CURRENT LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS IN NEPALI PUBLIC ENTERPRISES: IMPLICATIONS FOR EFFICIENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the critical role of leadership in shaping the performance, accountability and organisational culture of public enterprises (PEs) in Nepal. These issues have led to poor service delivery, low employee motivation and diminished public trust. It highlights the dominance of bureaucratic leadership, political patronage in leadership appointments and reactive management behaviours. All contribute to operational inefficiencies and hinder organisational growth. Based on these challenges, the article proposes a set of recommendations for leadership reforms. It included the promotion of transformational leadership, merit-based appointments, leadership training and enhanced accountability mechanisms of public enterprises in Nepal.

Keywords: leadership, public enterprises, political interference, bureaucratic structures, transformational leadership

INTRODUCTION

Context and Relevance

Public enterprises (PEs) have long been integral to the Nepali economic and service delivery framework, serving as key institutions in sectors such as transportation, telecommunications, manufacturing, energy and finance. These organisations were established to address gaps in the private sector and ensure equitable access to essential services across the country. PEs have been contributing to infrastructure development, employment generation and provision of public goods and services (Government of Nepal, 2024).

Since the 1960s, the Nepali public sector has witnessed significant growth, with the establishment of over 40 public enterprises. These enterprises were central to the state-led economic development model. They aimed at addressing market failures and fostering national economic self-sufficiency. However, despite their early promise, many PEs in Nepal have faced persistent challenges. Issues such as financial mismanagement, lack of innovation, political interference and bureaucratic inefficiencies have undermined their performance, leading to widespread concerns about their sustainability and effectiveness. The leadership within these enterprises has been a critical factor in both their successes and failures. Effective leadership inspire organisational transformation, enhances accountability and ensures the efficient use of resources. In contrast, poor leadership

perpetuate inefficiency and hinders the ability of PEs to achieve their developmental goals (Bhul, 2023). Therefore, understanding the nature of leadership behaviours in these organisations is crucial for improving their performance and restoring public trust.

Problem Statement

Despite their strategic importance, Nepali PEs are overwhelmed by widespread inefficiencies that hinder their operational effectiveness and growth. One of the most significant factors contributing to these inefficiencies is the poor leadership practices observed across various public enterprises. Leadership in PEs is often characterised by political influence, bureaucratic rigidity and a lack of visionary direction. These leadership challenges are compounded by the failure to embrace reform and innovation, which further exacerbates the inefficiencies within these organisations. Political appointments to leadership positions have led to a disconnect between the operational needs of the enterprises and the competencies of the leaders. As a result, many leaders are not equipped with the necessary skills to manage complex organisations. It leads to a decline in employee morale, poor service delivery and public distrust in the performance of these enterprises (Transparency International Nepal, 2022). The absence of a clear leadership vision and a proactive approach to management has resulted in a reactive organisational culture, where crises are addressed only after they occur, rather than being them through strategic planning.

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to assess the current leadership behaviours in Nepali public enterprises and examine their implications for organisational performance and public trust. Specifically: (1) Identify the dominant leadership styles present in Nepali public enterprises; (2) Evaluate the impact of these leadership behaviours on operational efficiency, employee motivation and service delivery within the enterprises; and (3) Provide actionable recommendations for cultivating leadership practices that promote organisational effectiveness and good governance within Nepali public enterprises.

RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, drawing on a combination of secondary data sources, including government reports, performance reviews and scholarly literature. Data are collected from public reports, case studies of specific PEs (i.e., Nepal Telecom and Nepal Airlines). These case studies provided real-world examples of how different leadership styles have influenced the success or failure of specific enterprises.

The study has reviewed relevant academic articles and leadership theories, including transactional and transformational leadership (Bass, 1990), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) and path-goal theory (House, 1971), to provide a theoretical framework for analysing leadership behaviours in Nepali public enterprises. A few interviews with current or

former leaders of PEs, as well as public sector experts. This has led to gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges and leadership dynamics within these organisations.

