

Midocean University
College of Management
Division / Master of Business
Administration



Research Title

**The Role of Leadership and Organizational Culture in
Enhancing Safety and Performance in Power and
Desalination plants in Saudi Arabia**

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Introduction:

In industrial environments like power generation and water desalination plants, maintaining safety and achieving strong operational performance are daily challenges. These plants operate under high-risk conditions and depend not only on technical systems but also on the way of people work together. From my experience as an operations engineer, I have realized that even highly advanced facilities could face safety issues or inefficiencies when leadership is weak or the workplace culture does not promote effective communication and safety mindset.

Over the past few years, the demand for electricity and fresh water has increased rapidly especially in countries like Saudi Arabia where natural resources are limited and the population is growing quickly. This has placed extra pressure on utility plants to perform reliably while maintaining high safety standards. Under these conditions, even small human mistakes or technical errors can lead to serious issues such as worker injuries, system shutdowns or environmental harm.

Leadership and organizational culture are not merely soft aspects of management. They are central to how people behave, how rules are followed, and how teams respond under pressure. A leader's attitude toward safety or performance is often mirrored by their team. Likewise, culture affects whether employees speak up about risks, follow procedures, or take shortcuts. Guldenmund (2000) pointed out that what people believe and value at work strongly shapes how safety rules are applied in practice.

It is also important to recognize that leadership and culture influence each other. Leaders shape the culture, but they are also affected by it. If a plant has a culture that ignores safety in favor of productivity, even well-intentioned leaders might struggle to change things. On the other hand, if leadership consistently supports transparency and accountability, that mindset can spread throughout the organization (Schein, 2010).

This research is especially timely given Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, which emphasizes sustainability, industrial modernization, and operational excellence. Enhancing leadership practices and organizational culture in critical sectors like energy and water can directly support these national goals.

Research Problem and Questions:

Research Problem (declarative):

There is still a clear gap in understanding how leadership practices and organizational culture affect safety compliance and operational performance in power and desalination plants especially within Saudi Arabia's industrial sector. Based on the researcher's direct experience in this field, most facilities may be well-equipped with advanced systems and procedures but actual performance often depends on human factors. When issues arise, they are rarely caused by technical failures only but they often stem from poor communication, inconsistent leadership, or a workplace culture that fails to prioritize safety (Reason, 1997).

In Saudi Arabia, power and desalination plants are essential to national infrastructure, making reliability and risk control especially important. While the country continues advancing its Vision 2030 goals with major investments in technology and infrastructure, less attention has been given to the human side of operations. Key areas such as leadership and organizational culture have not always received the same level of focus. These plants depend on diverse, cross-functional teams, and their ability to operate safely and efficiently often depends on how leaders set expectations and how cultural values shape daily behavior.

My motivation for this research comes from working directly in this kind of environment. I have seen how varying leadership styles and cultural expectations can impact team behavior, communication, and safety outcomes. These observations revealed the need to study this relationship more deeply within the Saudi Arabian context.

This challenge is not unique to Saudi Arabia. Across the Gulf region, many industrial operations share similar cultural and managerial dynamics, such as hierarchical decision-making, indirect communication, and resistance to challenging authority. These factors influence how safety compliance is understood, reported, and addressed. Although these dynamics are common across the region, there is still limited research on how leadership and organizational culture jointly shape outcomes in high-risk industries.

Globally, the role of leadership and culture in shaping safety performance is well established (Zohar, 2010; Clarke, 2013). However, most research comes from Western contexts and may not fully reflect the cultural realities or workforce dynamics of the Middle East. Applying global models without local adaptation can result in strategies that do not align with employee expectations or operational norms.

These gaps highlight the need for localized research into how leadership and culture interact in Saudi Arabia's power and desalination sector. Better understanding this relationship could inform the design of more effective leadership models, cultural strategies, and operational practices. This is the central issue this study seeks to address.

Main Research Question:

To what extent do leadership practices and organizational culture contribute to enhancing safety and performance in power and desalination plants in Saudi Arabia?

