

EFFECT OF LEADERSHIP TRUST ON WORKERS' COMMITMENT IN PUBLIC-OWNED HOSPITALS IN SOUTH-EAST, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of leadership trust on workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised all clinical and non-clinical staff in the selected public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East. A sample of 238 respondents was drawn using proportionate stratified sampling technique. Data were collected with the aid of a structured questionnaire designed on a 5-point Likert scale and validated by experts. Cronbach Alpha was used to establish reliability with a coefficient of .84. Descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while z-test was employed to test the hypotheses at .05 level of significance. Findings revealed that the level of leadership trust and workers' commitment in the hospitals was moderate. There was a significant difference in the level of commitment between workers who perceived high leadership trust and those who perceived low leadership trust. The study concluded that leadership trust significantly influences workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals. It was recommended that hospital management should adopt benevolent and integrity-based leadership practices, ensure fairness in decision making, and create open communication channels to enhance workers' commitment and service delivery.

Keywords: Leadership Trust, Workers' Commitment, Public-Owned Hospitals

Introduction

Public-owned hospitals remain the primary point of healthcare access for a large proportion of Nigerians, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas such as Enugu-East. The effectiveness of these institutions is not determined only by the availability of medical equipment or funding, but largely by the human element that drives service delivery daily. Within this human element, the relationship between leaders and workers occupies a central position. Leadership in public hospitals involves more than issuing directives; it involves creating an environment where workers feel safe, valued, and willing to go beyond formal job requirements.

In recent years, conversations around healthcare delivery in Nigeria have increasingly pointed to issues of staff morale, absenteeism, turnover intentions, and declining commitment among health workers. Many of these challenges are often attributed to poor remuneration and

inadequate infrastructure. However, emerging organizational behavior literature suggests that relational factors within the workplace, especially the level of trust workers have in their leaders, play an equally important role in shaping how workers relate to their jobs and organizations. Trust in leadership refers to the willingness of employees to be vulnerable to the actions of their leaders based on positive expectations of the leader's intentions and behaviors (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). When workers perceive their leaders as competent, benevolent, and having integrity, they are more likely to internalize organizational goals and invest their energy into achieving them.

In the context of public-owned hospitals, where resources are often limited and working conditions are demanding, leadership trust becomes a critical psychological resource. A worker who trusts that their head of department will be fair in duty rosters, transparent in the distribution of scarce resources, and supportive during professional challenges is more likely to remain committed even when external incentives are weak. Commitment here refers to the psychological attachment of workers to their hospital, characterized by a desire to remain, a willingness to exert effort, and belief in the organization's values (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Without this commitment, public hospitals struggle with high turnover, low productivity, and poor patient care outcomes, all of which undermine the purpose of public healthcare. Enugu-East Local Government Area hosts several public-owned hospitals that serve both urban and adjoining rural populations. Reports from healthcare administrators and informal interactions with staff suggest recurring concerns around supervision styles, favoritism, and lack of communication between management and workers. These issues hint at a possible trust deficit that may be affecting how committed workers are to their institutions. Yet, there is limited empirical attention within this specific geographical and sectoral context on how leadership trust directly influences workers' commitment. Understanding this relationship is important because improving leadership behavior may be a more feasible intervention for hospital management than waiting for large-scale systemic funding reforms.

Public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East continue to face operational challenges that affect service delivery. Despite government efforts to staff these facilities, there are persistent reports of low worker morale, lateness to duty, and reduced discretionary effort among health personnel. While structural factors such as poor funding and equipment shortages are well documented, the role of leadership dynamics within the hospitals has not received adequate empirical investigation.

Leadership trust is fundamental to organizational functioning because it shapes how workers interpret management actions and decide how much of themselves to invest in the organization. When trust is absent, workers tend to withdraw psychologically, comply minimally with rules, and seek exit opportunities. Conversely, when trust is present, workers demonstrate higher commitment through loyalty, extra-role behaviors, and persistence in the face of challenges. In public hospitals where financial rewards are often stagnant, commitment driven by trust may be one of the few levers available to management to sustain performance. Preliminary observations and discussions with some staff in hospitals within Enugu-East suggest that issues around perceived fairness, support from supervisors, and credibility of management decisions may be influencing how committed workers feel toward their hospitals. However, there is no documented study that systematically examines the influence of leadership trust on workers'

commitment within this setting. This gap makes it difficult for hospital administrators and policymakers to design targeted leadership interventions. It is against this background that this study seeks to examine the influence of leadership trust on workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria.

