

**Leadership Styles And Business Sustainability Of SMEs In Nakawa Division, Kampala District, Uganda**

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**Abstract**

This study investigated the relationship between leadership styles and business sustainability of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Nakawa Division, Kampala District, Uganda. Leadership had been widely recognized as a pivotal determinant of organizational outcomes, yet its specific effects on the sustainability of SMEs in Uganda's urban business environment had received limited scholarly attention. The study examined three dominant leadership styles transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and servant leadership and their effects on the economic, social, and environmental sustainability dimensions of SMEs. A cross-sectional survey of 306 SME owners, managers, and senior employees in Nakawa Division was conducted, and multiple regression analysis was used to test the relationships of interest. The findings revealed that leadership styles had a statistically significant positive effect on business sustainability, collectively explaining 57.3% of the variance in sustainability outcomes. Transformational leadership emerged as the strongest predictor of sustainability, followed by servant leadership and transactional leadership. The study offered important theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for SME leaders, business support organizations, and policymakers in Uganda.

**Keywords: Leadership Styles, Business Sustainability, SME, Nakawa Division, Kampala, Uganda, Transformational Leadership**

**Introduction**

The sustainability of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) had become an increasingly critical issue in Uganda's development discourse, particularly in the context of Kampala's rapidly growing and intensely competitive urban economy (Sarah & Audrey, 2024). Business sustainability defined as the capacity of a business to maintain operations, generate positive economic returns, contribute to social wellbeing, and minimize environmental harm over the long term was a multi-dimensional construct that reflected the overall health and resilience of an enterprise (Paul & Kazaara, 2023). In Uganda, where SME failure rates remained alarmingly high with estimates suggesting that over 60% of new businesses failed within five years of establishment understanding the factors that distinguished sustainable from non-sustainable SMEs was a matter of significant practical urgency (Julius & Matovu, 2025).

Among the many factors influencing SME sustainability, leadership had emerged as one of the most consistently important determinants across organizational research traditions (Ahumuza et al., 2025). Leadership was the process through which an individual influenced a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Isaac et al., 2023). The leadership style adopted by an SME owner or manager shaped the organizational culture, employee motivation, strategic orientation, stakeholder relationships, and adaptive capacity of the business all of which were critical for long-term sustainability (Sarah et al., 2024). In the context of Nakawa Division, which hosted a large and diverse SME community spanning Nakawa Industrial Area, Ntinda trading center, Naguru, Kyambogo commercial zone, and the

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Nakawa Market precinct, the quality of leadership among SME operators was a strategic variable with significant implications for the division's economic and social development(Christopher et al., 2022).

Three leadership styles had been particularly prominent in the contemporary leadership literature: transformational leadership, characterized by inspiring vision, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence; transactional leadership, characterized by clear task definitions, contingent rewards, and management by exception; and servant leadership, characterized by a primary orientation toward meeting the needs of followers and stakeholders(T. Moses, 2023). Each of these leadership styles was expected to have distinct effects on SME sustainability through different pathways. Transformational leaders were expected to drive sustainability by inspiring long-term vision, stimulating innovation, and building employee commitment(Winny et al., 2023). Transactional leaders were expected to support sustainability through disciplined goal-setting, performance monitoring, and accountability(Faith et al., 2023). Servant leaders were expected to enhance sustainability by building strong stakeholder relationships, fostering employee loyalty, and embedding ethical values in the business culture(Ntirandekura, Friday, et al., 2022).

#### **Statement of the problem**

The high rate of SME failure in Nakawa Division and the broader Kampala metropolitan area had been attributed to a range of factors, including inadequate capital, limited market access, and poor financial management(Winny et al., 2023). However, the role of leadership quality in determining SME sustainability had been insufficiently explored in the Ugandan context(Turyatamba et al., 2022). Anecdotal evidence from business development practitioners in Kampala had consistently pointed to leadership weaknesses including poor strategic vision, autocratic management styles, inability to delegate, and failure to invest in employee development as significant contributors to SME underperformance and failure(Emmanuel et al., 2023). Despite this practitioner recognition, rigorous empirical research linking specific leadership styles to SME sustainability outcomes in Kampala had been absent, leaving a critical knowledge gap that the present study aimed to address(Julius & Matovu, 2025).