PUBLIC ENTERPRISES IN NEPAL: CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

Public enterprises (PEs) in Nepal have a central role in the country's economy, spanning various sectors such as finance, energy, telecommunications, manufacturing, transportation and agriculture. These entities were established by the government to promote national development, provide essential public services and fill gaps in the private sector. The establishment of these enterprises was particularly crucial during Nepal's early stages of economic development, as they aimed to contribute to infrastructure development and ensure equitable access to goods and services in a largely rural and underdeveloped country (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

Public sector banks and financial institutions, such as the Nepal Rastra Bank, Agricultural Development Bank and Nepal Industrial Development Corporation, play a critical role in providing financial services to underbanked populations, especially in rural areas. The Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) is responsible for the generation, transmission and distribution of electricity, a critical sector for the country's infrastructure and economic development. Despite this, the sector has faced challenges related to power shortages and inefficient management.

Nepal Telecom and Ncell dominate the telecommunications sector, offering essential services such as mobile communication and internet access. As technology evolves, this sector requires adaptive leadership to manage rapid growth and technological advancements. PEs like the Hetauda Cement Factory and the Butwal Power Company contribute to Nepali manufacturing capabilities, although many of these enterprises face challenges related to outdated infrastructure and inefficient management practices.

Nepal Airlines, which operates domestic and international flights, is a significant player in the transportation sector. However, it has struggled with management crises and political interference, contributing to its operational inefficiency. Several public enterprises are involved in the agricultural sector, including the Salt Trading Corporation, which ensures the supply of essential commodities such as salt and other agricultural products. While these enterprises have contributed significantly to Nepali economic development, they have been consistently affected by managerial inefficiencies, political interference and lack of proper leadership, which has hampered their ability to meet their full potential.

Performance Trends

The performance of public enterprises in Nepal has been varied, with significant challenges in terms of profitability, operational efficiency and organisational effectiveness. As per the Annual Performance Review of Public Enterprises (2024), the number of profit-making PEs has remained relatively stagnant over the past decade, fluctuating between 10 and 15 annually. This contrasts with a significant proportion of loss-incurring enterprises, which have consistently constituted over 60% of the total public enterprises. Despite the critical role these organisations play in the Nepali economy, their performance has been

hindered by factors such as poor leadership, inefficiency and financial mismanagement (Government of Nepal, 2024).

Over the period from 2013 to 2023, the financial losses incurred by PEs were substantial. The cumulative losses of public enterprises exceeded NPR 160 billion, underlining the persistent structural and leadership challenges within the sector. A key example of this ongoing issue is Nepal Airlines, which has reported repeated losses due to managerial inefficiency, political interference and mismanagement of resources. Similarly, the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA), while central to the nation's energy infrastructure, has faced chronic financial losses due to high levels of system inefficiency and inadequate investment in infrastructure (Government of Nepal, 2024). The performance trends from 2013 to 2023 highlight systemic inefficiencies in the operation of PEs. For instance, a significant number of enterprises have failed to modernise, which has led to technological stagnation and an inability to compete effectively in a rapidly changing global marketplace. As a result, many public enterprises have experienced declining market share, poor service delivery and a loss of skilled human capital, which exacerbates their operational challenges (Pokhrel & Gyawali, 2025).

The key factors contributing to these poor performance trends included that many leadership positions in PEs are filled through political patronage, which leads to the appointment of individuals with limited managerial competence, undermining the operational capacity of these enterprises (Transparency International Nepal, 2022). The rigid, rule-based structure of most PEs stifles innovation and agility, preventing leaders from responding effectively to market and technological changes (Adhikari et al., 2024). Persistent financial losses, such as those observed in Nepal Airlines and the Hetauda Cement Factory, are often the result of poor financial oversight and a lack of strategic planning (Government of Nepal, 2024).

