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Organizational trust, leadership and resistance to change in South Sudan's public sector

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Abstract
Purpose: This study examines the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between change-oriented leadership, bureaucratic culture, and employee resistance to change in South Sudan's public sector.
Methodology/Design: A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed, grounded in positivist philosophy. Data were collected from 306 public officers across three ministries in Juba using a structured questionnaire. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS software was used to test the hypothesized relationships, with bootstrapping procedures employed to assess mediation effects.
Findings: Change oriented leadership significantly reduces employee resistance to change, both directly ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.001$) and indirectly through organizational trust. Bureaucratic culture significantly increases resistance, both directly ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) and indirectly through eroding trust ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Organizational trust partially mediates both relationships, confirming its critical role as a psychological mechanism in shaping employee responses to reform initiatives.
Implications: The findings underscore the need for comprehensive reform strategies that invest in change-oriented leadership development, address bureaucratic rigidity, and prioritize trust building. Policymakers and donors should incorporate trust building components into capacity building programs alongside technical development. Improved public service delivery, enhanced governance, and strengthened institutional resilience are potential societal benefits.
Originality/Value: This study extends organizational change theories to the underexplored context of post-conflict fragile states, providing empirical evidence on the mediating role of trust in one of the world's most challenging governance environments.

Keywords: Organizational trust, change oriented leadership, bureaucratic culture, resistance to change, public sector management

Introduction

Effective public sector reform in post-conflict states hinges not only on policy design but on the management of human behavior within institutions (Andrews *et al*., 2024) [4]. Organizational change initiatives frequently fail due to employee resistance, a phenomenon well documented across developing country contexts (World Bank, 2017) [35]. In South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, the challenge is particularly acute. Governed through a system of frequent presidential decrees and elite recycling rather than structured institutional mandates, ministries often operate without clear direction, creating an environment where loyalty is prioritized over service delivery (Fast, 2022). This governance culture fosters deep distrust, as political interference undermines professionalism and public confidence in state institutions (Janneh, 2025) [21]. Within this fragile context, understanding the drivers of employee resistance is critical for implementing sustainable reforms.

Research across low- and middle-income countries consistently identifies leadership turnover, weak managerial engagement, and lack of ownership as key factors behind resistance to change (Rengo Jr., 2025) [30]. The relationship between leadership behaviors and employee responses is particularly salient in crisis contexts. Studies demonstrate that change oriented leadership directly influences employee behavior and positively affects levels of vertical trust, while bureaucratic leadership often has a significant negative impact on trust (Katsaros, 2025) [22]. Furthermore, organizational trust has been shown to have a significant negative effect on resistance to change, with researchers confirming the mediating role of trust related constructs in this relationship (Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2023) [32].

In the public sector context, the interplay between bureaucratic culture and employee attitudes presents additional complexity. Employees in bureaucratically rigid environments often report a lack of autonomy, poor communication, and reduced trust in management, which collectively undermine reform effectiveness (Barbieri *et al*., 2024) [6]. Cultural factors of trust in public organizations are intimately connected to variables such as interpersonal conflict, resistance to change, empowerment, and support for innovation (Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2023) [32]. These dynamics are amplified in post conflict settings where institutional capacity is nascent and governance structures remain fragile (Van Gorp, 2012). However, the mediating role of organizational trust, the confidence employees have in their leaders' integrity and the fairness of institutional systems, remains underexplored in South Sudan's unique post conflict public sector environment.

Problem Statement

Notwithstanding the extensive donor investment in capacity building and institutional reform, South Sudan's public institutions remain dysfunctional, characterized by weak governance, corruption, and chronic service delivery failures (Africa-Press, 2025) [5]. The country faces an enormous economic crisis due to internal conflicts, floods, and external factors that have disrupted supply chains and led to macroeconomic instability (UNDP, 2024). A growing body of evidence suggests that these failures are

fundamentally managerial rather than purely technical. Governance operates through verbal instructions and decrees rather than documented policies, leaving ministries directionless and employees disengaged (Auling, 2025) [5]. Budget execution data reveals sharp disparities between approved allocations and actual spending, with the health sector using less than one third of its approved budget and accountability institutions spending just 4 percent, while security and infrastructure vastly overspend (Africa-Press, 2026) [1].

More critically, rapid leadership turnover and political interference have eroded employee trust in management, creating an environment where resistance to change is the norm (Channel Africa, 2026) [12]. Research on public sector reforms in fragile states indicates that introducing new procedures often fails due to entrenched hierarchical cultures, informal practices, and deep-seated skepticism about leaders' genuine commitment to change (Cai *et al*., 2018) [11]. In South Sudan, the situation is compounded by economic pressures and weak labor protections that force employees to tolerate toxic work environments while harboring resentment (Deng *et al*., 2025) [15]. Salaries remain low, unpredictable, and frequently delayed, directly affecting service delivery and employee morale (Africa-Press, 2026) [1].