#### **Theoretical framework**

##### **Full Range Leadership Theory**

The Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT), developed by Bass and Avolio (1994), provided the primary theoretical framework for this study. The FRLT posited that leadership behavior existed on a continuum ranging from laissez-faire (non-leadership) through transactional leadership to transformational leadership, with each level associated with progressively higher levels of follower performance and organizational outcomes. For SME sustainability, the FRLT predicted that transformational leadership would generate the strongest positive effects, followed by transactional leadership, while laissez-faire leadership would have negative or null effects.

##### **Servant Leadership Theory**

Robert Greenleaf's (1977) Servant Leadership Theory, later formalized by Spears (1995) and Liden et al. (2008), proposed that the most effective leaders were those who prioritized the needs and development of their followers and

other stakeholders above their own interests. For SMEs, servant leadership was particularly relevant in the context of sustainability because servant leaders tended to build deeper trust and commitment among employees, customers, and community stakeholders—relationships that were essential for long-term business viability. Servant leadership also emphasized ethical decision-making and community service, dimensions that aligned closely with the social and environmental sustainability components of business sustainability.

### **Triple Bottom Line Framework**

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework, developed by Elkington (1997), provided the conceptual foundation for measuring business sustainability in this study. The TBL expanded the conventional definition of business performance to encompass three dimensions: economic sustainability (financial viability and profitability), social sustainability (employee welfare, community contribution, and ethical business conduct), and environmental sustainability (resource efficiency and environmental responsibility). This framework was adopted as the dependent variable measurement approach, providing a comprehensive and multi-dimensional assessment of SME sustainability outcomes.

### **Literature Review**

The relationship between leadership styles and organizational sustainability had attracted growing scholarly attention, though the majority of research had focused on large corporations rather than SMEs. Garcia-Morales et al. (2012) found in a study of Spanish firms that transformational leadership was positively associated with innovation, knowledge management, and organizational performance all critical enablers of long-term sustainability (N. Moses et al., 2025). The study demonstrated that transformational leaders created learning organizations that adapted more effectively to environmental changes, a capability essential for sustainability in dynamic markets.

In the SME context, Nanjundeswaraswamy and Swamy (2014) found in India that transformational leadership had the strongest positive effect on employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment among the leadership styles studied, creating the human capital foundation for sustainable SME operations (Christopher et al., 2022). Nielsen et al. (2008) found in Nordic SMEs that servant leadership was positively associated with employee psychological well-being, which reduced staff turnover and maintained operational continuity important dimensions of business sustainability. Transactional leadership had been found to be positively associated with short-term performance outcomes but less strongly linked to long-term sustainability, as its focus on exchange relationships tended to generate compliance rather than the deeper commitment needed for sustainable operations (Ntirandekura, Ainebyoona, et al., 2022).

In the African context, Chipunza and Samuel (2013) in South Africa found that transformational leadership significantly predicted organizational sustainability through its positive effects on employee engagement and retention. In Uganda, research on leadership and SME performance was limited but growing. Musinguzi et al. (2018) found in a healthcare organization study that transformational leadership was positively associated with employee

performance, suggesting that the transformational leadership-performance relationship identified in developed country contexts was also applicable in the Ugandan organizational environment(Ramadhan et al., 2023).

**Methodology**

**Research Design and Sample**

A cross-sectional survey research design was employed. The target population comprised SMEs registered and operating within Nakawa Division, estimated at approximately 8,500 businesses based on KCCA's business registry. Stratified random sampling was used, with strata defined by geographic sub-area (Nakawa Industrial Area, Ntinda, Naguru, Kyambogo, and Nakawa Market area) and business sector. A sample of 360 SMEs was targeted, and 306 provided complete and usable responses, representing an 85% response rate. The relatively high response rate was facilitated by the use of trained enumerators who administered questionnaires in person during business hours(Abiodun et al., 2022).