This study focuses on public-owned hospitals within Enugu-East Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. The content scope covers two major constructs: leadership trust and workers' commitment. Leadership trust is examined through the dimensions of competence, benevolence, and integrity as conceptualized in Mayer et al.' (1995) model of trust. Workers' commitment is examined as psychological attachment to the hospital, including affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment as described by Allen and Meyer (1990).

The findings of this study are expected to be significant to several stakeholders. To hospital administrators and heads of departments in public-owned hospitals, the study will provide insight into how their behavior and relationship with workers influence staff commitment. By highlighting trust dimensions that matter most, the study can guide leadership development and supervisory practices aimed at improving staff retention and performance without necessarily increasing financial costs.

To policymakers in the Enugu State Ministry of Health, the study offers evidence on the human side of healthcare management. In a sector where policy often focuses on infrastructure and drug supply, this research draws attention to leadership quality as a policy lever for improving service delivery. Recommendations from the study can be integrated into training programs for hospital management teams.

For workers, the study gives voice to how leadership behaviors affect their willingness to stay and contribute. By identifying specific trust-related concerns, the study can encourage more open communication between staff and management.

Academically, the study contributes to the growing body of organizational behavior literature in the Nigerian public health sector. Most studies on commitment have focused on private organizations or on teachers and civil servants. By focusing on public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, this study fills a contextual gap and provides baseline data for future researchers who may wish to expand the scope to other LGAs or states.

Ultimately, improving workers' commitment through trustworthy leadership can translate into better patient care, reduced staff turnover, and more resilient public health institutions. Given the critical role of public hospitals in achieving health-related development goals, understanding and strengthening the leadership-worker relationship is both timely and necessary.

The main objective of this study is to examine the influence of leadership trust on workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine the level of leadership trust in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria.

2. Ascertain the level of workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria.

3. Examine the relationship between leadership trust and workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria.

In line with the specific objectives, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the level of leadership trust in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria?
2. What is the level of workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria?
3. What is the relationship between leadership trust and workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria?

A single null hypothesis was formulated and tested at .05 level of significance:

H01: There is no significant relationship between leadership trust and workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria.

Concepts

Leadership Trust

Leadership trust refers to employees' willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of their leaders based on the expectation that the leader will act fairly, competently, and with concern for their welfare (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). In public-owned hospitals, leadership trust is built when heads of departments and hospital management demonstrate competence in decision-making, show genuine care for staff well-being, and act with honesty and transparency. When workers trust their leaders, they are less likely to second-guess directives, more likely to cooperate, and more willing to exert discretionary effort even under difficult conditions. In healthcare settings where resources are scarce, trust becomes a key psychological resource that sustains performance.

Workers' Commitment

Workers' commitment is the psychological attachment of employees to their organization. It reflects the extent to which workers identify with the hospital's goals, desire to remain in the organization, and are willing to exert effort on its behalf (Allen & Meyer, 1990). It has three dimensions: affective commitment which is emotional attachment to the hospital, continuance commitment which is the perceived cost of leaving, and normative commitment which is the sense of obligation to stay. In public hospitals, committed workers show up consistently, provide quality patient care, and are less likely to engage in absenteeism or turnover. Low commitment often manifests as lateness, poor attitude to work, and reduced quality of service.

Public-Owned Hospitals

Public-owned hospitals are healthcare institutions that are owned, funded, and managed by government at the federal, state, or local level. Their primary mandate is to provide accessible and affordable healthcare services to the general public, especially low-income populations. In

Nigeria, these hospitals operate under bureaucratic structures with limited funding, heavy patient loads, and frequent policy changes. Because of these constraints, the behavior of leaders becomes critical in motivating workers. The effectiveness of public-owned hospitals therefore depends not only on infrastructure and drugs, but also on how well leaders manage human resources and maintain staff commitment.

These three concepts are interrelated: in public-owned hospitals, leadership trust shapes how workers feel about the organization, and that feeling directly influences their level of commitment to work.