However, the specific mechanisms through which organizational trust influences employee resistance to change in South Sudan's public sector remain largely unexamined. Studies in other contexts have demonstrated that trust serves as a critical psychological condition for fostering employee engagement, and that bureaucratic leadership can hinder trust while change oriented leadership fosters it (Bhayana *et al*., 2025) [7]. Without empirical evidence on how trust mediates the relationship between leadership behaviors, institutional culture, and employee resistance, reform efforts will continue to be designed without addressing the fundamental psychological and organizational barriers to change (Hadavinejad & Ebadi, 2024) [18]. This study therefore investigates the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between change-oriented leadership, bureaucratic culture, and employee resistance to change in South Sudan's public institutions, using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to test these relationships quantitatively.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant theoretical and practical implications for public sector management in post-conflict contexts. Theoretically, it extends knowledge on organizational change by empirically testing the mediating role of organizational trust in a fragile state, an area largely neglected in management literature (Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2018 [11]; Van Gorp, 2012). While prior research has examined leadership, culture, and resistance in stable contexts (Cai *et al*., 2018; Katsaros, 2025) [11, 22], this study uniquely applies these frameworks to South Sudan's volatile public sector, offering insights into how trust functions in extreme institutional settings (Deng *et al*., 2025) [15]. Practically, the findings provide empirical justification for investing in trust building mechanisms alongside technical capacity programs (World Bank, 2017) [35], enabling donors and policymakers to design interventions that address psychological barriers to change (Andrews *et al*., 2012; UNDP, 2024) [4], ultimately contributing to improved service delivery in one of the world's most challenging governance environments (Africa-Press, 2025) [5].

Literature Review

Organizational Trust

Organizational trust refers to employees' willingness to be vulnerable to leaders based on perceived integrity, competence, and benevolence (Mayer *et al*., 1995) [26]. Trust facilitates cooperation and enhances commitment to organizational goals (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) [14], mediating the relationship between leadership and employee openness to change (Cai *et al*., 2018; Katsaros, 2025) [11, 22]. In fragile states with pervasive political interference, organizational trust is often low, creating significant barriers to reform (Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2018). When employees distrust leaders, they view change as threatening rather than opportunistic (Van Gorp, 2012).

Leadership

Change oriented leadership, characterized by articulating vision, encouraging innovation, and challenging existing practices, influences employee attitudes by creating psychological safety and shared purpose (Cai *et al*., 2018; Katsaros, 2025) [11, 22]. Leadership turnover and weak managerial engagement are primary drivers of resistance (Deng *et al*., 2025) [15]. In post-conflict contexts like South Sudan, leaders demonstrating genuine commitment and transparent communication can significantly reduce resistance (Bhayana *et al*., 2025; Rengo Jr., 2025) [7, 30].

Resistance to Change

Resistance refers to employee behaviors opposing or undermining change initiatives (Bovey & Hede, 2001) [9], manifesting passively (foot-dragging) or actively (complaints, sabotage) (Dent & Goldberg, 1999). Resistance is a natural response to perceived threats to security or established routines (Lewin, 1947) [24]. In bureaucratically rigid environments, resistance is pronounced due to psychological attachment to existing procedures (Barbieri *et al*., 2024) [6], compounded by low trust and skepticism about reform commitment (Andrews *et al*., 2012). In South Sudan's decree-based governance system, resistance has become the norm (Africa-Press, 2026) [1].

Theoretical Underpinning and Hypotheses Development

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) [8] posits that trust emerges when employees perceive fair treatment and transparent leadership, shaping attitudes toward organizational change (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) [14]. In South Sudan's decree-based governance context, these exchange dynamics are particularly salient in shaping reform attitudes (Fast, 2011) [16]. Second, Lewin's Change Management Model (Lewin, 1947) [24] explains resistance through its three stages: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Resistance occurs primarily during unfreezing when employees confront abandoning established routines, a process particularly challenging in bureaucratically rigid environments (Burnes, 2004; Barbieri *et al*., 2024). Third, Mayer *et al*.'s (1995) [6, 10, 26] Model of Organizational Trust provides the theoretical mechanism linking leadership and culture to resistance, identifying

ability, benevolence, and integrity as core trust dimensions. When employees perceive leader competence, genuine care, and ethical adherence, trust is fostered; conversely, rigid bureaucratic cultures erode trust and heighten resistance (Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2018).

