

THE ROLE OF CARING LEADERSHIP IN ENHANCING STRATEGIC HORIZON: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE OPINIONS OF A RANDOM SAMPLE OF EMPLOYEES IN AL-KAFEEL HOSPITAL

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ABSTRACT

The role of caring leadership in developing the strategic horizon: A field study on a random sample of the staff of Al-Kafeel Hospital in Iraq Caring leadership means a leadership style that emphasizes empathy, well-being, and mutual respect in the workplace. The study uses a descriptive analytical method to evaluate the role of this leadership style in long-term vision, alignment of employees with the institutional goals, and strategic foresight of hospitals.

A structured questionnaire was administered randomly to administrative and clinical staff to collect data. This sample consisted of a variety of employees in various departments. Statistical data were then used to investigate the relationship between leadership behavior and strategic thinking measures such as flexibility, creating strategic vision, and prompting initiatives level, among others.

Results reveal a significant association between caring leadership practices and strategic horizon of employees (N = 221). Leaders who displayed caring behaviors were rated by their respondents as displaying greater strategic foresight, future-mindedness, and alignment with hospital goals. This data underscores the value of emotional intelligence and trust in leadership, especially in high-pressure situations such as healthcare.

The findings add to the literature on health care leadership by providing an explanation of how personal leadership characteristics may influence strategic results. To promote a culture of anticipatory, long-term strategic planning, the model recommends that hospital administration integrate caring leadership principles into leadership development programs.

Keywords: Caring leadership, Strategic horizon, Healthcare sector, Descriptive analysis, Al-Kafeel Hospital

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

The centrepiece of healthcare settings is leadership because they need to work together with speed and strategic foresight when things get difficult. The Caring Leadership model is one of many but is noteworthy among them due to its focus on human-oriented traits with a focus on empathy, trust, and one-to-one interaction. This model is particularly important in the hospital setting, where the morale, psychological safety, and interpersonal trust directly correlate with patient outcomes and the overall performance of the organization [1].

Al-Kafeel Hospital, a private national Iraqi hospital, works in a health system trend on high demands for quality of service, innovation and sustainability. Leaders will naturally gravitate to practices that foster long-term thinking and choices that align with their strategic vision. Caring leaders improve communication and collaboration, but also deepen employees' feeling of purpose, which can help broaden the organization's strategic horizon. This includes being able to forewarn, goal set and be futuristically proactive for upcoming trends in health care [2].

More recently, emotional intelligence and social capital in organizations have attracted increased attention from scholars and practitioners. Nevertheless, few studies have revealed the relationship between caring leadership and employees strategic awareness in healthcare institutions, especially in Middle Eastern context. This study attempts

to cover that correlation gap between caring leadership behaviors and strategic vision by examining the viewpoint of a random sample of staff at Al-Kafeel Hospital using a structured questionnaire and descriptive statistical methods to determine the degree of the correlation between its two variables.

This context is the backdrop to understanding how care-oriented leadership practices can leverage a sustainable long-term decision-making process in medical organizations.

1.2 Research Problem

Hospitals work in a rapidly evolving climate with increasing demand for higher quality services, emerging technologies and greater responsiveness to patient needs. What is being asked of our staff and leadership goes beyond operational efficiency and into strategic thinking. Although transformation through leadership is a paramount driver of long-term institutional direction, legacy thinking breeds a portfolio of healthcare institutions that sap resources in order to maintain administrative control. Caring leadership, which centers on trust, empathy, and individual recognition, may offer a viable path toward enhancing an organization's strategic capacity. However, in many hospitals, including those in Iraq, leadership models remain rooted in hierarchy and command, often lacking the relational depth needed to inspire strategic vision among employees [3].

The main problem this research addresses is the absence of empirical data on how caring leadership influences employees' ability to engage with strategic objectives. Specifically, there is limited understanding of:

- How employees perceive caring leadership in a healthcare environment
- Whether such perceptions translate into greater strategic awareness and participation
- To what extent leadership care affects communication, planning, and future-oriented thinking

This study investigates these questions in the context of Al-Kafeel Hospital. It seeks to determine whether leaders who exhibit caring behaviors contribute to expanding employees' strategic horizon, defined as their ability to anticipate, align with, and act on long-term organizational goals.

