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Leadership Strategies for Enhancing Employee and Organisational Performance Among Senior Management in the KwaZulu-Natal Education Sector, South Africa

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Abstract:

This study examines leadership strategies aimed at improving employee and organisational performance among Senior Management Service (SMS) members within the KwaZulu-Natal education sector. Triggered by persistent misalignment between individual performance ratings and institutional outcomes, the research explores how senior leaders interpret and experience the strategic integration of performance management systems. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that SMS members acknowledge the link between employee performance and organisational success, systemic challenges, such as inconsistent evaluation practices, limited accountability, and inadequate capacity-building undermine the effectiveness of current frameworks. To address these issues, the study evaluates strategic interventions including leadership development, goal alignment, merit-based recruitment, performance incentives, targeted professional development, organisational culture reform, and digital transformation. The research concludes with actionable recommendations to strengthen SMS effectiveness and foster a more transparent, integrated, and performance-driven public education system.

Keywords:

Employee Performance, Organisational Performance, Performance Management and Development System, Senior Management Service, Education Sector

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Introduction

The performance of public sector institutions, particularly in education, is strongly shaped by the quality and effectiveness of their leadership (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Recent report by the Public Service Commission (PSC) (2024), highlights that SMS members continue to face significant inhibitors to effective job performance, including weak consequence management, political interference in recruitment, and inconsistent performance assessment mechanisms which directly undermine the alignment between individual employee performance and broader organisational goals. These challenges are compounded by persistent gaps in leadership capacity and performance management frameworks, as outlined in the updated 2024 Senior Management Service Handbook, which emphasises ongoing deficiencies in leadership competencies and performance alignment across SMS structures responsible for strategic oversight and operational delivery. Additionally, empirical evidence from recent studies shows that misaligned performance management systems and inconsistent leadership practices continue to weaken public-sector performance and employee engagement, further limiting the ability of SMS members to drive organisational effectiveness within the education sector (Maake et al., 2024). These findings collectively reaffirm that leadership quality remains a core determinant of institutional performance in South Africa's education sector, where SMS members play a pivotal role. Against this backdrop, the study examines senior management perspectives on the leadership strategies employed to enhance employee and organisational performance within the KwaZulu-Natal education sector. It explores their leadership experiences, decision-making practices, and perceptions of the effectiveness of existing performance-enhancement mechanisms. Additionally, the study investigates how SMS members interpret and experience the integration of performance management systems and evaluates key interventions, including leadership development, merit-based recruitment, performance incentives, targeted professional development, organisational culture reform, and digital transformation as drivers of improved performance. By adopting a qualitative research design and applying thematic analysis to insights gathered from SMS members, the study aims to generate evidence-based recommendations that can strengthen SMS effectiveness and support the development of a more transparent, integrated, and performance-driven public education system.

Literature Review

Enhancing employee and organisational performance within the education sector particularly among SMS members is critical for achieving strategic objectives and improving service delivery (Singh, 2010). A 2024 Public Service Commission (PSC) report presented to Parliament highlights that the performance of SMS members is central to achieving strategic objectives across public institutions. The report emphasises that SMS effectiveness directly influences organisational performance, service

delivery, and the alignment of departmental goals, making improved leadership and performance management within the education sector essential for institutional success. Despite the existence of frameworks such as the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS), persistent implementation challenges hinder progress. Key barriers identified by the PSC (2018) include weak leadership, poor goal alignment, ineffective performance management systems, and limited professional development opportunities. This study investigates strategic interventions aimed at overcoming these challenges and strengthening SMS effectiveness. Specifically, it explores the role of goal alignment, robust performance management systems, performance incentives, capacity building, effective communication and regular feedback, merit-based recruitment, organisational culture reform, and technology integration. By critically examining current practices and their impact, the research seeks to generate actionable insights that can drive sustainable improvements in employee and organisational performance across the education system. Effective performance enhancement among SMS members in the education sector hinges on several interrelated strategic factors. Goal alignment is foundational, ensuring that individual efforts contribute directly to departmental objectives and learner outcomes. Despite frameworks like the PMDS, misalignment between strategic planning and operational execution remains a persistent challenge (Dipholo & Mokwena, 2020; Van der Waldt, 2013). Research shows that clear, well-aligned goals significantly strengthen motivation, while inclusive, feedback-rich developmental conversations further enhance engagement and performance, particularly in complex public-sector settings (Klier et al., 2025; Yigiter, 2026). Performance management systems (PMS) are critical for monitoring and improving performance, yet their integration into daily operations is often weak (Aguinis, 2013; Armstrong, 2014; Radnor & Barnes, 2007). This ongoing weakness is further highlighted in current reviews of public-sector PMS implementation, which reveal persistent gaps in system maturity, practical use of performance information, and alignment with organisational processes (Bai, 2025). Studies highlight the need for strategic alignment, stakeholder engagement, and capacity to implement PMS effectively (Setyawan et al., 2025; Van der Waldt, 2023). When properly executed, PMS can enhance job satisfaction, instructional quality, and institutional development (Makombo et al., 2024; Pooja & Kumari, 2024). Performance incentives, both financial and non-financial, play a vital role in motivating employees and fostering a culture of excellence (Ercegović, 2024; Figueiredo et al., 2025; CIPD, 2022). Research shows that merit-based rewards and recognition systems improve productivity and retention (Figueiredo et al., 2025; Deserranno et al., 2025). However, the absence of transparent and strategically aligned incentive structures limits their impact, particularly among SMS members (Ugwechi-Ishiaya, 2025). Capacity building is essential for developing leadership competencies and enhancing organisational effectiveness (Barends et al., 2023; Pham, Nguyen, & Nguyen, 2026). Scholars advocate for structured CPD programmes, mentorship models, and contextually relevant training aligned with institutional goals (Mahmood & Ahmad, 2024; Egbo, 2020; Castano-Munoz et al.,