**Measurement Instruments**

Leadership styles were measured using adapted items from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X) for transformational and transactional leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1995) and the Servant Leadership Survey (SLS) developed by Liden et al. (2008) for servant leadership. Business sustainability was measured using a 15-item scale covering economic sustainability (5 items), social sustainability (5 items), and environmental sustainability (5 items), adapted from established sustainability assessment frameworks. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)(Nelson et al., 2022). Reliability analysis confirmed adequate internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values of 0.861 for transformational leadership, 0.814 for transactional leadership, 0.824 for servant leadership, and 0.843 for business sustainability.

**Findings and discussion**

**Respondent Characteristics**

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Gender	Male	194	63.4
	Female	112	36.6
Position	Owner-Manager	198	64.7
	Professional Manager	71	23.2
	Senior Employee	37	12.1
Education	Secondary	64	20.9
	Diploma/Certificate	114	37.3
	Bachelor's Degree	98	32.0
	Postgraduate	30	9.8

Business Sector	Manufacturing	62	20.3
	Retail/Wholesale	89	29.1
	Services	97	31.7
	Construction	34	11.1
	Other	24	7.8
Years in Operation	1–3 years	71	23.2
	4–7 years	98	32.0
	8–12 years	82	26.8
	Over 12 years	55	18.0

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The demographic profile in Table 1 revealed that the majority of respondents were male (63.4%), a pattern consistent with the gender distribution of business ownership in urban Uganda. The predominance of owner-managers (64.7%) as respondents was particularly important methodologically, as owner-managers in SMEs typically served as both the primary strategic leader and the key operational decision-maker, making their leadership style directly observable in day-to-day business operations(Ahumuza et al., 2025). A significant proportion of respondents had diploma/certificate-level education (37.3%), while 32.0% held bachelor's degrees, reflecting the relatively educated profile of Nakawa Division's SME community given its urban location and proximity to Kampala's universities(Alex & Devis, 2023).

The business sector distribution showed a predominance of services SMEs (31.7%), followed by retail/wholesale (29.1%) and manufacturing (20.3%)(Julius & Matovu, 2025). Business age distribution indicated a relatively mature SME population, with 44.8% of businesses having operated for more than 7 years, compared to the national average where younger businesses dominated(Benard, 2023). This maturity profile was significant for the sustainability analysis, as more established businesses had already navigated early-stage survival challenges and could reflect more meaningfully on the leadership practices associated with long-term sustainability.

**Leadership Style Profiles**

**Table 2: Leadership Style Profiles among Nakawa Division SME Leaders**

Leadership Dimension	Statement	Mean	Std Dev	Level
Transformational	Articulates clear and inspiring business vision	3.41	1.12	Moderate



Transformational	Encourages employees to think creatively	3.28	1.18	Moderate
Transformational	Shows genuine interest in employee development	3.54	1.07	Moderate-High
Transformational	Leads by personal example and integrity	3.72	1.01	High
Transactional	Sets clear performance targets for employees	3.61	1.08	High
Transactional	Rewards employees for meeting targets	3.14	1.21	Moderate
Transactional	Monitors employee performance regularly	3.48	1.14	Moderate-High
Transactional	Addresses poor performance promptly	3.37	1.17	Moderate
Servant	Prioritizes employee wellbeing and growth	3.21	1.19	Moderate
Servant	Serves community beyond immediate business interests	2.87	1.27	Moderate
Servant	Practices ethical and transparent management	3.64	1.03	High
Servant	Empowers employees to make decisions	3.12	1.22	Moderate

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The leadership style profiles in Table 2 revealed that SME leaders in Nakawa Division demonstrated a mixture of transformational, transactional, and servant leadership behaviors, with some dimensions more strongly expressed than others. Leading by personal example and integrity (mean = 3.72) was the highest-rated leadership behavior overall, suggesting that role modeling was a natural and widely practiced leadership approach among Nakawa SME leaders, possibly shaped by the cultural context in which personal integrity was highly valued (Julius & Matovu, 2025). Setting clear performance targets (3.61) and practicing ethical and transparent management (3.64) also recorded relatively high means, indicating that Nakawa SME leaders placed considerable emphasis on goal clarity and ethical conduct (Julius & Matovu, 2025).