By addressing this gap, the study provides practical insights for hospital administrators and policymakers aiming to build strategic competence through human-centered leadership.

1.3 Research Objectives

This research aims to examine the relationship between caring leadership and the enhancement of the strategic horizon among healthcare employees. The study focuses on Al-Kafeel Hospital as a case example. The objectives are specific, measurable, and aligned with the research problem.

The main objectives are:

- To assess the extent to which caring leadership behaviors are practiced by supervisors and managers at Al-Kafeel Hospital
- To identify the level of strategic awareness and long-term orientation among hospital employees
- To examine the relationship between perceived caring leadership and employees' engagement with strategic goals
- To analyze how different demographic groups (e.g., role, department, experience) respond to caring leadership in terms of strategic outlook
- To provide recommendations for leadership development programs focused on enhancing strategic thinking through relational leadership practices

Achieving these objectives will help bridge the gap between leadership style and institutional strategy in the healthcare sector. It will also support the design of evidence-based leadership training tailored to the demands of medical institutions.

1.4 Research Significance

This study contributes to the understanding of leadership in the healthcare sector by examining how caring leadership influences strategic thinking among employees. Its importance lies in both academic and practical domains.

From an academic perspective, the study addresses a gap in existing literature by focusing on the connection between leadership care and strategic horizon within a hospital setting in Iraq. While existing research often focuses on operational efficiency or patient outcomes, few studies examine how leadership behaviors affect employees' ability to think and act strategically [4].

From a practical viewpoint, the findings offer direct value to hospital administrators, policy makers, and leadership trainers. In high-stress environments like Al-Kafeel Hospital, leadership grounded in empathy and human care can be a tool for fostering employee engagement with long-term institutional goals. Strategic horizon—defined as the capacity to anticipate change, plan proactively, and align actions with future objectives—is critical for survival and growth in the medical sector.

The study also supports the adoption of soft leadership skills, such as emotional intelligence and trust-building, in leadership development programs. By showing a measurable link between caring leadership and strategic engagement, it encourages investment in training that goes beyond technical and managerial skills. Finally, the research provides localized data from an Iraqi hospital, offering insights for other institutions in similar regional and organizational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Foundations of Caring Leadership

Caring leadership stems from theories of human relations and emotional intelligence. It emphasizes the value of empathy, respect, fairness, and concern for the well-being of others. Unlike traditional leadership models that focus on authority and results, caring leadership aligns leadership practice with psychological support and emotional trust [5].

Scholars such as Noddings and Greenleaf argued that leadership must begin with an ethical commitment to others' welfare, forming the base for servant and caring leadership philosophies [6]. Leaders operating under this model provide individualized support, build strong interpersonal connections, and focus on mutual growth rather than top-down control.

Caring leadership demonstrates the following key behaviors:

- Active listening and validation
- Constructive feedback with emotional sensitivity
- Recognition of employee challenges and achievements
- Creation of a psychologically safe work environment

In practice, such leadership reduces turnover, improves job satisfaction, and increases organizational citizenship behaviors [7].

A healthcare-specific review by Ling et al. revealed that nurse managers employing caring leadership contributed to improved patient safety and better staff cohesion [8].

2.2 The Strategic Horizon Concept

The strategic horizon represents the degree to which an organization and its members project into the future when planning, evaluating risks, or making decisions. A short-term strategic horizon focuses on immediate tasks and operational survival. A long-term or broad strategic horizon integrates innovation, institutional vision, and adaptive capacity [9].

In healthcare settings, strategic horizon influences not only how resources are allocated but how clinical teams engage with institutional missions, patient outcomes, and future readiness. Hospitals with broader strategic horizons:

- Align clinical activities with national health policy
- Engage in scenario-based risk modeling
- Integrate technological innovation into long-term planning
- Emphasize talent retention and training for future challenges

A study by Ginter et al. found that hospitals with strategic vision frameworks performed better during pandemics in adapting to unexpected operational pressures [10]. See Figure (1)



Figure (1) shows the basic elements involved in forming an organizational strategic horizon.

