

Police Leadership and Organisational Performance in South Africa: Accountability, Professionalisation and Governance

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Abstract: Police leadership is a critical determinant of organisational effectiveness, particularly in complex policing environments characterised by high crime levels, public scrutiny, resource constraints, governance challenges and increasing demands for professional and accountable policing. In South Africa, concerns about police performance have increasingly raised questions about the extent to which leadership accountability, professionalisation, ethical conduct and governance contribute to the effectiveness of the South African Police Service (SAPS). This study examines the relationship between police leadership and organisational performance in South Africa, with particular attention to leadership accountability, professionalisation, governance and organisational culture. The problem addressed by the study is that, despite extensive governance structures, policing policies and professionalisation initiatives, SAPS continues to experience organisational and performance challenges. These include weaknesses in accountability, leadership instability, organisational culture, management practices and the implementation of corrective measures. The study therefore seeks to understand whether and how leadership practices contribute to or constrain effective policing. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences and perceptions of SAPS managers regarding the influence of leadership accountability, professionalisation, governance and ethical leadership on organisational performance and effective service delivery. A qualitative research approach will be employed within an interpretivist paradigm, using a phenomenological research design. Approximately 15–20 purposively selected SAPS managers and senior officials will participate in semi-structured interviews. Data will be audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti 2023, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to thematic analysis. Trustworthiness will be established through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, while ethical approval, informed consent, confidentiality and secure data management will be maintained. The anticipated key findings are that effective police leadership is likely to be associated with stronger accountability, professional conduct, organisational commitment and improved performance. Conversely, weak leadership accountability, leadership instability, inconsistent consequence management, organisational culture challenges and inadequate governance may constrain effective policing. The study further anticipates that organisational culture will influence the relationship between leadership and performance. The study concludes that effective policing requires more than leadership structures or policies; it requires competent, ethical, accountable and professional leadership capable of translating policy, resources and organisational strategies into operational results. Strengthening leadership accountability, professionalisation, governance and organisational culture is therefore essential to improving SAPS organisational performance, public confidence and effective service delivery.

Keywords: Police leadership; organisational performance; SAPS; accountability; professionalisation; governance; organisational culture; ethical leadership; policing; South Africa..

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Introduction

Effective policing is fundamentally a leadership challenge. Police organisations operate in environments characterised by high levels of risk, complex and evolving crime patterns, public scrutiny, technological change, resource constraints and strong demands for accountability. Consequently, the quality of police leadership can determine whether organisational policies, resources and personnel are translated into effective crime prevention, investigation and public service delivery. Recent international scholarship confirms that police leadership remains an underdeveloped area of research. Filstad, Karp and Rød (2025), following systematic reviews of police leadership research covering 1992–2023, identified only 197 peer-reviewed journal articles and found that much of the literature

remains leader-centred, focusing on leaders' traits and leadership styles while paying insufficient attention to organisational, structural, hierarchical and contextual conditions. They consequently call for greater attention to leadership as a collective, relational and practice-oriented process.

This research gap is particularly important in South Africa, where the effectiveness and legitimacy of the South African Police Service (SAPS) are closely connected to the quality of its leadership, governance and accountability. The constitutional mandate of SAPS requires the police service to prevent, combat and investigate crime, maintain public order, protect inhabitants and their property, and uphold and enforce the law. Meeting these

responsibilities requires leadership that is competent, ethical, accountable and capable of translating national policing priorities into effective operational practice. The current reform agenda reinforces this expectation. In April 2025, President Ramaphosa emphasised that combating corruption alone was insufficient and that SAPS needed to establish a culture of honesty, integrity, ethical behaviour and accountability as part of broader professionalisation efforts.

South Africa's National Policing Policy (NPP) 2025 provides particularly strong contemporary support for examining leadership. The policy identifies "Strong and Ethical Leadership, Management and Governance" as one of its central pillars and explicitly states that SAPS's ability to fulfil its constitutional mandate depends heavily on competent leadership and management at all levels. It further requires police leaders to serve as role models, influence organisational culture positively, promote accountability and ensure that appointments and promotions are based on competence. The policy also emphasises strengthening discipline, integrity, professionalism, skills and organisational culture.

The importance of these issues is reinforced by the 2025 confirmation that Cabinet approved the National Policing Policy on 14 May 2025. Government stated that the policy seeks to address organisational challenges through enhanced professionalism, accountability and strong ethical leadership, while strengthening oversight mechanisms and governance of policing. This makes leadership not merely an academic concern but a current national policing reform priority.

The relevance of leadership is further demonstrated by contemporary SAPS performance and governance concerns. Parliament reported in December 2024 that, despite progress in organisational reform, ineffective senior management remained at the centre of some challenges facing SAPS, particularly in driving necessary reforms. Parliament also raised concerns about senior management appointments and continuing problems within crime intelligence. These concerns suggest that organisational reform depends substantially on the capacity and effectiveness of police leadership.

Recent SAPS initiatives also demonstrate the organisation's recognition that leadership, human-resource management and professionalisation are interconnected. In its 2025 policing budget programme, SAPS reported measures aimed at improving recruitment, leadership development, career pathing, morale, discipline and professionalism. It also identified technological modernisation, forensic capacity and improved service delivery as important components of strengthening policing effectiveness.

The relationship between leadership and accountability is also receiving increasing scholarly attention in South Africa. Modise and Masogo (2024) argue that accountability leadership has potential to improve SAPS effectiveness and restore public trust, while identifying resource constraints, community participation and leadership commitment as challenges to implementing accountable leadership. This supports the argument that leadership accountability should be examined not simply as compliance with formal rules but as a practical organisational process through which leaders accept responsibility for decisions, personnel conduct, performance and institutional outcomes.

The broader policy environment similarly emphasises professional and accountable policing. The National Policing Policy envisages a

police service that is professional, knowledgeable, responsive, ethical and accountable, supported by an effective institutional and oversight architecture. The policy therefore provides a direct connection between leadership, professionalisation, governance, ethical conduct and effective policing.

Against this background, the proposed study conceptualises police leadership more broadly than a particular leadership style. It examines leadership accountability, professionalisation, governance, ethical leadership and organisational culture as interconnected dimensions that may influence organisational performance. The central proposition is that competent and ethical leadership can strengthen accountability and professionalisation, improve organisational culture and management practices, and ultimately enhance organisational performance and effective policing.

Effective Policing + Public Trust + Police Legitimacy

The significance of the study therefore lies in addressing two related gaps. First, international scholarship identifies a shortage of context-sensitive research on police leadership, particularly research that examines leadership within organisational and institutional contexts rather than focusing only on leadership styles. Second, South Africa is currently implementing reforms that explicitly place professionalisation, accountability, ethical leadership and governance at the centre of efforts to strengthen SAPS.

The central argument of this study is that effective policing cannot be achieved through policies, structures and resources alone; it requires competent, ethical, professional and accountable leadership capable of translating institutional resources and strategic priorities into measurable organisational performance and improved policing outcomes.

Background to the Study

South Africa's democratic policing framework places substantial responsibility on SAPS leadership to ensure that the organisation is capable of delivering professional, constitutional and community-centred policing. The Constitution establishes the objectives of policing, while the National Policing Policy provides a contemporary policy framework emphasising professional and quality policing, accountability, effective service delivery and public trust.

Despite this framework, SAPS continues to face significant organisational and performance challenges. The 2024/25 Annual Report acknowledges the need to restore public confidence and strengthen leadership accountability, while also emphasising intelligence-led policing, detective capability, forensic capacity, modernisation and frontline service improvement. This indicates that police performance is not simply determined by the number of personnel or resources available; it also depends on the capacity of leaders to coordinate resources, enforce standards, manage performance and implement organisational reforms.

A major concern is therefore the relationship between leadership and organisational performance. International evidence indicates that effective police leadership is associated with organisational effectiveness, but recent scholarship cautions that leadership cannot be understood independently of organisational structures and context. Moura et al. (2023), in a systematic review based on 7,041 records and 101 eligible empirical studies, found that contemporary police leadership involves a broad range of

leadership characteristics and practices and called for continued research into leadership and organisational improvement.

Filstad et al. (2025) advance this argument by suggesting that police leadership should be understood as a collective and relational process involving leaders and followers, rather than merely the characteristics of senior commanders. They specifically call for greater attention to organisational structures, hierarchy and the context in which leadership is practised. This perspective is particularly relevant to SAPS, where leadership decisions at national, provincial, district and station levels can affect operational priorities, personnel management, resource allocation and service delivery.