2021). Despite its potential, capacity-building efforts often suffer from fragmentation and weak evaluation mechanisms, necessitating more targeted and sustainable approaches. Communication and regular feedback are vital for fostering trust, engagement, and alignment between individual and institutional goals (Carter, 2024; Jerab, 2024). Literature consistently highlights that two-way, transparent communication and timely, actionable feedback enhance employee motivation and performance (Carter, 2024; Aguinis, 2009). Poorly delivered feedback, however, can have adverse effects, particularly when it targets individuals rather than tasks (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Recent studies affirm that empathetic, person-mediated, and continuous feedback strengthens both immediate performance improvement and longer-term developmental outcomes (Pacheco, 2025; Giamos et al., 2024), reinforcing the need for feedback to be embedded as a strategic and ongoing practice. Merit-based recruitment is essential for building a competent and high-performing SMS members (Akpoyibo, 2025). Scholars advocate for recruitment processes that are transparent, strategically aligned, and grounded in qualifications and competencies (Ouabi et al., 2024; Kanyane, 2010; OECD, 2017). Political interference and organisational weaknesses often compromise recruitment integrity (Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024), prompting calls for third-party oversight and succession planning to ensure leadership continuity and institutional stability (PSC, 2021; Cameron & Sewell, 2003). Organisational culture significantly influences employee behaviour, innovation, and institutional outcomes. When aligned with strategic goals and quality management practices, culture becomes a powerful enabler of performance (Chelangat, 2022; Barajas, 2024). However, deeply embedded cultural assumptions can also act as barriers, especially in rigid environments (Khaddour, 2025; Schein's model). Effective cultural transformation requires intentional leadership, mission clarity, and a commitment to public values such as transparency and integrity (Perry & Gupta, 2025). Integration of technology is increasingly recognised as a catalyst for performance improvement in the public education sector. Digital tools enhance efficiency, collaboration, and professional development when implemented strategically (Barbu et al., 2025; Singh et al., 2025). Yet, adoption remains uneven due to infrastructural limitations, digital literacy gaps, and resistance to change (Cieslak & Valor, 2024). Successful digital transformation requires investment in infrastructure, targeted training, and a culture that embraces innovation and ethical use of technology (Feng et al., 2025). Collectively, the literature identifies a range of strategic levers, leadership development, goal alignment, performance management systems, communication and feedback, merit-based recruitment, performance incentives, capacity building, organisational culture, and technology integration as essential for improving SMS and organisational performance. However, gaps in implementation, contextual adaptation, and evaluation persist (Matlala, 2025). This underscores the need for empirical research to explore how these levers influence performance outcomes and to develop sector-specific strategies that strengthen leadership, align goals, and enhance service delivery in education.

