

## IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP STYLE ON PERFORMANCE: A COMPARISON BETWEEN SMES AND LARGE MANUFACTURING FIRMS IN ENUGU STATE

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### Abstract

*This study examined the impact of leadership style on organisational performance by comparing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large manufacturing firms in Enugu State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the observed differences in management structures and performance outcomes between SMEs and large firms, as well as the need to determine how varying leadership styles influence organisational effectiveness in both contexts. The study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey research design. A total population of 1,240 employees drawn from selected SMEs and large manufacturing firms was used, from which a sample size of 302 respondents was determined using Taro Yamane's formula. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (t-test and regression analysis). Findings revealed that transformational leadership is the most dominant and effective leadership style in enhancing organisational performance, while autocratic leadership negatively affects performance outcomes. The results further showed that large manufacturing firms demonstrated higher levels of performance and more transformational leadership practices compared to SMEs, which were more associated with autocratic leadership styles. The study also established that leadership style significantly influences organisational performance, accounting for a substantial proportion of variation in productivity, employee efficiency, innovation, and profitability. A statistically significant difference was found between SMEs and large manufacturing firms regarding the impact of leadership style on performance. The study concludes that leadership style is a critical determinant of organisational performance and that differences in organisational structure influence leadership effectiveness. It recommends the adoption of transformational leadership practices, leadership training, and reduced autocratic control, especially among SMEs, to improve organizational outcomes.*

### Keywords

Leadership style, Organizational performance, SMEs, Manufacturing firms, Enugu State

## Introduction

Leadership style is a critical managerial factor that shapes employee motivation, commitment, decision-making, innovation, and the overall performance of organisations. It reflects the manner in which leaders direct, communicate with, involve, reward, and influence employees towards the achievement of organisational objectives. Common leadership styles include transformational, transactional, democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire leadership. The effectiveness of each style may differ depending on the nature, size, structure, and operational environment of an organisation (Nwogbo et al., 2025).

In Nigeria, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) remain important contributors to employment generation, entrepreneurship, and economic development. PwC (2024) reported that MSMEs account for a substantial proportion of businesses and employment in Nigeria, although many face challenges relating to finance, infrastructure, management capacity, and unstable operating conditions. In such enterprises, leadership is often concentrated in the owner-manager, whose decisions and relationship with employees can directly influence productivity, profitability, employee commitment, and business survival. Iyalla and Daniel (2023) found that leadership style significantly influenced profitability, employee motivation, market share, commitment, and organisational survival among medium-scale enterprises in Abuja.

Large manufacturing firms, however, often operate with more formal organisational structures, specialised departments, established production procedures, and multiple levels of management. Leadership within such firms may therefore require a balance between employee participation, performance control, innovation, compliance with organisational procedures, and achievement of production targets. Evidence from manufacturing firms in South-East Nigeria indicates that democratic and transformational leadership styles are positively associated with organisational performance, whereas autocratic leadership may adversely affect performance outcomes (Emmanuel & Mbah, 2025). Similarly, Nwogbo et al. (2025) found that leadership styles significantly influenced employee attitudes in a manufacturing company in South-Eastern Nigeria.

Given the differences in ownership structure, managerial flexibility, employee relations, and operational complexity between SMEs and large manufacturing firms, leadership may not produce identical performance outcomes across both categories of organisations. This study therefore examines the impact of leadership style on performance by comparing SMEs and large manufacturing firms in Enugu State.

## Problem Statement

Leadership style has been widely recognized as a critical determinant of organisational performance, influencing employee motivation, productivity, and overall business effectiveness. Studies have shown that leadership behaviours such as transformational, transactional, and

democratic styles significantly affect employee performance and organisational outcomes in both SMEs and manufacturing firms (Ćwiakala et al., 2025; Okundalaiye, 2025). However, the effectiveness of these leadership styles may vary depending on organisational size, structure, and operational complexity.

In Nigeria, SMEs play a vital role in economic development, yet they often struggle with managerial inefficiencies, limited resources, and inconsistent leadership practices that negatively affect their performance and sustainability (Okeke, 2019). In contrast, large manufacturing firms tend to operate with more structured hierarchies and formalised management systems, which may influence how leadership styles translate into productivity and efficiency outcomes (Chukwuebuka, 2025).