CURRENT LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS IN NEPALI PUBLIC ENTERPRISES
Bureaucratic and Rule-Oriented Leadership

One of the dominant features of leadership in Nepali public enterprises is the adherence to bureaucratic and rule-oriented structures. These structures prioritise compliance with established regulations and procedures. This approach ensures that there is consistency and accountability in terms of legal and regulatory compliance. In such bureaucratic systems, leaders are often more focused on maintaining the status quo rather than fostering innovation or adapting to modern management practices (Adhikari et al., 2024). The rigid nature of bureaucratic leadership often stifles creativity and problem-solving capabilities, making it difficult for organisations to implement necessary reforms or embrace new technologies. This lack of adaptability has been particularly detrimental in sectors like telecommunications, manufacturing and energy, where rapid technological advancements are essential for maintaining competitive advantage. Bureaucratic leadership structures

slow decision-making processes, leading to delays in responding to market changes, diminishing organisational efficiency.

Politically Appointed Leadership

Political patronage in many PEs is often based on political connections rather than merit, with leaders being selected for their political loyalty rather than their managerial competence. This practice has a detrimental effect on the quality of management within these enterprises. Political appointments tend to result in leadership that lacks the necessary skills, experience and strategic vision to effectively guide an organisation toward growth and sustainability (Transparency International Nepal, 2022).

Political interference in leadership roles can lead to inconsistent decision-making, as leaders are frequently more concerned with political allegiances than with the long-term health of the enterprise. This undermines the ability of leaders to make objective, data-driven decisions, hindering the ability of public enterprises to operate efficiently and effectively. In some instances, political leaders may use public enterprises as a means to fulfil personal or party objectives, further exacerbating inefficiencies and mismanagement.

Lack of Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership is crucial for the success of any organisation, but it remains largely absent in Nepali public enterprises. The absence of visionary leaders within these organisations has had far-reaching implications, particularly in the realms of modernisation and digital transformation. Without leaders who can inspire and implement long-term strategic plans, public enterprises in Nepal have struggled to evolve in response to global economic and technological shifts.

The case of public enterprises like Nepal Telecom and the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has faced challenges in modernising their infrastructure and embracing new technologies. Leaders who fail to provide a clear, forward-thinking vision for digitalisation or modernisation leave these organisations vulnerable to technological obsolescence. This lack of innovation has contributed to poor service delivery, inefficiencies and an inability to remain competitive in an increasingly globalised and digital world (Government of Nepal, 2024).

Reactive Behaviour

A significant challenge facing the leadership in Nepali public enterprises is the tendency to adopt a reactive rather than proactive approach to management. Instead of anticipating challenges and preparing for potential risks, leaders often wait until problems arise before taking action. This reactive leadership style has contributed to recurring crises, financial setbacks and operational inefficiencies across various public enterprises.

In case of Nepal Airlines has faced repeated management crises and financial losses due to its leaders' inability to take preventive measures or adopt forward-thinking strategies. Similarly, the NEA has struggled with power shortages and inadequate infrastructure, issues that could have been mitigated with proactive leadership and long-term planning. The lack of anticipation and preparation for such challenges continues to impede the

effectiveness of public enterprises (Bhul, 2023).

Employee Motivation and Engagement

The current leadership behaviours within Nepali public enterprises have had a detrimental impact on employee morale, absenteeism and overall service quality. Leadership that fails to engage with employees or invest in their development results in low employee motivation and high turnover rates. Public enterprises that do not prioritise employee well-being or provide adequate incentives for performance often experience high absenteeism and low productivity. The lack of attention to employee development and empowerment results in employees feeling disconnected from the organisation's goals and less committed to their work. This disengagement leads to poor service delivery, diminished organisational performance and a loss of skilled professionals who seek better opportunities elsewhere (Pokhrel & Gyawali, 2025). In such an environment, leaders who fail to motivate and engage their teams contribute directly to inefficiencies and low-quality service.

