

Transforming Problematic Employees into Contributing Members: A Strategic Framework

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Abstract

This study explores the transformation of problematic employees into contributing members within the framework of positive workplace environments. Grounded in transformational leadership theory, interpersonal relationship theory, and strengths-based psychological frameworks, the research examines how leadership behavior, emotional intelligence, and organizational culture collectively influence employee rehabilitation. Employing a qualitative multiple-case study design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 12 key informants in Cebu City, including supervisors, human resource officers, department heads, and previously problematic employees. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, revealed five major themes: leadership approaches, relationship-building and emotional dynamics, organizational culture and climate, strength-based interventions and empowerment, and employee engagement and transformation outcomes. Findings emphasize that individualized leadership, psychological safety, empathetic relationships, and recognition of employee strengths play critical roles in behavioral improvement and reintegration. The study presents a strategic, concentric framework showing how outer layers of leadership and culture support inner transformations in motivation, behavior, and organizational commitment. This model provides practical implications for human resource management, emphasizing the importance of holistic and person-centered strategies in resolving performance challenges. The research contributes to both theoretical discourse and applied practice by reframing problematic employees as potential assets whose transformation can be cultivated through structured, supportive leadership and development systems.

Keywords: Employee transformation, positive workplace environment, transformational leadership

1. Introduction

Organizational change has transformed into a complex process influenced by culture, learning, and leadership, compared to a process that is linear. Employees in modern organizations are expected to become contributors to transformation instead of simply adapting to it. However, individuals who exhibit resistance, poor performance, or disengagement are frequently viewed to be problematic employees and create problems for many businesses. These individuals could potentially be seen as unrealized potential that can be achieved through strategic interventions and thoughtful leadership, instead of being static liabilities (Santos et al., 2023). Effective transformation requires behavioral alignment and emotional engagement across all levels, based on research, in addition to structural changes (Weber et al., 2022). Accordingly, transformational leadership has become a key factor in reconnecting employees. Such leadership can encourage employees to reconsider their roles, identities, and contributions within the organization when combined with inclusive policies and training that emphasize innovation (Tan et al., 2024). Furthermore, providing opportunities for strength-based development, encouraging open communication, and establishing psychological safety are crucial strategies for empowering formerly problematic individuals to thrive. This study explores the transformation of problematic employees into valuable team members in response to the increased demand for human-centered approaches in managing underperformance. It examines the impact of organizational culture, emotional dynamics, and leadership behaviors through a qualitative lens before putting forward a strategic framework that captures the intricate, multi-layered process of employee rehabilitation. This helps to advance theoretical discussions and practical suggestions for long-term organizational growth.

Theoretical Basis

This research is based on the theoretical convergence of strengths-based psychological frameworks, interpersonal relationship theory, and transformational leadership. These frameworks provide complementary perspectives on how individuals within organizations, especially those considered problematic, can be transformed into engaged and valuable employees. This concept is based on transformational leadership theory, which highlights the role of leaders who are visionary, compassionate, and morally oriented in promoting team integration and behavioral change (Schiuma et al., 2022). When leading employees through challenging changes or performance issues, transformational leaders exhibit qualities including inspiration, individualized support, and intellectual stimulation (Christie & Tippmann, 2024). In today's psychologically demanding and technologically complex workplaces, where relational presence and emotional intelligence are essential for building trust and performance, these leadership qualities are especially important.

The lens of relationships theory, which emphasizes the significance of social connectivity, empathy, and interpersonal competency in workplace transformation, supports this leadership perspective. According to Nilsen et al. (2023), interpersonal challenges are frequently mentioned as obstacles to long-term engagement, returning to productive roles, and professional advancement. According to studies, workers who have unresolved interpersonal issues frequently perform inadequately, demonstrate opposition to authority, or disengage (Hariani & Sigita, 2022). On the other hand, leaders and settings that place a high value on inclusive behaviors, effective communication, and emotional safety can greatly improve behavioral development and relationship recovery (Akinkunmi, 2023). The study additionally includes the ideas of psychological environment and strengths-based leadership, which suggest that emphasizing an employee's inherent characteristics instead of their weaknesses improves motivation, resilience, and creativity. Employees thrive in environments where their abilities are identified, nurtured, and strategically used (Wang et al., 2023; Breevaart & van Woerkom, 2024). Chang et al. (2022) demonstrate how enhanced psychological safety and team dynamics