Hypotheses Development

Leadership and Employee Resistance to Change

Change oriented leadership is characterized by leaders who articulate a compelling vision for reform, encourage innovation, and challenge the status quo (Katsaros, 2025) [22]. In public sector contexts, such leadership behaviors have been shown to reduce employee resistance by creating a sense of shared purpose and psychological safety (Cai *et al*., 2018) [11]. Employees are more likely to embrace change when they perceive their leaders are genuinely committed to improvement rather than merely complying with external donor demands (Van Gorp, 2024) [34]. In South Sudan's volatile institutional environment, where frequent leadership turnover undermines continuity, change oriented leadership becomes even more critical in overcoming employee skepticism toward reform initiatives (Rengo Jr., 2025) [30]. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, employees reciprocate change oriented leadership with reduced resistance and increased cooperation (Deng *et al*., 2025) [15]. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Change oriented leadership has a significant negative effect on employee resistance to change.

Bureaucratic Culture and Employee Resistance to Change

Bureaucratic cultures are characterized by rigid adherence to formal rules, hierarchical authority structures, and resistance to innovation (Barbieri *et al*., 2024) [6]. While bureaucratic systems provide stability and predictability, they often hinder organizational change by reinforcing established routines and discouraging experimentation (Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2023) [32]. In developing country contexts, bureaucratic cultures are frequently associated with informal practices, patronage networks, and resistance to accountability mechanisms (Andrews *et al*., 2024) [4]. Employees in bureaucratically rigid environments develop psychological attachment to existing procedures, perceiving change as a threat to their status and security (Bhayana *et al*., 2025) [7]. This is particularly relevant in South Sudan, where documented policies are often absent and governance operates through verbal instructions, creating an environment where employees resist formalization efforts (Auling, 2025) [5]. Lewin's Change Model suggests that bureaucratic cultures make the unfreezing stage particularly difficult, as employees resist abandoning familiar routines even when they are dysfunctional (Burnes, 2004) [10]. Consequently, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Bureaucratic organizational culture has a significant positive effect on employee resistance to change.

Leadership, Culture and Organizational Trust

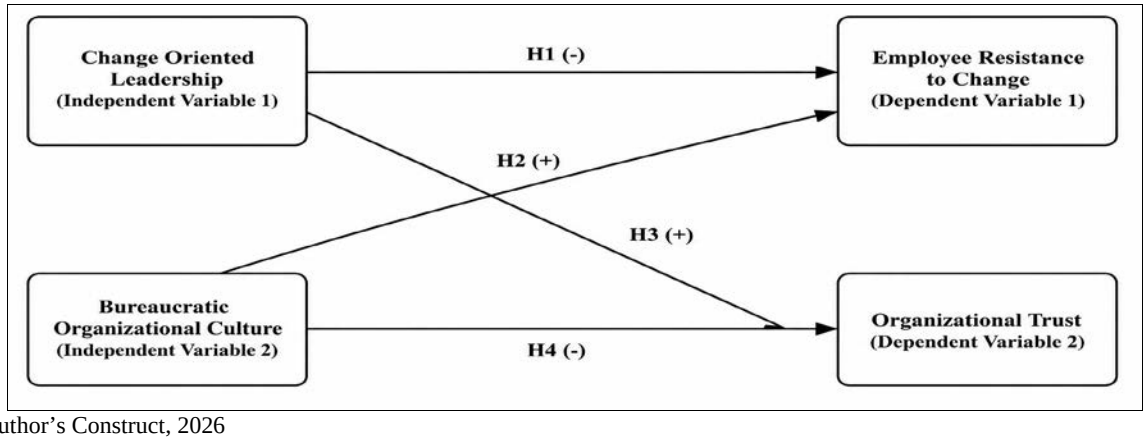
Organizational trust represents employees' confidence in their leaders' integrity, competence, and fairness (Mayer *et al*., 1995) [26]. Change oriented leadership directly fosters trust by demonstrating commitment to employee welfare, communicating transparently, and involving staff in decision making processes (Katsaros, 2025) [22]. When leaders exhibit changes-oriented behaviors, employees perceive them as capable and benevolent, thereby increasing trust in management (Cai *et al*., 2018) [11]. Conversely, bureaucratic cultures that prioritize rigid rule enforcement over employee empowerment systematically undermine trust (Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2018). Employees in highly bureaucratic environments experience reduced autonomy, poor communication, and perceptions of unfair treatment, all of which erode trust in institutional leadership (Barbieri *et al*., 2024) [6]. In South Sudan's public sector, where political interference and patronage networks are pervasive, bureaucratic cultures may exacerbate distrust by reinforcing perceptions that promotions and resource allocation are based on loyalty rather than merit (Africa-Press, 2025). Drawing on Mayer *et al*.'s (1995) [5, 26] trust model, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Change oriented leadership has a significant positive effect on organizational trust.

