

# Employee competence, leadership style and employee performance: mediating role of work motivation at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI

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## Article Info

### Article history:

Received : Feb 11, 2026

Revised : Mar 13, 2026

Accepted : Apr 28, 2026

### Keywords:

Employee Competence;  
Leadership Style;  
Work Motivation;  
Employee Performance;  
PLS-SEM

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of employee competence and leadership style on employee performance through work motivation as a mediating variable at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI. The research is motivated by the need to enhance employee performance to achieve organizational targets in the increasingly competitive plantation industry, where competence, leadership, and motivation are key determinants of success. A quantitative survey method was applied in this study. The population consisted of 85 permanent employees, all of whom were included as respondents using a census sampling technique. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale. The data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. The results show that employee competence has a positive and significant effect on work motivation ( $\beta = 0.578$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ), and leadership style also significantly influences work motivation ( $\beta = 0.805$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Employee competence has a positive and significant effect on employee performance ( $\beta = 0.328$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ), while work motivation significantly affects employee performance ( $\beta = 0.612$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). However, leadership style does not have a significant direct effect on employee performance ( $\beta = 0.067$ ;  $p = 0.515$ ). The model explains 64.8% of the variance in work motivation and 86.2% of the variance in employee performance. These findings indicate that work motivation plays an important mediating role in linking employee competence and leadership style with employee performance. Strengthening employee competence and implementing effective leadership practices can enhance motivation, which in turn improves employee performance at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The increasingly dynamic business environment requires organizations to enhance their competitiveness through effective human resource management. In the era of digital transformation and global competition, companies are not only expected to improve operational performance but also to develop the competencies of their human resources to adapt to rapidly changing business conditions. Organizational success in achieving strategic objectives is highly influenced by the quality

of its human resources, as employees serve as the primary driving force behind all organizational activities.

The palm oil plantation sector is one of the strategic industries that significantly contributes to the national economy. As a company engaged in palm oil plantation and processing activities, PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI is required to continuously improve productivity and operational efficiency to remain competitive in an increasingly challenging industry. To achieve these objectives, the company requires employees with strong competencies, supported by effective leadership practices and high levels of work motivation that can drive improved performance.

Employee performance is one of the key indicators of organizational success in achieving predetermined objectives. According to Wibowo (2021), performance refers to the results achieved by an individual based on the standards and responsibilities assigned by the organization. High levels of employee performance positively contribute to productivity, service quality, and organizational goal attainment. Conversely, poor employee performance may hinder organizational achievement and reduce corporate competitiveness.

One of the factors influencing employee performance is competence. Spencer and Spencer (1993) define competence as an underlying characteristic of an individual that is related to effective performance in a job. Competence encompasses knowledge, skills, work attitudes, technical abilities, and interpersonal capabilities that support task accomplishment. Employees with higher levels of competence tend to complete their work more effectively and efficiently, thereby contributing to improved organizational performance.

In addition to competence, leadership style plays an important role in influencing employee behavior and performance. Robbins and Judge (2021) argue that transformational leadership is capable of inspiring, motivating, and directing employees to achieve organizational objectives optimally. Leaders who provide clear direction, support, recognition, and exemplary behavior can create a conducive work environment and enhance employee enthusiasm toward work.

Work motivation represents a psychological factor that encourages individuals to perform their jobs with commitment and responsibility. According to Sutrisno (2021), work motivation refers to internal and external drives that encourage individuals to achieve specific goals. Employees with high levels of work motivation tend to be more productive, deliver higher-quality work, and contribute more effectively to organizational success.

Previous studies have demonstrated that employee competence and leadership style influence both work motivation and employee performance. However, empirical findings regarding the relationships among these variables remain inconsistent. Some studies have found that leadership style directly and significantly affects employee performance, whereas others suggest that the influence of leadership style is more substantial when mediated by variables such as work motivation. Furthermore, research examining the relationships among employee competence, leadership style, work motivation, and employee performance in state-owned plantation companies remains relatively limited, particularly within the PT Perkebunan Nusantara environment, which is currently facing demands for increased productivity, efficiency, and organizational transformation.

Several previous studies have reported inconsistent findings regarding the effect of leadership style on employee performance. Wijaya and Saputra (2023) found that transformational leadership has a positive and significant effect on employee performance. In contrast, Munawar and Hadiaty (2024) reported that the influence of leadership style on performance is more dominant through work motivation as a mediating variable. Similar findings were reported by Sitompul et al. (2024) and Putri (2024), who concluded that work motivation mediates the relationship between leadership style and employee performance.