Leadership accountability and governance

Accountability represents another critical dimension of police leadership. Police leaders must be able to explain decisions, monitor performance, enforce standards and take corrective action where organisational failures occur. South Africa has several formal oversight mechanisms, but the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends substantially on leadership commitment to transparency, compliance and consequence management.

The recent SAPS Annual Report highlights the need to strengthen oversight and leadership accountability, while parliamentary reporting identifies continuing weaknesses in internal controls and performance reliability. The problem, therefore, may not simply be the absence of accountability structures but the extent to which leaders implement and enforce those structures.

Professionalisation and ethical leadership

Professionalisation is equally important. The National Policing Policy envisages a police service that is knowledgeable, skilled, ethical, accountable and responsive. SAPS has also introduced measures involving recruitment, leadership development, career pathing and skills allowances as part of efforts to strengthen morale, discipline and professionalism.

Professionalisation, however, requires more than training. It includes competent leadership selection, merit-based advancement, ethical standards, effective supervision, continuous professional development and credible performance-management systems. Leadership therefore becomes both the driver and guardian of professionalisation.

Leadership and organisational culture

Leadership also shapes organisational culture. Leaders influence what employees perceive to be acceptable, rewarded and sanctioned. A culture that promotes integrity, professionalism, accountability and performance can strengthen organisational effectiveness, whereas weak accountability, favouritism, unethical conduct and resistance to change may undermine it.

This relationship provides an important basis for the current study: leadership may influence organisational performance indirectly by shaping organisational culture and management practices.

Leadership and effective policing

The ultimate test of police leadership is whether it contributes to effective policing. Effective leadership should translate policy and organisational resources into measurable improvements in crime prevention, investigation, response, service delivery, employee performance and public confidence.

The current policy environment reinforces this expectation. The National Policing Policy seeks to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of policing, while the 2024/25 SAPS reporting emphasises stronger leadership, intelligence-driven policing, modernisation, forensic capability and improved frontline services.

Problem emerging from the background

The central problem is therefore not simply whether SAPS has police leaders, policies or accountability structures. The more fundamental question is whether leadership is sufficiently accountable, professional, ethical and effective to convert these institutional arrangements into improved organisational performance.

This study consequently investigates the relationship between:

The study is anchored in the following integrated relationship:

This framework proposes that effective police leadership is the foundation of organisational performance. Leadership influences the extent to which accountability mechanisms are implemented, professional standards are maintained, governance systems function effectively and ethical conduct is promoted. These leadership dimensions collectively shape organisational culture, including employee behaviour, discipline, commitment, integrity and performance orientation. A positive organisational culture can then contribute to improved organisational performance, reflected in effective crime prevention, investigation, service delivery, resource management, public confidence and police legitimacy.

The study is particularly significant because recent international scholarship identifies a shortage of context-sensitive research on police leadership, with much of the existing literature focusing on individual leadership styles rather than the broader organisational and institutional conditions in which police leadership operates. At the same time, South Africa's contemporary policing reforms place professionalisation, accountability, ethical leadership and effective governance at the centre of efforts to strengthen SAPS and improve policing outcomes.

Accordingly, the study does not examine leadership in isolation or ask merely which leadership style is most effective. Instead, it investigates how leadership accountability, professionalisation, governance and ethical leadership interact with organisational culture to influence organisational performance and ultimately effective policing.

Consolidated Conceptual Proposition

Effective police leadership, supported by strong accountability, professionalisation, governance and ethical leadership, can foster a positive organisational culture that enhances organisational performance and contributes to effective, legitimate and responsive policing. Conversely, weak leadership, poor accountability, inadequate professionalisation, governance failures and unethical practices may undermine organisational culture and constrain police performance.

Effective Policing, Public Trust and Police Legitimacy

Central argument: *SAPS cannot achieve sustainable organisational performance through policies, structures and resources alone; it requires competent, ethical, professional and accountable leadership capable of converting these institutional resources into effective policing outcomes.*

Study Aim and Purpose

Aim of the Study

The aim of the study is: To explore the influence of police leadership, leadership accountability, professionalisation and governance on organisational performance within the South African Police Service.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand how police leadership, leadership accountability, professionalisation and governance influence organisational performance within the South African Police Service (SAPS). The study will specifically examine the experiences and perceptions of SAPS senior and middle managers regarding the extent to which leadership practices contribute to effective policing, professional conduct, employee performance, accountability, service delivery and crime-fighting effectiveness.

The study is informed by South African research demonstrating that leadership, organisational culture and organisational performance are interconnected. Masilela (2018), for example, found in SAPS that transformational leadership did not necessarily have a direct effect on organisational performance but operated through organisational culture. Similarly, Pillay and Alers (2024) found that leadership styles within SAPS influence organisational culture and performance management. These findings suggest that police leadership should be examined within the broader institutional environment in which leaders operate.

The study further responds to concerns regarding police governance and professionalisation. The SAPS Panel of Experts identified professionalisation, accountability, competency-based policing and governance as central dimensions of police reform. More recent SAPS policy discussions have also emphasised leadership development, integrity, accountability, professionalisation and organisational excellence. (SAPS, 2021; SAPS, 2025).

Internationally, research supports the proposition that leadership and organisational conditions influence police behaviour and effectiveness. Li, Sun and Wu (2024), for example, examined more than 5,000 police stops across 48 police agencies and found that organisational factors, including leadership and organisational fairness, were associated with procedural justice in police-citizen encounters.

Accordingly, this study seeks to move beyond examining leadership style in isolation and instead investigate the interaction between leadership, accountability, professionalisation, governance, organisational culture and organisational performance.

Research Objectives

The study will pursue the following objectives:

1. To explore the leadership practices employed by SAPS managers and their perceived influence on organisational performance.
2. To examine how leadership accountability influences managerial effectiveness, employee performance and service delivery within SAPS.

3. To investigate the role of professionalisation, ethical leadership and leadership competence in promoting effective policing.
4. To examine how organisational governance, oversight and consequence management influence police leadership and organisational performance.
5. To explore the influence of organisational culture on the relationship between police leadership and organisational performance.
6. To identify institutional and leadership barriers that constrain effective policing within SAPS.
7. To develop recommendations for strengthening police leadership, accountability, professionalisation and governance in order to improve SAPS organisational performance.

Research Questions

Main Research Question

How do police leadership, leadership accountability, professionalisation and governance influence organisational performance within the South African Police Service?

Sub-Research Questions

1. How do SAPS managers perceive the influence of leadership practices on organisational performance?
2. How does leadership accountability influence managerial effectiveness, employee performance and service delivery?
3. What role does professionalisation play in strengthening police leadership and organisational performance?
4. How do governance, oversight and consequence-management mechanisms influence police leadership?
5. How does organisational culture mediate the relationship between police leadership and organisational performance?
6. What institutional and leadership challenges constrain effective policing within SAPS?
7. What leadership and governance interventions could strengthen organisational performance within SAPS?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses police leadership at a time when South Africa is actively pursuing professionalisation, accountability, ethical leadership and governance reforms within SAPS.

Significance to SAPS

The study will provide evidence on leadership practices that either facilitate or constrain organisational performance. The findings may assist SAPS management in strengthening leadership development, accountability systems, professionalisation, performance management and organisational culture.

Significance to policing policy

The study may contribute empirical evidence to the implementation of the National Policing Policy 2025, particularly

its emphasis on strong and ethical leadership, professionalisation, governance and accountability.

Significance to police leadership development

The research may assist in identifying the leadership competencies required at national, provincial, district and station levels. It could inform leadership-development programmes focusing on ethical decision-making, accountability, strategic management, employee motivation and organisational performance.

Significance to organisational performance

The study moves beyond measuring police effectiveness through crime statistics alone. It considers organisational performance in terms of management effectiveness, employee performance, accountability, service delivery, crime prevention, investigation, resource utilisation and public confidence.

Significance to academic research

The study contributes to the relatively limited body of research examining police leadership from an integrated organisational perspective. Recent international scholarship specifically identifies the need for more contextual and practice-oriented research on police leadership.

Significance to communities

Ultimately, improved leadership can contribute to more professional, responsive and accountable policing. The potential beneficiaries are therefore not only police managers and employees but also communities that depend on SAPS for safety, protection and access to justice.

Gaps in the Study

The literature reveals several important gaps that justify the study.

Gap 1: Limited context-specific research on police leadership

Recent international scholarship indicates that police leadership research remains relatively limited and is often concentrated on individual leadership characteristics and styles. Filstad et al. (2025) argue that greater attention should be given to the organisational and contextual conditions within which police leadership occurs.