This question sits at the center of the study. It explores how leadership behavior and organizational culture together affect key outcomes such as safety compliance and operational performance. In complex and high-risk environments like Saudi Arabia's power and desalination plant, understanding this relationship can help shape more effective management approaches, practical safety frameworks, and policy decisions that align with the specific needs of local organizations.

Sub-questions:

- 1. What leadership styles are most commonly practiced in power and desalination plants?**

This question seeks to identify which leadership styles such as transformational or transactional are most frequently observed in Saudi Arabia's power and desalination sector. Understanding these leadership patterns provides a necessary foundation for analyzing how different styles influence employee behavior, communication, and performance in high-risk operational environments.

- 2. How does leadership influence safety compliance and employee accountability?**

Leadership plays a key role in shaping how employees understand risk, follow safety procedures, and take responsibility for their actions. This question explores how specific leadership behaviors such as communication, role modeling, and enforcement of standards contribute to building a culture of safety and accountability. This is especially important in Saudi Arabia's power and desalination facilities, where even minor errors can lead to serious consequences.

- 3. What are the most common cultural characteristics in Saudi Arabia's power and desalination plants?**

Organizational culture includes the shared values, norms, and informal practices that influence how people behave in the workplace. This question aims to identify the most common cultural features in Saudi Arabia's power and desalination facilities and evaluate whether these features support or restrict safety goals and performance expectations.

- 4. How does organizational culture affect teamwork, motivation, and risk behavior?**

Organizational culture influences how employees communicate, collaborate, and respond to operational challenges. This question explores whether a strong safety-oriented culture leads to better teamwork, higher motivation, and safer decision-making. It also examines how cultural values shape how employees view and manage risk.

5. What is the combined impact of leadership and organizational culture on overall plant performance?

While leadership and culture can independently shape performance, this question explores the effects of their interaction. It considers whether alignment between leadership behaviors and cultural values leads to better outcomes or if mismatches between the two may reduce operational effectiveness.

6. Are there specific leadership and cultural practices associated with high safety records and strong operational performance?

This question aims to identify best practices and patterns from facilities that have a strong track record in safety and performance. The goal is to provide practical insights and benchmarks that plant managers, Engineers, supervisors and technicians can apply to enhance operational outcomes and maintain high safety across the sector.

The Importance of The Research:

This study is especially relevant to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. As the nation continues its efforts to modernize and enhance both operational performance and workplace safety, critical sectors such as energy and water are under increasing pressure to operate more efficiently and with reduced risk. Power and desalination plants, which form a core part of the country's infrastructure, cannot rely on technology alone. Leadership practices and organizational culture play a significant role in improving safety, maintaining employee motivation, and sustaining high levels of performance. Based on the researcher's direct experience in this field, the study takes a practical look at how leadership expectations, communication styles, and workplace norms affect daily operations.

Beyond Saudi Arabia, industrial sectors across the Gulf and wider Arab region face similar challenges. These include rising demand, centralized decision-making, and strict safety regulations. However, there is still limited research that looks at leadership and organizational culture as connected factors shaping how these workplaces perform. Many studies examine either leadership or employee satisfaction separately without fully exploring how the two work together. This research addresses that gap with a regional analysis of high-risk workplaces, where authority and group dynamics shape employee behavior.

From a global academic perspective, this study contributes to ongoing discussions in the fields of leadership and organizational behavior. While theories such as transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and organizational culture (Schein, 2010) are widely recognized, they are often applied without fully considering the unique characteristics of industrial environments in the Middle East. Moreover, research on industrial safety has typically focused on sectors such as oil and gas or manufacturing. However, the power and desalination sector, though highly complex and safety-critical has received comparatively little academic attention. This study helps bridge that gap by connecting global theory with local operational realities.

Knowledge gained through this research may benefit plant managers, engineers and human resource professionals. The findings can help shape leadership training, employee engagement strategies, and culture-focused initiatives that reflect the operational realities of Saudi Arabia's utility sector. In addition, the study may assist policymakers and organizational leaders in closing the gap between technical advancements and the development of human systems. This support aligns with broader national goals focused on long-term growth and human-centered development.

Over time, this research may serve as a valuable reference for professionals seeking to modernize leadership approaches and safety systems in complex operational environments. It may also inspire future studies that examine how leadership and organizational culture work together to affect outcomes in settings where both operational accuracy and human decision-making are critical.