2.3 Theoretical Links Between Leadership and Strategy

Strategic behavior in organizations is not driven by formal plans alone. It is often shaped by leadership. Leaders who engage employees in long-term planning help cultivate an anticipatory mindset across departments. Caring leaders, in particular, foster:

- Vision internalization
- Future-oriented motivation
- Willingness to invest effort in long-term improvements

Research by Boal and Hooijberg emphasized that leadership must integrate cognitive complexity and social intelligence to engage employees strategically [11]. Transformational leaders can do this through shared vision and intellectual stimulation. Caring leaders achieve similar results by offering emotional support and meaning.

Studies show a correlation between leadership style and strategic flexibility. Employees who perceive their leaders as supportive are more likely to adapt and innovate [12]. This is vital in the healthcare sector, where uncertainty is high and adaptive responses are required. See table 1: Leadership models and their role in fostering strategic behavior [13]

Table (1) compares selected leadership styles based on their impact on strategic participation.

Leadership Style	Emotional Focus	Strategic Alignment	Innovation Support
Authoritarian	None	Low	None
Transactional	Low	Moderate	Low
Transformational	Moderate	High	High
Caring Leadership	High	High	High

2.4 Empirical Research on Caring Leadership in Healthcare

Healthcare is a high-risk environment characterized by emotional pressure, multidisciplinary collaboration, and urgent decision-making. In such settings, the role of leadership becomes not just administrative but emotional and ethical. Several studies confirm the positive outcomes of caring leadership in medical settings. For example:

- A study by Wang et al. found that departments led by emotionally responsive supervisors had lower absenteeism rates and higher productivity [14].
- Another study by Kruse et al. concluded that caring leadership improved coordination between clinical and administrative units during high-stress emergencies [15].

In Iraq, healthcare institutions have seen shifts in leadership structures due to privatization, competition, and regulatory reforms. However, few local studies have evaluated whether leadership practices—especially those grounded in empathy—help align staff with strategic institutional goals. See Figure 2: How caring leadership affects employee engagement with strategic goals [15]



Figure (2) illustrates how caring leadership translates into strategic engagement in healthcare systems.

2.5 Gaps in Current Research

While literature shows strong support for the effectiveness of caring leadership in improving staff morale, patient outcomes, and communication, few studies directly examine its impact on strategic awareness and future planning within healthcare institutions.

Key gaps include:

- Limited empirical data from Arab countries, particularly Iraq
- Few studies isolating strategic horizon as a measurable outcome
- Lack of mixed-method validation to assess subjective perceptions of leadership behavior and objective indicators of strategic engagement
- Underrepresentation of secondary staff and non-clinical departments in leadership studies

This research contributes to closing those gaps by:

- Focusing on a real-world hospital in Iraq
- Targeting multiple staff levels through random sampling
- Measuring both leadership perception and strategic behavior using validated instruments

Caring leadership provides a supportive framework that aligns emotional trust with organizational vision. Its capacity to build psychological safety makes it ideal for high-risk sectors like healthcare. Strategic horizon, meanwhile, represents the institutional ability to think long-term, act preemptively, and maintain readiness for future demands.

Although both concepts are well-studied separately, their intersection remains underexplored. This study integrates both into a focused analysis of Al-Kafeel Hospital, aiming to determine whether caring leadership correlates with stronger strategic engagement among staff.

The next section presents the methodology used to explore this relationship in detail.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive analytical research design. The goal is to examine the relationship between caring leadership and the strategic horizon among employees at Al-Kafeel Hospital. A descriptive design allows for measuring employee perceptions and identifying patterns without manipulating variables. Analytical tools are applied to interpret correlations and differences between variables within the data set [5].