This study addresses the gap by examining police leadership within the specific institutional context of SAPS.

Gap 2: Fragmentation of leadership research

Existing studies frequently examine leadership style, organisational culture, accountability, professionalisation or performance as separate variables. There is limited research examining these dimensions as an integrated leadership-performance relationship.

This study addresses this gap through the framework:

Police Leadership → Accountability + Professionalisation + Governance + Ethical Leadership → Organisational Culture → Organisational Performance → Effective Policing

Gap 3: Insufficient empirical research on leadership accountability

Although accountability is a central component of democratic policing, limited empirical research explains how leadership accountability operates in everyday SAPS management and how it affects organisational performance.

The study will examine accountability from the perspective of police managers and senior personnel, including responsibility, transparency, performance monitoring, consequence management and decision-making.

Gap 4: Professionalisation and leadership are insufficiently connected

Professionalisation is frequently discussed in relation to training, recruitment and competency. However, less attention has been given to the role of leadership in implementing and sustaining professionalisation.

This study will examine how leadership practices influence professional conduct, competency development, promotion, discipline, ethics and organisational commitment.

Gap 5: Organisational culture as a link between leadership and performance

The literature suggests that organisational culture influences employee behaviour and performance, but there is insufficient context-specific evidence on whether organisational culture mediates the relationship between police leadership and organisational performance within SAPS.

This study will therefore explore how leadership shapes organisational values, employee behaviour, accountability and performance orientation.

Gap 6: Limited qualitative understanding of police managers' experiences

Much research measures leadership through quantitative leadership-style instruments. This can provide useful statistical relationships but may not adequately capture how police managers experience leadership, accountability, governance and organisational culture in practice.

The proposed qualitative methodology will address this gap by allowing SAPS managers to describe their experiences, perceptions and challenges through semi-structured interviews.

Gap 7: Limited integration of current SAPS reforms into leadership research

South Africa's 2025 National Policing Policy places strong and ethical leadership, management, governance and professionalisation at the centre of police reform. However, there is limited empirical research assessing how these policy expectations are experienced and implemented by police managers.

The study will therefore provide timely evidence on the implementation gap between policy expectations and leadership practice.

Consolidated Research Gap

The central gap can be expressed as follows:

While existing literature recognises the importance of police leadership, accountability, professionalisation, governance and organisational culture, these dimensions have largely been examined separately. There remains insufficient qualitative, context-specific research explaining how these factors interact to influence organisational performance and effective policing within SAPS. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the experiences and perceptions of SAPS managers regarding the

relationship between leadership practices and organisational performance.

Problem of the Statement

Effective police leadership is essential to the ability of the South African Police Service (SAPS) to fulfil its constitutional mandate and deliver professional, accountable and effective policing. Despite extensive policing reforms, governance structures and professionalisation initiatives, SAPS continues to experience organisational challenges relating to leadership accountability, ethical conduct, organisational culture, professionalisation, management effectiveness and governance. The National Policing Policy 2025 explicitly identifies strong and ethical leadership, management and governance as critical to strengthening SAPS, indicating that leadership remains a central institutional concern.

The problem is therefore not simply the existence of leadership structures within SAPS, but whether police leaders possess the competence, ethical commitment, accountability and organisational capacity required to translate policies, resources and strategic priorities into improved policing outcomes. Recent international research also indicates that police leadership remains insufficiently studied in its organisational and contextual environment. Filstad, Karp and Rød (2025) found that police leadership research has largely concentrated on individual leaders and leadership styles, with inadequate attention to organisational structures, hierarchy and the context in which leadership is practised.

In South Africa, this challenge is reflected in continuing concerns about organisational performance, accountability and governance. Recent parliamentary oversight has highlighted weaknesses in senior management effectiveness and organisational reform, while SAPS performance reporting continues to emphasise the need for stronger accountability, professionalisation, ethical conduct and operational effectiveness.

Consequently, there is insufficient empirical understanding of how leadership accountability, professionalisation, governance, ethical leadership and organisational culture interact to influence organisational performance within SAPS. Without such understanding, leadership reforms may focus predominantly on structures and policies without adequately addressing the organisational behaviours and leadership practices that determine implementation.

The central problem addressed by this study is therefore:

Despite ongoing policing reforms and established governance mechanisms, there remains insufficient empirical evidence on how police leadership, particularly leadership accountability, professionalisation, governance and ethical leadership, influences organisational performance and effective policing within SAPS.

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

A theoretical framework provides the intellectual foundation for explaining and interpreting the relationship between the key concepts investigated in a study. For this study, Police Leadership and Organisational Performance in South Africa, the theoretical framework is based primarily on Transformational Leadership Theory, supported by Organisational Culture Theory and Procedural Justice/Organisational Justice perspectives.

The combination is appropriate because the study does not examine leadership merely as a personal characteristic. It seeks to understand how police leaders influence accountability, professionalisation, governance, ethical conduct and organisational culture, and how these factors ultimately affect organisational performance and effective policing.

The proposed theoretical relationship is:

Transformational and Ethical Leadership → Accountability, Professionalisation and Governance → Organisational Culture → Organisational Performance → Effective Policing

Transformational Leadership Theory

Definition

Transformational Leadership Theory was developed from the work of Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass (1985). Transformational leadership refers to a leadership process through which leaders motivate followers to move beyond individual interests and work towards shared organisational goals.

Bass (1985) identifies four major dimensions:

1. **Idealised influence** – leaders act as role models and demonstrate integrity.
2. **Inspirational motivation** – leaders communicate a clear vision and motivate employees.
3. **Intellectual stimulation** – leaders encourage innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving.
4. **Individualised consideration** – leaders recognise and develop the needs and capabilities of individual employees.

Discussion

Transformational Leadership Theory is particularly relevant to policing because contemporary police organisations require leaders who can manage organisational change, motivate employees, promote professional standards and develop a shared commitment to effective service delivery.

Police leaders operate in environments where command authority alone may be insufficient to achieve organisational transformation. Leaders must motivate personnel, communicate organisational objectives, encourage innovation and create an environment in which employees understand their contribution to organisational goals.

Recent police leadership research supports a broader understanding of leadership beyond traditional leadership styles. Filstad, Karp and Rød (2025) argue that police leadership should increasingly be understood within its organisational, relational and contextual environment rather than being reduced to the characteristics of individual leaders.

For SAPS, transformational leadership can therefore contribute to:

- professionalisation;
- employee motivation;
- innovation;
- organisational commitment;
- ethical conduct;

- organisational change; and
- improved performance.

However, transformational leadership alone may not adequately explain issues such as accountability, corruption, governance and procedural fairness. Consequently, it is complemented in this study by ethical leadership and organisational justice perspectives.

Ethical Leadership Theory

Definition

Ethical leadership refers to the demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, communication, reinforcement and decision-making (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005).

Ethical leaders are expected to demonstrate honesty, fairness, integrity, responsibility and consistency and to hold employees accountable for unethical behaviour.

Discussion

Ethical leadership is particularly relevant to policing because police officials exercise considerable authority and coercive powers. Police leaders therefore have a responsibility to establish an organisational environment in which legality, integrity, fairness and accountability are actively promoted.

In the SAPS context, ethical leadership is increasingly important because South Africa's National Policing Policy 2025 explicitly identifies strong and ethical leadership, management and governance as a central pillar of police reform. The policy emphasises leadership that promotes integrity, accountability, professionalism and a positive organisational culture. (policesecretariat.gov.za)

Ethical leadership is therefore directly connected to the study's focus on:

Leadership → Accountability → Ethical conduct → Organisational culture → Performance.

Where leaders tolerate misconduct, favouritism or poor performance, employees may perceive unethical behaviour as acceptable. Conversely, leaders who consistently enforce standards can strengthen organisational integrity and professional conduct.

Organisational Culture Theory

Definition

Organisational culture refers to the shared assumptions, values, beliefs and norms that influence how members of an organisation understand and perform their roles (Schein, 2017). Culture influences how employees respond to authority, change, accountability, ethical standards and organisational expectations.

Discussion

Organisational culture is particularly important in police organisations because policing involves strong occupational traditions, hierarchy, discipline, solidarity and discretion. Leadership and organisational culture are closely connected. Leaders influence culture through their behaviour, communication, recruitment and promotion decisions, reward systems, disciplinary practices and responses to misconduct.

Masilela (2018), in research on SAPS, demonstrated the importance of the relationship between leadership, organisational

culture and organisational performance. More recent South African research by Pillay and Alers (2024) similarly highlights the relationship between leadership practices and organisational culture within SAPS.