in a strengths-based setting have a favorable impact on creativity and performance. The effectiveness of character strengths-based interventions in improving job satisfaction, engagement, and role effectiveness across various sectors was also established by Vásquez-Pailaqueo et al. (2025) through a meta-analytic study. Finally, the study highlights how organizational systems that encourage long-term change are shaped by dynamic capacities theory. The ability of the organization to reorganize internal procedures and shift focus toward adaptive problem-solving is essential for organizational success when addressing human capital concerns, as proposed by Schulze & Brusoni (2022). Underperforming employees can be successfully reformed when such systemic agility is combined with strategic leadership and employee-centered interventions. In synthesizing these frameworks, this study builds a strategic model that positions leadership behavior, interpersonal skill-building, and strengths development as central to transforming problematic employees into committed, high-performing contributors.

2. Statement of Objectives

This study critically investigates the role of leadership behaviors and organizational culture in fostering positive workplace environments, with a focus on how transformational leadership and positive relationship-building strategies influence the transformation of problematic workers into productive contributors. Acknowledging that employee engagement, trust, and supportive culture are central to organizational success, this research seeks to understand the mechanisms through which troubled employees can be reintegrated and empowered. To accomplish this, the study is structured around three core domains of inquiry:

1. Explore the leadership practices and interpersonal strategies used to manage and rehabilitate problematic employees;
2. Examine the influence of organizational culture, climate, and strength-based interventions on employee engagement and productivity; and
3. Develop a framework for strategic leadership and relational approaches that enable the transformation of problematic workers into valuable team members.

3. Methodology

Design

This study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore how problematic employees are transformed into contributing members through strategic leadership and organizational interventions. The design was chosen to enable an in-depth investigation of lived experiences and behavioral change within authentic workplace contexts, capturing the complexity of interpersonal dynamics and organizational influence. The study utilized the fundamental six-phase approach to thematic analysis—familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting—to direct the interpretation of narrative data. This approach was strengthened by their most recent discussion on thematic rigor and application in contemporary qualitative research. This analytical framework turned out to be particularly appropriate for research that examined the dynamic and socially constructed nature of change in organizational life since it enabled a comprehensive, methodical examination of data while maintaining contextual meaning.

Environment

This study was conducted within organizational settings in Cebu City, a significant Philippine metropolis known for its diverse institutional, commercial, and service sectors. The environments that were selected included medium-sized to large organizations in both the public and private sectors, with active human resource development programs, formal leadership hierarchies, and performance evaluation systems. These situations were specifically

selected to represent actual work environments where human interactions, corporate culture, and leadership practices have a big impact on employee engagement and change. Insights that can be applied to similarly organized businesses in other urban settings were obtained by analyzing how problematic employees are managed, supported, and reintegrated into productive roles against the backdrop of Cebu City's institutional environment.

Key Informants

The study engaged a total of twelve (12) key informants selected through purposive sampling, each holding critical roles in the management or experience of employee transformation within organizational settings in Cebu City. The participants included four (4) immediate supervisors responsible for directly managing employees with performance concerns, three (3) human resource officers involved in implementing intervention and development programs, two (2) department heads who oversaw broader team performance and disciplinary action, and three (3) employees who were previously identified as problematic but later demonstrated significant improvement and reintegration. This distribution ensured a balanced perspective from both managerial and employee viewpoints. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached, defined as the stage where no new codes or themes emerged, and redundancy in responses was observed. The inclusion of informants from varied hierarchical positions allowed for a holistic understanding of the interpersonal, procedural, and cultural dimensions that shape the transformation of problematic employees into contributing organizational members.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2024). This approach was selected for its methodological flexibility and its ability to generate rich, detailed, and nuanced accounts of qualitative data. The first phase involved familiarizing oneself with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts and recording initial observations. In the second phase, initial codes were systematically developed across the entire data set to highlight meaningful features aligned with the study's objectives. In the third phase, these codes were organized into potential themes, where patterns of shared meaning were identified and grouped. The fourth phase involved reviewing and refining the themes to ensure their coherence with both the coded extracts and the broader data corpus. In the fifth phase, each theme and sub-theme was clearly defined and named to ensure conceptual clarity. The final phase involved writing a detailed narrative report that integrated thematic interpretations with representative quotations from the participants. Manual coding was used to maintain close engagement with the data, and analytic rigor was supported through reflective memoing and careful documentation of coding decisions. The study followed established qualitative standards by ensuring credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, thereby enhancing the overall trustworthiness of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the highest ethical standards to ensure the protection, dignity, and rights of all participants. Before data collection, ethical clearance was secured from the appropriate institutional review board, and all research activities were conducted following established ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Participants were selected voluntarily and were provided with a clear explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained in written form before each interview. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and any identifying information was omitted from transcripts and reporting. Data were securely stored in encrypted digital files accessible only to the researcher. Participants were assured that the information shared would be used solely for academic purposes and treated with strict confidentiality. Furthermore, the researcher practiced