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Conceptual Framework

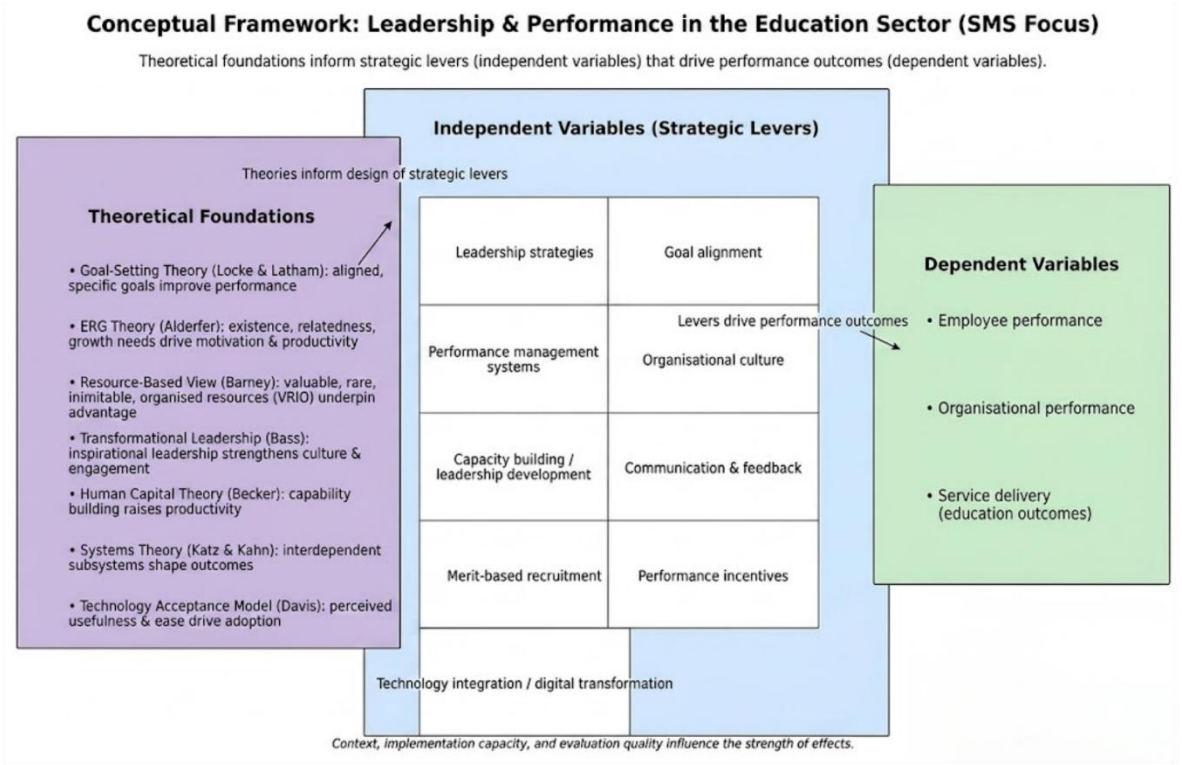


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework provides a structured explanation of how the study's variables relate to one another. It defines the key concepts, variables, and their interrelationships, serving as a roadmap that outlines the researcher's understanding of how different concepts connect within the study (Salawu, Bolatitio & Masibo, 2025). In this study, the independent variables, leadership strategies, goal alignment, performance management systems, organisational culture, capacity building, incentives, communication, merit-based recruitment, and technology integration are expected to influence the dependent variables of employee performance, organisational performance, and service delivery outcomes. The framework is anchored in Goal-Setting Theory, which posits that clear, aligned, and measurable goals enhance performance and strengthen strategic coherence within organisations; (Locke & Latham, 2002). Additionally, contemporary summaries of the theory reaffirm that well-defined and measurable goals act as intrinsic motivators within organisational settings (Liu, 2025). ERG Theory, which explains how employees' existence, relatedness, and growth needs shape motivation and productivity, making leadership support, communication, and development essential for performance;

and the Resource-Based Theory, which argues that organisational resources such as leadership capability, digital infrastructure, and human capital are strategic assets that improve performance when effectively developed and deployed (Penrose, 2009). These core theories are complemented by Transformational Leadership Theory, which emphasises the role of inspirational leadership in shaping organisational culture and employee engagement; Human Capital Theory, which links capacity building and professional development to improved productivity; Systems Theory, which explains how leadership, culture, and performance processes interact within complex public institutions; and the Technology Acceptance Model, which clarifies how perceived usefulness and ease of use influence technology adoption, critical for digital transformation in the education sector. Empirical studies further validate these theoretical linkages: evidence shows that misaligned performance management systems and inconsistent leadership practices weaken employee engagement and overall public-sector performance (Maake et al., 2024), while Public Service Commission findings highlight persistent leadership capacity gaps and poor performance alignment among SMS members (PSC, 2024). Additional research confirms structural implementation failures, contextual challenges, and weak evaluation mechanisms that undermine the effectiveness of performance-enhancing strategies (Matlala, 2025). Together, these theories and studies justify the conceptual framework by illustrating how strategic leadership levers shape performance outcomes, why gaps in implementation persist, and how a theoretically informed approach is needed to strengthen leadership effectiveness, goal alignment, and service delivery in the education sector.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a structured set of concepts and theories that explains the relationships between variables and provides the foundation for a research study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). This study is guided by three interrelated theories: Goal Setting Theory, Alderfer's ERG Theory, and Resource-Based Theory (RBT), which collectively offer a comprehensive lens for understanding and improving SMS performance. Goal Setting Theory (Locke & Latham, 1968) posits that specific, challenging goals, supported by feedback and employee involvement, enhance performance. It underscores the importance of goal clarity, fairness, and adaptability (Armstrong, 2015; Gkizani & Galanakis, 2022), while cautioning against rigid goal structures that may hinder motivation (Armstrong & Taylor, 2017). Alderfer's ERG Theory extends Maslow's hierarchy by categorising needs into Existence, Relatedness, and Growth. It highlights the role of psychological safety, meaningful work, and development opportunities in fostering engagement and long-term commitment (Vaswani & Nema, 2023; Caulton, 2020). This theory complements goal setting by emphasising the need for a supportive environment that nurtures motivation. RBT refined by Barney, asserts that competitive advantage stems from valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources. Recent expansions integrate intangible assets such as culture and mindset (Dhrubo, 2025), making RBT more applicable in dynamic, human-centred

environments. When combined with Goal Setting and ERG theories, RBT supports strategic resource deployment, goal alignment, and motivation, forming a triadic framework for performance enhancement. This integrated theoretical approach provides a holistic foundation for examining how strategic interventions can improve employee and organisational performance in the education sector, while acknowledging tensions between linear goal structures, flexible need progression, and evolving resource dynamics.