IMPACTS OF CURRENT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Ineffective leadership in Nepali public enterprises has directly contributed to operational inefficiency, as evidenced by examples such as Nepal Airlines and Hetauda Cement. In the case of Nepal Airlines, repeated leadership crises, including poor management and political interference, have resulted in operational disruptions and financial losses. The airline has struggled to maintain a competitive edge, resulting in an inefficient fleet, outdated technology and financial instability. Similarly, the Hetauda Cement Factory, a key public enterprise in Nepal, has faced challenges related to outdated equipment, poor production planning and insufficient leadership oversight. The failure to modernise and improve operational practices has led to continuous financial losses and an inability to meet market demand, hindering the company's growth and profitability. These examples highlight the direct link between ineffective leadership and poor operational outcomes in Nepali public enterprises (Government of Nepal, 2024).

The public perception of public enterprises in Nepal is largely negative, with many citizens viewing these organisations as inefficient, corrupt and poorly managed. The lack of accountability and transparency, coupled with recurring leadership failures, has eroded public trust in these institutions. This public distrust is particularly evident in sectors like transportation and telecommunications, where poor service quality, unreliable infrastructure and financial mismanagement are frequently reported. The lack of ethical leadership and accountability within these enterprises has made it difficult for the public to believe that these organisations are genuinely committed to improving service delivery or contributing to national development (Transparency International Nepal, 2022).

Rigid leadership structures within Nepali public enterprises have contributed to institutional stagnation. The bureaucratic nature of these organisations, compounded by a lack of innovative leadership, has led to an inability to embrace change or adapt to evolving market conditions. This rigidity has particularly affected the ability of PEs

to invest in new technologies, modernise their operations and improve service delivery. The failure to modernise in response to global economic trends, particularly in the telecommunications and energy sectors, has left many public enterprises vulnerable to competition from private sector firms that are more agile and innovative. The inability of public enterprises to respond to these changes due to institutional rigidity further diminishes their effectiveness and relevance in the modern economy (Government of Nepal, 2024).

Ineffective leadership within public enterprises has resulted in the loss of skilled professionals, who often leave for better opportunities in the private sector or abroad. The lack of investment in employee development, poor work conditions, and low morale have contributed to high turnover rates and a shrinking talent pool within these organisations. As a result, many public enterprises struggle to retain skilled employees who could contribute to improving performance and innovation. The departure of skilled professionals further exacerbates the challenges faced by these enterprises, as there is a continuous drain of institutional knowledge and expertise. This loss of human capital undermines the capacity of public enterprises to drive long-term reforms, implement technological advancements, or improve service quality (Bhul, 2023).

CASE STUDY: NEPAL TELECOM VS. NEPAL AIRLINES

Nepal Telecom

Nepal Telecom (NT) has often been named as one of the more successful public enterprises in Nepal, largely due to its semi-autonomous leadership practices and its focus on customer service. It has been granted a certain level of operational autonomy, which has allowed it to make decisions more quickly and respond to market conditions more effectively. This flexibility has been critical in enabling NT to implement long-term strategies and improve its service delivery.

A key factor in NT performance has been its emphasis on customer satisfaction and the ability to innovate in a rapidly evolving telecommunications market. It was one of the first to introduce 4G services in Nepal, which significantly improved the quality of mobile and internet services for users across the country. The leadership at NT has focused on upgrading infrastructure and improving customer support, which has bolstered the company's reputation and customer loyalty. However, it is important to note that NT's success does not imply immunity from all challenges. As a public enterprise, NT still faces some of the inherent problems associated with bureaucratic red tape and political pressures.