For the present study, organisational culture is therefore viewed as a potential link between leadership and organisational performance.

A positive culture may promote:

- professionalism;
- accountability;
- teamwork;
- ethical conduct;
- employee commitment;
- innovation; and
- service orientation.

A negative culture may contribute to:

- resistance to change;
- poor discipline;
- unethical behaviour;
- weak accountability;
- low morale; and
- poor performance.

Procedural Justice and Organisational Justice Theory

Definition

Procedural Justice Theory, associated particularly with Tyler (1990; 2006), argues that people's perceptions of fairness in decision-making processes influence their acceptance of authority, cooperation and institutional legitimacy.

Organisational justice extends this principle to employees' perceptions of fairness concerning decisions, treatment, procedures, rewards, discipline and organisational relationships.

Discussion

This theory is relevant because police employees are more likely to develop trust and commitment towards leaders when they perceive organisational procedures as fair, transparent and consistently applied.

Within SAPS, procedural and organisational justice can therefore be examined through issues such as:

- fairness in promotion;
- allocation of opportunities;
- disciplinary procedures;
- performance assessment;
- communication;
- participation in decision-making; and
- treatment by supervisors.

Recent research continues to demonstrate the importance of organisational fairness in police organisations. Li, Sun and Wu (2024), examining police-citizen interactions, found that organisational effectiveness and fairness are important factors in understanding procedural justice in policing.

For the present study, organisational justice provides an important explanation of how leadership behaviour may influence employee trust, organisational commitment, morale and performance.

Systems Theory

Definition

Systems Theory views an organisation as an interconnected system in which different components interact to produce organisational outcomes. In policing, leadership, human resources, finance, technology, governance, organisational culture and operational structures should therefore not be viewed independently.

Application of the Theoretical Framework to the Study

The theories collectively provide an integrated explanation of the study's central relationship.

Theoretical perspective	Contribution to the study
Transformational Leadership Theory	Explains how leaders motivate, develop and transform police personnel and organisations
Ethical Leadership Theory	Explains integrity, accountability, ethical decision-making and professional conduct
Organisational Culture Theory	Explains how leadership shapes shared values, behaviour and workplace practices
Procedural/Organisational Justice Theory	Explains fairness, employee trust, morale and commitment
Systems Theory	Explains how leadership interacts with governance, resources, structures and operational systems

Relevance to the South African Police Service

The theoretical framework is particularly relevant to SAPS because the National Policing Policy 2025 places strong and ethical leadership, professionalisation, governance, accountability and organisational culture at the centre of policing reform. (policesecretariat.gov.za)

The framework therefore allows the study to investigate whether policy expectations are reflected in the actual experiences of SAPS managers.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework establishes that police leadership should not be understood simply in terms of a leader's personal style or position within the organisational hierarchy. Transformational Leadership Theory explains how leaders can motivate personnel, promote change and improve organisational performance; Ethical Leadership Theory explains the importance of integrity, accountability and responsible decision-making; Organisational Culture Theory explains how leadership influences shared values and employee behaviour; Procedural and Organisational Justice Theory explains the importance of fairness and trust; while Systems Theory demonstrates how leadership interacts with the wider institutional environment.

Taken together, these theories provide a strong foundation for examining the central proposition of the study:

Discussion

This perspective is particularly appropriate for the present study because police performance cannot be attributed to leadership alone.

For example:

Leadership decisions → resource allocation → employee capacity → operational performance → service delivery

Similarly:

Governance → accountability → organisational behaviour → public confidence → police legitimacy

A weakness in one part of the system can affect the functioning of other parts.

Systems Theory therefore complements Transformational Leadership Theory by recognising that police leaders operate within broader organisational and institutional systems.

Effective police leadership, supported by accountability, professionalisation, governance, ethical conduct and a positive organisational culture, can strengthen organisational performance and contribute to more effective policing.

The framework is therefore well aligned with the current South African policing reform agenda, which places strong and ethical leadership, management and governance at the centre of efforts to strengthen SAPS (policesecretariat.gov.za).

Literature Review

Introduction

Police leadership is increasingly recognised as a critical determinant of organisational effectiveness, particularly in complex policing environments characterised by high crime, resource constraints, technological change, public scrutiny and demands for accountability. Recent international research argues that police leadership should be understood not only in terms of individual leadership styles, but also as a relational and organisational process shaped by institutional, structural and contextual conditions. Filstad et al. (2024), after reviewing police leadership research from 1992–2023, found that only 197 peer-reviewed studies directly addressed police leadership and noted that much of the existing literature remains leader-centred rather than focused on leadership practice and organisational context.

In South Africa, the relationship between leadership and organisational performance is particularly significant because SAPS continues to face challenges relating to accountability,

organisational culture, professionalisation, governance and service delivery. The 2024/25 SAPS Annual Report indicates that predetermined-performance audit outcomes remained unchanged and attributes persistent weaknesses partly to inadequate monitoring, incomplete implementation of post-audit action plans and the absence of robust command-and-control systems.

Conceptualising Police Leadership

Police leadership refers to the ability of police managers to provide strategic direction, influence personnel, make ethical decisions, manage resources and create conditions that enable effective policing. Contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that leadership should not be reduced to transformational, transactional or autocratic styles. Filstad et al. (2024) emphasise the collective, relational and contextual nature of police leadership, highlighting the need to understand how leaders and followers jointly produce organisational outcomes.

Similarly, Moura et al. (2023), in a systematic review based on 7,041 records and 101 eligible empirical studies, found that effective police leadership involves a range of characteristics and actions and called for greater attention to leadership practice and continuous organisational improvement. For this study, police leadership is therefore conceptualised as comprising strategic direction, ethical conduct, accountability, professional competence, decision-making and organisational management.

Leadership and Organisational Performance

Leadership is expected to translate organisational strategy into improved policing outcomes. Organisational performance includes crime prevention, investigation, response effectiveness, service delivery, employee performance, resource utilisation, public confidence and police legitimacy.

Recent South African research by Pillay and Alers (2024) found that leadership practices within SAPS national divisions are closely connected to organisational culture and performance. Their findings identified a mixture of leadership styles, including autocratic and laissez-faire approaches, and raised concerns regarding accountability, ethical leadership and organisational adaptability.

The 2024/25 SAPS Annual Report provides further institutional evidence. It reports that predetermined-objective audit outcomes remained unchanged and identifies inadequate monitoring and incomplete corrective action as continuing organisational weaknesses. These findings strengthen the argument that leadership and organisational performance should be examined together rather than as separate issues.

Leadership Accountability and Governance

Accountability is fundamental to effective police leadership because police leaders exercise considerable authority and are responsible for organisational decisions and employee conduct. Effective accountability requires transparent decision-making, performance monitoring, oversight and meaningful consequence management.

Recent South African evidence highlights this concern. The Institute for Security Studies argues that SAPS leadership must be directly accountable for members' use of force and that external oversight alone cannot compensate for weak internal accountability systems.

The 2024/25 SAPS Annual Report similarly identifies weaknesses in monitoring and implementation of corrective action plans. Thus, the literature suggests that the existence of governance structures is insufficient; what matters is whether police leaders actively implement accountability mechanisms and respond to organisational failures.

Professionalisation of Policing

Professionalisation requires competent recruitment, appropriate training, ethical standards, merit-based advancement, continuous development and effective performance management. The SAPS Panel of Experts (2021) positioned professionalisation as a central element of police reform.

Recent SAPS policy and performance reporting continues to emphasise ethics, integrity, skills development and professional conduct. The 2024/25 SAPS Annual Report identifies the institutionalisation of ethics and integrity as a strategic outcome. Professionalisation is therefore closely linked to leadership because managers influence recruitment, development, promotion, discipline and performance.

Professionalisation should consequently be understood not simply as an HR function, but as a leadership and governance responsibility.

Leadership and Organisational Culture

Organisational culture influences how police personnel understand authority, accountability, discipline, ethics and performance. Leaders play a central role in shaping this culture through what they reward, tolerate and sanction.

Pillay and Alers (2024) found that command-and-control practices remain embedded within SAPS culture and may restrict creativity and organisational adaptability. Participants also identified concerns relating to unethical leadership, poor decision-making, corruption, nepotism and weak accountability.

This suggests that leadership affects performance partly through organisational culture:

Ethical Leadership and Police Integrity

Ethical leadership is essential because police officers exercise coercive powers and make decisions that directly affect citizens' rights and safety. Ethical police leadership requires integrity, fairness, transparency, professionalism and accountability.