Linking Theoretical Framework to Research Objectives

The research is guided by two clear objectives. First, the study seeks to explore senior management perspectives on the leadership strategies used to enhance employee and organisational performance within the KwaZulu-Natal education sector. Second, it aims to provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening employee and organisational performance within this context. These objectives are grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that draws on Goal Setting Theory, Alderfer's ERG Theory, and Resource-Based Theory (RBT). Goal Setting Theory informs the study by emphasising the importance of clear, specific, and challenging goals in motivating employees and aligning individual performance with broader organisational priorities. Through structured feedback and participatory goal setting, this theory supports accountability, engagement, and effective strategic execution among SMS members. Alderfer's ERG Theory complements this approach by addressing the motivational needs that underpin performance. It provides insight into how senior managers' existence, relatedness, and growth needs influence their leadership behaviours and their ability to create productive organisational environments. By recognising the role of fair compensation, supportive relationships, and opportunities for professional development, the theory informs recommendations aimed at fostering a supportive and sustainable work environment that promotes long-term commitment and performance. Resource-Based Theory adds a strategic dimension by positioning human capital, particularly SMS members as a critical organisational resource. It underpins recommendations that focus on leveraging unique capabilities, cultivating a high-performance culture, and investing in intangible assets such as leadership capacity, innovation, and institutional knowledge. Collectively, these theories provide a coherent and robust foundation for developing targeted recommendations that address both the motivational and strategic dimensions of performance, ensuring relevance to the education sector and sustainability of performance outcomes.

Identified Gaps in the Literature Review

Despite much research on ways to improve SMS and organisational performance, several gaps still remain. First, implementation challenges remain unresolved, frameworks like PMDS and PMS are conceptually robust but lack coherence in practice, with weak alignment between strategic planning and operational execution (Dipholo & Mokwena, 2020; Van der Waldt, 2023). Second, contextual adaptation

is limited, studies often generalise best practices without addressing sector-specific constraints such as political interference, resource limitations, and cultural rigidity (Khaddour, 2025; Nkgapele & Mofokeng, 2024). Third, evaluation mechanisms for interventions like capacity building, technology integration, and cultural transformation are underdeveloped, making it difficult to measure long-term impact (Castano-Munoz et al., 2021; Feng et al., 2025). Fourth, while literature acknowledges the importance of feedback, communication, and merit-based recruitment, empirical evidence on their combined effect on SMS performance in education is scarce (Akpoyibo, 2025). Finally, interdependencies among strategic levers, such as how organisational culture influences technology adoption or how incentives interact with performance management systems are rarely explored in an integrated manner, even though Alabi (2025) demonstrates that organisational culture plays a critical role in shaping technology adoption processes, and Zaim and colleagues (2024) show that culture–technology relationships are often analysed in isolation rather than within holistic performance models. These gaps justify the need for empirical research that examines these factors collectively and develops context-specific strategies for sustainable service delivery in education.

Methods and Data

This study employed a qualitative design grounded in a phenomenological approach to explore how SMS members experience and interpret performance management practices within their organisational context, as phenomenology effectively uncovers lived experiences and subjective meanings in complex environments (Odongo & Ntara, 2024). Guided by an inductive strategy, themes and patterns were allowed to emerge organically rather than testing predefined hypotheses, consistent with the study's aim to generate rich, context-specific insights (Williams, 2026). The target population, defined as "the specific group of individuals that a study aims to investigate and draw conclusions about" (Fiveable Content Team, 2025), comprised employees across various levels of the education department, including administrative staff, practitioners, Assistant Directors, Deputy Directors, Directors, Chief Directors and Deputy Director-Generals, selected for their familiarity with PMDS processes and strategic organisational direction. A purposive sampling strategy was used to deliberately select ten information-rich participants who met clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, ensuring that only Senior Management Service (SMS) members with direct experience of the Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) were included. To enhance transparency and replicability, participants were required to be current SMS employees within the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, have at least one year of experience in an SMS role, possess direct involvement in PMDS processes as supervisors or appraisees, be willing to participate voluntarily, and be able to communicate effectively in English. Individuals were excluded if they were not SMS members, had less than one year of experience in the role, lacked direct exposure to PMDS activities, were unwilling or unavailable to participate, or

had potential conflicts of interest. The sampling process involved identifying eligible directorates, compiling a list of potential participants, screening them against the criteria, and selecting those best positioned to provide deep, meaningful insights aligned with Patton's principle of focusing on "information-rich cases." Although 12 eligible individuals were approached, ten consented to participate, and data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerge was reached by the tenth interview, confirming the adequacy of the final sample (Rutgers University scholars). This non-probability approach ensured depth and relevance over generalisability, aligning with the emphasis on expertise and contextual understanding in qualitative inquiry (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews supported by a flexible protocol that enabled participants to elaborate on their experiences (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Ruslin et al., 2022), focusing on employee, organisational performance dynamics, implementation challenges, and improvement strategies. Document analysis further enhanced triangulation and credibility, following recommended best practices for qualitative document analysis (Morgan, 2022). Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which provides a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying and interpreting patterns in qualitative data, described as a "systematic approach to identifying and interpreting patterns… within qualitative data" (Qaissi, 2025). Participants who lacked sufficient PMDS knowledge, SMS-related leadership responsibilities, or requisite strategic experience were excluded in accordance with established guidance requiring that inclusion and exclusion criteria ensure participants possess attributes necessary for fulfilling the research purpose (Pepperdine University IRB, 2026). The analysis followed a structured process that included familiarisation, coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006; McLeod, 2024). A pilot study refined the interview guide, revealing two questions that elicited similar responses, thereby improving clarity and ensuring reliability. Trustworthiness was reinforced through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria, credibility achieved through prolonged engagement and verbatim quotations, transferability ensured through detailed contextual descriptions, and dependability and confirmability supported by transparent documentation and an audit trail (Nowell et al., 2017; Rashid, 2025). Ethical standards were rigorously upheld, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and ethical clearance, with all data securely stored and anonymised to protect participants (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). Despite its strengths, the study faced limitations typical of qualitative research, including limited generalisability due to its focus on a single sector (Gamble & Hewlett, 2025; Mwita, 2022), absence of quantitative data that could have supported methodological triangulation and enhanced robustness (Shibly et al., 2022), and findings potentially reflecting transitional phases in digital transformation rather than stable patterns due to uneven technological adoption across the public sector (Savchenko et al., 2024; Kraus et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the research establishes a strong foundation for future studies employing broader samples

