## A Qualitative Approach to Phenomenological Study. Focus on Task-oriented and People-Oriented Relationships in the Behavioral Approach of Leadership

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## ABSTRACT

*Leadership behaviour plays a pivotal role in shaping organisational outcomes, particularly in balancing the demands of productivity and human relationships. While task-oriented leadership emphasises planning, monitoring, and achieving goals, people-oriented leadership prioritises communication, empathy, and team cohesion. This Qualitative phenomenological study seeks to explore the lived experiences of leaders who navigate between these two behavioural approaches in their professional contexts. 10 participants were selected, 5 from the education sector and 5 from the corporate sector. This selection was made with purposive sampling, which focuses on individuals having experience. Using semi-structured interviews with educational and organisational leaders, the study uncovers how task- and people-oriented behaviours are practised, perceived, and adapted in real-life scenarios. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant themes: (1) the challenge of balancing efficiency with empathy, (2) contextual factors influencing the dominant behavioural approach, and (3) evolving leadership identities that integrate both behaviours over time. The findings extend behavioural leadership theory by illustrating that effective leadership is not a rigid adherence to one approach but a dynamic, situational blending of both. This research contributes practical insights for leadership training and development, highlighting the importance of adaptability, reflective practice, and emotional intelligence in achieving sustainable leadership effectiveness.*

***Keywords:** Leadership, Phenomenological study, Behavioural approach, Task and people oriented, and Situation-based.*

## INTRODUCTION

Leadership remains a cornerstone of organizational and educational success. Across sectors, from schools and universities to corporate organizations, the quality of leadership determines not only productivity but also morale, motivation, and long-term institutional growth. Leadership has been studied through multiple theoretical lenses—trait theories emphasizing inherent qualities, situational theories highlighting contextual adaptation, and transformational approaches stressing inspiration and vision. Yet among these, behavioral leadership theory stands out for its practical focus: it shifts attention from who leaders are to what leaders do.

Behavioural theory emphasises observable actions and interactions rather than internal traits. Early research at Ohio State University (Stogdill & Coons, 1957) and the University of Michigan (Likert, 1961) identified two dominant leadership behaviors: task-oriented (initiating structure, setting goals, monitoring performance) and people-oriented (consideration, communication, empathy, and support). Later models, such as Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid (1964), further illustrated how effective leadership emerges from the balance between concern for production and concern for people. These foundational studies continue to shape leadership research and practice today.

Despite extensive theoretical development, a critical gap remains: much of the existing literature on behavioral leadership relies on quantitative surveys and models, which, while useful, often fail to capture the lived experiences of leaders themselves. Numbers may show correlations between task- or people-orientation and outcomes, but they cannot fully explain how leaders perceive their own behaviors, how they adapt under pressure, or how they reconcile conflicts between achieving goals and maintaining relationships. For this reason, qualitative approaches, particularly phenomenology, provide an essential opportunity to deepen understanding.

Phenomenological research allows scholars to investigate leadership as experienced in practice, not merely as defined in theory. By engaging leaders in reflective interviews, researchers can uncover insights about how leaders navigate behavioural choices in dynamic, complex contexts. For example, a school principal may need to be highly task-oriented during examination periods but people-oriented when addressing teacher burnout. Similarly, organisational leaders may shift between strict performance monitoring and empathetic coaching depending on situational demands. These nuanced experiences are often absent from traditional behavioural models.

The research problem guiding this study is, therefore, the limited exploration of behavioural leadership through a qualitative, phenomenological lens. Theories of task- and people-oriented leadership have been tested extensively, but little is known about how leaders experience these behaviours, what challenges they face in balancing them, and how they perceive their growth as leaders through the lens of behaviour.

**Aims of Research.**

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of leaders in practising and balancing task-oriented and people-oriented leadership behaviours.

**Objectives.**

- To examine how leaders, describe their task-oriented and people-oriented behaviours in practice.
- To identify challenges leaders, face in balancing efficiency with empathy.
- To explore how leaders' experiences, contribute to their evolving leadership identity.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study is significant for both theoretical and practical reasons. Theoretically, it enriches behavioural leadership theory by integrating leaders' personal perspectives, offering a more humanised understanding of leadership behaviour. Practically, it provides insights for leadership training programs, emphasising the need to equip leaders with the ability to adapt their behaviours contextually rather than adhere rigidly to one style. In an era where both productivity and emotional well-being are critical to organisational success, understanding this balance has never been more relevant.