reflexivity throughout the study to minimize potential bias and ensure the respectful representation of participant experiences.

4. Results

Theme 1: Leadership Approaches in Managing Problematic Employees

Transformational leadership is essential for managing and rehabilitating problematic employees as it demonstrates moral behavior, encourages change, promotes innovation, and offers individualized assistance. According to participant narratives, leaders who live up to transformational principles perform more effectively at building trust, reintegrating underperforming employees, and enhancing employee engagement at work. This theme is broken down into four interrelated sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1: Individualized Consideration

Leaders who employ individualized consideration provide mentorship and assistance that is specific to the needs and abilities of each employee. The participants said that this method fosters trust and gives problematic employees a sense of recognition and worth. Informant 3 discussed:

“My supervisor didn’t generalize my mistakes—she sat me down, listened to my side, and assigned tasks that matched my pace. It felt like someone finally believed in my growth.”

The results suggest that providing individualized attention promotes psychological safety and trust, enabling problematic employees to feel valued and encouraged to grow professionally. According to Saraiva and Nogueiro (2025), younger employees tend to disengage when leadership does not establish a personal relationship with them, and Jesus (2024a) highlighted the importance of customized HR strategies in enhancing employee engagement. In addition to humanizing leadership, tailored support serves as a strategic instrument for behavioral change and re-engagement.

Sub-theme 2: Inspirational Motivation

The ability of a leader to inspire people toward common objectives by articulating a compelling vision is known as inspirational motivation. Being reminded of the team's overarching goal and receiving praise for small achievements, according to a number of participants, helped them refocus their attention and dedication. Informant 6 mentioned:

“Even though I was struggling, my manager told me, ‘I know you can rise above this because I’ve seen what you can do.’ That kept me going.”

By fostering a sense of purpose, optimism, and recognition, inspirational motivation has become an effective instrument for refocusing employee attention toward common objectives. This supports the findings of Jesus (2024b), who discovered that human capital practices that encourage and recognize employees motivate them in demanding work environments, and George (2024), who emphasizes the transformative power of visionary leadership in fostering commitment and resilience. Leaders encourage problematic employees to redefine their positions and aim for significant improvements by fostering a belief in their potential.

Sub-theme 3: Intellectual Stimulation

This sub-theme captures the role of leaders in challenging problematic employees to think critically, solve problems creatively, and take initiative. Participants noted that they were encouraged to find solutions and reflect on their behaviors in non-punitive environments. Informant 4 explained:

“Instead of just scolding me, my team leader asked me how I would solve the issue if I were in his position. That shift in thinking made a big impact.”

Intellectual stimulation encourages accountability by enabling employees to solve problems and think critically without being concerned about facing consequences. This supports the findings of Jesus (2024c), who highlighted the importance of tailored training in changing workplace conduct, and Kuo et al. (2022), who discovered that transformational leadership fosters creativity when staff members feel accountable and trusted. Leaders foster an environment where problematic employees can develop their understanding and initiative by promoting reflection and independence.