H4: Bureaucratic organizational culture has a significant negative effect on organizational trust.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence discussed, this study proposes a conceptual framework examining the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between change-oriented leadership, bureaucratic culture and employee resistance to change in South Sudan's public sector. Figure 1 presents the framework



Source: Author's Construct, 2026

Fig 1: Conceptual Framework Showing the Hypothesized Relationships among Change-Oriented Leadership, Bureaucratic Organizational Culture, Employee Resistance to Change, and Organizational Trust.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study, illustrating the hypothesized relationships among the key variables. The framework shows that change-oriented leadership is expected to have a negative effect on employee resistance to change H1 and a positive effect on organizational trust H3. It also proposes that bureaucratic organizational culture has a positive effect on employee resistance to change H2 and a negative effect on organizational trust H4. The directional arrows represent the proposed causal relationships that will be tested empirically in the study.

Methodology

Research Philosophy

This study adopted a positivist research philosophy, grounded in the ontological assumption that reality is objective and exists independently of human perception, and the epistemological assumption that knowledge can be acquired through systematic observation and empirical measurement (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020) [2]. Positivism emphasizes hypothesis testing, quantifiable variables, and numerical data to establish causal relationships (Noordin, 2011) [27]. This orientation was appropriate as the study sought to test hypothesized relationships using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which requires objective measurement (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020) [2].

Research Design

A cross-sectional quantitative research design was employed. This design is suitable for examining relationships between variables at a single point in time and is consistent with positivist research traditions. Cross-sectional designs have been successfully utilized in recent public sector research in South Sudan, demonstrating their feasibility in this context (World Bank, 2017) [35].

Sample Size and Justification

The target sample size was 320 respondents, justified by established SEM guidelines. SEM commonly requires samples ranging from 200 to 400 for models with 10 to 15 indicators (Hair *et al*., 2010). Stevens (1996) [19, 31] recommends at least 15 cases per indicator. With approximately 20 indicators across four latent variables, the required sample was 300, considered "good" for quantitative analysis (Comrey & Lee, 1992) [13]. The target of 320 provided sufficient statistical power and accounted for potential non-response.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population comprised civilian public officers in selected ministries of the Government of South Sudan in Juba. Approximately 61% are classified staff (World Bank, 2017) [35]. A stratified random sampling technique ensured representation across ministries and professional cadres. Respondents were drawn from the Ministry of Public Service, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Education (World Bank, 2017) [35].

Data Collection Instrument

A self-administered structured questionnaire was developed using established scales adapted from prior research. The questionnaire comprised four sections:

Change Oriented Leadership - measured using validated leadership scales adapted from Katsaros (2025) and Cai *et al*. (2018) [11, 22], Bureaucratic Organizational Culture - measured using scales from Barbieri *et al*. (2024) [6] and Sułkowski & Chmielecki (2018), Organizational Trust - measured using Mayer *et al*.'s (1995) [26] trust scale and finally, Employee Resistance to Change - measured using scales adapted from Bovey & Hede (2001) and Deng *et al*. (2025) [9, 15]. All items used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree". Demographic variables (age, gender, tenure, education level, and classification status) were collected as control variables.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through paper-based questionnaires administered during staff meetings or with assistance from department heads. This method was appropriate given South Sudan's unreliable internet connectivity. The questionnaire was administered in English, which is the official language of government business in South Sudan. Permission was sought from relevant ministry authorities prior to data collection.

Common Method Bias

To address common method bias (Podsakoff *et al*., 2003), procedural and statistical remedies were employed. Procedurally, respondent anonymity was guaranteed, temporal and psychological separation of measures was implemented, and validated scales were used (Podsakoff *et al*., 2012) [28]. Statistically, Harman's Single Factor Test was conducted, and the Common Latent Factor Method was employed in SEM to estimate method effects (Podsakoff *et al*., 2012) [28].

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with AMOS software. Analysis proceeded in two stages: Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) assessed the measurement model, and path analysis tested the structural model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Hair *et al*., 2010) [3, 19]. Fit indices examined included CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR. Mediation effects were tested using bootstrapping with 5000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) [29].

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality of responses was guaranteed. Participation was voluntary and respondents had the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 306 valid questionnaires were obtained from 320 distributed, representing a response rate of 95.6%. The demographic characteristics of respondents are presented below.

Gender Distribution: The sample comprised 189 males (61.8%) and 117 females (38.2%), reflecting the broader composition of South Sudan's public service where males dominate particularly in senior positions (World Bank, 2017) [35].

Age Distribution: Respondents' ages ranged from 22 to 62 years, with a mean age of 41.3 years. The majority (38.9%) fell within the 36 to 45 years bracket, followed by 26 to 35

years (27.1%), 46 to 55 years (21.2%), above 55 years (7.5%), and 18 to 25 years (5.2%).

Educational Attainment: The majority held a bachelor's degree (62.4%), while 18.3% possessed a master's degree or higher. Diploma holders constituted 13.1%, and secondary education accounted for 6.2%.

Tenure and Work Experience: Work experience ranged from 2 to 38 years, with a mean tenure of 12.7 years. The largest proportion (35.6%) had served between 10 and 19 years, followed by 5 to 9 years (28.1%), less than 5 years (18.6%), and 20 years or more (17.6%).