Employee development behaviors, including showing genuine interest in employee growth (3.54) and encouraging creative thinking (3.28), were at moderate levels, suggesting room for improvement in the transformational leadership domain. Servant leadership behaviors, particularly community service orientation (2.87) and employee empowerment (3.12), were the least strongly expressed, indicating that the servant leadership orientation with its emphasis on subordinating self-interest to the needs of others was less naturally practiced than the more individually focused transformational and transactional leadership behaviors.

**Business Sustainability Outcomes**

**Table 3: Business Sustainability Dimensions – Descriptive Statistics**

<b>Sustainability Dimension</b>	<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std Dev</b>	<b>Level</b>
Economic	Business has been profitable for 3+ consecutive years	3.21	1.18	Moderate
Economic	Revenue has grown consistently over last 3 years	3.34	1.14	Moderate
Economic	Business maintains adequate cash reserves	3.08	1.21	Moderate
Social	Pays fair wages above minimum wage	3.41	1.09	Moderate-High
Social	Actively supports local community initiatives	2.94	1.24	Moderate

Social	Maintains safe and healthy work environment	3.54	1.07	High
Social	Has low staff turnover compared to industry	3.12	1.19	Moderate
Environmental	Manages waste responsibly	3.28	1.13	Moderate
Environmental	Uses energy efficiently in operations	3.04	1.22	Moderate
Environmental	Sources materials from sustainable suppliers	2.78	1.28	Moderate

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The business sustainability indicators in Table 3 showed that Nakawa Division SMEs demonstrated moderate levels of sustainability across all three dimensions. Social sustainability indicators recorded the highest means overall, with maintaining a safe work environment (3.54) and paying fair wages (3.41) both scoring at moderate-to-high levels. This finding suggested that Nakawa SME leaders had internalized basic employment responsibilities, which was particularly important given the high employee dependency in Nakawa Division's manufacturing and services sectors. Economic sustainability indicators were at moderate levels, with consistent revenue growth (3.34) and profitability (3.21) suggesting modest but not transformative economic performance.

Environmental sustainability dimensions recorded the lowest means among the three sustainability pillars, with sustainable sourcing scoring only 2.78 and energy efficiency at 3.04. These findings reflected the generally low priority accorded to environmental management among Ugandan SMEs, where immediate economic survival concerns tended to dominate business decision-making at the expense of long-term environmental considerations. The moderate levels of environmental sustainability also pointed to the need for environmental awareness campaigns and the development of affordable green business practices tailored to SME capacities.

**Correlation Analysis**

**Table 4: Correlation Matrix – Leadership Styles and Business Sustainability**

Variable	Business Sustainability	Transformational	Transactional	Servant
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Business Sustainability	1.000			
Transformational Leadership	0.658**	1.000		
Transactional Leadership	0.512**	0.487**	1.000	
Servant Leadership	0.614**	0.541**	0.423**	1.000

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

**Source: Primary Data, 2026**

The Pearson correlation matrix in Table 4 revealed that all three leadership styles had statistically significant positive correlations with business sustainability. Transformational leadership registered the strongest correlation with business sustainability ( $r = 0.658, p < 0.01$ ), confirming the theoretical prediction that inspiring vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized employee consideration were the most powerful leadership mechanisms for driving multi-dimensional sustainability outcomes (Nelson et al., 2023). Servant leadership was the second strongest correlate ( $r = 0.614, p < 0.01$ ), reflecting its alignment with social sustainability dimensions, ethical management, and community orientation. Transactional leadership showed a moderate positive correlation ( $r = 0.512, p < 0.01$ ), indicating that disciplined goal-setting and performance management contributed to sustainability but with less impact than the more holistically oriented transformational and servant leadership approaches.