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and mixed-method designs to extend understanding of performance management within the public sector.

Results

This section presents the findings related to the research objectives, which sought to explore senior management perspectives on the leadership strategies used to enhance employee and organisational performance and develop recommendations for enhancing employee and organisational performance among SMS in the education sector in KwaZulu-Natal. The results are derived from semi-structured interviews conducted with ten SMS members drawn from various directorates within the department. Demographic information such as gender and educational background was considered to contextualise participant perspectives. A thematic analysis of the interview data revealed recurring patterns and key themes that reflect the participants' lived experiences, strategic insights, and professional viewpoints.

Demographic Information

Gaining insight into the profile of the study participants was crucial for interpreting the findings accurately and within the appropriate context. The group represented a mix of genders, qualifications, and professional backgrounds, which contributed to diverse viewpoints and enriched the depth of the analysis. These demographic differences offered valuable context for understanding how various experiences and perspectives shaped the themes identified in the study. The sections that follow provide a detailed summary of these demographic characteristics to support a clearer interpretation of the results.

Years of Experience of Participants

The ten SMS participants brought a wide spectrum of experience to the study, offering a rich foundation for understanding organisational performance. Their tenure in current roles varied notably: one participant had served for less than three years, five had between four and six years of experience, one had seven to ten years, and three had been in their roles for more than a decade. This spread created a healthy balance between relatively newer managers and long-serving leaders. Those with four to six years of experience formed the largest group, representing individuals who were sufficiently established in their roles and able to provide informed insights, yet still open to new approaches and improvements. The long-tenured participants contributed historical depth and institutional memory, helping contextualise changes within the department over time. In contrast, the perspective of the least experienced member offered a valuable lens into challenges related to onboarding, adaptation, and early engagement with performance systems. Together, this mix of experience levels enriched the analysis and allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the performance dynamics within the organisation.

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Age Composition of the Participants

Among the ten participants in the study, eight identified as male and two as female, reflecting an uneven gender distribution within the sample. Although gender dynamics were not a central focus of the research and are therefore unlikely to have shaped the findings in any significant way, acknowledging this imbalance is important for transparency and contextual clarity. Recognising the demographic composition allows for a more nuanced understanding of the perspectives captured in the study and underscores the value of pursuing greater inclusivity in future research. Studies involving a more balanced representation of genders may yield broader insights and enhance the applicability of the findings across diverse leadership contexts.

Educational Qualifications of Participants

The group of ten SMS participants reflected a notably high level of academic attainment. The sample included two individuals with Doctoral degrees, four with Master's degrees, and four with Honours degrees, indicating a strong concentration of advanced qualifications. This academic profile suggests that the study benefited from insights grounded in substantial theoretical understanding and professional expertise. Contributions from participants with Doctoral and Master's degrees added depth to the analysis, particularly in areas requiring critical reflection and conceptual interpretation. At the same time, the perspectives of participants with Honours degrees broadened the range of academic viewpoints represented, enriching the diversity of thought within the dataset. Overall, the qualifications of the participants suggest that the findings were informed by well-developed analytical skills and sound academic reasoning, thereby strengthening the credibility and robustness of the study's conclusions.

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

The thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview data revealed a coherent and integrated set of perspectives from Senior Management Service (SMS) members on strategies for enhancing employee and organisational performance within the KwaZulu-Natal education sector. One overarching theme, strategic interventions to enhance employee and organisational performance emerged through a rigorous and systematic qualitative coding process, supported by four interrelated sub-themes: capacity building and training, embracing technology, communication and regular feedback, and organisational culture and performance. Beginning with open coding, participants' raw statements were disaggregated into concise analytic labels capturing recurring ideas such as skills enhancement, leadership development, PMDS training, ICT adoption, communication practices, feedback mechanisms, and organisational values. These initial codes were subsequently consolidated through focused coding into broader conceptual categories, which, through iterative comparison and abstraction, were refined into analytically meaningful sub-themes. Overall, these sub-themes shed light on senior managers' common

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priorities, recognised constraints, and future-oriented opportunities, illustrating that the development of employee capabilities, the adoption of technology, clear and ongoing communication, and a positive organisational culture are perceived as interconnected and mutually reinforcing drivers of improved individual and organisational performance.