By linking management theory (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978) and organizational culture (Schein, 2010) with real-world issues such as safety and performance (Clarke, 2013; Zohar, 2010), this study aims to offer practical insights for both academics and industry professionals. The findings may help guide managers, leadership developers, and policymakers toward strategies that boost performance while also creating safer work environments.

The Objectives of The Research:

Main Objective:

The main objective of this study is to explore how leadership and organizational culture influence safety and performance in power and desalination plants. It focuses on understanding how these two key management elements work together to shape employee behavior, operational discipline, and overall effectiveness in high-risk environments.

By concentrating on the specific environment of Saudi Arabia's power and desalination sector, the research aims to provide valuable findings on leadership practices and cultural development. These findings are designed to contribute not only to theory but also to practical efforts by policymakers and managers to strengthen organizational outcomes.

Specific Objectives:

- 1. To identify the most suitable leadership styles in power and desalination plants in Saudi Arabia.**

This objective involves examining and categorizing which leadership styles such as transformational and transactional that are most appropriate for the operational demands of utility facilities. Drawing on established leadership theory (Bass, 1985), the aim is to build a foundational understanding for assessing leadership effectiveness in these environments.

- 2. To explore the relationship between leadership practices and safety compliance.**

This objective focuses on understanding how leadership behaviors impact safety outcomes, such as following procedures, promoting accountability, and encouraging the reporting of risks. It will specifically consider how leaders set expectations, make decisions, and support safety-related efforts within the organization.

- 3. To analyze the characteristics of organizational culture within these sectors.**

This objective focuses to identify the key cultural characteristics that impact daily operations in power and desalination plants. These may include leadership hierarchy, communication openness, teamwork practices, and the extent to which a safety-oriented mindset is integrated within the organizational culture.

- 4. To assess how organizational culture affects operational performance and employee behavior.**

This objective focuses on examining how shared values, workplace norms, and informal routines influence key outcomes such as productivity, morale, teamwork, and system reliability. It also considers whether the existing culture supports or works against the broader goals of the organization.

- 5. To investigate how leadership and organizational culture interact and whether their alignment or misalignment enhances or weakens safety and operational outcomes.**

This objective aims to examine how leadership behavior and cultural norms either align to support performance or clash in ways that create operational challenges.

6. To provide practical recommendations for enhancing leadership effectiveness and strengthening organizational culture in the power and desalination sector.

Based on the research findings, this objective focuses on offering strategies to improve safety and operational performance. These may include leadership development programs, cultural alignment efforts, and employee engagement strategies designed to promote continuous improvement throughout the sector.

Research Hypotheses:

To explore the influence of leadership and organizational culture on safety compliance and operational performance in Saudi Arabia's power and desalination plants, the following research hypotheses have been developed. These hypotheses are designed to examine both the independent and combined effects of leadership behavior and cultural dynamics on key workplace outcomes. They reflect the study's commitment to grounding theoretical frameworks in a localized, high-risk industrial environment.

Main Hypotheses (H_1):

There is a significant relationship between leadership practices and organizational culture, and the improvement of safety and performance in power and desalination plants in Saudi Arabia.

Sub-Hypotheses:

Causal Hypotheses:

1. **H_1-1 :** Effective leadership practices positively influence safety compliance among employees in power and desalination plants.

This hypothesis suggests that when leaders clearly set expectations and promote accountability, employees are more likely to follow safety rules and report risks.

2. **H_1-2 :** A strong organizational culture contributes to better operational performance in power and desalination plant.

This hypothesis is based on the idea that shared values, team alignment, and a clear sense of purpose help improve coordination, support better decisions and increase overall efficiency.

Correlational Hypotheses:

3. **H_1-3 :** There is a significant relationship between leadership style and the overall safety performance of power and desalination operations.

This hypothesis does not assume a direct cause-and-effect relationship. Instead, it explores whether leadership styles such as transformational or transactional are linked to different levels of safety performance.

4. **H_1-4 :** There is a positive association between organizational cultural attributes and employee engagement levels in high-risk operational environments.

