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UNDERSTANDING MANAGEMENT SUCCESSION IN POLITICISED CONTEXTS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF LEADERSHIP STYLE

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Abstract
This paper develops a conceptual framework to explain how leadership style moderates the relationship between organisational politics and management succession outcomes. Although management succession is widely recognised as a critical governance process, it often unfolds within politically charged environments that shape leadership transitions in complex ways. Drawing on Full Range Leadership Theory and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, the study advances the argument that leadership style conditions whether organisational politics produces constructive or dysfunctional outcomes during succession processes. The paper proposes that transformational leadership mitigates destructive political behaviour by fostering trust, transparency, and shared purpose; transactional leadership enhances procedural clarity and stability but may inadvertently reinforce patronage dynamics; and laissez-faire leadership exacerbates instability by enabling unchecked political contestation. These propositions are illustrated with reference to documented succession challenges in organisational contexts, including Nigerian universities. The study contributes to the literature by integrating leadership behaviour into the analysis of political dynamics in management succession and by offering a theoretically grounded moderation framework. The paper concludes by outlining implications for leadership development, governance practices, and future empirical research in organisational settings.

Keywords: Leadership style; management succession; Nigerian universities; organisational politics

1. Introduction

Management succession remains a critical governance challenge for contemporary organisations, given its implications for continuity, legitimacy, and long-term performance (Rothwell, 2022; Coffie et al., 2025). Despite the growing formalisation of succession planning processes, leadership transitions frequently occur within politically charged environments characterised by competing interests, informal influence, and power contestation (Ferris et al., 2022; Buchanan & Badham, 2023). Such political dynamics often complicate decision-making, undermine transparency, and weaken stakeholder trust, thereby affecting succession outcomes. Although extensive research has examined

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management succession and organisational politics independently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how leadership behaviour shapes the interaction between these constructs. This gap is particularly important because leadership style influences communication patterns, trust formation, and conflict management, all of which are central to politically sensitive succession processes (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Drawing on Full Range Leadership Theory and Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, this paper develops a conceptual framework that positions leadership style as a moderating variable in the relationship between organisational politics and management succession outcomes. The study is further contextualised within documented succession challenges in organisational settings, including Nigerian universities, where governance complexities often amplify political dynamics.
The paper proceeds as follows: the next section reviews relevant literature and develops theoretical arguments; this is followed by the conceptual research design, framework development and propositions, and finally, conclusions with implications for theory, practice, and future research.

2. Literature Review

Management Succession

Management succession is the systematised procedures that support successful leadership transition by identifying, developing, and appointing capable successors that will steer the affairs of an organisation (Groves, 2007; Rothwell, 2022). Hence, effective succession planning safeguards institutional knowledge, sustains morale, and lessens operational risk. However, politically propelled successions induce instability and decline in performance (Kellermanns et al., 2020).
Recently, succession crises have persisted in Nigerian universities as a result of inadequate planning and over-dependence on political benefaction. Research established that transparent succession procedures boost employees' morale and readiness (Okolocha & Anugwu, 2023; Beryl et al., 2020); nevertheless, the absence of standard frameworks is observed in numerous institutions, culminating in favouritism and weak governance (Nwagwu, 2010; Geys, 2020; Buchanan & Badham, 2023). LMX Theory underscores that high-quality relationships among outgoing leaders, successors, and followers foster trust and smoother transitions (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Organisational Politics

Organisational politics is an inevitable part of organisational life, but it intensifies during succession when uncertainty and high stakes dominate (Buchanan & Badham, 2023; Preston & Carton, 2024). Ferris et al. (2012; 2022) define it as informal, self-serving, and aimed at influencing decision-making beyond formal authority. Typical tactics include alliance-building, information control, and impression management. While some political manoeuvrings can surface hidden talent or stimulate dialogue (Drory & Romm, 1990; Pfeffer, 2013), most evidence links politicised succession to conflict and low trust (Geys, 2020; Utami et al., 2025). In Nigerian universities, opaque appointments and external interference frequently result in strikes, protests, and loss of institutional cohesion (Okolocha & Anugwu, 2023).