Sub-theme 4: Idealized Influence

Idealized influence pertains to the leader's ability to serve as a role model through ethical conduct, integrity, and consistency. Participants shared how witnessing their leaders uphold values like fairness and transparency inspired a desire to emulate those behaviors. Informant 4 shared:

“When you see your boss doing the right thing even when it’s hard, you start asking yourself, ‘What’s stopping me from doing better too?’”

Idealized influence encourages self-reflection and behavioral alignment among employees by serving as an example of moral behavior, honesty, and consistency. Jesus et al. (2025) observed that leadership that preserves explicit organizational principles favorably shapes employees' enjoyment and performance. Li et al. (2025) also found that ethical behavior is reinforced by authentic role modeling when it is based on transparency. By setting an example rather than using force, leaders who conduct themselves according to the values they advocate can motivate even problematic employees to change.

Theme 2: Relationship-Building and Emotional Dynamics

The quality of interpersonal interactions at work is a key factor in the successful transformation of problematic employees. Beyond technical leadership techniques, participants stressed that the emotional environment created by communication, empathy, and trust had a big impact on employee rehabilitation. This theme highlights the role of emotional intelligence and social connection in driving behavioral change and is explored through four interconnected sub-themes.

Sub-theme 1: Trust and Psychological Safety

Trust and psychological safety were described by participants as essential foundations for change. Problematic employees were more responsive to guidance when they felt secure and not judged. Leaders who fostered non-threatening environments allowed individuals to reflect, admit mistakes, and take proactive steps toward improvement. Informant 7 conveyed:

“What changed me was knowing I could talk to my manager without fear of being embarrassed in front of the team. That safety helped me open up and take responsibility.”

Trust and psychological safety emerged as vital enablers of behavioral change, allowing problematic employees to reflect openly and take responsibility without fear of embarrassment or punishment. This aligns with Jesus (2024d), who emphasized that supportive environments foster accountability within high-pressure work systems, and with Yevtushenko et al. (2022) and Spomer (2022), who highlight psychological safety as a key driver of growth, learning, and performance across diverse settings. Leaders who cultivate such spaces effectively reduce defensiveness and promote constructive engagement.

Sub-theme 2: Open Communication

Participants highlighted open and honest communication as a powerful driver of change. Regular feedback, non-confrontational conversations, and active listening practices allowed

problematic employees to understand expectations better and adjust their behavior accordingly. Informant 2 communicated:

“What helped me most was how my supervisor talked to me. It wasn’t aggressive or vague—just honest, clear, and respectful.”

Open communication proved instrumental in fostering trust and behavioral alignment, as participants responded positively to clear, respectful, and non-confrontational dialogue. This finding aligns with Basilisco and Jesus (2024), who emphasized the role of transparent communication in enhancing service quality and employee responsiveness, and is further supported by Mgbe-Ordinma and Aríjeníwà (2024) and Oloba et al. (2024), who highlight open dialogue as a cornerstone of trust-building and organizational resilience. Leaders who prioritize honest, consistent communication enable problematic employees to better understand expectations and feel more accountable to change.

Sub-theme 3: Empathy and Support

The expression of empathy by leaders had a profound impact on workers dealing with personal or professional struggles. Participants expressed that knowing someone genuinely cared about their well-being increased their motivation to change and improved their emotional resilience. Informant 9 narrated:

“There was a time I was close to resigning, but my supervisor asked me if everything was okay, not just about work, but about me as a person. That mattered a lot.”

Empathetic leadership significantly influenced employee motivation and emotional resilience, especially for those navigating personal or professional hardships. This is supported by Jesus et al. (2024e), who emphasized the human dimension of leadership amidst digital transformation, and by Beiki Demneh et al. (2023), who identified empathy as a core component of engaging leadership. As Belasen and Bertola (2024) also noted, authentic care fosters connection, enabling employees to re-engage and thrive within supportive environments.

Sub-theme 4: Mentorship and Peer Support

Informants pointed to mentorship and peer support as instrumental in sustaining long-term transformation. Having colleagues who offered guidance, encouragement, and accountability created a sense of belonging and decreased feelings of isolation among problematic workers. Informant 5 narrated:

“A teammate who once went through the same thing mentored me. It felt less lonely, and I started to see that improvement was possible.”