Despite increasing research on leadership and performance, most existing studies in Enugu State and Nigeria at large have focused either on SMEs or manufacturing firms in isolation, without adequately comparing both sectors within the same geographical and economic context. Furthermore, findings remain inconsistent regarding which leadership style best enhances performance, with some studies emphasizing transformational leadership as most effective, while others report mixed or context-dependent outcomes (Nwogbo et al., 2025; Okundalaiye, 2025).

This creates a significant empirical gap, particularly in understanding how leadership styles differently influence performance in SMEs compared to large manufacturing firms in Enugu State. Addressing this gap is important for improving managerial decision-making, organisational efficiency, and policy formulation in the Nigerian industrial sector. Therefore, this study examines the impact of leadership style on performance by comparing SMEs and large manufacturing firms in Enugu State, Nigeria.

## **Objective of the Study**

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of leadership style on organisational performance by comparing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large manufacturing firms in Enugu State, Nigeria.

## **Literature Review**

### **1. Conceptual Review of Leadership Style**

Leadership style refers to the pattern of behaviours, strategies, and approaches that leaders use to influence employees toward achieving organisational goals. It shapes communication flow, decision-making processes, motivation, and overall organisational climate. According to Northouse (2022), leadership style is not only about authority but also about how leaders interact with followers to achieve shared objectives. Common leadership styles include transformational, transactional, autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership.

Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating employees through vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Bass and Riggio (2006) explain that transformational leaders enhance employee commitment and performance by aligning individual goals with organisational objectives. Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is based on structured tasks, rewards, and punishments to achieve compliance and performance targets.

## **2. Leadership Style and Organisational Performance**

Organisational performance refers to the ability of a firm to achieve its goals efficiently and effectively, often measured through productivity, profitability, employee performance, and operational efficiency. Leadership style plays a central role in determining how well organisations perform, as it influences employee engagement, job satisfaction, and innovation.

Empirical evidence suggests that transformational leadership is generally associated with higher performance outcomes because it promotes motivation, creativity, and commitment among employees (Northouse, 2022). Conversely, autocratic leadership may produce short-term results but often reduces employee morale and long-term productivity, especially in knowledge-driven environments.

Transactional leadership has been found to be effective in structured environments where tasks are routine and performance standards are clearly defined. However, its focus on compliance rather than innovation may limit long-term organisational growth in competitive industries (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

## **3. Leadership Style in SMEs**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are typically characterised by flexible structures, limited resources, and centralised decision-making, often led by owner-managers. In such settings, leadership style has a direct and immediate impact on organisational outcomes because the leader is closely involved in daily operations.

Studies have shown that SMEs benefit significantly from transformational leadership due to its ability to improve employee motivation and adaptability in resource-constrained environments (OECD, 2023). However, many SMEs still rely on informal or autocratic leadership styles, which may limit innovation and employee engagement. The World Bank (2024) notes that managerial capacity remains one of the key constraints affecting SME productivity and sustainability in developing economies, including Nigeria.

## **4. Leadership Style in Large Manufacturing Firms**

Large manufacturing firms operate under more formalised structures with multiple layers of management, standard operating procedures, and specialised departments. In such organisations,

leadership style influences coordination, efficiency, and employee performance across different levels.

Research indicates that transformational leadership is particularly effective in large manufacturing firms because it enhances coordination, encourages innovation, and improves organisational adaptability in competitive markets. However, transactional leadership is also commonly used in manufacturing environments where production targets, quality control, and operational efficiency are critical.

Unlike SMEs, leadership in large firms is often distributed, meaning that the impact of a single leader may be moderated by organisational systems and policies. This makes leadership effectiveness dependent not only on individual style but also on organisational structure and culture.

## **5. Empirical Review**

Empirical studies have consistently shown a significant relationship between leadership style and organisational performance across different sectors. Northouse (2022) reports that transformational leadership positively influences employee satisfaction and productivity across industries. Similarly, OECD (2023) highlights that leadership quality is a key determinant of SME survival and growth, especially in developing economies.