Ministry Representation: Respondents were drawn from the Ministry of Public Service (42.5%), Ministry of Finance (31.4%), and Ministry of Education (26.1%).

Professional Cadre**:** Classified staff constituted 68.3% of respondents, while unclassified staff accounted for 31.7%, aligning with national payroll data (World Bank, 2017) [35]. These demographic characteristics indicate that the sample is representative of South Sudan's public sector workforce, comprising experienced, educated employees across key governance ministries.

Descriptive Analysis of Study Variables

Following the demographic analysis, descriptive statistics for the four main study variables were computed. Mean scores, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values, skewness and kurtosis were calculated for each construct IN Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variables	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Change Oriented Leadership	306	2.87	1.12	1.00	4.80	0.21	-0.58
Bureaucratic Organizational Culture	306	3.92	0.94	1.40	5.00	-0.35	-0.42
Organizational Trust	306	2.65	1.08	1.00	4.80	0.32	-0.51
Employee Resistance to Change	306	3.78	0.96	1.20	5.00	-0.28	-0.47

Source: Field Data, 2026

Note: N = 306 respondents. All variables were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). SD = Standard Deviation; Min = Minimum; Max = Maximum.

As shown in Table 1, change oriented leadership recorded a moderate to low mean score of 2.87 (SD = 1.12), suggesting employees perceive leaders as not strongly demonstrating visionary or innovative behaviors (Auling, 2025; Fast, 2011) [5, 16]. Bureaucratic organizational culture recorded the highest mean of 3.92 (SD = 0.94), indicating employees perceive their organizations as rigid, hierarchical, and rule bound (World Bank, 2017; Barbieri *et al*., 2024 [6, 35]; Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2018). Organizational trust recorded the lowest mean of 2.65 (SD = 1.08), reflecting eroded employee confidence in leadership integrity and institutional fairness due to political interference and rapid turnover (Channel Africa, 2026; Rengo Jr., 2025 [12, 30]; Van Gorp, 2012). Employee resistance to change recorded a mean of 3.78 (SD = 0.96), indicating relatively high resistance to reform initiatives (Africa-Press, 2026; Cai *et al*., 2018; Deng *et al*., 2025) [1, 11, 15]. Skewness and kurtosis values for all variables were within the acceptable range of ±2, confirming normal distribution and suitability for SEM analysis (Hair *et al*., 2010; Kline, 2016) [19, 23].

Measurement Model Assessment

Prior to testing the structural relationships among the constructs, the measurement model was assessed through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to evaluate the psychometric properties of the measurement scales. The assessment examined construct validity, reliability, and model fit.

Construct Validity

Construct validity was assessed through convergent and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was evaluated using factor loadings, Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and Composite Reliability (CR). As shown in Table 2, all factor loadings exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.50, with most items loading above 0.70 (Hair *et al*., 2010) [19]. The AVE values for all constructs ranged from 0.61 to 0.74, exceeding the recommended minimum of 0.50, indicating that each construct explained more than half of the variance in its indicators (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) [17]. Composite Reliability values ranged from 0.83 to 0.91, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70, confirming internal consistency reliability (Hair *et al*., 2010) [19].

Table 2: Convergent Validity and Reliability

Construct	CR	AVE	Range of Factor Loadings
Change Oriented Leadership	0.89	0.68	0.62 - 0.84
Bureaucratic Organizational Culture	0.83	0.61	0.58 – 0.79
Organizational Trust	0.91	0.74	0.71 - 0.86
Employee Resistance to Change	0.87	0.65	0.60 - 0.82

Note: CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which requires that the square root of the AVE for each construct should be greater than its correlations with other constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) [17]. As shown in Table 3, the square roots of AVEs (diagonal values) were all greater than the off-diagonal correlations, confirming discriminant validity among the constructs.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Change Oriented Leadership	0.82			
2. Bureaucratic Organizational Culture	-0.41	0.78		
3. Organizational Trust	0.58	-0.49	0.86	
4. Employee Resistance to Change	-0.45	0.52	-0.61	0.81

Note: Diagonal values (bold) represent the square root of AVE; off-diagonal values represent correlations between constructs.

Model Fit

The measurement model was assessed using multiple fit indices. The results indicated a good fit between the measurement model and the observed data. As presented in

Table 4, the Chi-square statistic was significant (χ^2 = 384.67, df = 164, p < 0.001), which is expected with larger sample sizes (Hair *et al*., 2010) [19]. However, other fit indices indicated acceptable model fit: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.94, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.93, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.06 (90% CI: 0.05 - 0.07), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.05. These values meet the recommended thresholds of CFI and TLI ≥ 0.90, RMSEA ≤ 0.08, and SRMR ≤ 0.08, confirming adequate model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Hair *et al*., 2010) [19, 20].