Mentorship and peer support emerged as critical components of sustained employee transformation, offering emotional reinforcement and practical guidance. This finding aligns with Waters et al. (2022), who emphasized the role of collective well-being and relational networks in fostering resilience, and with Diab and Green (2024), who highlighted that peer-driven support systems contribute significantly to long-term success in challenging environments. Such informal structures help normalize struggle and create a culture of shared growth and accountability.

Theme 3: Organizational Culture and Climate

Organizational culture and climate serve as the ecosystem within which problematic workers either thrive or continue to disengage. Participants emphasized that the structure, inclusivity, and values embedded within an organization shape employees’ receptiveness to change and their sense of belonging. This theme explores how specific cultural elements contribute to employee reintegration.

Sub-theme 1: Positive Climate and Inclusion

A positive organizational climate—characterized by fairness, respect, and emotional safety—was perceived as crucial in encouraging problematic employees to become active contributors. Inclusive environments made participants feel respected regardless of their past performance. Informant 4 revealed:

“I felt like I was given a second chance without being labeled. That acceptance made me work harder to prove myself.”

A positive and inclusive organizational climate was found to be essential in fostering behavioral change among problematic employees by promoting acceptance and emotional safety. This supports Bernard and Geiger (2024), who emphasized the role of inclusive cultures in reshaping workplace identity and motivation, and Davis (2024), who highlighted internal branding and equity as key drivers of belonging in public sector organizations. When employees feel valued despite past challenges, they are more likely to re-engage and contribute meaningfully.

Sub-theme 2: Feedback Culture

A culture that embraces feedback as a tool for development rather than criticism fosters behavioral improvement. Participants shared that frequent, timely, and constructive feedback was more impactful than formal reprimands. Informant 1 disclosed:

“It wasn’t the warning letters that changed me—it was the small conversations after a task where my supervisor told me what I did right and what to work on.”

The study highlights that regular, constructive feedback plays a more effective role in transforming employee behavior than punitive measures. As shown in Frennert et al. (2022), consistent feedback embedded in routine practices enhances integration and engagement, paralleling how informal supervisory feedback normalized performance improvement among participants. While Sun et al. (2022) explored feedback in human-machine systems, their findings reinforce the broader value of timely response loops in promoting adaptive behavior and learning in dynamic environments.

Sub-theme 3: Consistency of Values and Vision

Organizations that modeled consistent leadership behaviors aligned with their core values influenced employee behavior more effectively. Participants noted that when company vision and actual practice aligned, expectations became clearer and more motivating. Informant 6 articulated:

“Our leaders don’t just talk about excellence—they show it. That consistency pushes me to level up, too.”

Consistency between organizational values and leadership behavior was found to significantly enhance employee motivation and trust. This supports Jerab and Mabrouk (2023), who emphasized the transformative impact of value-driven leadership on organizational culture, and aligns with Rahal & Farmanesh (2022), who identified trust in leadership as a key mediator between value consistency and employee engagement. When actions reflect stated principles, employees are more likely to internalize and align with organizational goals.

Sub-theme 4: Safe Spaces for Growth

The presence of spaces where employees could take risks, learn, and grow without fear of harsh judgment allowed for authentic transformation. Participants emphasized the importance of being allowed to fail and improve. Informant 7 reported:

“I was told I could make mistakes—as long as I learned from them. That’s when I started taking initiative again.”

Creating safe spaces where employees can make mistakes without fear fosters psychological security and encourages proactive learning. This is consistent with Caro-Gonzalez (2023), who emphasized that innovation thrives in cultures that tolerate risk-taking, and with Sathyajith and Sudheesh (2025), who noted that mentally calm environments support initiative and growth. When employees feel safe to fail and improve, they are more likely to engage meaningfully and contribute creatively.

Theme 4: Strength-Based Interventions and Empowerment

This theme highlights the proactive strategies used by leaders to harness and develop the inherent potential of problematic workers. Participants reported that shifting the focus from weaknesses to strengths significantly improved their self-efficacy and motivation.