These inconsistent findings indicate the existence of a research gap concerning the relationship between leadership style and employee performance. In addition, studies examining the interrelationships among employee competence, leadership style, work motivation, and employee performance within state-owned plantation companies remain scarce. Therefore, this study re-examines these relationships at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI by incorporating work motivation as a mediating variable.

The novelty of this study lies in examining the simultaneous relationships among employee competence, leadership style, work motivation, and employee performance within a state-owned plantation company using SEM-PLS analysis. Furthermore, this study investigates the mediating role

of work motivation in explaining how competence and leadership style influence employee performance, an area that has received limited attention in the context of Indonesian plantation enterprises.

This study contributes to the human resource management literature by investigating the mediating role of work motivation in the relationship between employee competence, leadership style, and employee performance at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI.

Within PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI, differences in employee competence levels, adaptability to changing work systems, and work motivation across organizational units are still evident. Internal company reports indicate variations in employee competence, work motivation, and performance achievement across different work units.

Based on these circumstances, this study aims to analyze the influence of employee competence and leadership style on employee performance through work motivation as a mediating variable at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI. The findings are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of human resource management literature and practical recommendations for organizations in formulating strategies to improve employee performance.

## 2. METHOD

This study was conducted at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI, located in Langsa City, Aceh Province, Indonesia. The research was carried out over a two-month period, covering the stages of research preparation, instrument development, data collection, data analysis, and report preparation.

This research employed a quantitative approach using a survey method. The quantitative approach was selected because the study aimed to examine the relationships among variables and to analyze the effects of employee competence and leadership style on employee performance through work motivation as a mediating variable at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI.

The population of this study consisted of all permanent employees of PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI, totaling 85 employees. Considering the relatively small population size and the accessibility of all population members, a census sampling technique (saturated sampling) was employed. Consequently, all 85 employees were included as research respondents.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of statements related to the research variables and was measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The survey was designed to obtain primary data regarding employee competence, leadership style, work motivation, and employee performance.

Descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to describe respondents' demographic characteristics, including gender, age, educational background, years of service, and work unit. The analysis included minimum values, maximum values, mean scores, and standard deviations.

The study involved four variables. Employee competence (X1) and leadership style (X2) were treated as independent variables, work motivation (Z) as the mediating variable, and employee performance (Y) as the dependent variable.

Data analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) with the assistance of SmartPLS software. The measurement model (outer model) was evaluated through convergent validity and reliability testing. Convergent validity was assessed using outer loading and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability. The structural model (inner model) was evaluated using the coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), path coefficient analysis, and hypothesis testing through the bootstrapping procedure.

### 2.1 Research Hypotheses

H1: Employee competence has a positive effect on work motivation.

H2: Leadership style has a positive effect on work motivation.

H3: Employee competence has a positive effect on employee performance.

H4: Leadership style has a positive effect on employee performance.

H5: Work motivation has a positive effect on employee performance.

H6: Work motivation mediates the effect of employee competence on employee performance.

H7: Work motivation mediates the effect of leadership style on employee performance.

**Table 1.** Operational Definition of Variables

Variabel	Indicator	References
Employee Competence (X1)	Knowledge, Skills, Work Attitudes, Technical Ability, Interpersonal Ability	Spencer & Spencer (1993)
Leadership Style (X2)	Idealized Influence, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, Individualized Consideration	Bass & Avolio
Work Motivation (Z)	Needs, Drives, Rewards, Expectations, Work Environment	Sutrisno (2021)
Employee Performance (Y)	Quality, Quantity, Timeliness, Effectiveness, Responsibility	Mangkunegara (2020)

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 RESULTS

##### 3.1.1 Respondent Characteristics

A total of 85 employees participated in this study. Male respondents accounted for 69 employees (81%), while female respondents accounted for 16 employees (19%). The majority of respondents were within the productive age range, with educational backgrounds consisting of senior high school graduates (41%), Diploma graduates (4%), bachelor's degree holders (53%), and master's degree holders (2%). Most respondents held a bachelor's degree, indicating that the workforce generally possesses an adequate educational background to support organizational operations.

The respondents also varied in terms of years of service, ranging from 1–5 years to more than 30 years. This diversity reflects the presence of both relatively new and highly experienced employees within PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI.

##### 3.1.2 Descriptive Analysis of Research Variables

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Standard Deviation	Category
Employee Competence	4.04	2.51	4.33	0.47	High
Leadership Style	4.04	2.69	4.25	0.41	High
Work Motivation	3.92	2.26	4.47	0.69	High
Employee Performance	4.05	2.40	4.34	0.51	High

The descriptive analysis indicates that all research variables fall within the high category. Employee competence achieved a mean score of 4.04, suggesting that employees possess adequate knowledge, skills, and work-related abilities. Leadership style also recorded a mean score of 4.04, indicating that leaders are perceived as capable of providing direction, support, and motivation to employees.