From its static perspective of managerial conduct to a more sophisticated, contextual understanding, behavioural leadership theory has changed since its start. Early behavioural research defined leadership as a series of observable behaviours instead of inherent characteristics. Modern interpretations combine these underlying concepts with psychological and social aspects. Recent research (Carsten et al., 2019; Dinh et al., 2020) suggests that behavioural leadership, while multidimensional, including goal setting, coordination, and support, also embraces flexibility and emotional atonement. This change recognises that leadership is becoming more relational and situational, hence calling for flexibility between direct and participatory methods (Winkler & van Knippenberg, 2018).

For example, Northouse (2022) maintains that behavioural leadership is also about the "doing" of leadership, that is, delegating duties or providing comments and also about the "being" of leadership, in which self-awareness and emotional link affect decisions based on behaviour. Leaders are presently assessed on how well they combine operational accuracy with empathy, therefore showing an ongoing convergence between behavioura and transformationa leadership.

## Points of Opinion

Achieving organisational structure, clarity, and goal alignment still depends on task-oriented behaviour. Modern institutions depend on methodical leadership, especially in public administration and education, to guarantee accountability and consistency (Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016). Task-oriented leaders perform planning, scheduling, monitoring, and performance evaluation. Their actions are related to greater productivity, better judgment, and a clearer sense of direction (Judge & Piccolo, 2019).

Scholars point out, nevertheless, that too much task orientation might hamper employee engagement and creativity. While task-oriented behaviours improve short-term performance, overemphasis on control can lower trust and invention, according to a meta-analysis by Derue et al. (2019). Similarly, Cote and Gilbert (2020) say that demanding goal execution without emotional balance can result in burnout, especially in high-pressure settings such as clinics or schools.

Task orientation in educational leadership assures curriculum alignment and assessment quality, but studies by Bush and Glover (2021) reveal that when leaders concentrate only on Instructional control falls off, as does teacher autonomy and motivation. Hence, participative decision-making and clear communication help contemporary task-oriented leadership to be balanced so that sustained institutional performance may be maintained.

Rising focus on psychological safety, compassion, and inclusive workplace culture has brought people-oriented behaviour, usually known as relationship-oriented leadership, back into the spotlight. Leaders who show empathy create supportive surroundings where staff members feel valued (Kerns, 2018). Recent research shows great correlations between human-oriented leadership and employee well-being, engagement and retention (Newman et al., 2020; Breevaart & Bakker, 2018).

The post-pandemic organisational environment further highlighted this need. Dirani et al. (2020) find that leaders who showed empathy and clear communication throughout times of crisis had greater team resilience and lower turnover. People-oriented leadership in academic settings enhances teacher satisfaction and student results by fostering trust and teamwork (Ghavifekr & Ibrahim, 2019).

People-oriented actions fit well with theories of emotional intelligence as well. High emotional intelligence leaders carefully and sympathetically handle interpersonal connections, therefore improving team cohesion (Goleman et al., 2017). Leaders like these pay close attention, offer insightful criticism,

and promote cooperation, which helps to create more sustainable institutional development (Kim & Kim, 2021).

Understanding how leaders successfully mix task-oriented and people-oriented actions is a main topic in modern behavioural research. This duality is occasionally referred to as "behavioural ambidexterity" (Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2017), which reflects a leader's capacity to swing between structuring and nurturing actions according to situational needs. For instance, task orientation could rule throughout strategic planning stages, while people orientation assumes great importance during times of change or conflict (Zhang et al., 2018), hence balancing changes depending on the situation.

Leaders who combine both orientations experience higher team efficiency and trust, according to research by Asencio and Mujkic (2016) in public institutions. Likewise, Breevaart et al. (2020) found that teams headed by "balanced" leaders had better emotional well-being and performance ratings.

Even in contemporary leadership research, the Managerial Grid Model (Blake & Mouton, 1964) continues to be a valid framework. Effective leaders, according to newer interpretations, move freely around the grid rather than staying rooted in one quadrant (Munyaka et al., 2017). This dynamic equilibrium guarantees that, particularly in challenging or multicultural environments, leaders can chase objectives without endangering human interaction.