Sub-theme 1: Recognition of Strengths

Identifying and affirming employees' talents gave them a renewed sense of value and purpose. This shift often marked the beginning of performance improvement. Informant 2 presented:

“When my team lead told me I had a sharp eye for detail, I started seeing myself differently.”

Recognition of employee strengths played a pivotal role in fostering self-worth and initiating behavioral improvement. This supports Imran et al. (2025), who found that appreciation significantly enhances motivation and performance, and aligns with Backstrom (2023), who emphasized that affirming individual talents activates confidence and authentic engagement. By acknowledging capabilities, leaders empower employees to reframe their identities and invest more fully in their roles.

Sub-theme 2: Growth and Learning Opportunities

Access to workshops, mentoring, and skill development programs gave employees practical tools to improve performance. Participants felt that learning opportunities signaled the organization's belief in their potential. Informant 5 voiced:

“They enrolled me in a communication workshop—that one act showed me they hadn't given up on me.”

Providing growth and learning opportunities signaled organizational trust and investment, motivating employees to improve their performance. This aligns with Mahand and Caldwell (2023), who identified developmental support as a countermeasure to disengagement behaviors like quiet quitting, and with Agustian et al. (2023), who emphasized skill development as a strategic HR approach to enhancing employee contribution and competitiveness. Learning interventions empower employees to view themselves as valuable assets capable of change.

Sub-theme 3: Job Redesign

Restructuring roles to better match an employee's skills and interests helped optimize performance and minimize conflict. This personalized approach reduced frustration and improved job satisfaction. Informant 9 reported:

“When I was moved to a role that suited my personality, I stopped feeling like I was always failing.”

Job redesign was found to be an effective strategy for aligning individual strengths with organizational needs, reducing employee frustration and improving performance. This aligns with Mak et al. (2024), who emphasized that tailoring roles to better fit personal competencies enhances satisfaction and retention, particularly in rehabilitation-focused environments. When employees are placed in roles that reflect their abilities, they are more likely to succeed and re-engage with their work.

Sub-theme 4: Empowerment through Autonomy

Giving employees ownership of their tasks fostered a sense of responsibility and pride. Participants described autonomy as both a motivator and a trust signal. Informant 8 outlined:

“When I was allowed to lead a small project, I felt accountable in a good way—it pushed me to deliver.”

Empowering employees with autonomy enhanced their sense of accountability, motivation, and ownership over outcomes. This finding aligns with Dushkova & Ivlieva (2024), who emphasized that empowerment fosters active participation and purpose-driven behavior, not only in communities but also in organizational settings. Autonomy transforms passive compliance into engaged contribution, reinforcing trust and initiative among previously disengaged employees.

Theme 5: Employee Engagement and Transformation Outcomes

This final theme captures the observable and long-term outcomes of the combined leadership strategies, cultural dynamics, and empowerment practices. Participants reflected on personal changes and organizational integration that followed their transformation journey.

Sub-theme 1: Behavioral Changes

Participants reported noticeable shifts in punctuality, communication style, task completion, and initiative. These behavioral improvements were often validated through positive feedback and team recognition. Informant 3 highlighted:

“I used to avoid responsibilities—now I volunteer first. That change didn’t happen overnight, but it’s real.”

Behavioral changes such as improved punctuality, task ownership, and proactive engagement were seen as clear markers of employee transformation. This aligns with Jones et al. (2022), who emphasized that observable behavioral indicators are essential for driving and sustaining organizational improvement, and with Chychun et al. (2023), who highlighted that change management relies on measurable shifts in employee actions to ensure long-term success. These transformations reflect not only personal growth but also the effectiveness of supportive workplace interventions.

Sub-theme 2: Motivation and Initiative

Rehabilitated employees described a renewed drive to contribute meaningfully. This motivation stemmed from positive reinforcement and a sense of belonging. Informant 10 outlined:

“Now I look forward to being part of meetings and suggesting ideas. I didn’t feel that before.”

Rehabilitated employees exhibited renewed motivation and initiative, often sparked by reinforcement and inclusion in team processes. This is supported by Nurhaeda et al. (2024), who found a strong link between motivation, creativity, and performance, and by Mdhlalose (2024), who emphasized that supportive environments and recognition drive innovative behavior. When employees feel valued, their intrinsic drive to contribute meaningfully is significantly enhanced.