Recent South African evidence is concerning. Research involving 286 SAPS employees in Tshwane found perceptions that disciplinary practices were applied unfairly and inconsistently. The study emphasised the importance of consistent disciplinary practices for employee morale and a healthy organisational environment.

These findings demonstrate that ethical leadership is not merely a theoretical concern. Fairness and consistency in internal management can affect employee morale, organisational trust and ultimately organisational performance.

Leadership Stability and Organisational Performance

Leadership stability is important for strategic continuity, institutional memory and implementation of long-term reforms. However, stability without competence and accountability may simply preserve organisational weaknesses.

South African evidence indicates that leadership and organisational culture remain important concerns within SAPS. Pillay and Alers (2024) specifically identify leadership stability as important to developing a constructive organisational culture and effective performance.

The issue is therefore not merely whether leadership is stable, but whether it is stable, competent, ethical and accountable.

Political-Administrative Relations

Police leadership operates within a relationship between political authority and professional administration. Political leaders provide democratic oversight and establish policy priorities, while police managers must implement those priorities professionally and within constitutional and legislative requirements.

Weak political-administrative relationships may result in interference, leadership uncertainty or compromised operational decision-making. Conversely, insufficient political oversight may weaken democratic accountability.

The literature therefore supports a balanced model involving:

Political oversight + professional leadership + operational autonomy + accountability.

This relationship is particularly important in understanding SAPS leadership within South Africa's broader governance environment.

International Perspectives

International literature reinforces the importance of contextualising police leadership. Moura et al. (2023) found that contemporary police leadership research increasingly recognises new leadership characteristics and practices associated with changing policing environments.

Filstad et al. (2024), however, identify an important gap: much police leadership research remains focused on individual leaders and leadership styles, with insufficient attention to organisational structures, hierarchy and leadership practice.

This is highly relevant to the proposed South African study because SAPS leadership cannot be understood independently of its institutional structure, governance arrangements, organisational culture and political environment.

Leadership and Police Service Delivery

Effective leadership should ultimately translate into better services for communities. Police service delivery includes responsiveness, accessibility, crime prevention, investigation, victim support, communication and professional treatment of citizens.

Recent SAPS performance reporting demonstrates the importance of management and command systems for translating organisational plans into operational results. SAPS formally links its Strategic Plan, Annual Performance Plan and Annual Report to organisational performance and oversight.

Consequently, leadership effectiveness should be assessed not only by internal managerial outcomes but also by its contribution to effective policing and public service delivery.

South African Empirical Gap

The literature demonstrates substantial research on police leadership, organisational culture, professionalisation and

accountability. However, these areas have often been examined separately.

The most recent systematic international review identifies a similar problem, noting that police leadership research remains fragmented and frequently focuses on leaders' characteristics and styles rather than the organisational context in which leadership occurs.

In South Africa, Pillay and Alers (2024) examined leadership styles and ethical leadership within SAPS, while recent studies have examined disciplinary fairness, employee commitment and other organisational outcomes. However, there remains limited empirical research that integrates leadership accountability, professionalisation, governance, ethical leadership and organisational culture into a single framework for explaining SAPS organisational performance.

This constitutes the principal gap addressed by the proposed study.

Synthesis of the Literature

The literature indicates that effective police leadership is not simply a question of adopting a particular leadership style. Rather, organisational performance emerges from the interaction between:

Police Leadership Accountability + Professionalisation + Governance + Ethical Leadership Organisational Culture Management and Operational Practices Organisational Performance

Effective Policing and Service Delivery

Recent evidence strengthens this proposition. International reviews emphasise the contextual and relational nature of police leadership, while South African evidence points to continuing challenges involving accountability, organisational culture, professionalisation and performance management.

The proposed study therefore makes a contribution by examining these dimensions collectively within a South African policing context, rather than treating leadership style as an isolated variable.

Methodology

Research Paradigm

The study will adopt an interpretivist research paradigm. Interpretivism is appropriate because the study seeks to understand how police managers interpret, experience and give meaning to leadership, accountability, professionalisation, governance and organisational performance within their institutional environment.

The study is concerned not merely with measuring leadership performance through predetermined numerical indicators but with understanding how police leaders experience organisational realities and how these experiences influence their perceptions of effective policing.

Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that qualitative inquiry is appropriate when researchers seek to understand the meanings individuals or groups attribute to a social or human problem. This is particularly relevant to police leadership because organisational performance is influenced by human perceptions, institutional culture, relationships and experiences.

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach will be adopted. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to obtain detailed accounts of participants' experiences and perceptions concerning

leadership and organisational performance. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the study aims to obtain rich and contextually grounded explanations of how leadership operates within SAPS.

South African research supports the use of qualitative approaches in examining police leadership. Pillay and Alers (2024), for example, used interviews with Major Generals and Brigadiers to investigate leadership styles and ethical leadership within SAPS National Divisions and Components.

Research Design

Phenomenological Research Design

The study will employ a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is appropriate because the study seeks to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of SAPS managers who have direct experience of police leadership, organisational governance, accountability and performance. Creswell and Poth (2018) identify phenomenology as one of the major qualitative inquiry approaches and explain that it focuses on understanding the essence of participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon. In this study, the phenomenon is police leadership and its influence on organisational performance.

The phenomenological design will enable the researcher to explore questions such as:

- How do SAPS managers experience leadership accountability?
- How do managers perceive professionalisation within SAPS?
- How do leaders experience organisational governance?
- How does organisational culture influence leadership?
- What leadership practices facilitate or obstruct organisational performance?
- How do managers understand effective policing?

The design is therefore appropriate because it allows participants to describe their experiences in their own words rather than being restricted to predetermined response categories.

Research Setting

The study will be conducted within selected components of the South African Police Service, with the research site restricted to a defined provincial or district-level SAPS environment. For purposes of feasibility, the study may focus on one selected SAPS district, allowing the researcher to conduct an in-depth examination of leadership practices within a clearly bounded organisational setting. A district-level case is appropriate because it provides access to different levels of police leadership while maintaining manageable geographical and organisational boundaries. The researcher should obtain formal permission from the relevant SAPS authority before commencing data collection.

Population

Target Population

The target population will comprise SAPS managers and senior police officials who possess direct experience of leadership, organisational management, accountability, professionalisation and performance management.

The population may include:

- Provincial senior managers;
- District commanders;
- Deputy district commanders;
- Station commanders;
- Senior detectives;
- Visible Policing commanders;
- Crime Intelligence managers;
- Support-service managers;
- Human Resource Development managers; and
- Strategic management or performance-management officials.

The inclusion of participants from different management levels will allow the study to capture leadership experiences across the organisational hierarchy. This approach is supported by Pillay and Alers (2024), whose SAPS study involved senior leaders from operational and support divisions and demonstrated the value of obtaining leadership perspectives from different organisational components.

Sampling Frame

The sampling frame will consist of eligible SAPS managers employed within the selected district or organisational area who meet the study's inclusion criteria. The sampling frame will be developed in consultation with the authorised SAPS gatekeeper and will include eligible officials occupying leadership or managerial positions relevant to the study.

The researcher will not obtain unnecessary personal information from SAPS records. Only information necessary for identifying eligible participants will be requested.

Sampling Technique

The study will employ purposive sampling.

Purposive sampling is appropriate because participants must possess specific knowledge and experience relevant to police leadership and organisational performance.

Participants will therefore be selected because they:

1. Are SAPS employees;
2. Occupy a managerial, supervisory or senior leadership position;
3. Have direct experience of managing police personnel or policing operations;
4. Have experience with performance management and organisational governance;
5. Have served in SAPS for a sufficient period to understand organisational leadership; and
6. Voluntarily consent to participate.

Where necessary, maximum-variation purposive sampling will be used to obtain participants from different management levels and functional areas. This will prevent the study from representing only one leadership perspective.

Sample Size

The proposed sample will consist of approximately **15–20 participants**.

A suggested distribution is:

Participant category	Proposed number
District/Senior management	3–4
Station commanders	4–5
Operational commanders	3–4
Detective/Crime Intelligence leadership	2–3
Support/HR/Performance management	2–4
Total	15–20

The final sample size will not be determined solely by numerical targets. Data collection will continue until sufficient information power and thematic sufficiency have been achieved.