	MAIN THEME Strategic interventions to enhance employee and organisational performance
	SUB-THEMES
1.1	Capacity building and training
1.2	Embrace technology
1.3	Communication and regular feedback
1.4	Organisational Culture and performance

Table 1: Table of Themes

Discussion

Main Theme: Strategic Interventions to Enhance Employee and Organisational Performance

SMS members collectively viewed the enhancement of employee and organisational performance in the education sector as dependent on purposeful, well-planned, and future-oriented strategies. They noted that performance outcomes are influenced by a range of interrelated elements, including staff competencies, technological capacity, communication mechanisms, leadership practices, and organisational culture, all of which require coordinated attention. Participants stressed the value of proactive and cohesive approaches that integrate human resource practices, organisational structures, and leadership systems to promote ongoing improvement, reinforce accountability, and foster an environment in which employees are enabled to contribute meaningfully to departmental objectives, ultimately supporting sustained performance improvement.

Sub-Theme 1.1: Capacity Building and Training

Capacity building and training emerged as a strategic intervention rather than a peripheral support function for enhancing employee capability and organisational performance in the public education sector. SMS participants emphasised the need to strengthen job-relevant competencies, leadership

pipelines and the institutionalisation of PMDS practice, reflected in statements such as "*We need to enhance employee skills, capacitate them better to do their work in their areas*" (P1), "*Strategic leadership development"* (P2), and "*Workshop/train on PMDS*" (P4). From a Goal Setting Theory perspective, these concerns point to gaps in goal clarity, feedback and consistent follow-through, where fragmented planning and weak accountability undermine goal commitment and dilute the developmental impact of training. ERG Motivation Theory further demonstrates how uneven access to development opportunities frustrates staff Growth needs, weakens Relatedness through insufficient peer support, and intensifies Existence pressures linked to workload and time constraints, reducing motivation and learning transfer. Critically, the Resource-Based View (RBV) positions capacity building as a mechanism for developing strategic human capital capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable. Competencies such as PMDS proficiency, instructional leadership, performance moderation and strategic decision-making are valuable because they directly enhance organisational effectiveness and service quality. They are rare in the public education sector, where uneven professional development contributes to inconsistent PMDS implementation. These capabilities are inimitable as they develop through accumulated experience, tacit knowledge, mentorship, organisational socialisation and context-specific learning that cannot be easily replicated by other departments. They are also non-substitutable, as no technological systems or procedural tools can replace the judgement, interpretive skill and contextual insight required for leadership, moderation and effective PMDS execution. This theoretical triangulation is strongly supported by empirical literature demonstrating that meaningful behaviour change depends on high-fidelity learning design, deliberate practice, coaching, supervisory reinforcement and reflective cycles (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Kolb, 1984; Argyris & Schön, 1978). Research further shows that strategically aligned, job-embedded professional development improves learning, behaviour and organisational outcomes (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009; Salas et al., 2012), while in the education sector, ongoing, content-focused development supported by coaching significantly strengthens instructional leadership (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Kraft et al., 2018). Conversely, scholarship cautions that one-off workshops rarely transfer to practice without structured follow-through, incentives and supervisory support, and that compliance-driven performance systems weaken developmental outcomes (Joyce & Showers, 2002; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Grossman & Salas, 2011), echoing participants' concerns regarding fragmented planning and accountability gaps. These insights point to the need for a multi-year, system-embedded capacity-building programme that professionalises PMDS practice, develops leadership pipelines and ensures equitable access through blended delivery. Such a programme should include data-driven Training Needs Analysis linked to PMDS evidence, modular curricula for induction, practitioner and advanced levels, coaching and communities of practice, clear governance arrangements to strengthen accountability and rigorous evaluation of behavioural and results-level outcomes. When implemented effectively, this approach

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satisfies motivational and developmental needs (ERG), enhances clarity and feedback cycles (Goal Setting) and builds distinctive human capital capabilities (RBV), ultimately translating training investments into sustainable improvements in performance quality, consistency and strategic alignment across the organisation.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Embrace Technology

Embracing technology emerged as a pivotal strategic intervention for enhancing productivity, efficiency, and performance across the organisation. SMS participants consistently highlighted that digital tools are no longer optional but foundational to modern public sector work, citing the need to "*leverage technology*" for virtual meetings, reporting, e-submissions and recruitment processes (P1), the importance of "*ICT training*" (P2), and calls for adequate devices and connectivity (P4). Additional reflections emphasised automation for improving timeliness (P7) and the need for all employees to become "*ingrained in computer technology*" through structured upskilling (P8). Collectively, these views position technology as both an enabler of streamlined workflows and a catalyst for modernising public service delivery. The wider literature strongly reinforces these insights: digital tools enhance organisational performance by improving communication, efficiency and accountability (Parry & Tyson, 2011), while digitalisation strengthens transparency and institutional governance when integrated with organisational systems and culture (World Bank, 2022). Empirical studies similarly show that technology facilitates collaboration, accuracy and timely administrative processes (Barbu et al., 2025; Singh et al., 2025), with direct relevance for PMDS where digital platforms enable real-time monitoring, reliable data trails and reduced human error. However, scholarship also cautions that technological adoption succeeds only when organisational readiness, user competence and change management are adequately addressed. Poorly planned digital initiatives disrupt workflows and heighten employee anxiety (Cieslak & Valor, 2024), while adoption is shaped by perceived usefulness, ease of use and social influence (Feng et al., 2025; Singh et al., 2025). These dynamics mirror participant concerns about uneven system uptake, outdated tools, limited digital literacy, and infrastructural barriers such as insufficient devices and weak connectivity. Together, these issues underscore that technology alone cannot improve performance; human factors, skills, attitudes and organisational support are equally critical. Importantly, the findings also align strongly with the Resource-Based View (RBV), which argues that technology becomes a source of strategic advantage only when it evolves from a stand-alone tool to an organisational capability that is valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable. The integration of digital systems into PMDS and broader organisational routines creates value by improving accuracy, timeliness and transparency. While technology itself may not be rare, the *capability to deploy it effectively* shaped by user competence, customisation, leadership commitment and organisational learning, is rare within many public sector contexts. This capability becomes inimitable because it depends on tacit knowledge, internal training, system integration and change management processes that cannot be