Table 4: Measurement Model Fit Indices

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold	Reference
Chi-square (χ^2)	384.67	--	--
Degrees of freedom (df)	164	--	--
p-value	< 0.001	--	--
CFI	0.94	≥ 0.90	Hu & Bentler (1999) [20]
TLI	0.93	≥ 0.90	Hu & Bentler (1999) [20]
RMSEA	0.06	≤ 0.08	Hair *et al*. (2010) [19]
SRMR	0.05	≤ 0.08	Hu & Bentler (1999) [20]

Note: CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Following the confirmation of adequate measurement model fit, the structural model was evaluated to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs. The structural model assessed both the direct effects of change oriented leadership and bureaucratic organizational culture on employee resistance to change, as well as the mediating role of organizational trust. The structural model demonstrated good fit with the data (χ^2 = 412.38, df = 168, p < 0.001; CFI = 0.93; TLI = 0.92; RMSEA = 0.06; SRMR = 0.06), indicating that the proposed model adequately represented the relationships among the constructs.

Direct Effects

The path coefficients and significance levels for the hypothesized direct relationships are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Hypothesis Testing Results (Direct Effects)

Hypothesis	Path	B	SE	t-text	p-value	Decision
H1	Change Oriented Leadership → Employee Resistance to Change	-0.31	0.06	-5.17	< 0.001	Supported
H2	Bureaucratic Organizational Culture → Employee Resistance to Change	0.38	0.05	7.60	< 0.001	Supported
H3	Change Oriented Leadership → Organizational Trust	0.48	0.05	9.60	< 0.001	Supported
H4	Bureaucratic Organizational Culture → Organizational Trust	-0.42	0.05	-8.40	< 0.001	Supported

Note: β = Standardized coefficient; SE = Standard Error; p-values are two-tailed.

Hypothesis 1: posited that change oriented leadership has a significant negative effect on employee resistance to change. The results supported this hypothesis (β = -0.31, t = -5.17, p < 0.001), indicating that higher levels of change oriented leadership were associated with lower employee resistance to change.

Hypothesis 2: posited that bureaucratic organizational culture has a significant positive effect on employee resistance to change. The results supported this hypothesis (β = 0.38, t = 7.60, p < 0.001), indicating that higher levels of bureaucratic culture were associated with greater employee resistance to change.

Hypothesis 3: posited that change oriented leadership has a significant positive effect on organizational trust. The results supported this hypothesis (β = 0.48, t = 9.60, p < 0.001), indicating that change oriented leadership significantly enhanced employee trust in management.

Hypothesis 4: posited that bureaucratic organizational culture has a significant negative effect on organizational trust. The results supported this hypothesis (β = -0.42, t = -8.40, p < 0.001), indicating that bureaucratic cultures significantly eroded employee trust in management.

Indirect Effects and Mediation

To test the mediating role of organizational trust, bootstrapping procedures with 5000 resamples were employed (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) [29]. The indirect effects and their significance are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Indirect Effects (Mediation)

Path	Indirect Effect	SE	95% CI	p-value
Change Oriented Leadership → Organizational Trust → Employee Resistance to Change	-0.29	0.24	[-0.37, -0.21]	< 0.001
Bureaucratic Organizational Culture → Organizational Trust → Employee Resistance to Change	0.31	0.04	[0.23, 0.39]	< 0.001

Note: SE = Standard Error; CI = Confidence Interval; Bootstrapping with 5000 resamples.

The indirect effect of change oriented leadership on employee resistance through organizational trust was significant (β = -0.29, p < 0.001, 95% CI: -0.37 to -0.21), confirming that organizational trust partially mediates this relationship. Similarly, the indirect effect of bureaucratic organizational culture on employee resistance through organizational trust was significant (β = 0.31, p < 0.001, 95% CI: 0.23 to 0.39), confirming partial mediation.

Discussion of Findings

This study examined the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between change-oriented leadership, bureaucratic culture, and employee resistance to change in South Sudan's public sector. The findings offer important theoretical and practical insights into organizational change dynamics in fragile state environments.

Influence of Change Oriented Leadership on Resistance to Change

The results supported Hypothesis 1, confirming that change oriented leadership has a significant negative effect on employee resistance to change (β = -0.31, p < 0.001). This finding is consistent with prior research demonstrating that leaders who articulate a compelling vision, encourage innovation, and challenge existing practices effectively reduce employee resistance (Katsaros, 2025; Cai *et al*., 2018) [11, 22]. In South Sudan's public sector context, where decree-based governance and political interference undermine institutional stability, change oriented leadership emerges as a critical factor in fostering employee openness to reform. The findings align with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) [8], suggesting that when employees perceive leaders as committed to improvement and genuinely concerned about organizational welfare, they reciprocate with reduced resistance and increased cooperation (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) [14]. This is particularly significant in South Sudan, where frequent leadership turnover has created widespread skepticism about leaders' commitment to genuine reform (Rengo Jr., 2025) [30]. The results suggest that leaders who demonstrate consistency, transparency, and genuine commitment to change can overcome employee skepticism and reduce resistance.