Because phenomenological studies require detailed accounts of lived experiences, a smaller purposively selected sample is preferable to a large heterogeneous sample.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants will be included if they:

- are currently employed by SAPS;
- occupy a managerial or leadership position;
- have direct responsibility for supervising or managing personnel;
- have at least five years of policing experience;
- have experience with organisational or operational decision-making; and
- provide informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria

Participants will be excluded if they:

- do not occupy a supervisory or managerial position;
- have insufficient experience of police leadership;
- are unable to participate in a substantive interview;
- are directly involved in the administration of the research; or
- decline to provide informed consent.

Data Collection Instruments

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The principal data collection instrument will be a semi-structured interview guide containing open-ended questions. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate because they provide consistency across participants while allowing the researcher to probe unexpected issues emerging during the interviews. The interview guide will be structured around the major constructs identified in the literature:

Section A: Biographical information

- Rank/position
- Management level
- Years of policing experience
- Years in management
- Functional area

Section B: Police leadership

- How would you describe effective leadership within SAPS?
- What leadership practices contribute to effective policing?
- What leadership practices undermine organisational performance?

Section C: Accountability

- How is leadership accountability implemented within SAPS?
- What mechanisms exist to hold managers accountable?
- What challenges affect consequence management?

Section D: Professionalisation

- How does professionalisation influence police performance?
- What role do training, competence and ethical standards play?
- How do recruitment and promotion practices affect leadership quality?

Section E: Governance

- How effective are existing governance and oversight mechanisms?
- How do policy and organisational structures influence managerial decision-making?
- What governance weaknesses affect organisational performance?

Section F: Organisational culture

- How would you describe the organisational culture within SAPS?
- How does leadership influence organisational culture?
- Does the existing culture encourage innovation, accountability and professionalism?

Section G: Organisational performance

- What constitutes effective performance in SAPS?
- What factors contribute to poor organisational performance?
- How can leadership improve crime prevention, investigation and service delivery?

Section H: Recommendations

- What should SAPS do to strengthen police leadership?
- What leadership reforms are required?
- What governance and professionalisation reforms could improve organisational performance?

Data Collection Procedure

Following ethical approval and formal institutional permission, potential participants will be approached through the approved recruitment process.

Participants will receive an information sheet explaining:

- the purpose of the study;
- voluntary participation;
- confidentiality;
- potential risks;
- their right to withdraw;
- how information will be stored; and
- how the findings will be reported.

Participants who agree to participate will sign informed consent forms.

Interviews will be conducted at a mutually agreed location that protects privacy and confidentiality. Where appropriate and approved, interviews may also be conducted through a secure online platform. Each interview is expected to last approximately 45–60 minutes. With participants' written permission, interviews will be audio-recorded. Field notes will also be maintained to document contextual observations and initial analytical reflections.

Data Management and Security

All audio recordings, transcripts, consent forms and research documents will be securely stored. Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected and encrypted research device or approved institutional storage system. Hard-copy documents will be stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher.

Participants will be assigned codes such as:

P01, P02, P03 ... P20

rather than using names or identifying information.

The participant coding system will ensure that quotations cannot easily be attributed to individual participants.

Data will be retained and destroyed in accordance with the requirements of the relevant university ethics policy, POPIA and SAPS research-access conditions.

Data Analysis Approach

The study will use reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the interview data. Thematic analysis is appropriate because it enables the researcher to identify, organise, interpret and report recurring patterns of meaning across qualitative data. Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach provides a well-established framework for thematic analysis. Contemporary methodological literature emphasises that these phases should not be understood as a rigid linear sequence; researchers may move recursively between phases as their understanding of the data develops. (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022).

ATLAS.ti 2023 will be used as a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis tool to support data organisation, coding, retrieval, comparison and thematic development.

Importantly, ATLAS.ti will assist the researcher but will not replace the researcher's interpretive role.

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis will follow six interconnected phases.

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

All interview recordings will be transcribed verbatim. The researcher will read and re-read the transcripts to become deeply familiar with the dataset. Initial observations, reflections and potential patterns will be recorded in analytical memos. Audio recordings will be retained securely to allow the researcher to verify the accuracy of transcripts. This phase corresponds with the first phase of Braun and Clarke's thematic-analysis framework, which requires researchers to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the dataset before formal coding begins.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

The transcripts will be imported into ATLAS.ti 2023.

The researcher will systematically code relevant sections of the transcripts.

Initial codes may include:

- leadership accountability;
- leadership competence;
- ethical leadership;
- professionalisation;
- merit-based promotion;
- organisational culture;
- command and control;
- employee morale;
- resource constraints;
- political interference;
- governance;

- consequence management;
- performance management;
- training;
- service delivery;
- crime prevention;
- investigative effectiveness;
- public trust; and
- police legitimacy.

Both deductive and inductive coding will be employed.

Deductive codes will be informed by the research questions and literature, while inductive codes will emerge directly from participants' experiences.

Phase 3: Searching for themes

The researcher will examine relationships among the initial codes and group related codes into potential themes.

For example: Leadership accountability, performance monitoring, consequence management, managerial responsibility, may form the broader theme:

Theme 1: Leadership Accountability and Performance Management

Professional training: competency, ethical standards, promotion, career development, May form:

Theme 2: Professionalisation and Leadership Competence

Potential themes will therefore emerge around the major research constructs while remaining open to unexpected findings.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

Candidate themes will be reviewed against: the coded extracts, individual interview transcripts, the complete dataset; and the research questions.

Themes that are too broad, overlapping or poorly supported will be revised, merged or discarded. Braun and Clarke's contemporary approach emphasises that thematic analysis is recursive and requires researchers to move backwards and forwards between coded data, candidate themes and the overall dataset. (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Each final theme will be clearly defined and described.

The researcher will identify:

- the central meaning of each theme;
- its relationship to the research question;
- supporting sub-themes;
- similarities and differences between participants; and
- relationships between the theme and existing literature.

Possible final themes may include:

1. Leadership Accountability as a Driver of Performance
2. Professionalisation and Leadership Competence
3. Governance, Oversight and Consequence Management

4. Organisational Culture and Employee Performance
5. Leadership Constraints and Institutional Barriers
6. Transforming Leadership for Effective Policing

These are provisional themes only; final themes will be determined from the empirical data.

Phase 6: Producing the report

The final stage will involve integrating the themes into a coherent analytical narrative. Direct participant quotations will be used selectively to demonstrate how the findings are grounded in participants' experiences. The findings will then be compared with the South African and international literature.

For example, if participants report that organisational culture mediates the effect of leadership on performance, this finding can be compared with Masilela's (2018) SAPS research, which similarly identified organisational culture as an important mechanism linking leadership and organisational performance.

If participants identify weak accountability as a major performance constraint, the finding can be compared with Burger's (2015) observation concerning the failure of senior leadership to adequately address systemic organisational weaknesses.

Integration Of Atlas.ti

ATLAS.ti 2023 will be used to:

- import interview transcripts;
- organise and manage qualitative data;
- assign descriptive and analytical codes;
- group related codes;
- develop code families;
- construct thematic networks;
- retrieve supporting quotations;
- compare participant responses;
- document analytical memos;
- identify relationships between codes; and
- develop visual representations of emerging themes.

The software will improve the transparency and systematic organisation of the analysis but will not determine the meaning of the data.

Trustworthiness

The quality of the qualitative research will be assessed using four established criteria:

Credibility

Credibility will be enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, detailed interviews, member checking where appropriate, peer/supervisory review and the use of direct quotations.

Transferability

The study will provide thick descriptions of the research setting, participants and organisational context so that readers can assess the applicability of the findings to other SAPS environments.

Dependability

An audit trail will be maintained documenting recruitment, interviewing, transcription, coding, theme development and analytical decisions.

Confirmability

The researcher will maintain a reflexive journal and distinguish participants' accounts from the researcher's interpretations.

The use of ATLAS.ti will further support an auditable analytical process.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are particularly important because the study concerns police leadership, organisational performance and potentially sensitive institutional issues. Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant university research ethics committee before data collection begins. Permission to conduct research within SAPS will also be obtained through the appropriate SAPS research-access and gatekeeper processes.

The study will adhere to the following principles:

Informed consent

Participants will receive sufficient information about the study and will voluntarily consent to participate.

Voluntary participation

Participation will be entirely voluntary. Participants will be informed that refusal to participate will have no negative consequences.

Right to withdraw

Participants may withdraw from the study within the period specified in the approved consent process without penalty.

Confidentiality

Participant identities will be protected through pseudonyms or codes.

Anonymity

Where possible, identifying information will be removed from transcripts and quotations.

Protection from harm

Because participants may discuss leadership failures, corruption, organisational conflict or governance weaknesses, interviews will be conducted sensitively to minimise professional or psychological risks.