easily replicated by other departments. It is also non-substitutable, as manual systems cannot match real-time tracking, automated reporting or integrated workflow management central to an effective PMDS environment. Thus, SMS participants' emphasis on technological transformation reflects an implicit understanding aligned with RBV: technology yields strategic value only when embedded into organisational routines, supported by skilled employees, and reinforced through leadership and culture.

Taken together, the convergence of participant experiences, theoretical insights and empirical evidence signals that digital transformation must be approached as part of a broader organisational change agenda rather than a technical exercise. This requires strategic planning, continuous ICT training, adequate infrastructure, leadership sponsorship and deliberate change management to overcome resistance and build confidence. When implemented thoughtfully with the right support systems, technology can significantly strengthen PMDS processes, enhance data integrity, improve responsiveness, and contribute to the development of a unique organisational capability that underpins sustainable performance improvement. Consequently, digital transformation should be integrated into capacity-building strategies to ensure that every employee is equipped, empowered and confident to operate effectively in an increasingly digital public sector environment.

Sub Theme 1.3: Communication and Regular Feedback

Communication and regular feedback emerged as a central strategic intervention for improving employee and organisational performance, with SMS participants consistently emphasising that clear, timely and two-way communication forms the backbone of an effective performance management system. Participants highlighted shortcomings in current feedback loops, particularly between senior leadership and SMS members, as reflected in statements such as "*Regular feedback from top management… the feedback loop is what needs to be improved*" (P1), "*Regular feedback*" (P3), and "*Communication"* (P6), alongside calls for stronger stakeholder engagement (P7) and improved communication across all levels (P9). These insights align closely with Goal Setting Theory, which holds that performance improves when employees receive clear expectations and ongoing feedback to guide their progress. From an ERG Motivation perspective, communication meets core Relatedness needs by fostering trust, psychological safety and a sense of support; when communication breaks down, frustration and disengagement can occur, which was evident in participants' concerns. The broader literature reinforces these perspectives, with studies showing that transparent, two-way communication strengthens organisational alignment (Carter, 2024), and that high-quality, timely feedback enhances behaviour change and performance (Aguinis, 2009; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Recent empirical evidence further suggests that continuous, person-mediated feedback strengthens motivation and longer-term growth (Giamos, Doucet & Léger, 2024; Pacheco, 2025), while inconsistent or poorly framed feedback undermines learning and weakens performance systems (Chambers, Alves & Aceves, 2024). These

findings also strongly reflect the Resource-Based View (RBV), which positions communication and feedback as socially complex organisational capabilities that can generate sustained performance advantage when embedded in everyday routines. Effective communication structures are valuable because they enhance clarity, trust, coordination and PMDS effectiveness by ensuring that employees understand expectations and can adjust behaviour accordingly. They are rare in bureaucratic public sector environments where hierarchical silos and limited upward communication often persist. They are inimitable because they arise from deep-seated organisational norms, interpersonal relationships, shared experiences, leadership styles and tacit routines that cannot simply be copied by other organisations. Communication is also non-substitutable, as no system, policy or technology can replace the relational and human dynamics intrinsic to meaningful feedback. Thus, strengthening communication and feedback practices contributes directly to the development of VRIN capabilities that RBV identifies as essential for long-term organisational effectiveness. In practical terms, embedding structured communication processes into PMDS supported by leadership commitment, manager training in constructive feedback, and formal feedback cycles, transforms PMDS into a dynamic system that enhances trust, accountability and continuous performance improvement. In doing so, communication fulfils Goal Setting Theory's requirements for clarity and feedback, meets ERG's motivational and relational needs, and builds RBV-aligned capabilities that sustain improved organisational performance.