Influence of Bureaucratic Culture on Resistance to Change

The results supported Hypothesis 2, confirming that bureaucratic organizational culture has a significant positive effect on employee resistance to change (β = 0.38, p < 0.001). This finding is consistent with research indicating that bureaucratically rigid environments characterized by hierarchical structures, rigid rules, and resistance to innovation heighten employee opposition to change initiatives (Barbieri *et al*., 2024 [6]; Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2018). In South Sudan, where governance operates through verbal instructions and informal practices rather than documented policies, bureaucratic cultures are deeply entrenched (World Bank, 2017; Auling, 2025) [5, 35]. The findings support Lewin's Change Management Model (Lewin, 1947) [24], suggesting that bureaucratic cultures make the unfreezing stage particularly challenging, as employees cling to familiar procedures even when they are ineffective (Burnes, 2004) [10]. Employees in such environments develop psychological attachment to existing routines, perceiving change as a threat to their status and security (Bhayana *et al*., 2025) [7]. The high mean score for bureaucratic culture (3.92) observed in this study underscores the pervasiveness of rigid organizational structures in South Sudan's public sector, explaining why reform initiatives frequently encounter strong employee opposition (Africa-Press, 2026) [1].

Relationship between Leadership, Culture and Organizational Trust

The results supported Hypotheses 3 and 4, confirming that change oriented leadership positively influences organizational trust (β = 0.48, p < 0.001), while bureaucratic culture negatively influences organizational trust (β = -0.42, p < 0.001). These findings align with Mayer *et al*.'s (1995) [26] Model of Organizational Trust, which identifies ability, benevolence, and integrity as core dimensions of trustworthiness. Change oriented leaders foster trust by demonstrating competence in implementing reforms (ability), genuinely caring about employee welfare (benevolence), and adhering to ethical principles (integrity) (Katsaros, 2025) [22]. Conversely, bureaucratic cultures that prioritize rigid rule enforcement over employee empowerment systematically erode trust (Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2018). In South Sudan's context, where political interference and patronage networks are pervasive, bureaucratic cultures exacerbate distrust by reinforcing perceptions that promotions and resource allocation are based on loyalty rather than merit (Africa-Press, 2026) [1]. The low mean scores for organizational trust (2.65) observed in this study reflects the erosion of employee confidence in leadership integrity and institutional fairness, consistent with the characterization of South Sudan's governance environment as volatile and unpredictable (Channel Africa, 2026; Van Gorp, 2024) [12, 34].

The Mediating Role of Organizational Trust

A key contribution of this study is the confirmation of organizational trust as a significant mediator in the relationships between leadership, culture, and resistance to change. The indirect effects of change oriented leadership on resistance through trust (β = -0.29, p < 0.001) and bureaucratic culture on resistance through trust (β = 0.31, p < 0.001) were both significant, indicating partial mediation. These findings suggest that trust serves as a critical psychological mechanism through which leadership behaviors and organizational culture shape employee responses to change (Cai *et al*., 2018; Deng *et al*., 2025) [11, 15]. When employees trust their leaders and institutions, they are more likely to embrace change initiatives, viewing them as opportunities rather than threats (Van Gorp, 2024) [34]. Conversely, when trust is eroded by bureaucratic rigidity and political interference, employees become skeptical of reform efforts, heightening resistance (Hadavinejad & Ebadi, 2024) [18]. This finding has important implications for South Sudan, where low organizational trust has become a significant barrier to effective reform implementation (World Bank, 2017) [35]. The results suggest that reform efforts must prioritize trust building alongside technical capacity development to overcome employee resistance.

Implications of the Study

Theoretical Implications

This study makes several significant theoretical contributions. First, it extends Social Exchange Theory

(Blau, 1964) [8] to the underexplored context of post-conflict fragile states, demonstrating that reciprocal exchange dynamics operate even in environments characterized by political interference and institutional instability (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) [14]. Second, it contributes to Lewin's Change Management Model (Lewin, 1947) [24] by empirically demonstrating that organizational trust facilitates the unfreezing stage of change, serving as a psychological prerequisite for employees to abandon familiar routines (Burnes, 2004) [10]. Third, it extends Mayer *et al*.'s (1995) [26] Model of Organizational Trust by validating the mediating role of trust between organizational antecedents and employee outcomes in an African post-conflict context, confirming that ability, benevolence, and integrity operate similarly in South Sudan's public sector (Katsaros, 2025 [22]; Sułkowski & Chmielecki, 2018). Fourth, it contributes to knowledge on organizational change in developing countries (Andrews *et al*., 2012; Van Gorp, 2024) [34] by providing empirical evidence on the unique challenges of implementing change in fragile states (Deng *et al*., 2025) [15]. Fifth, it contributes to public administration theory by demonstrating that rigid bureaucratic cultures can heighten resistance and undermine reform efforts in developing country contexts (Barbieri *et al*., 2024) [6].