The justification for using this approach lies in its ability to explore real-world settings, specifically in institutions like hospitals where leadership behaviors are complex, multidimensional, and context-dependent.

3.2 Research Population and Sampling

The population for this study includes all full-time employees at Al-Kafeel Hospital in Karbala, Iraq. This includes administrative, nursing, medical, and support staff. Based on the hospital's human resource data, the total population was estimated at 420 employees.

A simple random sampling technique was used to select participants. This approach ensures each member of the population has an equal chance of being included, reducing selection bias. The final sample included 120 participants, selected to represent different departments and roles within the hospital.

See table (2) for the demographic breakdown of the sample.

Table 2: Distribution of sample by functional category

Category	Number	Percentage
Administrative	35	29.2%
Medical Staff	45	37.5%

Nursing Staff	28	23.3%
Support Services	12	10.0%

3.3 Data Collection Tool

The study relied on a structured questionnaire, designed to measure two key dimensions:

1. Perceived Caring Leadership – behaviors of immediate supervisors or managers, rated by employees.
2. Strategic Horizon Engagement – indicators of strategic thinking, awareness, and alignment with hospital vision.

The questionnaire consisted of 28 items divided as follows:

- 15 items measuring caring leadership (based on validated scales from previous studies [6], [7])
- 13 items measuring strategic orientation (adapted from strategic engagement models [8])

Responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree.

3.4 Validity and Reliability

3.4.1 Content Validity

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of five academic experts in leadership, strategic management, and healthcare administration. Their feedback led to adjustments in item clarity, language simplicity, and item alignment with research objectives.

3.4.2 Reliability Testing

The instrument's reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha. A pilot test was conducted with a subgroup of 20 employees from departments not included in the final sample. Results showed strong internal consistency:

- Caring Leadership items: $\alpha = 0.91$
- Strategic Horizon items: $\alpha = 0.88$

These values exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating reliable measurement [9].

3.5 Data Analysis Procedures

Collected data were entered into SPSS version 26 for statistical analysis. The following procedures were applied:

- Descriptive statistics: frequencies, means, and standard deviations
- Pearson correlation coefficients: to test the relationship between leadership and strategic engagement
- Independent sample t-tests and ANOVA: to analyze differences across demographic variables (e.g., department, gender, years of experience)

All tests used a significance level of $p < 0.05$.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research adhered to ethical standards in human research. The following steps were taken:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants
- Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed
- Participation was voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any time
- No identifying information was collected or stored

The study was approved by the internal ethics committee at the researcher's academic institution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Overview of Data Collection

A total of 120 completed questionnaires were returned from Al-Kafeel Hospital staff, representing a response rate of 92.3%. The participants came from diverse departments, roles, and levels of experience. The data were analyzed using SPSS 26, employing descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, t-tests, and one-way ANOVA where applicable.

4.2 Descriptive Analysis of Caring Leadership

Table (3) presents the descriptive statistics for the 15 items measuring caring leadership. Each item was scored on a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 3: Selected items measuring perceptions of caring leadership

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
My supervisor listens actively to concerns	4.16	0.78
My supervisor shows concern for employee well-being	4.23	0.71
My supervisor recognizes personal efforts	4.05	0.80
My supervisor treats all employees fairly	4.12	0.76
My supervisor creates a safe and respectful environment	4.18	0.74

The overall mean score for caring leadership was 4.15, indicating a generally strong perception of supportive leadership across the hospital [5].

4.3 Descriptive Analysis of Strategic Horizon

The strategic horizon scale included 13 items reflecting employee awareness of institutional goals, planning participation, and future orientation.

Table 4: Selected items measuring strategic horizon engagement

Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
I understand the hospital's long-term vision	3.97	0.82
I am encouraged to participate in strategic planning	3.85	0.87
I feel that my role contributes to the hospital's mission	4.02	0.79
I am aware of how the hospital prepares for future challenges	3.91	0.84
I believe my input matters in shaping future improvements	3.88	0.86

The overall mean score for strategic horizon was 3.92, showing moderate-to-high awareness and participation in strategy-related activities [6].