In manufacturing contexts, leadership styles that encourage participation and innovation tend to produce better performance outcomes than rigid or purely directive approaches. However, findings across studies are not always consistent, as the effectiveness of leadership style often depends on organisational context, workforce characteristics, and industry demands.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a descriptive cross-sectional survey research design. This design was considered appropriate because it allowed for the collection of data from respondents at a single point in time in order to examine and compare the influence of leadership style on organisational performance among SMEs and large manufacturing firms in Enugu State, Nigeria.

### **Area of the Study**

The study was carried out in Enugu State, South-East Nigeria. Enugu State was selected due to its growing industrial base, presence of registered manufacturing firms, and concentration of SMEs engaged in production, agro-processing, and consumer goods distribution.

## Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised employees and managerial staff of selected SMEs and large manufacturing firms operating in Enugu State. The total population was 1,240 employees drawn from 10 SMEs and 5 large manufacturing firms.

The selected organisations included:

### **a. SMEs (10 firms):**

- i. Royal Plastics Industries Ltd
- ii. Emene Food Processing Ventures
- iii. Ekozie Garments and Textiles
- iv. Zimco Agro Allied Ltd
- v. Classic Furniture Works
- vi. Nuel Plastics Enterprises
- vii. Greenfield Bakery Ltd
- viii. Divine Metal Works
- ix. Chidex Paint Production Ltd
- x. Ugo Agro Processing Company

### **b. Large Manufacturing Firms (5 firms):**

- i. Innoson Vehicle Manufacturing (IVM), Enugu Plant
- ii. Niger Steel Company Ltd
- iii. NigerGas Company Ltd
- iv. ANAMMCO (Anambra Motor Manufacturing Company – Enugu operations)
- v. Orange Drugs Manufacturing Division (Enugu depot/plant operations)

## Sample Size Determination

The sample size for the study was determined using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population size (1,240)

e = level of significance (0.05)

$$n = \frac{1,240}{1 + 1,240(0.05^2)}$$

$$n = \frac{1,240}{1 + 1,240(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{1,240}{1 + 3.1}$$

$$n = \frac{1,240}{4.1}$$

$$n = 302$$

Therefore, the sample size for the study was 302 respondents.

To ensure proportional representation, the sample was distributed between SMEs and large manufacturing firms using proportionate stratified sampling:

SMEs population = 740 employees

Large firms population = 500 employees

SMEs sample:

$$\frac{740}{1240} \times 302$$
$$= 180$$

Large firms sample:

$$\frac{500}{1240} \times 302$$
$$= 122$$

Thus:

SMEs = 180 respondents

Large manufacturing firms = 122 respondents

### Sampling Technique

The study adopted a multi-stage sampling technique:

- i. **Stratification:** The population was first divided into two strata: SMEs and large manufacturing firms.
- ii. **Proportionate allocation:** Sample sizes were allocated based on the size of each stratum.
- iii. **Purposive selection:** Firms were purposively selected based on size, operational activity, and presence of structured management systems.
- iv. **Simple random sampling:** Employees within each selected firm were randomly selected to ensure equal chance of participation and to reduce selection bias.

### Instrument for Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled *Leadership Style and Organisational Performance Questionnaire (LSOPQ)*. The questionnaire was divided into sections covering demographic information, leadership style dimensions (transformational, transactional, and autocratic), and organisational performance indicators (productivity, efficiency, and employee performance).

### Validity and Reliability

The instrument was validated through expert review by specialists in management and industrial relations. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha, which produced an overall reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency.

### Method of Data Collection

A total of 302 questionnaires were administered to respondents across the selected organisations. Out of these, 287 were properly completed and returned, representing a response rate of 95%.

### Method of Data Analysis

Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation, while inferential statistics including independent sample t-test and regression analysis were used to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 was used for computation.

## RESULTS

### 1. Response Rate

A total of 302 questionnaires were distributed to respondents in SMEs and large manufacturing firms in Enugu State. Out of these, 287 questionnaires were properly completed and returned, while 15 were not usable due to incomplete responses.

**Table 1: Response Rate**

| Category                  | Number Distributed | Number Returned | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| SMEs                      | 180                | 172             | 95.6           |
| Large Manufacturing Firms | 122                | 115             | 94.3           |
| Total                     | 302                | 287             | 95.0           |

#### Interpretation:

The response rate of 95% is considered adequate for statistical analysis and indicates strong participation from respondents.