Sub-theme 3: Team Integration

Transformation extended beyond individual change; participants noted improved relationships with coworkers and inclusion in team activities. Informant 6 brought up:

“There was a time no one wanted to work with me—now they ask me to join their groups.”

Improved relationships and inclusion in team activities signified the successful reintegration of previously problematic employees into the workplace community. This aligns

with Frey (2022), who highlighted that belonging is a key outcome of reintegration processes, and with Glorieux et al. (2023), who emphasized that social support and team acceptance are critical in restoring employee identity and engagement. Team integration reflects not just behavioral change, but social acceptance, marking the completion of a meaningful transformation journey.

Sub-theme 4: Long-Term Commitment and Retention

Some participants shared that their transformation experience deepened their loyalty to the organization. Being given a second chance created a desire to “give back” through loyalty and longevity. Informant 2 illustrated:

“Because they didn’t give up on me, I don’t see myself leaving anytime soon. This company became my turning point.”

Participants who experienced meaningful transformation expressed increased loyalty and a stronger intention to remain with their organizations. This is consistent with Silva et al. (2023), who found that perceived organizational support enhances job satisfaction and commitment, and with Aminizadeh et al. (2022), who linked supportive work conditions to long-term employee retention. Providing second chances not only rehabilitates performance but fosters enduring organizational commitment.

Framework Generated

The framework generated in this study encapsulates the thematic patterns identified through in-depth qualitative analysis of managerial and employee experiences. It illustrates the strategic interplay between leadership, emotional dynamics, empowerment mechanisms, and the resulting employee transformation. Grounded in participant narratives, the model offers a structured and practical pathway for organizations aiming to rehabilitate and reintegrate problematic employees into productive roles.

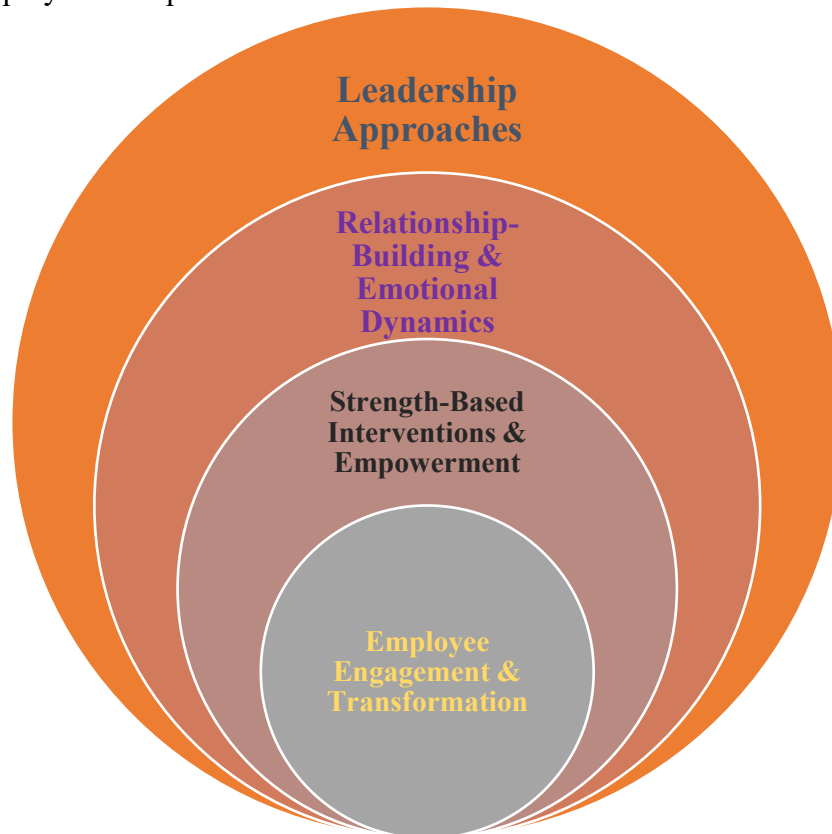


Figure 1: Strategic Framework for Transforming Problematic Employees into Contributing Members