Constructive vs. Destructive Politics

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Constructive politics may facilitate negotiation and innovation, while destructive politics undermines legitimacy and morale. Leadership is pivotal in determining which outcome prevails (Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2016). Contemporary research, therefore, calls for examining how leadership style shapes the consequences of political dynamics during succession (Ferris et al., 2022; Preston & Carton, 2024).

Leadership Style as Moderator

Leadership style shapes how organisational members interpret and respond to political dynamics (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

i. Transformational leadership fosters trust, psychological safety, and shared purpose, reducing destructive political behaviour (Hoch et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2011; Bormann & Rowold, 2018).
ii. Transactional leadership ensures order and clarity but may reinforce patronage if rewards are tied to loyalty (Braun et al., 2013; Tse et al., 2018).
iii. Laissez-faire leadership creates leadership vacuums that exacerbate political conflict (Skogstad et al., 2007; DeRue et al., 2011).

Recent studies also highlight the effectiveness of hybrid leadership approaches in managing complex organisational dynamics (Antonakis & House, 2014; Hoch et al., 2018).

LMX Theory complements FRLT by stressing that high-quality leader-follower relationships buffer against political tension (Tse et al., 2018). Together, these theories justify treating leadership style as a moderator that conditions the politics-succession relationship, rather than as a mediator transmitting it.

Building on the foregoing review, it becomes evident that while management succession and organisational politics have been widely examined, limited attention has been devoted to the behavioural mechanisms through which leadership style shapes their interaction. To address this gap, the present study adopts a conceptual methodological approach to develop a theoretically grounded framework.

Empirical Review

Although empirical studies explicitly examining leadership style as a moderator in management succession politics remain limited, a growing body of literature provides indirect but relevant evidence. Research consistently shows that leadership styles significantly influence how organisational politics affects outcomes during periods of transition.

Transformational leadership has been widely associated with reduced dysfunctional political behaviour, enhanced organisational trust, and improved legitimacy during leadership transitions (Wang et al., 2011; Bormann & Rowold, 2018; Hoch et al., 2018). By promoting transparency, inclusiveness, and a shared organisational vision, transformational leaders are better positioned to channel political behaviour toward constructive engagement. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, contributes to stability and clarity through structured reward systems and performance monitoring (Podsakoff et al., 2006). However, empirical evidence suggests that such systems may also reinforce political patronage where rewards are linked to loyalty rather than competence, thereby sustaining factional alignments (Braun et al., 2013; Tse et al., 2018). In contrast, laissez-faire leadership is consistently associated with

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negative organisational outcomes, particularly during periods of uncertainty. Studies indicate that leadership avoidance creates a vacuum that encourages opportunistic behaviour, intensifies political scheming, and undermines organisational cohesion (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Skogstad et al., 2007; DeRue et al., 2011). Emerging research further highlights the effectiveness of hybrid leadership approaches, which integrate transformational and transactional behaviours. Such approaches enable leaders to balance visionary direction with administrative control, thereby managing political complexities more effectively (Antonakis & House, 2014; Hoch et al., 2018).

Beyond leadership styles, empirical studies confirm that politicised management succession processes often negatively affect organisational outcomes. Organisational politics during succession has been linked to reduced trust, lower employee morale, and weakened institutional legitimacy (Ferris et al., 2022; Buchanan & Badham, 2023; Vigoda-Gadot & Drory, 2024). In higher education contexts, documented succession-related disputes in several Nigerian universities illustrate how political contestation can disrupt governance processes and institutional stability, reinforcing the need for effective leadership moderation (Utami et al., 2025).

Overall, the empirical literature supports the proposition that leadership style plays a critical role in shaping how organisational politics influences management succession outcomes, thereby justifying its conceptualisation as a moderating variable.