Work motivation obtained a mean score of 3.92, while employee performance recorded the highest mean score of 4.05. These findings suggest that employees of PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI demonstrate high levels of motivation and performance. Overall, the high mean values across all variables indicate that employee competence, leadership practices, work motivation, and employee performance have been well established within the organization and contribute positively to organizational objectives.

##### 3.1.3 Measurement Model Evaluation (Outer Model)

The measurement model was evaluated through convergent validity and reliability assessments. Convergent validity was examined using outer loading values and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability.

##### 3.1.4 Convergent Validity

Convergent validity evaluates the extent to which indicators represent the intended construct. According to Hair et al. (2022), indicators are considered valid when the outer loading value exceeds 0.70 and the AVE exceeds 0.50.

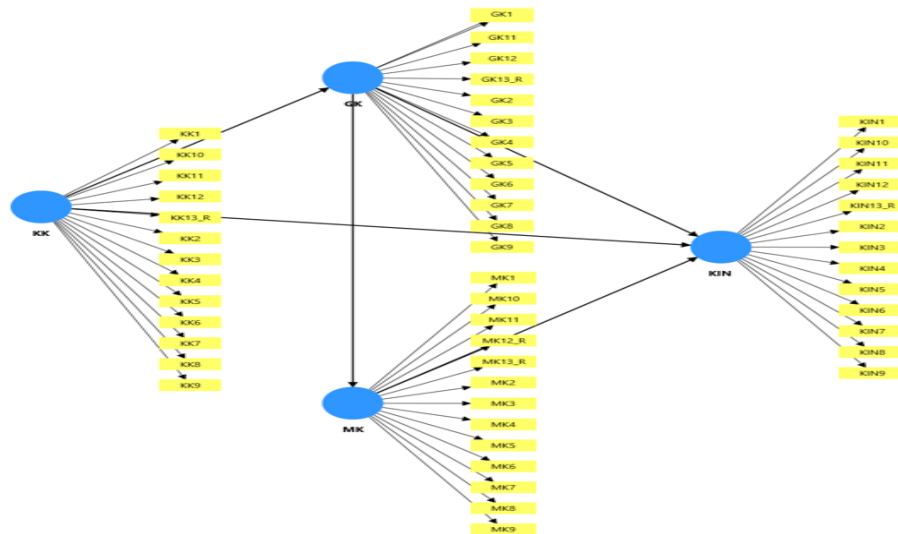


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework and Measurement Model

3.1.5 Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Table 3. Average Variance Extracted (AVE)

Variable	AVE	Result
Employee Competence	0.824	Valid
Leadership Style	0.775	Valid
Work Motivation	0.598	Valid
Employee Performance	0.803	Valid

Convergent validity was assessed to determine the extent to which the indicators accurately represent their respective constructs. The evaluation was based on the outer loading values and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). According to Hair et al. (2022), a construct is considered to demonstrate adequate convergent validity when the outer loading values are greater than 0.70 and the AVE value exceeds 0.50.

The measurement model assessment revealed that all indicators exhibited outer loading values greater than 0.70, confirming their validity in representing the respective latent constructs. In addition, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were 0.824 for Employee Competence, 0.775 for Leadership Style, 0.598 for Work Motivation, and 0.732 for Employee Performance. Since all AVE values exceeded the minimum recommended threshold of 0.50, the constructs demonstrated satisfactory convergent validity. Accordingly, all constructs were considered valid and appropriate for subsequent analyses.

3.1.6 Reliability Test

3.1.6.1 Cronbach's Alpha

Table 4. Cronbach's Alpha

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	Result
Employee Competence	0.977	Valid
Leadership Style	0.967	Valid
Work Motivation	0.926	Valid
Employee Performance	0.960	Valid

3.1.6.2 Composite Reliability

Table 5. Composite Reliability

Variable	Composite Reliability	Result
Employee Competence	0.983	Reliable
Leadership Style	0.976	Reliable
Work Motivation	0.943	Reliable
Employee Performance	0.970	Reliable

Reliability assessment was performed to evaluate the internal consistency of the measurement instrument in capturing the constructs under study. The reliability of each construct was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability. According to Hair et al. (2022), a construct demonstrates satisfactory reliability when its Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values are greater than 0.70.