Nepal Airlines

Nepal Airlines (NA) has faced significant management crises, political interference and leadership instability, which have hindered its performance and growth. The airline, once a symbol of national pride. It has suffered from a lack of strategic direction and consistent leadership. Frequent changes in top management. It is often due to political appointments, which have resulted in a lack of continuity and vision. These leadership disruptions

have made it difficult for Nepal Airlines to formulate and execute long-term strategies for improving operations, upgrading aircraft, or expanding routes. Political interference has been a major factor contributing to Nepal Airlines' poor performance. Leadership positions in the airline industry have often been filled based on political considerations rather than managerial expertise. As a result, many of the appointed leaders lacked the necessary skills or experience to effectively run a complex organisation like an airline. This has led to mismanagement of resources, operational inefficiencies and an inability to adapt to the rapidly changing aviation industry.

The instability in leadership, coupled with poor decision-making, has resulted in a long-standing decline in Nepal Airlines' profitability. The airline has struggled to maintain a competitive fleet, facing repeated delays in acquiring new aircraft or modernising existing ones. Additionally, its customer service has suffered, with frequent complaints about poor maintenance and unreliable flight schedules. Unlike Nepal Telecom, which has leveraged semi-autonomy and customer-centric leadership to thrive, Nepal Airlines has remained mired in political and managerial instability, leading to inefficiency and a loss of public trust.

LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES UNIQUE TO NEPAL

Weak Political-Administrative Separation

One of the most significant challenges facing leadership in Nepali public enterprises is the weak separation between political and administrative functions. Political interference in administrative matters is a pervasive issue in many public enterprises, where leadership appointments and decisions are often influenced by political interests rather than merit. Political leaders frequently use public enterprises as a tool to fulfil party agendas, which undermines the efficiency and professionalism of these organisations.

This blending of political and administrative roles creates an environment where decisions are made based on political considerations rather than organisational needs. As a result, leadership positions may be filled by individuals who lack the necessary skills or experience to manage complex public enterprises. Furthermore, political interference can lead to inconsistent decision-making, inefficiency and a lack of long-term strategic vision. The absence of a clear boundary between politics and administration has made it difficult for public enterprises to implement reforms, improve accountability and achieve sustainable development (Transparency International Nepal, 2022).

Limited Accountability Mechanisms

Another challenge facing public enterprises in Nepal is the lack of robust accountability mechanisms. Without clear systems to hold leaders accountable for their actions, there is little incentive for public enterprise leaders to prioritise efficiency, transparency, or service quality. The absence of stringent oversight and monitoring systems has allowed inefficiencies, corruption and mismanagement to persist within many public enterprises. In Nepal, leadership appointments are often made based on political affiliation, and once in power, leaders may not be held accountable for their performance or financial

management. In the absence of independent audit mechanisms, performance evaluations and public accountability frameworks, many public enterprises have become mired in poor governance and operational inefficiencies. The lack of accountability has also led to the failure of many public enterprises to deliver services effectively, contributing to a loss of public trust (Pokhrel & Gyawali, 2025).

Inadequate Leadership Development

Leadership training and development programs within the public sector are often insufficient, and there is a lack of emphasis on preparing leaders to manage complex, modern organisations. As a result, many leaders in public enterprises are not equipped with the necessary skills in areas such as strategic planning, organisational management and innovation. The focus on political loyalty rather than merit in leadership appointments exacerbates the lack of professional leadership. In many cases, leaders are appointed based on their political affiliations rather than their qualifications, which undermines the overall effectiveness of public enterprises. The absence of structured leadership development programs prevents public sector leaders from acquiring the expertise needed to tackle the unique challenges of the public sector, such as navigating political interference, managing public funds and ensuring accountability.

Cultural Factors

Nepali hierarchical and collectivist society places a strong emphasis on respect for authority and seniority, which can sometimes lead to a reluctance to question leadership decisions or push for necessary reforms. This cultural deference can stifle critical thinking and innovation, as employees may be hesitant to voice concerns or challenge their leaders. Nepotism and favouritism, which are often culturally ingrained in Nepali society, can perpetuate the cycle of political patronage and hinder the appointment of competent leaders based on merit. This culture of favouritism has contributed to widespread inefficiencies within public enterprises, as leaders are often chosen based on their social or political connections rather than their qualifications or experience (Adhikari et al., 2024). While cultural norms can promote harmony and respect within organisations, they can also create environments where accountability is lacking and ineffective leadership is tolerated. This cultural backdrop further exacerbates the leadership challenges faced by Nepali public enterprises, making it difficult to implement lasting reforms and improve overall performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP REFORM