Effect of Leadership Trust on Workers' Commitment in Public-Owned Hospitals

Leadership trust has a direct and significant effect on workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals, especially in contexts where material incentives are limited and work demands are high. In hospitals such as those in Enugu-East, Nigeria, workers operate under heavy patient loads, irregular supply of materials, and bureaucratic constraints. In such an environment, the relationship between leaders and workers becomes a major determinant of how much effort, loyalty, and emotional investment staff are willing to give to the organization.

When workers perceive their leaders as trustworthy, three key outcomes emerge that strengthen commitment.

First, trust increases psychological attachment to the hospital. Based on Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman's (1995) model, employees who view their leaders as competent, benevolent, and having integrity develop confidence that management decisions will be fair. This reduces fear and uncertainty. A nurse who trusts that duty rosters will be distributed fairly, or a doctor who believes that promotion will be based on merit and not favoritism, is more likely to develop affective commitment. They begin to identify with the hospital's goals and feel a sense of belonging. This emotional bond makes them less likely to consider leaving, even when better offers exist elsewhere.

Second, trust enhances discretionary effort and work behavior. Workers who trust their leaders are more willing to go beyond formal job descriptions. In public hospitals, this shows up as staying extra hours during emergencies, showing empathy to patients despite workload, and cooperating with colleagues without supervision. This happens because trust signals that the leader values the worker and will reciprocate effort with support. Conversely, when trust is low, workers adopt a "work-to-rule" attitude. They do only what is required and withdraw emotionally, leading to absenteeism, lateness, and poor patient care.

Third, trust reduces turnover intentions and strengthens normative commitment. Public-owned hospitals struggle with brain drain and staff migration. However, workers who feel that their leaders are honest and care about their welfare develop a sense of obligation to remain and contribute. Benevolence from leadership such as advocating for staff during challenges or acknowledging good work creates loyalty. Integrity in handling resources and communicating transparently creates credibility. Even when salaries are delayed or equipment is lacking, workers stay committed because they believe in the leadership.

Empirically, studies using correlation and regression have shown a positive and significant relationship between leadership trust and workers' commitment. In the context of Enugu-East, the effect is most pronounced through the dimensions of benevolence and integrity, while technical competence alone has less impact. This suggests that relational behaviors matter more than technical expertise in influencing commitment in resource-constrained public hospitals.

In summary, leadership trust acts as a social glue in public-owned hospitals. It transforms compliance into commitment. When leaders are trusted, workers are more attached, more productive, and more willing to stay. Therefore, improving leadership trust is one of the most cost-effective strategies for hospital management to enhance workers' commitment and, by extension, the quality of healthcare delivery.

Theoretical Framework

The following theories that underpin this study are reviewed below.

Integrative Model of Trust

Integrative Model of Trust by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995). The theory proposes that trust in a leader is determined by three key attributes: ability, benevolence, and integrity. Ability refers to the leader's competence and skills to perform effectively in their domain. Benevolence is the extent to which a leader is perceived to care about the welfare of followers beyond self-interest. Integrity is the perception that the leader adheres to a set of principles that the follower finds acceptable, such as fairness, honesty, and consistency. According to the model, when employees perceive their leaders as possessing these three characteristics, they develop trust and become more willing to be vulnerable to the leader's actions. This trust then influences employee attitudes and behaviors such as commitment, job satisfaction, and performance. The theory further explains that trust reduces uncertainty in the workplace and encourages employees to invest more of themselves into organizational goals.

The relevance of this theory to the present study is direct. Public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East operate in a resource-constrained environment where financial incentives are often limited. In such a context, workers' commitment is likely to be driven more by relational factors than by material rewards. By applying Mayer et al.'s (1995) model, this study examines how workers' perception of their leaders' competence, benevolence, and integrity influences their psychological attachment to the hospital. The theory therefore provides a framework for understanding why leadership trust matters and how it can be leveraged by hospital management to enhance workers' commitment and ultimately improve service delivery.

Social Exchange Theory (George C. Homans (1958))

Homans saw social behaviour as an exchange. This theory explains that when hospital leaders show trust, support, and fairness to workers, employees feel obliged to reciprocate. In public hospitals, this often shows up as nurses, doctors, and support staff giving back through higher commitment, loyalty, and willingness to go beyond their basic duties because they perceive that the leadership cares about their welfare.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Proposed by James MacGregor Burns in 1978 and argues that leaders who inspire, mentor, and build trust with their followers can influence workers' attitudes and values. In Enugu-East public hospitals, a leader who communicates a clear vision, provides intellectual stimulation, and shows concern for staff can increase affective commitment, where workers stay because they genuinely identify with the hospital's goals and feel emotionally attached to the organization.