Practical Implications

The findings offer actionable insights for public sector managers, policymakers, and international donors. For public sector managers, the study highlights the need to prioritize change oriented leadership development through training programs emphasizing vision articulation, transparent communication, and genuine commitment to employee welfare (Cai *et al*., 2018; Katsaros, 2025) [11, 22]. Managers should address bureaucratic rigidity by streamlining procedures, delegating authority, and introducing performance-based systems (World Bank, 2017) [35]. Trust building must be prioritized through fair promotions, consistent policy implementation, and employee involvement in decision-making (Mayer *et al*., 1995) [26]. Reform communication strategies should introduce changes incrementally with clear employee benefits (Deng *et al*., 2025) [15].

For policymakers, reforms should incorporate trust building components alongside technical capacity development (Andrews *et al*., 2024) [4], and address governance issues including political interference and patronage-based appointments that undermine trust (Channel Africa, 2026; Rengo Jr., 2025) [12, 30]. For international donors, capacity building programs should be reoriented to include trust building components (UNDP, 2024) [18], and institutional reforms addressing bureaucratic rigidity should be supported through sustained engagement (World Bank, 2017) [35]. For HR practitioners, employee engagement initiatives including regular feedback mechanisms and recognition programs should be designed to build trust and reduce resistance (Bhayana *et al*., 2025) [7].

Societal Implications

The findings have broader implications for South Sudanese society. Improved public service delivery can result from reduced resistance and enhanced trust, enabling employees to adopt new procedures and technologies that enhance service efficiency (World Bank, 2017) [35]. Enhanced governance and accountability can emerge when employees trust leaders and institutions, leading to greater adherence to ethical standards and accountability mechanisms (Cai *et al*., 2018) [11]. Strengthened social cohesion can result as citizens observe effective and fair public institutions, contributing to social stability and peace (Fast, 2011) [16]. Economic development can be facilitated through more efficient public institutions that create an enabling environment for private sector growth and investment (UNDP, 2024). Institutional resilience can be built through trust and adaptive leadership that enable effective crisis response (Van Gorp, 2024) [34]. Finally, empowerment of public employees through engagement and inclusion contributes to employee well-being and professional development with positive spillover effects for families and communities (Deng *et al*., 2025) [15].

Conclusion

This study investigated the mediating role of organizational trust in the relationship between change-oriented leadership, bureaucratic culture, and employee resistance to change in South Sudan's public sector. Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, Lewin's Change Management Model, and Mayer *et al*.'s Model of Organizational Trust, a conceptual framework was tested using Structural Equation Modeling with data from 306 public officers across three ministries.

The findings revealed that change oriented leadership significantly reduces employee resistance to change, both directly ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.001$) and indirectly through fostering organizational trust. Conversely, bureaucratic culture significantly increases resistance, both directly ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) and indirectly through eroding trust ($\beta = -0.42$, $p < 0.001$). Organizational trust emerged as a critical mediating mechanism, with significant indirect effects confirming partial mediation (change oriented leadership → trust → resistance: $\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.001$; bureaucratic culture → trust → resistance: $\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$).

The study makes several theoretical contributions by extending established organizational theories to the underexplored context of post-conflict fragile states, demonstrating that trust facilitates the unfreezing stage of change in bureaucratically rigid environments. Practically, the findings underscore the need for comprehensive reform strategies that invest in change-oriented leadership development, address bureaucratic rigidity, and prioritize trust building to overcome employee resistance. Societally, addressing the trust deficit contributes to improved public service delivery, enhanced governance, strengthened social cohesion, and institutional resilience.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference; future longitudinal research could track changes over time (Hair *et al*., 2010) [19]. Self-reported data may introduce bias; future studies should incorporate objective measures and multi-source data (Podsakoff *et al*., 2003, 2012) [28]. The focus on three ministries in Juba limits generalizability; future research should expand to more ministries, states, and institutions (World Bank, 2017) [35]. The study examined organizational trust in management without distinguishing hierarchical levels; future research could explore multi-level trust dynamics (Mayer *et al*., 1995) [26]. Potential moderators such as tenure and education were not examined; future studies could investigate these and political dynamics (Rengo Jr.,

2025) [30]. Quantitative methods may not capture contextual nuances; future qualitative and mixed-methods research could provide deeper insights (Van Gorp, 2024) [34]. Finally, cross-sectoral and cross-country comparisons could identify common patterns across fragile states.

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