4.4 Correlation Between Caring Leadership and Strategic Horizon

Pearson's correlation coefficient was computed to examine the relationship between perceived caring leadership and strategic engagement.

Table 5: Correlation between caring leadership and strategic horizon

Variables	Pearson's r	Sig. (2-tailed)
Caring Leadership & Strategic Horizon	0.763	0.000

The results show a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.763$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that employees who rated their supervisors highly on caring behaviors were more likely to be engaged in strategic thinking and planning [7].

4.5 Differences by Department

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine if caring leadership perceptions differed by department.

Table 6: Departmental comparison of caring leadership scores

Department	Mean Caring Leadership	F-value	Sig.
Medical	4.18		
Nursing	4.12		
Administration	4.14	1.021	0.386
Support Services	4.10		

No statistically significant differences were found ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that caring leadership is perceived relatively consistently across the hospital [8].

4.6 Gender-Based Comparison

Independent samples t-test was conducted to examine gender-based differences in perceptions of caring leadership and strategic horizon.

Table 7: Gender comparison of key variables

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	t-value	Sig.
Caring Leadership	4.12	4.18	-0.92	0.360
Strategic Horizon	3.89	3.94	-0.75	0.452

Again, no statistically significant differences were found, indicating similar experiences across genders in terms of leadership and strategic alignment [9].

4.7 Discussion and Comparison with Previous Studies

The strong correlation between caring leadership and strategic horizon aligns with international literature. For instance:

- A study by Zarei et al. in Iranian hospitals confirmed that supportive leadership enhances goal alignment and long-term thinking [10].
- Research by Tseng and Lee found that leadership characterized by empathy and inclusion significantly increased innovation and strategic contribution in nursing units [11].

This research confirms similar dynamics within the context of Al-Kafeel Hospital. Staff who feel heard and respected by leadership are more likely to understand, support, and contribute to the hospital's long-term plans.

These findings reinforce the strategic importance of emotional intelligence and relational skills in leadership training for healthcare administrators [12].

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

5.1 Conclusion

This research analyzed the relationship between caring leadership and the strategic horizon among a random sample of employees at Al-Kafeel Hospital. The findings show a strong positive correlation between these two variables. Employees who perceived their supervisors as emotionally supportive, fair, and responsive demonstrated greater awareness of institutional goals and a stronger commitment to long-term strategic direction.

Key conclusions:

- **Caring leadership is positively associated with strategic engagement.**

Staff exposed to supportive leadership behaviors exhibited stronger alignment with the hospital's vision and showed more willingness to participate in planning and improvement activities.

- **The effect is consistent across demographics.**

Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences in leadership perception or strategic awareness by gender or department.

- **Caring leadership can be a strategic asset.**

Beyond improving morale and retention, it promotes behaviors that support innovation, planning, and proactive adaptation in healthcare settings.

These results confirm that caring leadership is not only an ethical imperative but also a contributor to organizational resilience and strategic capacity in dynamic healthcare environments.

5.2 Future Work

To build on the insights of this research, future studies should address the following areas:

- **Longitudinal analysis:**

Future research can investigate whether and how the changes in the leadership development programs impact the strategic thinking in the longer run.

- **Multi-hospital comparisons:**

Perform similar studies in public and private hospitals in other geographical settings to Evaluate whether the same association can be observed in other healthcare settings.

- **Mixed-method approach:**

If you really want to know how employees interpret and react to leadership behavior, surveys are best supplemented with qualitative methods, such as interviews.

- **Connection to performance results:**

Future research should also investigate the relationship between caring leadership and objective measures, such as error rates, patient satisfaction, retention of staff, or responses to emergencies.

- **Evaluating leadership training:**

Asses how programs to develop emotional intelligence, empathy, and other supportive behaviors are working in healthcare administration

The study confirms that caring leadership enhances not just individual well-being but also institutional strategic capability. Hospitals aiming to remain competitive and resilient must treat leadership care as a foundational element of their strategic planning framework.

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