The foregoing analysis indicates that management succession is not merely a procedural or administrative exercise but a deeply embedded social and political process. While formal structures and policies provide a framework for leadership transition, the outcomes of such processes are significantly shaped by behavioural dynamics, particularly organisational politics and leadership style. Organisational politics, especially during succession periods, may serve both functional and dysfunctional roles. On the one hand, political behaviour can facilitate negotiation, coalition building, and strategic alignment. On the other hand, excessive politicisation often generates mistrust, conflict, and legitimacy challenges, thereby undermining effective succession outcomes. The critical issue, therefore, lies not in the existence of politics per se, but in how such dynamics are managed within the organisation.

In this regard, leadership style emerges as a key conditioning factor. Transformational leadership, through its emphasis on shared vision, inclusiveness, and trust, has the potential to channel political behaviour toward constructive engagement. Transactional leadership, while providing structure and clarity, may inadvertently reinforce patronage systems if not anchored in meritocratic principles. In contrast, laissez-faire leadership tends to exacerbate instability by allowing political dynamics to unfold without direction or control. These dynamics are particularly salient in institutional environments characterised by governance complexities and competing stakeholder interests. Documented succession challenges in several Nigerian universities illustrate how politicised leadership transitions can disrupt organisational stability, thereby reinforcing the importance of effective leadership behaviour in moderating such dynamics. Overall, the analysis suggests that leadership style plays a critical role in shaping the outcomes of management succession processes by influencing how organisational politics is expressed and managed.

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3. Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual research design aimed at theory development rather than empirical testing. Conceptual research is appropriate for synthesising existing knowledge and proposing new theoretical relationships (Jaakkola, 2020). A narrative literature review approach was employed to analyse relevant peer-reviewed studies on management succession, organisational politics, and leadership styles. The selection of literature was guided by relevance, theoretical significance, and recency. The study integrates insights from the FRLT Theory and LMX Theory to develop a conceptual framework. The outcome of this process is a proposed model that explains how leadership style moderates the relationship between organisational politics and management succession outcomes. This framework provides a basis for future empirical investigation.

4. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Drawing from the literature review, a framework was developed to examine the role of leadership style as a moderator variable on the relationships between organisational politics and management succession. Succession procedures activate political goings-on such as lobbying, coalition-building, and competition. However, the type of leadership style establishes whether or not such activity stabilises or undermines succession outcomes. Thus;

i. Transformational or Hybrid leaders dispatch political strength positively by emphasising rightfulness and impartiality.
ii. Transactional leaders, on the other hand, put into effect order, but then may extend benefaction if rules are unfairly used.
iii. Laissez-faire leaders allow instability to heighten as a result of indecisiveness.
iv. Hybrid leadership style combines transformational and transactional s which may stabilise vision with order (Antonakis & House, 2014).

Figure 1 depicts the proposed framework where management succession interconnects with organisational politics, whereas leadership style moderates this relationship by either intensifying or lessening political apprehensions.