Promote Transformational Leadership

To address the deeply rooted leadership challenges in Nepali public enterprises, it is essential to develop visionary and ethical leaders who can inspire and guide organisations towards greater efficiency and innovation. Transformational leadership, characterised by a focus on long-term goals, innovation, and empowering employees, is vital for modernising Nepali public enterprises. Such leaders should be able to galvanise their teams, align organisational goals with national development strategies, and foster a culture

that promotes continuous improvement and change (Bass, 1990). Transformational leaders would create an environment where employees are motivated to perform at their best, while also encouraging the development of new technologies, digitalisation, and sustainable practices.

Institutionalise Merit-Based Appointments

A critical reform for improving leadership in public enterprises is the institutionalisation of merit-based recruitment processes for leadership roles. The current system of political patronage and favouritism in leadership appointments has severely undermined the operational efficiency and governance of public enterprises. Therefore, it is essential to establish transparent, competitive recruitment mechanisms that prioritise candidates' qualifications, experience and leadership abilities over their political affiliations.

Independent selection committees should be established to oversee the recruitment of top leaders, ensuring that they possess the necessary managerial skills and a track record of effective leadership. Merit-based appointments would not only promote greater accountability but also help to restore confidence in the governance of public enterprises, enhancing their ability to meet national developmental goals.

Leadership Training and Development

The lack of adequate leadership training and development programs in the Nepali public sector has left many leaders unprepared to handle the complexities of managing large organisations. To address this, structured leadership development programs should be introduced that focus on critical areas such as ethics, accountability, strategic planning and organisational management.

These programs should be mandatory for leaders within public enterprises and be tailored to meet the specific challenges of the public sector. Training should focus on building the capacity for innovation and long-term strategic thinking, which are essential for modernising public enterprises and enhancing service delivery.

Strengthen Accountability and Monitoring

To ensure that leadership reforms result in tangible performance improvements, it is essential to strengthen accountability mechanisms within public enterprises. One way to achieve this is by implementing robust internal audit systems that regularly assess the financial and operational performance of enterprises. These audits should be independent and conducted by skilled professionals who are free from political interference. For internal audits, citizen feedback loops should be established to gather public opinions on the quality of services provided by public enterprises. This feedback would help leaders understand the public concerns and improve transparency. Furthermore, performance-based evaluations should be instituted to assess the effectiveness of leaders and hold them accountable for their actions. These evaluations should be linked to incentives or consequences to ensure that leaders remain committed to improving the performance of their organisations.

Encourage Participatory Leadership Models

To promote a more inclusive and engaging work environment, participatory leadership models should be adopted within Nepali public enterprises. This approach encourages leaders to involve employees at all levels in decision-making processes, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability. Team-based decision-making can enhance employee motivation, improve communication within the organisation and lead to higher levels of job satisfaction. Participatory leadership is particularly important in public enterprises, where employees are often disengaged due to the bureaucratic nature of the work environment.

CONCLUSION

The current leadership behaviours within Nepali public enterprises are characterised by bureaucratic structures, political interference, a lack of visionary leadership and poor employee engagement. These challenges have led to inefficiencies, poor service delivery and a loss of public trust. The prevalence of reactive, rule-oriented leadership, along with the frequent instability in top management positions, has impeded the potential for growth and reform in the Nepali public sector. To address these challenges, it is essential to implement leadership reforms that focus on cultivating transformational, ethical and participatory leadership practices. Transformational leadership would inspire employees, encourage innovation and align public enterprise goals with national development objectives. Institutionalising merit-based appointments, improving leadership training and enhancing accountability mechanisms would help create a more effective and transparent public sector.

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