Figure 1 presents a multi-layered, concentric model illustrating the strategic process by which problematic employees are transformed into contributing members within an organization. This framework, derived from qualitative thematic analysis, reflects an integrated, developmental progression that begins with institutional influence and moves inward toward personal change. Each layer represents a foundational domain necessary to support employee transformation, with leadership at the outermost ring and engagement outcomes at the core. At the outermost layer lies *Leadership Approaches*, signifying the pivotal influence of transformational leadership in initiating employee rehabilitation. This domain includes behaviors such as individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence. These leadership qualities set the cultural tone of the organization, build trust, and create a climate conducive to change. Participants highlighted that leadership behavior was often the catalyst that determined whether problematic employees remained disengaged or began their path toward improvement.

Enclosed within the leadership domain is the layer of *Relationship-Building and Emotional Dynamics*. This component emphasizes the interpersonal mechanisms that facilitate trust, psychological safety, open communication, and emotional connection. Participants described these dynamics as crucial in mitigating defensive behavior, encouraging reflection, and building rapport between supervisors and employees. Without strong relational foundations, technical interventions alone were perceived as ineffective. The third ring, *Strength-Based Interventions and Empowerment*, reflects the targeted developmental strategies that enable problematic employees to realize their potential. This includes the recognition of individual strengths, access to learning opportunities, job redesign, and the provision of autonomy. These practices signal to employees that they are not merely being managed, but actively supported and invested in. Participants noted that when organizations focused on what employees could do rather than what they lacked, motivation and engagement significantly improved.

At the core of the framework is *Employee Engagement and Transformation*, representing the outcome of the preceding layers. Behavioral changes, intrinsic motivation, social reintegration within the team, and long-term organizational commitment are hallmarks of this transformation. This inner circle is not an isolated process but a culmination of structural leadership, relational quality, and personal empowerment. Participants shared stories of personal and professional growth that began with acknowledgment, developed through trust and support, and solidified through opportunities to contribute meaningfully.

The concentric nature of the model reinforces the understanding that transformation is not linear, but systemic. Each layer reinforces the next, and the absence or weakness of any domain compromises the effectiveness of the overall strategy. Organizations aiming to rehabilitate and empower underperforming staff must adopt a holistic approach—one that integrates leadership excellence, relational intelligence, and developmental support.

The framework has practical implications for human resource development, management training, and organizational policy. By situating employee change within a layered context of support, this model provides a strategic roadmap for institutions seeking to transform performance challenges into opportunities for long-term contribution and loyalty.

5. Conclusion

This study has illuminated the multifaceted process of transforming problematic employees into contributing members through the development of positive workplace environments. Drawing on rich qualitative insights, the findings highlight how transformational leadership, emotional intelligence, relational strategies, and strength-based interventions converge to shape employee rehabilitation. The strategic framework generated reflects a systemic approach where

leadership excellence initiates change, emotional and relational dynamics sustain it, and targeted empowerment fosters long-term behavioral transformation and organizational commitment. Importantly, the study affirms that individual performance issues cannot be addressed in isolation from the organizational context. Cultivating an inclusive culture, promoting psychological safety, and aligning leadership behaviors with developmental goals are crucial in enabling underperforming employees to thrive. By investing in these layered interventions, organizations not only resolve immediate performance challenges but also build resilient and engaged workforces capable of sustaining excellence over time. Ultimately, this research contributes a practical, evidence-based model that organizations can adopt to support strategic human resource management and drive meaningful organizational change. It underscores the imperative for leadership-driven, empathetic, and empowering environments that recognize the potential in every employee, including those once deemed problematic.

6. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the transformation of problematic employees within positive workplace environments, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study's qualitative nature, relying on in-depth interviews with a purposive sample, may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader organizational contexts. The perspectives captured are context-specific and may not fully represent the diversity of experiences across different industries, organizational sizes, or cultural settings. Second, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias, as participants may have presented socially desirable narratives or minimized negative experiences. Lastly, the study did not include longitudinal tracking of transformation outcomes, which could have offered deeper insights into the sustainability of behavioral and attitudinal changes over time. Future research could address these limitations through mixed-methods approaches, cross-sectoral sampling, and longitudinal designs to enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

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