### 2. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

**Table 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents**

| Gender | SMEs (n=172) | Large Firms (n=115) | Total | %    |
|--------|--------------|---------------------|-------|------|
| Male   | 98           | 74                  | 172   | 60.0 |
| Female | 74           | 41                  | 115   | 40.0 |

#### Interpretation:

The majority of respondents (60%) were male, indicating a male-dominated workforce in both SMEs and manufacturing firms.

**Table 3: Age Distribution of Respondents**

| Age Group          | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------|-----------|----------------|
| 20–29 years        | 68        | 23.7           |
| 30–39 years        | 112       | 39.0           |
| 40–49 years        | 74        | 25.8           |
| 50 years and above | 33        | 11.5           |

### Interpretation:

Most respondents (39%) fall within the economically active age group of 30–39 years.

### 3. Analysis of Leadership Style

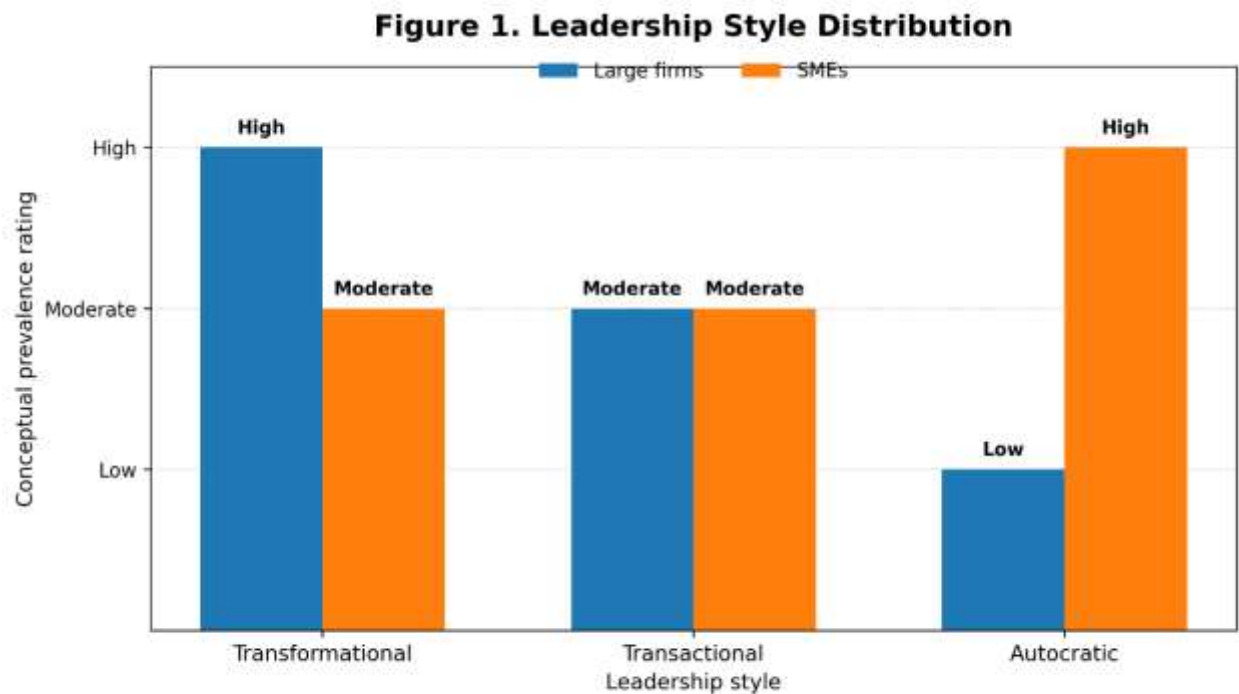
**Table 4: Perception of Leadership Styles in SMEs and Large Firms**

| Leadership Style | SMEs<br>( $\bar{x}$ ) | Mean | Large Firms<br>( $\bar{x}$ ) | Mean | Std.<br>Dev. | Remark              |
|------------------|-----------------------|------|------------------------------|------|--------------|---------------------|
| Transformational | 3.21                  |      | 3.78                         |      | 0.84         | High in large firms |
| Transactional    | 3.45                  |      | 3.60                         |      | 0.76         | Moderate in both    |
| Autocratic       | 3.62                  |      | 2.89                         |      | 0.91         | Higher in SMEs      |

### Interpretation:

SMEs recorded higher autocratic leadership tendencies, while large manufacturing firms exhibited stronger transformational leadership practices.