Sub-Theme 1.4: Organisational Culture

Organisational culture emerged as a critical determinant of employee motivation, behaviour, and PMDS effectiveness, with participants emphasising that the department's existing norms, communication patterns, and leadership practices either support or hinder performance. Several highlighted the urgency of cultural transformation, with P5 describing "*the issue of effecting the strategic shift to the organisational culture of the department*" as paramount, while P9 linked effective performance to "*trust, communication and feedback and good human relations*." Others stressed the need for a developmental and innovative culture that empowers staff, as P6 observed: "*We need to enhance employee skills… think outside the box and find different ways to deliver*." Collectively, these insights point to a culture characterised by low trust, inconsistent communication, and limited developmental support conditions that dampen morale, weaken accountability, and disrupt PMDS implementation. These dynamics resonate strongly with Goal Setting Theory, which emphasises that supportive organisational contexts strengthen goal clarity, commitment, and performance (Locke & Latham, 2002), and with ERG Motivation Theory, which suggests that unmet needs related to communication, recognition, and growth diminish motivation and may trigger frustration-regression (Alderfer, 1972). Crucially, the findings also align with the Resource-Based View (RBV), which positions organisational culture as a strategic, socially complex, and difficult-to-imitate capability that can yield sustained performance advantages (Barney,

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1991; Wernerfelt, 1984). A cohesive, developmental culture is valuable because it enhances trust, collaboration, learning, accountability, and innovation, conditions necessary for PMDS to function as an improvement-oriented process rather than a compliance exercise. It is rare because few public sector organisations consistently cultivate cultures that prioritise psychological safety, transparency, and ongoing development. It is inimitable due to its embeddedness in shared history, leadership styles, unwritten norms, deep social relationships, and collective experiences, making it impossible for other organisations to copy. It is also non-substitutable, as no policy, technology, or training programme can compensate for the absence of a supportive culture; without the right cultural foundation, even well-designed systems fail to translate into improved performance. These RBV characteristics reinforce the views of foundational organisational scholars such as Schein (2010), Denison (2000), and Cameron and Quinn (2011), and recent evidence showing that values-driven cultures build trust (Carter, 2024), poor cultural communication undermines performance systems (Williams, 2024), empathetic communication enhances motivation (Pacheco, 2025), and real-time supportive feedback strengthens performance (Sarangapani, 2024). Workforce insights further reveal that 96% of employees value regular communication and 84% report higher engagement when feedback is consistent (Exploding Topics, 2025), underscoring the centrality of culture in shaping behaviour and organisational performance. Taken together, participant perspectives and the wider scholarship highlight that culture is not merely an environmental backdrop but a strategic resource with VRIN characteristics that fundamentally shapes PMDS outcomes and organisational effectiveness. Transforming the department's culture to promote trust, accountability, psychological safety, continuous learning, and collaboration is therefore essential for enabling PMDS to function as intended and for shifting culture from a barrier to a strategic enabler of improved service delivery and sustainable organisational performance.

Conclusion

Leadership strategies for enhancing employee and organisational performance in the KwaZulu-Natal education sector centre on four interconnected sub-themes, capacity building, technology integration, communication and feedback, and organisational culture which together create a comprehensive performance environment for SMS members and their teams. The findings show that strategically aligned capacity-building initiatives strengthen competence, readiness, and the quality of PMDS implementation, while improved technological integration enhances efficiency, accuracy, and real-time monitoring of performance processes. Equally essential is the establishment of transparent communication channels and consistent, constructive feedback, which foster trust, clarity, accountability, and engagement. A values-driven organisational culture reinforces these strategies by promoting collaboration, ethical behaviour, innovation, and responsiveness, particularly when aligned with

principles such as Batho Pele. Theoretically, these findings demonstrate how Goal Setting Theory, ERG Motivation Theory, and the RBV collectively explain the mechanisms through which leadership strengthens performance: clear expectations and feedback improve goal attainment (Goal Setting), motivational needs at existence, relatedness, and growth levels must be satisfied to enable sustained engagement (ERG), and internal capabilities such as organisational culture, employee competence, digital readiness, and leadership quality operate as strategic resources that can drive long-term performance advantages (RBV). These insights carry important policy implications, including the need to institutionalise multi-year, job-embedded capacity-building programmes, standardise communication and feedback cycles within PMDS, promote equitable digital access across districts, and reinforce Batho Pele values and accountability norms as part of cultural transformation. Managerially, leaders must model expected behaviours, deliver high-quality feedback, support digital adoption, use data to guide decisions, and foster collaborative work practices that reduce silo mentalities. Practically, the findings highlight the need for continuous learning embedded in daily work, consistent PMDS implementation, strengthened team communication routines, and values-based practices that enhance service delivery. Theoretically, the study advances understanding by integrating three frameworks to show how leadership influences performance simultaneously through clarity, motivation, and capability development. However, the study is limited by the qualitative nature of its evidence and the exclusive focus on SMS participants; departmental variation in technology, structure, and system implementation may limit generalisability. Future research should therefore adopt mixed methods to quantify the impact of leadership interventions, incorporate educator and school-level experiences, and examine cultural transformation processes over time to build a more holistic evidence base.

Future Research Study:

Based on the study's findings and conclusions, several key areas were identified for future development to enhance employee performance and organisational effectiveness in the public education sector. These include:

- Evaluating the long-term impact of improved Performance Management and Development System (PMDS) implementation on learner outcomes and service delivery.
- Conducting comparative studies across provinces or departments to identify best practices and contextual challenges.
- Exploring the influence of leadership styles and organisational culture on performance outcomes.
- Expanding digital integration in performance management to improve efficiency, transparency, and data utilisation.

- Investigating non-financial incentive models, such as recognition, career development, and flexible work arrangements, to address budgetary constraints.
- Strengthening the consistent and strategic implementation of PMDS, ensuring it is well-understood, effectively applied, and aligned with developmental goals.

These areas present valuable opportunities for further research and policy refinement, aimed at advancing leadership effectiveness and institutional performance in the education sector.

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