Behavioural leadership theory continues to serve as a foundation for understanding how leaders' actions shape organisational effectiveness, motivation, and culture. The framework's focus on task-oriented and people-oriented behaviours offers a tangible way to examine leadership in both educational and organisational settings. While classical studies from the Ohio State and Michigan universities laid the groundwork for these dimensions (Stogdill and Coons, 1957; Likert, 1961), recent scholarship has revisited and expanded these constructs to include emotional intelligence, contextual adaptability, and relational trust (Northouse, 2022; Yukl and Gardner, 2020). Contemporary perspectives suggest that leadership effectiveness depends not only on performing tasks or relationship behaviours in isolation but on a dynamic balance shaped by situational demands, organisational culture, and leader identity (Cummings et al., 2021).

Modern leadership research highlights how behaviour can only be completely grasped in its context. National culture, organisational environment, and situational circumstances influence which leadership styles are most effective (House et al., 2014; Hofstede et al., 2010). In collectivist societies like those in Asia, for instance, people-oriented leadership usually results in greater team cohesion; task orientation dominates in individualistic settings, and may more closely match performance metrics (Nguyen et al., 2018).

Cultural expectations that combine hierarchical authority with interpersonal sensitivity abound for leaders in educational institutions in South Asia, including Pakistan. Research by Shah and Nisar (2021) and Ahmad and Saeed (2020) shows that school leaders who strike a balance between task perfection and compassion have greater morale and institutional loyalty. On the other hand, excessive authoritative task direction might turn off employees and stifle group creativity.

Thus, behavioural leadership effectiveness rests on culturally attuned adaptability rather than on general actions. To fine-tune their behavioural attitude, leaders must understand social signals, corporate values, and follower expectations (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

One of the most explored topics nowadays is the overlap of emotional intelligence (EI) and behavioural leadership. Leaders with high emotional intelligence can recognise when to stress structure and when to develop connections; hence, Goleman (2018), Wong and Law (2017) show how emotionally intelligent leaders have remarkable adaptability, trust-building ability, and conflict management capabilities.

Behaviourally, EI converts to greater quality communication, more effective delegation, and a more encouraging environment (Côté, 2020). Recent research from both commercial and educational sources shows that emotional intelligence mediates the association between people-oriented actions and employee engagement (Miao et al., 2021). Leaders, those who control their own emotions and sense others' emotional states, can balance responsibility with compassion, a crucial ability in modern leadership situations.

Moreover, the behavioural effects of EI go outside of interpersonal control. It affects resiliency, moral decision-making, and self-regulation of leaders (Boyatzis, 2018). These abilities fit the adaptive nature of behavioural leadership, in which both task and relationship behaviours have to develop in reaction to emotional and contextual feedback.

In education, behavioural leadership remains central to administrative effectiveness and instructional quality. Teachers and school heads function as behavioural leaders when they model goal-oriented discipline and empathetic communication (Leithwood et al., 2020). Task behaviours such as setting academic goals and monitoring teaching outcomes ensure accountability, while people behaviours such as mentoring and collaboration build a supportive learning climate (Bush, 2021).

Research by Rahim and Daud (2020) in Malaysian schools found that principals employing both task and people-oriented behaviours reported higher teacher commitment and student performance. Similarly, studies in Pakistani educational contexts reveal that a balanced behavioural approach enhances trust, reduces turnover, and encourages reflective teaching practices (Nadeem & Azeem, 2022).

In organisational sectors, behavioural leadership influences innovation and employee retention. Employees under leaders who balance structure with empathy demonstrate greater job satisfaction and organisational citizenship behaviours (Choi et al., 2020). Behavioural leadership in hybrid or remote environments also demands heightened communication and flexibility, reinforcing the need for leaders to consciously shift between task and relational modes (Contreras et al., 2020).

In education, behaviourial leadership is still at the heart of administrative effectiveness and instructional quality. When teachers and school administrators model goal-oriented discipline and empathetic communication, they act as behavioural leaders (Leithwood et al., 2020). Task behaviours, such as setting Academic objectives and tracking of teaching results, guarantee responsibility; meanwhile, people's behaviours like mentoring and cooperation create a nurturing learning environment (Bush, 2021).

According to Rahim and Daud (2020), principals in Malaysian schools exhibiting both task and people-oriented actions reported increased teacher commitment and pupil performance. Likewise, studies in Pakistani educational settings show that a balanced behavioural approach improves trust, lowers turnover, and promotes reflective teaching techniques (Nadeem & Azeem, 2022).