Organizational Commitment Theory

Proposed by Meyer and Allen (1990). It breaks commitment into affective, continuance, and normative types. Trust from leadership strengthens affective commitment because workers feel valued and want to remain, and it also builds normative commitment where staff feel a moral obligation to stay and contribute, especially in resource-constrained public health settings where teamwork and reliability are critical for patient care.

Empirical Review

The study by Onyema and Eze (2021) examined the effect of leadership trust on employee commitment in selected public hospitals in Southeast Nigeria. The variables of the study were leadership trust as the independent variable and organizational commitment as the dependent variable. A descriptive survey design was adopted and data were collected from 310 health workers using structured questionnaires. Pearson Product Moment Correlation and multiple regression were used for data analysis. The findings revealed that leadership trust had a significant positive effect on employee commitment. The study concluded that when workers perceive their leaders as trustworthy, their commitment to the organization increases. It was recommended that hospital management should build trust through fairness, transparency and consistent communication.

Adebayo and Musa (2020) investigated leadership behavior and workers' commitment in government-owned health institutions in North Central Nigeria. The study focused on transformational leadership and trust as independent variables, with affective and continuance commitment as dependent variables. A survey research design was used and 245 respondents were sampled. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation and ANOVA. The findings showed that trust in leadership significantly predicted both affective and continuance commitment among workers. The study concluded that leadership behavior that promotes trust enhances workers' psychological attachment to their institutions. It was recommended that training programs on ethical leadership should be organized for hospital administrators.

Chukwu and Okoro (2022) carried out a study on the influence of supervisory trust on job commitment of nurses in public hospitals in Enugu State. The independent variable was supervisory trust while job commitment was the dependent variable. The study adopted a descriptive survey design with a sample of 200 nurses. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation and z-test. The findings indicated that nurses who had high trust in their supervisors reported higher levels of job commitment compared to those with low trust. The study concluded that supervisory trust is a critical factor in sustaining nurses' commitment in

public hospitals. It was recommended that hospital management should promote supportive supervision and open-door policies.

The research by Ibrahim, Bello and Yusuf (2019) assessed the relationship between leadership integrity and organizational commitment among health workers in tertiary hospitals in Northern Nigeria. The variables studied were leadership integrity and organizational commitment. A cross-sectional survey design was employed and 400 copies of questionnaire were administered. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. The results showed that leadership integrity had a significant positive influence on organizational commitment. The study concluded that integrity in leadership fosters loyalty and reduces turnover intention among health workers. It was recommended that recruitment and promotion of hospital leaders should prioritize integrity and accountability.

Umeh and Nnaji (2023) examined the effect of benevolent leadership on employee commitment in public health facilities in South East Nigeria. The study variables were benevolent leadership as the independent variable and employee commitment as the dependent variable. A descriptive survey design was used with 270 respondents. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation and t-test. The findings revealed that benevolent leadership significantly influenced employee commitment. The study concluded that when leaders show care and concern for workers' welfare, commitment levels improve. It was recommended that hospital leaders should adopt people-oriented leadership styles that prioritize staff welfare and recognition.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to examine the influence of leadership trust on workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria. The descriptive survey design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect data from a large number of respondents and describe the existing state of affairs regarding leadership trust and workers' commitment without manipulating any variable. The population of the study comprised all clinical and non-clinical staff in the public-owned hospitals within Enugu-East Local Government Area. A sample of 238 respondents was selected using proportionate stratified random sampling technique to ensure fair representation across departments and hospitals. Data were collected with the aid of a structured questionnaire developed by the researcher on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by two experts in Hospital Management and one expert in Measurement and Evaluation from Enugu State University of Science and Technology. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach Alpha and a reliability coefficient of .84 was obtained, which indicated that the instrument was reliable for the study. Copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents by the researcher with the help of two research assistants and 238 copies were retrieved, representing 100% return rate. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions, while z-test was used to test the three null hypotheses at .05 level of significance. The decision rule was that any item with a mean score of 3.00 and above was regarded as agreed, while any item below 3.00 was regarded as disagreed. For the z-test, the null hypothesis was rejected if the calculated

z-value was greater than the critical z-value of 1.96 at .05 level of significance, otherwise it was accepted.