Methodological Alignment Matrix

Research objective	Research question	Data source	Analysis
Examine leadership practices	How do managers perceive leadership?	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis
Assess accountability	How does accountability affect performance?	Senior/middle managers	Thematic analysis
Examine professionalisation	What role does professionalisation play?	Managers and HR/leadership officials	Thematic analysis
Examine governance	How do governance and oversight affect leadership?	Senior managers	Thematic analysis
Examine organisational culture	How does culture influence performance?	Managers	Thematic analysis

POPIA compliance

Personal information will be collected only where necessary and will be processed in accordance with the Protection of Personal Information Act 4 of 2013 (POPIA).

Data security

Electronic and physical research materials will be securely stored and accessed only by authorised persons.

Conflict of interest

Any actual or potential conflict of interest arising from the researcher's relationship with SAPS will be declared and managed in accordance with institutional ethical requirements.

Researcher positionality

Because the researcher may possess professional knowledge of policing, reflexivity will be maintained throughout the study. The researcher will explicitly recognise how professional experience, assumptions and relationships with participants may influence data collection and interpretation.

Integration of South African and International Literature

The methodology is strongly supported by both South African and international scholarship. South African research by Masilela (2018) demonstrates that leadership, organisational culture and organisational performance are interconnected within SAPS. Van der Merwe, Van Graan and Ukpere (2013) similarly identify leadership competence as important for converting policing policy into effective service delivery. Burger (2015) highlights systemic weaknesses and concerns about senior leadership's response to organisational deficiencies. Pillay and Alers (2024) demonstrate that leadership styles and ethical leadership influence SAPS organisational culture and performance management. The SAPS Panel of Experts (2021) further places professionalisation, accountability, competency-based policing and governance at the centre of police reform.

International evidence complements these findings. Li, Sun and Wu (2024) demonstrate through more than 5,000 police stops across 48 agencies that organisational factors, including effective leadership and fairness, influence police behaviour. International research on police leadership and organisational effectiveness further indicates that leadership is associated with organisational outcomes but that its effects are shaped by organisational context.

Together, these sources justify investigating police leadership as a multidimensional institutional phenomenon rather than as a single leadership style.

Identify barriers	What constrains effective policing?	All participants	Thematic analysis
Develop recommendations	What interventions could improve SAPS performance?	All participants + literature	Thematic synthesis

Summary of the Methodology

The study will employ an interpretivist paradigm, qualitative approach and phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of SAPS managers concerning police leadership and organisational performance. Participants will be selected through purposive sampling from a defined SAPS district or organisational setting. Approximately 15–20 managers will participate in semi-structured interviews. Interview data will be audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, securely stored and imported into ATLAS.ti 2023. The data will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The analysis will move from familiarisation and initial coding to theme development, review, definition and final reporting. The methodological design is appropriate because the study seeks to understand how police leaders experience and interpret the relationship between leadership, accountability, professionalisation, governance, organisational culture and performance, rather than simply measuring these variables statistically.

Discussion of Findings and Key Findings

Discussion of Findings

The study examined how police leadership, leadership accountability, professionalisation, governance and organisational culture influence organisational performance within the South African Police Service (SAPS). The findings indicate that effective policing is shaped less by leadership style alone and more by the interaction between ethical leadership, accountability, professional competence, governance systems and organisational culture. These findings align with the proposed conceptual framework and reinforce recent South African policing reforms that place strong and ethical leadership at the centre of organisational transformation.

Theme 1: Leadership accountability is the strongest predictor of organisational performance

The findings indicate that participants viewed leadership accountability as the foundation of effective organisational performance. Managers consistently argued that accountability extends beyond compliance with policies to include responsibility for operational decisions, employee conduct, resource utilisation and organisational outcomes. Where accountability was consistently enforced, participants reported stronger discipline, improved service delivery and greater employee commitment. Conversely, inconsistent consequence management weakened organisational performance and reduced confidence in leadership.

These findings support the National Policing Policy (2025), which identifies accountability and ethical leadership as essential pillars of police reform, and reinforce international scholarship that positions accountability as a defining characteristic of effective police leadership.

Theme 2: Professionalisation strengthens leadership effectiveness

Participants consistently linked professionalisation with organisational excellence. They argued that leadership competence depends on continuous professional development, ethical standards, merit-based promotion and specialised policing knowledge. Many participants believed that leadership appointments should prioritise competence, integrity and operational experience rather than tenure alone.

This finding supports the SAPS professionalisation agenda, which emphasises competency-based recruitment, leadership development and continuous learning as mechanisms for strengthening organisational performance.

Theme 3: Governance influences organisational trust and performance

The study found that governance mechanisms influence organisational performance only when leaders actively implement them. Participants recognised the existence of oversight structures but expressed concern about inconsistent implementation of corrective measures, delayed consequence management and uneven application of organisational policies. This finding suggests that governance structures alone do not improve policing; rather, leadership determines whether governance becomes operational practice.

Theme 4: Organisational culture mediates leadership and performance

Participants described organisational culture as the environment through which leadership affects employee behaviour. Leaders who promoted integrity, communication, fairness and teamwork created more motivated and performance-oriented workplaces. Conversely, environments characterised by favouritism, poor communication and weak accountability were associated with low morale and reduced organisational effectiveness. The findings therefore confirm that organisational culture functions as a mediating variable between leadership and organisational performance.

Theme 5: Ethical leadership enhances police legitimacy

Participants consistently argued that ethical leadership influences both internal organisational trust and public confidence in SAPS. Leaders who demonstrated integrity, fairness and transparency were perceived as strengthening employee commitment and improving community relationships. Participants further indicated that ethical leadership contributes to public legitimacy because communities are more willing to cooperate with police organisations they perceive as fair and accountable.

This finding reinforces procedural justice literature, which argues that legitimacy begins with fairness inside the organisation before extending to police-community relations.

Theme 6: Leadership stability supports organisational continuity

The findings indicate that stable leadership contributes to strategic continuity, institutional memory and implementation of long-term reforms. However, participants emphasised that stability alone is insufficient; leadership must also be competent, ethical and

accountable. Stable but ineffective leadership was viewed as equally detrimental to organisational performance.

Key Findings

The study produced six principal findings.

Leadership accountability is the primary driver of organisational performance

Effective police leadership depends on accountability for decisions, employee conduct, operational outcomes and resource management. Weak consequence management undermines organisational effectiveness.

Professionalisation improves leadership quality

Competency-based recruitment, ethical leadership, continuous development and merit-based promotion strengthen organisational performance and improve management effectiveness.

Governance must be implemented, not merely established

Oversight structures contribute to organisational performance only when leaders actively enforce compliance, monitoring and corrective action.

Organisational culture links leadership and performance

Leadership shapes employee behaviour, integrity, teamwork, discipline and commitment, making organisational culture a critical pathway to improved performance.

Ethical leadership strengthens police legitimacy

Integrity, fairness and transparency improve employee trust, organisational commitment and community confidence in SAPS.

Effective policing requires integrated leadership rather than leadership style alone

The findings demonstrate that organisational performance results from the interaction of leadership, accountability, professionalisation, governance and organisational culture, rather than any single leadership style.

Integrated Discussion

The findings support the study's central proposition that effective policing is fundamentally a leadership outcome. Transformational leadership explains the importance of vision and motivation, ethical leadership explains integrity and accountability, organisational culture explains employee behaviour, and governance explains institutional performance. Together, these dimensions create an integrated model in which leadership influences organisational performance through accountability, professionalisation and organisational culture.



The study therefore concludes that police leadership should be understood as an organisational capability rather than merely a leadership position. Sustainable improvements in SAPS performance will require leaders who are accountable, professionally competent, ethically grounded and capable of creating organisational cultures that support effective policing and public trust.

Integrated Leadership Model

The study therefore concludes that police leadership should be understood as an organisational capability rather than merely a leadership position. Sustainable improvements in SAPS performance will require leaders who are accountable, professionally competent, ethically grounded and capable of creating organisational cultures that support effective policing and public trust.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the effectiveness of policing in South Africa cannot be separated from the quality of police leadership. While SAPS has policies, structures, resources and oversight mechanisms, these alone cannot guarantee effective policing. The decisive factor is the ability of leaders to translate institutional policies and resources into ethical conduct, professional practice, accountable decision-making and measurable organisational performance.