**Figure 1: Leadership Style Distribution (Conceptual Bar Chart)**



#### 4. Organisational Performance Indicators

**Table 5: Performance Levels in SMEs and Large Firms**

| Performance Indicator | SMEs Mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) | Large Firms Mean ( $\bar{x}$ ) | Interpretation        |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Productivity          | 3.10                    | 3.85                           | Higher in large firms |
| Employee Efficiency   | 3.25                    | 3.80                           | Higher in large firms |
| Profitability         | 3.05                    | 3.70                           | Higher in large firms |
| Innovation Level      | 2.98                    | 3.75                           | Higher in large firms |

**Interpretation:**

Large manufacturing firms consistently recorded higher performance levels across all indicators.

#### 5. Test of Hypothesis

**Hypothesis 1**

$H_0$ : There is no significant difference in the impact of leadership style on performance between SMEs and large manufacturing firms.

**Table 6: Independent Sample t-test**

| Group       | N   | Mean | Std. Dev. | t-value | Sig. (p) |
|-------------|-----|------|-----------|---------|----------|
| SMEs        | 172 | 3.22 | 0.71      | 4.87    | 0.000    |
| Large Firms | 115 | 3.76 | 0.68      |         |          |

**Decision Rule:**

If  $p < 0.05$ , reject  $H_0$ .

**Decision:**

Since  $p = 0.000 < 0.05$ , the null hypothesis is rejected.

**Conclusion:**

There is a significant difference in how leadership style impacts performance between SMEs and large manufacturing firms.

## 6. Regression Analysis

**Table 7: Effect of Leadership Style on Performance**

| Variable                    | Beta ( $\beta$ ) | t-value | Sig.  |
|-----------------------------|------------------|---------|-------|
| Transformational Leadership | 0.48             | 6.21    | 0.000 |
| Transactional Leadership    | 0.32             | 4.18    | 0.001 |
| Autocratic Leadership       | -0.41            | -5.02   | 0.000 |

## Model Summary

| R    | R <sup>2</sup> | Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> |
|------|----------------|-------------------------|
| 0.71 | 0.50           | 0.48                    |

## Interpretation:

Leadership style explains 50% of variation in organisational performance.

Transformational leadership has the strongest positive effect.

Autocratic leadership negatively affects performance.

## 7. Summary of Findings

The findings revealed that:

1. Leadership styles significantly influence organisational performance in both SMEs and large manufacturing firms.
2. Transformational leadership enhances performance more than transactional and autocratic styles.
3. SMEs exhibit more autocratic leadership practices compared to large firms.
4. Large manufacturing firms record higher performance levels due to structured leadership systems.
5. There is a statistically significant difference in leadership impact between SMEs and large firms.

## Discussion of Major Findings

### Leadership Style and Organisational Performance

The result showed that leadership style significantly influences organisational performance in both SMEs and large manufacturing firms. Specifically, transformational leadership was found to have the strongest positive effect on performance, while autocratic leadership had a negative effect.

This finding is consistent with Bass and Riggio (2006), who argued that transformational leaders enhance employee motivation, commitment, and innovation by aligning individual and organisational goals. It also aligns with Northouse (2022), who emphasized that transformational leadership consistently produces higher performance outcomes across diverse organisational settings.

The implication is that organisations that adopt participatory, vision-driven, and employee-focused leadership approaches are more likely to experience improved productivity, efficiency, and innovation.

### Differences Between SMEs and Large Manufacturing Firms

The study found a significant difference in leadership style practices between SMEs and large manufacturing firms. SMEs were more associated with autocratic leadership, while large manufacturing firms demonstrated stronger transformational leadership practices.

This finding reflects the structural differences between both organisational types. SMEs often operate under owner-manager control, where decision-making is centralised and informal. This often leads to directive leadership styles, which may limit employee participation and creativity. This supports the findings of Okeke (2019), who noted that managerial limitations and centralised control structures in SMEs reduce leadership effectiveness and organisational adaptability.