Results

This chapter presents the results of data analysis in line with the research questions and hypotheses. A total of 238 copies of questionnaire were administered and retrieved, representing 100% return rate. Data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation to answer research questions, and z-test to test hypotheses at .05 level of significance.

Research Question 1: What is the level of leadership trust in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation on Level of Leadership Trust

S/N Trust	Items on Leadership	
	Mean Decision	N Std.Dv.
1 My supervisor is competent in handling hospital matters	238 0.84	2.98 Disagreed
2 My head of department shows concern for my welfare	238 0.79	3.12 Agreed
3 Management decisions in this hospital are transparent and fair	238 3.27 Agreed	0.75 0.75
4 I can depend on my leader to keep promises	238 0.81	3.05 Agreed
5 Leaders in this hospital demonstrate honesty in their actions	238 0.77	3.19 Agreed
	Grand Mean	238
	3.12 Moderate	0.78

The grand mean of 3.12 indicates that the level of leadership trust in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East is moderate. Integrity and benevolence items scored higher while competence scored lowest.

Research Question 2: What is the level of workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation on Level of Workers' Commitment

S/N Commitment	Items on Workers' N Mean Std.Dv. Decision	
1 I feel emotionally attached to this hospital	238 0.72	3.42 Agreed
2 I am willing to put extra effort for the success of this hospital	238 0.76	3.28 Agreed
3 I feel a sense of obligation to remain in this Hospital	238 0.80	3.20 Agreed
4 I would be happy to spend the rest of my career in this hospital	238 3.18 Agreed	0.83 238
5 Leaving this hospital now would be difficult for me	238 0.78	3.29 Agreed
	Grand Mean	238
	3.27 Moderate	0.71

The grand mean of 3.27 indicates that the level of workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East is moderate, with affective commitment being the strongest.

Test of Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between leadership trust and workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria.

Table 3: z-test on Relationship between Leadership Trust and Workers' Commitment

Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	z-cal	z-crit	df	Decision
High Trust	132		3.56	0.65			
4.87	1.96	236		Significant			
Low Trust	106		2.91	0.71			

Since the calculated z-value of 4.87 is greater than the critical z-value of 1.96 at .05 level of significance, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between leadership trust and workers' commitment.

Summary of Findings

1. The level of leadership trust in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East is moderate.
2. The level of workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East is moderate.
3. There is a significant relationship between leadership trust and workers' commitment.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that the level of leadership trust and workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East is moderate. This aligns with Onyema and Eze (2021) who reported moderate trust and commitment levels among health workers in Southeast Nigeria, and with Chukwu and Okoro (2022) who found that supervisory trust influences nurses' commitment in Enugu State. The significant relationship between leadership trust and workers' commitment supports Adebayo and Musa (2020) who established that trust in leadership predicts both affective and continuance commitment in government health institutions.

Furthermore, the significant difference in commitment between workers with high and low trust perception, and the predictive influence of leadership trust, corroborates the works of Ibrahim, Bello and Yusuf (2019) and Umeh and Nnaji (2023). Both studies concluded that integrity and benevolence in leadership enhance loyalty and commitment among health workers. The implication is that in resource-constrained public hospitals, relational factors such as fairness, care and honesty from leaders serve as key drivers of workers' commitment.

Therefore, improving leadership trust is a practical strategy for enhancing staff retention and service delivery in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East.

Conclusion

This study concludes that leadership trust significantly influences workers' commitment in public-owned hospitals in Enugu-East, Nigeria. The moderate levels of both trust and commitment observed indicate that while workers have some attachment to their hospitals, improving leadership behavior can further strengthen their commitment and by extension, service delivery.

Recommendations

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

1. Hospital management should adopt benevolent leadership practices by showing genuine concern for workers' welfare, as this was found to enhance commitment among staff.
2. Leaders in public-owned hospitals should demonstrate integrity and fairness in decision making and resource distribution to build trust and loyalty among workers.
3. Management should create open communication channels that allow workers to express concerns and receive feedback, since transparency was a key dimension of trust in this study.
4. The Enugu State Ministry of Health should organize regular leadership and supervisory training for hospital heads to equip them with skills for building trust and improving workers' commitment.

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