This hypothesis assumes that certain cultural attributes such as trust, effective communication, and continuous learning positively influence employee engagement. In high-risk environments, these cultural qualities are more likely to promote motivation, responsibility, and active participation.

Null Hypotheses (H_0):

Null Hypotheses for Safety:

H_0-1 : There is no significant relationship between leadership practices and safety compliance in power and desalination plants.

Null Hypotheses for Performance:

H_0-2 : Organizational culture does not significantly influence operational performance in power and desalination plants.

These null hypotheses provide a baseline for statistical analysis and help ensure that all findings are evaluated with objectivity and scientific accuracy.

Previous Research and Theoretical Framework:

Review of Previous Studies:

A growing number of studies have explored how leadership and organizational culture affect safety and performance across various industrial sectors. Although much of the existing research originates from Western or global contexts, several important studies have also been conducted in Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf region. These local and regional contributions provide useful perspectives and help establish a foundation for this study, while also pointing to a clear gap in research focused specifically on the power and desalination sector.

In the Saudi context, Alzahrani and Eltayeb (2021) examined how transformational leadership affects safety performance within the construction sector. Their findings showed that transformational leadership had a positive impact on safety outcomes. Although their study focused on a different industry, the results are still relevant to high-risk environments such as power and desalination plants, where leadership is a key factor in promoting safe work practices.

Almutairi et al. (2020) studied leadership approaches in Saudi industrial sites and found that visible, participatory leadership was linked to lower incident rates and stronger employee engagement with safety. Their research highlights how leadership behavior can encourage safer practices and more active involvement from workers.

The role of culture has also received growing attention. Almalki et al. (2019), in a case study of water and power projects in Saudi Arabia, found that both safety climate and deeper cultural values had a direct impact on performance. Their findings suggest that how leaders behave and show commitment to safety plays a key role in shaping how employees view and respond to risks.

In a related study, Alotaibi and Campbell (2022) applied Hofstede's cultural dimensions to the Saudi National Water Company. They found that characteristics such as high power distance and uncertainty avoidance shaped how employees responded to leadership and how teams communicated. Their findings highlight the need for leadership styles that align with both national culture and organizational values.

Expanding to the broader region, Alqaralleh and Al-Tarawneh (2020) studied safety leadership in Jordanian manufacturing plants. They found that active leadership involvement was linked to safer employee behavior and higher compliance with safety standards. However, their research gave limited attention to the cultural factors that may influence or interact with leadership, a gap this current study aims to explore in greater depth.

Globally, several key studies have shaped the theoretical understanding of leadership and organizational culture in safety-critical industries. Clarke (2013), conducted a meta-analysis showing that both transformational and transactional leadership styles influence safety behavior. Among them, transformational leadership demonstrating a stronger impact in promoting proactive safety engagement.

Zohar (2010) introduced the concept of "safety climate," referring to employees' shared perceptions of how seriously safety is prioritized within their organization. His research showed that a strong safety climate, especially when supported by consistent leadership behavior was associated with fewer workplace incidents.

Schein (2010) offered a broader organizational perspective, highlighting that culture evolves through leadership over time. He argued that leaders shape culture by what they focus on, communicate as priorities, and choose to reward or tolerate. This influence is especially critical in high-risk environments, where informal norms can carry as much weight as formal safety policies.

Lastly, Reason's (1997) "Swiss Cheese Model" of accident causation explained how latent organizational weaknesses such as poor oversight or unclear communication can align and lead to major safety failures. His model highlights the essential role of strong leadership and an integrated organizational culture in minimizing the risk of systemic failures.

Previous research has largely focused on leadership and culture independently, with limited attention to their combined impact. Few have explored how these two forces interact, especially in the context of power and desalination facilities in Saudi Arabia. These facilities operate under distinct cultural, regulatory, and technical conditions that differentiate them from other industrial sectors. This study seeks to address that gap by offering a more integrated and context-specific analysis of leadership and organizational culture, aimed at enhancing safety and performance in one of the Kingdom's most vital industries.

Theoretical Framework:

In high-risk sectors like power and desalination, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region, leadership and organizational culture play a critical role in shaping workplace behavior and safety outcomes. While technical systems continue to improve, ongoing challenges often originate from human dynamics. To analyze these influences, this study is guided by two interconnected theoretical frameworks: Transformational Leadership Theory and Organizational Culture Theory.