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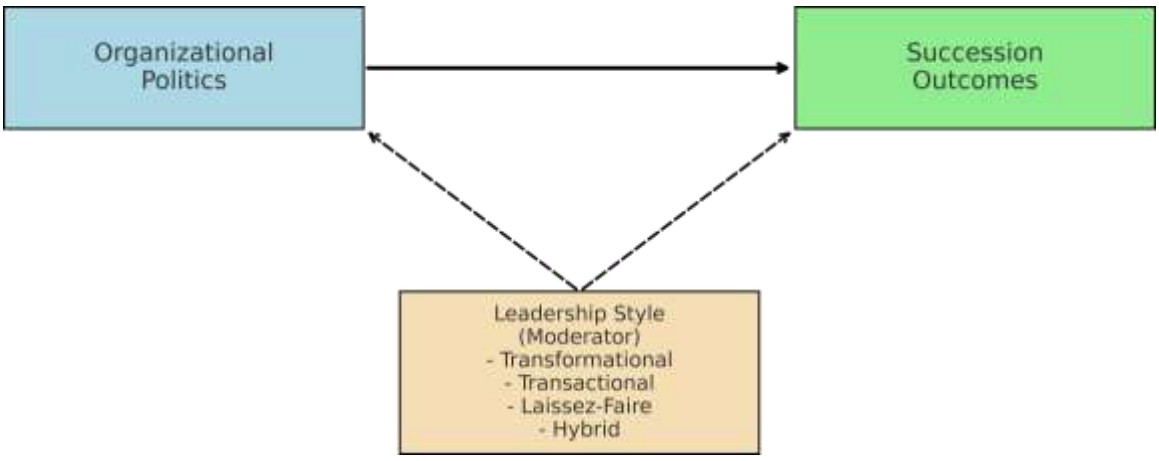

Figure 1: *Leadership Style as a Moderator of Organisational Politics in Management Succession*

Two theories support the framework where leadership style moderates the relationship between organisational politics and management succession. Firstly, Full Range Leadership Theory (Bass & Riggio, 2006) is that which rationalises leaders (transformational, transactional, laissez-faire) that inspire organisational outcomes, as well as suggesting a basis for exploring how group dynamics are shaped by leadership. Secondly, LMX Theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) focuses on relational quality among leaders and followers, especially touching on trust, legitimacy, and management of conflict in the course of succession. Accordingly, integrating these theories offers the conceptual support for leadership style as a moderating variable, as depicted in Figure 1.

5 Implications and Directions for Future Studies

This conceptual and theoretical framework provides a foundation for multiple testable propositions and opens new avenues for future empirical research.

It is suggested that further empirical research should investigate the moderating effect of leadership style, exploiting multi-level quantitative designs by evaluating probably, perceived organisational politics, leadership style employing the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), along with succession outcomes such as trust, legitimacy, or organisational stability among Nigerian universities and, possibly, comparable institutions in erstwhile regions.

It is also suggested that in-depth qualitative case studies may show micro-political dynamics unnoticed in quantitative studies. Therefore, conducting interviews with governing council members and other stakeholders could show the manner in which informal systems shape appointment procedures and how diverse leaderships manage or magnify tension. Again, comparative studies involving Nigerian universities and institutions in other countries, especially Africa, could assess the contextual generalizability of the template. Moderation effect of leadership may vary in environments with stronger regulatory supervision or diverse cultural leanings for authority.

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Finally, it is evident that the framework emphasises that formal succession regulations on their own are not enough, but leadership ability and style are likewise indispensable for policymakers and university governing councils in managing institutions. Thus, leadership-development programs with emphasis on hybrid skills supported by ideal engagement mixed with procedural fairness might possibly lessen negative politics at some point in transitions. Such programs should include simulation exercises that expose leaders to real-world succession scenarios and ethical dilemmas.

This paper conceptually puts forth three contributions:

1. Combining FRLT and LMX into an integrated framework, bringing together all relational elements of leadership to succession politics;
2. Engaging leadership as a moderator as a contextual conditioner instead of a mediator of political succession relationships and,
3. Broadening organisational politics theory to higher-education governance, which is an understudied area but important area in developing economies.

This study advances a conceptual framework that positions leadership style as a moderating factor in the relationship between organisational politics and management succession outcomes. By integrating insights from Full Range Leadership Theory and Leader-Member Exchange Theory, the paper provides a structured basis for understanding how leadership behaviour may influence succession dynamics in politically complex organisational environments. Given its conceptual orientation, the study does not seek to establish definitive empirical conclusions but rather to propose theoretically grounded relationships that warrant further investigation. The framework, therefore, serves as a foundation for future empirical research aimed at testing and refining the proposed relationships across diverse organisational contexts.

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