In corporate circles, behavioural leadership impacts employee retention and innovation. Greater job happiness and organisational citizenship behaviours are found in employees under leaders who strike a balance between structure and compassion (Choi et al., 2020). Behavioural leadership in hybrid or

Remote situations require increased adaptability and communication, therefore underlining the necessity of leaders deliberately transitioning between task and relational styles (Contreras et al., 2020).

Implementing a balanced behavioural approach offers problems despite its benefits. Especially in stressful or resource-limited situations, leaders sometimes find it challenging to choose the right emphasis between structure and relationship. According to 2018 research by Breevaart and Bakker, time pressure frequently forces leaders to rely on task-oriented actions, which over time can corrode relational trust.

Furthermore, influencing behavioural patterns are personality traits and past events. Leaders with great empathy may shun needed confrontation, while those with strong achievement goals may incline too toward task orientation (Harms et al., 2018). Organisational structures are furthermore important; many times, bureaucratic systems reward compliance and performance measures, thereby dissuading people-oriented involvement (Kerns, 2018).

These obstacles highlight the need for reflective practice: leaders must intentionally observe their actions and their impact on subordinates to strike a long-lasting balance.

Digital transformation has altered how task and people-oriented activities are performed. Leaders in distant and hybrid settings must keep responsibility and emotional connection through virtual channels (Carroll & Conboy, 2020). Task-oriented actions now call for technological proficiency, data-driven decision-making, and virtual performance management. People-oriented leadership also calls for digital empathy, establishing trust and support over digital frontiers (Molino et al., 2020).

Educational leaders experience comparable transitions. Online learning environments call for disciplined planning and supervision as well as empathy for students' varied learning situations. Studies reveal that leaders who mix technological expertise with human-centred communication have better sustained engagement (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2020). Technology has therefore redefined behavioural leadership rather than eliminated it.

In the 1940s, researchers identified two predominant behavioural dimensions: task-oriented behaviour (called "initiating structure") and people-oriented behaviour (called "consideration") through analysis of the Leader Behaviour Description Questionnaire (LBDQ).

Michigan Studies of Leadership: Undertaken in the 1950s, this research by Rensis Likert reinforced the two-dimensional structure, recasting them as "production-oriented" (task-focused) and "employee-oriented" (relationship-focused) behaviours. It suggested combining both improved productivity and job satisfaction.

Blake & Mouton's Managerial Grid: In 1964, this model mapped leadership styles along the axes of concern for production (task) and concern for people (relationship), identifying the "team" leader (maximum concern for both dimensions) as the most effective style.

Task-oriented leaders emphasise structure, clarity, deadlines, and performance. They define roles, set goals, and monitor progress actively. Benefits include improved productivity and efficiency; however, overreliance on this style can contribute to employee burnout and reduced morale.

People-oriented (or relationship-oriented) leadership involves empathy, communication, trust, and support. These leaders prioritise the well-being of team members and foster positive relationships. Outcomes include higher employee satisfaction, motivation, and positive team dynamics.

Meta-analytic findings indicate that task-oriented leadership tends to yield higher productivity, while people-oriented leadership promotes employee satisfaction. The effectiveness of each style often depends on context; for instance, tasks requiring precision or tight deadlines benefit from task orientation, whereas long-term development and engagement benefit from a relational approach.

Behavioural styles alone don't ensure effectiveness; context plays a crucial role. Studies show that task-oriented behaviours are more effective in smaller bureaucracies, while in larger or emotionally sensitive environments, people-oriented leadership may be more beneficial.

Forsyth's task-relationship model also highlights that sometimes neither style is necessary; conditions such as routine tasks or highly capable team members can substitute leadership behaviours entirely.

Beyond the foundational models, leadership theory has evolved to include additional behaviours such as change-oriented, participative, and transformational leadership. Yet, the task–people orientation pair remains central, with broad recognition across frameworks (Avolio et al., 2009; Yukl et al., 2002)

Education: In classroom or institutional settings, task behaviours support effective organisation (lesson planning, performance tracking), while people's behaviours build trust and engagement among students and staff.

Organisations: Leaders may need to adopt a task orientation in crisis management but shift to a people orientation for team development and retention.

Although quantitative studies have shown the effects of task and people-oriented actions, qualitative and phenomenological approaches offer a greater knowledge of the lived experiences behind these trends. Recent phenomenological investigations (Githens & Matkin, 2019; Cummings et al., 2021) investigate how leaders understand their behavioural decisions in uncertainty, thereby exposing that balancing task and Experiential rather than formulaic are relational behaviours.