Transformational Leadership Theory:

Originally introduced by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass (1985), transformational leadership describes a style that goes beyond routine supervision to inspire, motivate, and empower team members. This approach is characterized by four main behaviors: creating a compelling vision (inspirational motivation), serving as a role model (idealized influence), encouraging innovative thinking (intellectual stimulation), and providing personalized support (individualized consideration).

In high-risk industries such as Saudi Arabia's power and desalination sector where teamwork, morale, and safety are essential, this leadership style is especially relevant. Transformational leaders are more likely to build trust, promote open discussions about safety, and encourage proactive behavior. Bass and Riggio (2006) highlighted how this approach strengthens employee engagement and situational awareness, two key factors for maintaining safe and efficient plant operations.

Organizational Culture Theory:

Schein's (2010) theory underscores that shared values, beliefs, and assumptions within an organization play a major role in shaping behavior. In many Gulf-region workplaces, hierarchy, loyalty, and formal communication are deeply rooted. These cultural patterns shape how teams understand authority, follow procedures, and respond to safety

expectations. For example, deference to leadership may discourage employees from speaking up unless a culture of openness is actively encouraged.

Schein also highlighted the key role of leaders in shaping culture, through what they prioritize, reward, and tolerate. In high-risk sectors such as power and desalination, success often depends on human reliability and teamwork. A strong safety-oriented culture can improve communication and speed up responses during critical situations. When safety is treated as a core value rather than just a formal policy, employees are more likely to act responsibly even under pressure.

Integrating the Two Theories:

By combining Transformational Leadership Theory and Organizational Culture Theory, this study takes an integrated view of how leadership and culture interact to influence safety and performance. In Saudi utilities, where national culture shapes organizational customs, this relationship is particularly important. Leaders not only implement policies but also shape the cultural environment in which those policies are understood and practiced. This theoretical foundation informs the research questions and hypotheses. It helps examine how leadership behaviors align or conflict with dominant cultural values, offering practical guidance for improving safety and performance in high-risk sectors.

Research Methodology:

This study adopts a quantitative research approach utilizing a cross-sectional survey design, which is suitable for examining relationships between measurable variables at a single point in time. This design enables the researcher to test hypotheses related to how leadership practices and organizational culture influence safety compliance and operational performance in power and desalination plants in Saudi Arabia.

The cross-sectional method is well suited to industrial settings, where long-term observation or experimental intervention may interrupt operations. It allows for the efficient collection of standardized data from participants across various organizational levels, offering a cross-section of current practices and attitudes within the organization. This approach also supports statistical analysis to identify trends, associations, and potential cause-effect relationships within a real-world context.

Data Sources:

Primary Data:

Primary data will be gathered using a structured questionnaire developed from validated measurement scales in the literature. The instrument will include a mix of closed-ended questions and Likert-scale items, addressing four core areas:

- Leadership styles (adapted from Bass, 1985)
- Characteristics of organizational culture (based on Schein, 2010)
- Employee safety behavior and compliance (informed by Clarke, 2013)
- Perceptions of operational performance (adapted from relevant industry benchmarks)

To ensure the questionnaire is relevant and reliable, a pilot version will be distributed to a small sample of participants. Feedback from this pilot will be used to refine the wording, structure, and overall usability of the instrument. The final version of the questionnaire will be distributed both electronically and in paper format to maximize accessibility across different job roles and functional areas.

Secondary Data:

To enhance the primary survey findings, this study will also incorporate secondary data where available. These sources provide additional context to help validate trends and support a more in-depth understanding of safety performance and organizational dynamics within the power and desalination sector.

- Internal safety records such as incident reports and near-miss logs
- Operational performance documents including KPIs, shift reports and maintenance statistics
- National and industry publications relevant to utility performance and workplace safety
- Academic and technical literature relevant to leadership, organizational culture, safety and performance

These sources will provide additional insights into the operational environment that is contributing to a more comprehensive analysis.