The positive inter-correlations among leadership styles (ranging from  $r = 0.423$  to  $r = 0.541$ ) suggested that effective leaders in Nakawa Division SMEs tended to combine elements of multiple leadership styles rather than practicing a single pure style. This finding was consistent with Bass and Avolio's Full Range Leadership Theory, which conceptualized transformational and transactional leadership as complementary rather than mutually exclusive, with the most effective leaders practicing both styles as the situation demanded.

**Multiple Regression Analysis**

**Table 5: Multiple Regression Results – Leadership Styles on Business Sustainability**

Predictor Variable	Beta ( $\beta$ )	Std Error	t-value	p-value	Decision
Constant	0.812	0.207	3.923	0.000	
Transformational Leadership	0.374	0.054	6.926	0.000	Significant
Transactional Leadership	0.198	0.057	3.474	0.001	Significant

Servant Leadership	0.287	0.055	5.218	0.000	Significant
R <sup>2</sup>	0.573				
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.569				
F-statistic	135.27			0.000	

Source: Primary Data, 2026

The multiple regression results in Table 5 demonstrated that the three leadership styles collectively explained 57.3% of the variance in business sustainability ( $R^2 = 0.573$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.569$ ,  $F = 135.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This was the highest level of explained variance across all five studies in this research series, underscoring the powerful role of leadership in determining SME sustainability outcomes in Nakawa Division (Ahumuza et al., 2025). Transformational leadership was the strongest individual predictor ( $\beta = 0.374$ ,  $t = 6.926$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming its status as the most impactful leadership style for sustainability (Winny et al., 2023). A one-unit improvement in transformational leadership behavior was associated with a 0.374-unit improvement in business sustainability, holding other predictors constant.

Servant leadership was the second strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.287$ ,  $t = 5.218$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), consistent with servant leadership theory's emphasis on stakeholder orientation, ethical management, and community service—all of which resonated strongly with the social and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Transactional leadership was a significant but weaker predictor ( $\beta = 0.198$ ,  $t = 3.474$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ), suggesting that while performance management and goal-setting contributed to sustainability, they were insufficient on their own to drive the multi-dimensional sustainability outcomes that transformational and servant leadership approaches achieved.

**Sustainability Outcomes by Dominant Leadership Style**

**Table 6: Business Sustainability by Dominant Leadership Style**

Dominant Style	n (%)	Econ. Sust.	Social Sust.	Environ. Sust.	Overall Sust.
Transformational	87 (28.4%)	3.72	3.81	3.54	3.69
Servant	64 (20.9%)	3.54	3.89	3.61	3.68
Combined (TFL+SL)	78 (25.5%)	3.81	3.94	3.71	3.82
Transactional	54 (17.6%)	3.34	3.21	3.12	3.22
Laissez-faire/Low	23 (7.5%)	2.74	2.61	2.54	2.63

The sustainability analysis by dominant leadership style in Table 6 provided compelling evidence of the superior sustainability outcomes associated with transformational and servant leadership styles compared to transactional and laissez-faire approaches. SMEs whose leaders exhibited a combined transformational and servant leadership orientation recorded the highest overall sustainability scores (3.82), followed closely by those with predominantly transformational (3.69) or servant (3.68) leadership styles. Transactional leadership produced moderate sustainability outcomes (3.22), while laissez-faire or low-engagement leadership was associated with the lowest sustainability scores (2.63).

