning, values-based leadership as a mechanism for reinforcing integrity and consistency, and developmental leadership as a resource for strengthening employee competence and future-oriented growth. Examining these leadership approaches within a single framework enables a more nuanced assessment of whether their distinct relational and motivational resources provide complementary explanatory value for organizational trust.

The framework further proposes employee engagement as a theoretically ordered mechanism through which leadership experiences may translate into broader organizational trust. While organizational trust and employee engagement may plausibly exhibit reciprocal influence, the proposed model specifies engagement as the intervening pathway, suggesting that sustained involvement, psychological investment, and active participation provide employees with repeated experiences through which organizational intentions and practices can be evaluated. This positioning extends the application of social exchange theory and the job demands-resources framework by linking differentiated leadership resources with employee engagement and, subsequently, experience-based evaluations of organizational trust.

Importantly, the proposed associations are conceptual and remain subject to empirical validation. Future research should establish the discriminant distinctiveness of the three leadership styles, assess competing causal orderings between employee engagement and organizational trust, and evaluate the model across diverse Malaysian private higher education settings. Empirical testing would clarify whether the proposed leadership portfolio offers incremental explanatory value beyond individual leadership approaches and whether employee engagement constitutes a substantively meaningful mechanism through which leadership experiences contribute to the development of organizational trust.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this conceptual article because no human participants, animals, or empirical data were involved. Approval from the relevant institutional research ethics committee will be obtained before the proposed survey is carried out.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

No empirical dataset was generated or analyzed for this conceptual article. Data from the proposed validation study will be managed and shared in accordance with ethical approval, participant consent, and institutional requirements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank UNITAR University College Kuala Lumpur for supporting this research.

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