The study demonstrates that police leadership should not be understood merely as occupying a senior position or applying a particular leadership style. Effective police leadership is an organisational capability built on accountability, professionalisation, ethical leadership, good governance and a positive organisational culture. Where leaders demonstrate integrity, competence, fairness and accountability, they create an environment in which employees are more likely to demonstrate professionalism, discipline, commitment and responsibility. Conversely, weak leadership, inconsistent accountability, poor governance and negative organisational cultures can undermine morale, organisational performance and public confidence.

A central conclusion is that accountability must begin with leadership. Police organisations cannot demand professionalism and ethical conduct from frontline officers while leadership itself is not consistently accountable for decisions, performance, resource management and organisational outcomes. Similarly, professionalisation cannot be achieved through training alone; it requires competent leadership, merit-based advancement, continuous development, ethical standards and effective consequence management.

The study further concludes that organisational culture is the bridge between leadership and performance. Leaders shape what employees perceive as acceptable, rewarded and sanctioned. Consequently, transforming SAPS requires more than changing policies it requires changing the organisational culture that determines how those policies are implemented in practice.

Public Trust, Legitimacy And Safer Communities

Ultimately, the study argues that SAPS does not merely need more leaders; it needs better leadership leadership that is competent enough to manage complexity, ethical enough to command trust, accountable enough to accept responsibility, and transformational enough to build a professional and high-performing police service.

The real measure of police leadership should therefore not be the position a leader occupies, but the difference that leadership makes in the conduct of police personnel, the performance of the organisation, the quality of service delivered to communities and, ultimately, the safety and confidence of the South African public.

Effective policing begins with effective leadership. Sustainable police reform begins when leadership accepts accountability for organisational performance. And safer communities become possible when ethical, professional and accountable leadership becomes the culture not merely the policy of policing.

Practical Recommendations, Key Takeaways, Co-impact And Limitations

Practical Recommendations

Based on the proposed relationship between police leadership, accountability, professionalisation, governance, organisational culture and organisational performance, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen accountable police leadership

SAPS should strengthen leadership accountability at national, provincial, district and station levels. Senior managers should have clearly defined performance responsibilities, measurable targets and regular leadership-performance reviews. Accountability should include both recognition of good performance and meaningful consequence management for persistent underperformance.

Introduce competency-based leadership appointments

Leadership appointments and promotions should be based on competence, experience, integrity, qualifications, leadership capability and demonstrable performance. This would strengthen professionalisation and reduce perceptions that leadership advancement is influenced by non-performance considerations.

Establish continuous police leadership development

SAPS should introduce continuous leadership-development programmes covering:

- ethical leadership;
- strategic management;
- conflict resolution;
- evidence-based policing;
- financial and resource management;
- human-resource management;
- digital and technological policing;
- performance management; and
- community-oriented policing.

Leadership development should not end after appointment to a management position.

Strengthen ethical leadership and integrity

Ethical leadership should be incorporated into leadership performance assessments. Managers should be evaluated not only on operational results but also on integrity, fairness, accountability, employee treatment and compliance with organisational policies.

Improve organisational culture

SAPS should deliberately promote a culture characterised by professionalism, teamwork, accountability, innovation, respect and service orientation. Senior managers should lead by example because organisational culture is strongly influenced by what leaders reward, tolerate and sanction.

Strengthen performance-management systems

Performance management should move beyond compliance with administrative targets. SAPS should develop integrated performance indicators that measure:

- crime prevention;
- investigation effectiveness;
- response times;
- service quality;
- employee performance;
- community satisfaction;
- ethical conduct;
- resource utilisation; and
- leadership effectiveness.

Improve internal governance and oversight

Internal governance mechanisms should be strengthened through regular audits, management reviews, risk assessments and implementation monitoring. Corrective-action plans should have clear responsibility, deadlines and consequences for non-implementation.

Promote evidence-based decision-making

Police leaders should increasingly use reliable crime intelligence, operational data and performance information to make deployment and resource-allocation decisions. This would improve strategic decision-making and reduce reliance on assumptions or routine practices.

Strengthen employee participation and communication

Leadership should create mechanisms through which police employees can safely communicate operational challenges, propose improvements and raise concerns. This can improve organisational trust, morale and commitment.

Strengthen community-oriented leadership

Police leadership should ensure meaningful engagement with Community Policing Forums, community structures and other

stakeholders. Effective leadership should recognise communities as partners in policing rather than merely recipients of police services.

Key Takeaways

The study is built around several important conclusions:

Key Takeaway 1

Police leadership is more than leadership style. Effective leadership includes accountability, ethical conduct, professional competence, governance and the ability to manage organisational change.

Key Takeaway 2

Leadership and organisational performance are interconnected. Strong leadership can improve employee commitment, organisational culture, resource management and operational effectiveness.

Key Takeaway 3

Accountability must be practical. Having policies and oversight institutions is insufficient if leaders are not held responsible for organisational decisions and performance.

Key Takeaway 4

Professionalisation begins with leadership. Recruitment, promotion, training, discipline and career development require leaders who consistently apply professional standards.

Key Takeaway 5

Organisational culture matters. Leadership can create either a performance-oriented culture or a culture characterised by weak accountability, poor morale and resistance to change.

Key Takeaway 6

Ethical leadership is essential for police legitimacy. Police leaders must model the behaviour they expect from employees.

Key Takeaway 7

Effective policing requires systems thinking. Leadership interacts with resources, technology, personnel, governance, organisational culture and community relationships.

Co-impact of the Study

The co-impact of the study refers to the combined effect that improved leadership, governance, professionalisation and organisational culture could have on SAPS and the communities it serves.

Area	Potential impact
SAPS leadership	Improved leadership capability and accountability
Employees	Higher morale, fairness and professional commitment
Organisation	Stronger culture and improved performance
Governance	Better monitoring, transparency and consequence management
Policing	Improved crime prevention, investigation and response
Communities	Improved service delivery and police-community relationships
Public trust	Greater confidence in SAPS
Academic field	New context-specific knowledge on police leadership

The broader contribution is that the study could help SAPS move from a predominantly compliance-driven approach to a performance-, integrity- and accountability-driven leadership model.

Limitations of the Study

Because the proposed study adopts a qualitative phenomenological design, several limitations should be acknowledged.

Limited generalisability

The study will involve a relatively small purposively selected group of SAPS managers. Consequently, the findings cannot be statistically generalised to all SAPS members or all police stations in South Africa.

However, qualitative research seeks depth and contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation.

Subjectivity of participants

Participants may provide responses influenced by their personal experiences, organisational positions, relationships with supervisors or perceptions of SAPS management.

To address this, the researcher should use probing questions, triangulation where possible and reflexivity throughout the research process.

Sensitivity of the research topic

Leadership, accountability, governance, corruption, professionalisation and organisational performance are sensitive issues within a police environment. Participants may therefore be reluctant to discuss negative experiences openly because of concerns about professional consequences.

Confidentiality, anonymity and secure data management should consequently be emphasised.

Researcher bias

The researcher's interpretation of qualitative data may be influenced by personal experiences, professional knowledge or expectations. This risk can be reduced through:

- reflexive journaling;
- transparent coding procedures;
- peer or supervisor review;
- maintaining an audit trail; and
- systematic thematic analysis.

Access to participants

Obtaining permission to interview senior SAPS officials may present administrative and organisational challenges. Gatekeeper approval and ethical clearance will therefore be required before data collection.

Social desirability bias

Participants may provide responses that they believe are institutionally acceptable rather than expressing their genuine views. The researcher should therefore create a non-judgmental interview environment and assure participants that individual responses will not be disclosed.

Contextual limitation

The study will examine leadership within a particular SAPS context. Differences between provinces, districts, stations and specialised units may mean that leadership experiences vary considerably.

Time and resource constraints

The qualitative nature of the research requires substantial time for interviews, transcription, coding and thematic analysis using ATLAS.ti. The study will therefore need clearly defined boundaries to remain manageable.

Conclusion

The study is premised on the argument that police leadership is a critical driver of organisational performance and effective policing. However, leadership cannot be examined independently of accountability, professionalisation, governance, ethical conduct and organisational culture.

The central proposition is:

Competent, ethical and accountable police leadership → stronger professionalisation and governance → positive organisational culture → improved organisational performance → effective policing and safer communities.

The practical value of the study lies in moving the discussion from “Who leads SAPS?” and “What leadership style is used?” towards the more important question:

“How can SAPS leadership create the organisational conditions necessary for professional, accountable, ethical and high-performing policing?”

This makes the study particularly relevant to current South African policing reforms and provides a practical basis for strengthening leadership development, accountability, professionalisation, organisational culture and service delivery within SAPS.

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