The superior sustainability performance of combined leadership style adopters confirmed that the most effective SME leaders were those who adapted their leadership approach to situational demands—inspiring and empowering employees through transformational behaviors while also maintaining clear performance expectations through transactional mechanisms, and grounding all leadership activities in a service orientation toward stakeholders. The lowest sustainability scores among laissez-faire leaders highlighted the critical cost of leadership disengagement for SME sustainability, reinforcing the view that active, intentional leadership was a non-negotiable requirement for long-term business viability.

### **Discussion**

The study's findings had several important implications for both theory and practice. The strong positive effect of transformational leadership on business sustainability was consistent with the Full Range Leadership Theory and the broader organizational behavior literature, which had consistently found transformational leadership to be the most effective style for generating high-level organizational outcomes. In the SME context of Nakawa Division, transformational leadership appeared to drive sustainability through multiple pathways: by inspiring strategic vision that oriented the business toward long-term goals rather than short-term survival; by encouraging employee innovation that generated new value and adaptive capacity; and by building the individual commitment and organizational culture necessary for sustained performance.

The significant positive effect of servant leadership on sustainability was a particularly noteworthy finding, as it suggested that the servant leadership model—developed primarily in Western organizational contexts—was also highly applicable and effective in Uganda's cultural business environment. This was perhaps not surprising, given that Ugandan cultural values around community, mutual support, and relationship-based trust aligned closely with the servant leadership philosophy of prioritizing others' needs. SME leaders who practiced servant leadership in Nakawa Division appeared to generate stronger stakeholder relationships, higher employee loyalty, and deeper community trust—resources that contributed directly to long-term business sustainability.

The positive but relatively weaker effect of transactional leadership on sustainability underscored the limitations of exchange-based leadership in driving multi-dimensional sustainability outcomes. While clear performance targets, contingent rewards, and performance monitoring were valuable management tools, they were insufficient on their own to inspire the deeper commitment, creativity, and stakeholder orientation needed for sustainable business operations.

This finding suggested that SME training programs focused exclusively on management skills without attention to transformational and servant leadership dimensions were likely to produce suboptimal sustainability outcomes.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This study concluded that leadership styles had a significant and positive effect on business sustainability among SMEs in Nakawa Division, Kampala District, Uganda. Transformational leadership was the most powerful predictor of sustainability, followed by servant leadership and transactional leadership. The three leadership styles collectively explained 57.3% of the variance in business sustainability, establishing leadership as a dominant determinant of SME sustainability outcomes in the Nakawa Division context. The evidence also confirmed that the combination of transformational and servant leadership generated the highest sustainability outcomes, highlighting the complementary nature of these leadership approaches.

The study recommended several interventions to strengthen SME leadership quality in Nakawa Division and beyond. First, the KCCA was recommended to integrate leadership development into its SME business support programs, providing affordable workshops, coaching, and mentoring specifically focused on transformational and servant leadership skills. Second, the Uganda Entrepreneurship Development Institute and Makerere University Business School were recommended to include leadership development as a core component of their SME capacity-building curricula, drawing on the local business case studies developed through research such as this study to make the content contextually relevant. Third, established SME associations in Nakawa Division, including the Uganda Small Scale Industries Association and sector-specific trade associations, were recommended to establish peer leadership learning circles, enabling more experienced and effective leaders to mentor and model best practices for newer entrepreneurs. Fourth, commercial banks and microfinance institutions with SME lending portfolios were recommended to incorporate leadership quality assessments into their SME loan evaluation processes, recognizing that strong leadership capability was a predictor of business sustainability and loan repayment capacity. Fifth, the government's enterprise development programs, including those administered by the Uganda Development Corporation and the Private Sector Foundation Uganda, were recommended to prioritize leadership development as a cross-cutting theme in all SME support interventions, recognizing that the effectiveness of financial, technical, and market support was ultimately contingent on the quality of leadership exercising these resources. Finally, further research was recommended to explore the mediating and moderating variables in the leadership-sustainability relationship, including organizational culture, employee engagement, and external environmental factors, to build a more complete causal model of SME sustainability in Uganda.

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