Rather than as planned decisions informed by empathy, moral reasoning, and context, leaders usually characterise behavioural changes as "intuitive responses". This experiential aspect emphasises the need for phenomenological studies in leadership theory as it reflects the subjective realities of leadership conduct, therefore exposing how leaders absorb their multiple obligations to people and performance.

Hence, this study's phenomenological approach enhances current behavioural research by concentrating on how leaders see and feel this equilibrium in practical educational and organisational environments. By broadening the conversation from "what" leaders do to "how" and "why" they exhibit specific behaviours, it helps one to better appreciate leadership as a lived and changing activity.

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## Why a Phenomenological Qualitative Approach is Needed

While decades of quantitative surveys support the task–people orientation framework, few studies explore leaders' lived experiences, how they perceive, reconcile, and balance these behaviours in practice, under real pressures. This gap can be effectively addressed through a phenomenological approach, offering deeper insight into the nuanced, contextual reality of leadership behaviour.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of leaders who demonstrate task-oriented and people-oriented behaviours. Phenomenology was chosen as it allows an in-depth exploration of how individuals perceive, experience, and describe their leadership practices in real organisational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### Participants

The participants consisted of 10 organisational leaders (five from educational institutions and five from corporate organisations). The sample included principals, head teachers, department coordinators, and team managers. Selection was made through purposive sampling, focusing on individuals with at least five years of leadership experience.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that lasted between 25–30 minutes. Guiding questions included:

- How do you define effective leadership in your context?
- Can you describe a situation where task-oriented behaviours were essential?
- Can you describe a situation where people-oriented behaviours made a difference?
- How do you balance both approaches?

All interviews were audio-recorded (with participant consent) and transcribed verbatim.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed. The process involved:

- Familiarisation with data.
- Initial coding.
- Searching for themes.
- Reviewing and refining themes.
- Defining and naming themes.

- Producing the report.

Both semantic codes (explicit meanings) and latent codes (underlying assumptions) were used.

**Ethical Considerations**

Participants were informed of the research purpose, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board.

**FINDINGS**

From the data, four major themes emerged:

**Theme 1: Task-Oriented Leadership Enhances Structure and Efficiency**

Leaders consistently highlighted the importance of setting clear goals, defining roles, and monitoring progress.

*Many participants described task-oriented behaviours as "necessary for organisational discipline" and "ensuring timely outcomes."*

**Theme 2: People-Oriented Leadership Builds Trust and Motivation**

Participants reported that empathy, active listening, and open communication contributed significantly to team morale.

*Leaders emphasised that "relationships are the foundation of sustainable leadership."*

**Theme 3: The Tension Between Task and People Orientation**

Several leaders acknowledged the challenge of balancing results with relationships.

*A principal noted: "Sometimes you need to push for results, but if you lose the trust of your team, the success will not last."*

***Thematic Map***

**Theme 4: Context Shapes Leadership Behaviour**

Findings revealed that leaders often adjusted their behaviours depending on situational demands (e.g., deadline-driven environments required more task-orientation, while conflict management required people-orientation).

**DISCUSSION**

The findings reinforce the behavioural leadership theory (Ohio State and Michigan studies), which distinguished task-oriented and people-oriented behaviours as central to leadership effectiveness (Stogdill, 1974; Likert, 1961).

Task Orientation aligns with organisational needs for clarity and performance outcomes.

People Orientation resonates with transformational leadership insights, emphasising trust and human connection.

The balance echoes Blake and Mouton's (1964) Managerial Grid, where the most effective leaders demonstrate high concern for both people and production.

Unique to this study is the phenomenological evidence that leaders consciously shift behaviours depending on context, suggesting a fluid and adaptive style rather than a fixed trait.

**CONCLUSION**

This research concludes that leadership is not an either/or choice between task and people orientation. Instead, effective leadership is the ability to balance both behaviours in response to organisational needs. Task orientation ensures efficiency, while people orientation sustains morale and trust. Leaders who integrate both approaches adapt more effectively to diverse challenges.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Leadership Training Programs should include modules on balancing task and people orientation.

- Policy Makers in Education and Business should encourage leadership frameworks that value human relationships alongside productivity.
- Future Research may explore cross-cultural comparisons of leadership behaviours or extend the analysis using mixed methods to strengthen generalizability.
- Mentorship Schemes should be developed where experienced leaders model the integration of task and people orientations.

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