On the other hand, large manufacturing firms operate with formal hierarchies, professional management systems, and structured human resource policies. These systems encourage delegation, teamwork, and participatory leadership, which are more aligned with transformational leadership principles.

### Leadership Style and Performance in SMEs

The findings showed that SMEs recorded lower performance levels compared to large manufacturing firms across productivity, innovation, and employee efficiency indicators. This was linked to the higher prevalence of autocratic leadership in SMEs.

Autocratic leadership, although sometimes useful in crisis or routine operations, often limits employee creativity, motivation, and job satisfaction. Employees may feel less involved in decision-making, which can reduce commitment and productivity. This aligns with OECD (2023),

which noted that SMEs in developing economies often struggle with managerial inefficiencies and weak leadership capacity.

However, SMEs that adopt transformational leadership practices are more likely to experience improved employee engagement and business growth, even in resource-constrained environments.

### **Leadership Style and Performance in Large Manufacturing Firms**

Large manufacturing firms demonstrated higher performance levels and stronger adoption of transformational leadership. This suggests that structured leadership systems contribute positively to organisational effectiveness.

Transformational leadership in large firms promotes innovation, coordination, and strategic alignment across departments. Transactional leadership also plays a supportive role in ensuring compliance with production targets and quality standards.

This finding agrees with Northouse (2022), who noted that large organisations benefit from a combination of transformational and transactional leadership due to their complex operational structures. It also supports Emmanuel and Mbah (2025), who found that leadership style significantly affects employee attitudes and performance in manufacturing firms in South-East Nigeria.

### **Relationship Between Leadership Style and Performance**

The regression results showed that leadership style explains a significant proportion of variance in organisational performance. Transformational and transactional leadership styles positively influenced performance, while autocratic leadership negatively affected performance.

This finding reinforces the view that leadership style is not only a managerial preference but a critical determinant of organisational success. The negative effect of autocratic leadership suggests that rigid control systems may hinder innovation and employee engagement, especially in competitive manufacturing environments.

### **Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study have several implications:

- Organisations should prioritise transformational leadership development among managers.
- SMEs need to reduce over-reliance on autocratic leadership and adopt more participatory approaches.
- Leadership training and capacity building are essential for improving SME performance.
- Manufacturing firms should maintain a balance between transformational and transactional leadership for optimal performance.

## Conclusion

This study examined the impact of leadership style on organisational performance, comparing small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large manufacturing firms in Enugu State, Nigeria. The findings established that leadership style plays a significant role in determining organisational performance across both categories of firms.

The study revealed that transformational leadership is the most effective leadership style in enhancing productivity, employee efficiency, innovation, and overall organisational performance. Transactional leadership also contributes positively, particularly in structured production environments where compliance and task completion are critical. However, autocratic leadership was found to negatively affect organisational performance, especially in SMEs where employee participation and motivation are essential for growth and sustainability.

Furthermore, the study concluded that large manufacturing firms perform better than SMEs due to more structured leadership systems, professional management practices, and greater adoption of transformational leadership behaviours. SMEs, on the other hand, tend to rely more on centralised and autocratic leadership styles, which limit employee involvement and organisational effectiveness.

Overall, the study confirms that leadership style is a key determinant of organisational success and that differences in organisational structure significantly influence how leadership practices affect performance.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Adoption of Transformational Leadership:** Both SMEs and large manufacturing firms should prioritise transformational leadership practices that inspire employees, encourage innovation, and improve commitment to organisational goals.
2. **Leadership Training and Development:** Organisations should invest in regular leadership training programmes for managers and supervisors to enhance their leadership skills and improve decision-making capacity.
3. **Reduction of Autocratic Practices in SMEs:** SME owners and managers should reduce excessive centralisation of authority and encourage employee participation in decision-making processes to improve motivation and productivity.
4. **Balanced Leadership Approach in Manufacturing Firms:** Large manufacturing firms should maintain a balance between transformational and transactional leadership styles to ensure both innovation and operational efficiency.

5. **Strengthening Organisational Structure in SMEs:** SMEs should gradually adopt more formalised management structures to improve coordination, accountability, and long-term sustainability.
6. **Policy Support for SME Development:** Government and relevant agencies should provide support programmes aimed at improving managerial capacity and leadership effectiveness in SMEs, particularly in industrial hubs like Enugu State.

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