Study Population and Sample:

This research targets employees from power and desalination plants across various regions of Saudi Arabia. The sample includes individuals in operational, maintenance and safety-related department such as managers, engineers, supervisors, technicians and safety officers whose perspectives are essential for understanding leadership and organizational culture in high-risk industrial environments.

To ensure meaningful group comparisons, a stratified random sampling method will be applied, grouping participants by department and job level. A sample size of approximately 100 to 150 respondents is expected to provide sufficient statistical power for standard quantitative analyses aligned with established research practices.

Data Collection Tools and Analysis Techniques:

The main data collection tool will be a structured questionnaire developed based on the theoretical frameworks of leadership and organizational culture. The reliability of the instrument will be assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and exploratory factor analysis (EFA) will be used to confirm the validity of the constructs.

Data will be analyzed using SPSS or similar statistical software. The following analytical techniques will be applied:

- Descriptive statistics to summarize the data (means, standard deviations, frequencies)
- Correlation analysis to assess relationships among key variables
- Multiple regression analysis to test causal hypotheses and evaluate the influence of leadership and culture on safety and performance
- T-tests and ANOVA where applicable, to identify any significant differences between groups based on department and job level

Ethical Considerations:

Participation in this study will be voluntary with informed approval obtained in advance. All responses will remain confidential, and no identifying information will be collected. Data will be securely stored and reported in summarized form. The study will comply with ethical standards and if needed, seek approval before data collection begins.

Research Limits:

Like all academic studies, this research has certain limitations. Recognizing these constraints is important for maintaining visibility and for analyzing the findings accurately. By clearly outlining the study's boundaries, this section helps clarify its scope and highlights areas for future investigation.

Temporal Limits:

The data for this study will be collected during the second half of 2025. As a result, the insights generated will reflect the leadership practices, cultural dynamics, and operational conditions present during that specific period. Any future developments such as changes in leadership styles, policy shifts, or evolving organizational norms, lie beyond the study's timeframe. Therefore, the conclusions should be understood within this time-specific context.

Spatial Limits:

This study focuses solely on power and desalination plants in Saudi Arabia. While this offers valuable local insights, the findings may not be fully applicable to other countries due to differences in regulations, culture, and operational conditions.

Objective Boundaries:

This study focuses solely on the relationship between leadership practices, organizational culture, safety compliance, and operational performance. Other influencing factors such as training, technology, or compensation are excluded to maintain a clear and focused scope.

Practical Limitations:

Several real-world challenges may affect the research process. Access to internal operational data might be limited due to confidentiality or company policies. Additionally, participants may be hesitant to provide honest feedback about their leaders or organizational culture, especially if they fear negative consequences. This may lead to social desirability bias, where participants provide answers they believe are expected rather than expressing their true opinions or experiences (Reason, 1997). Time constraints and limited availability of staff may also affect the sample size. To mitigate these issues, the study will use confidential surveys, careful sampling methods, and clear communication to ensure data reliability.

Methodological Limitations:

This cross-sectional study collects data at a single point in time, which limits the ability to track long-term changes or establish causal relationships. Additionally, using self-reported data may lead to measurement bias as participants' responses might not accurately reflect their true behaviors. While statistical tools like regression analysis can help address some variability, such limitations cannot be entirely eliminated.

Theoretical Limitations:

This study primarily relies on Transformational Leadership Theory (Bass, 1985) and Organizational Culture Theory (Schein, 2010). These frameworks are well-established and widely applied across various organizational environments. However, these frameworks may not fully reflect the complexity of leadership and cultural dynamics within non-Western industrial environments. Alternative theories, such as contingency leadership, safety systems theory, or institutional theory, could provide additional insights. Their exclusion here is a measured choice to maintain focus, not to dismiss their relevance.

Despite these theoretical boundaries, the study aims to offer valuable insights into a sector of national and industrial significance. Acknowledging these limitations enhances the study's credibility and sets the stage for future research that could expand the scope, use long-term approaches, or explore additional theoretical frameworks.

The General Perception of The Research Structure:

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6. Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations

- Summary of Findings
- Recommendations for Practice
- Limitations of the Study

- Suggestions for Future Research

7. References

8. Appendices

- Survey Questionnaire
- Tables, Figures, and Other Supporting Documents

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