The results of the reliability assessment revealed that all constructs exhibited Cronbach's Alpha values greater than 0.90, namely Employee Competence (0.977), Leadership Style (0.967), Work Motivation (0.926), and Employee Performance (0.960). In addition, all constructs demonstrated Composite Reliability values above the recommended threshold of 0.70, ranging from 0.943 to 0.983. Specifically, the Composite Reliability values were 0.983 for Employee Competence, 0.976 for Leadership Style, 0.943 for Work Motivation, and 0.970 for Employee Performance. Therefore, all constructs were considered reliable and exhibited a high level of internal consistency, indicating that the measurement instrument was suitable for subsequent analyses.

### 3.1.7 Structural Model Evaluation (Inner Model)

#### 3.1.7.1 Coefficient of Determination ( $R^2$ )

Endogenous Variable	$R^2$
Work Motivation	0,648
Employee Performance	0,862

The coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) was used to assess the predictive power of the structural model.

The  $R^2$  value of 0.648 for work motivation indicates that employee competence and leadership style explain 64.8% of the variance in work motivation. Meanwhile, the  $R^2$  value of 0.862 for employee performance indicates that employee competence, leadership style, and work motivation collectively explain 86.2% of the variance in employee performance.

According to Hair et al. (2022),  $R^2$  values above 0.75 are categorized as substantial. Therefore, the research model demonstrates strong predictive capability in explaining both work motivation and employee performance.

Based on the  $R^2$  values, the structural model can be considered to have substantial explanatory and predictive power, indicating that it adequately explains variations in work motivation and employee performance at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI.

### 3.1.8 Hypothesis Testing

**Table 6.** Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Path Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	T-Statistic	P-Value	Decision
H1	Employee Competence → Work Motivation	0.578	4.020	0.000	Supported
H2	Leadership Style → Work Motivation	0.805	10.099	0.000	Supported
H3	Employee Competence → Employee Performance	0.328	3.088	0.002	Supported
H4	Leadership Style → Employee Performance	0.067	0.651	0.515	Not Supported
H5	Work Motivation → Employee Performance	0.612	5.997	0.000	Supported

#### Testing Criteria

- T-statistics > 1,96
- P-values < 0,05

The findings reveal that employee competence positively and significantly influences work motivation. Similarly, leadership style has a positive and significant effect on work motivation.

Employee competence also exerts a positive and significant influence on employee performance. In addition, work motivation significantly enhances employee performance.

However, leadership style does not have a significant direct effect on employee performance. This result suggests that leadership contributes to performance primarily through indirect mechanisms rather than direct influence.

### 3.1.9 Mediation Effect Testing

**Table 7.** Mediation Analysis Results

Indirect Relationship	T-Statistic	P-Value	Decision
Employee Competence → Work Motivation → Employee Performance	3.220	0.001	Partial Mediation
Leadership Style → Work Motivation → Employee Performance	5.143	0.000	Full Mediation

#### Testing Criteria

- T-statistics > 1,96
- P-values < 0,05

The mediation analysis results indicate that work motivation significantly mediates the relationship between employee competence and employee performance, with a T-statistic of 3.220 and a p-value of 0.001. Since the direct effect of employee competence on employee performance was also found to be significant, work motivation serves as a partial mediator in this relationship.

Furthermore, work motivation significantly mediates the relationship between leadership style and employee performance, with a T-statistic of 5.143 and a p-value of 0.000. Since the direct effect of leadership style on employee performance was not significant, work motivation functions as a full mediator in this relationship. Therefore, hypotheses H6 and H7 are supported.

## 3.2 Discussion

### 3.2.1 Effect of Employee Competence on Work Motivation

The results indicate that employee competence has a positive and significant effect on work motivation. This finding suggests that employees with higher levels of competence tend to demonstrate stronger motivation in carrying out their duties and responsibilities. Competence, which encompasses knowledge, skills, technical abilities, and interpersonal capabilities, provides employees with greater confidence in performing their tasks effectively, thereby enhancing their motivation to work.

This finding is consistent with the competency theory proposed by Spencer and Spencer (1993), which states that competence represents an underlying characteristic that contributes to effective job performance. Employees who possess higher levels of competence are generally more confident in facing work-related challenges and are therefore more motivated to achieve organizational goals.

The finding also supports the study conducted by Hidayat (2021), which concluded that competence positively influences employee motivation and productivity. Within the context of PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI, employee competence plays a critical role because the company is required to continuously improve operational efficiency and adapt to increasingly integrated work systems. Employees with adequate competencies are better equipped to adjust to organizational changes and are consequently more motivated to achieve performance targets.

### 3.2.2 Effect of Leadership Style on Work Motivation

The findings reveal that leadership style has a positive and significant effect on work motivation. This result indicates that effective leadership can encourage employees to become more enthusiastic, committed, and motivated in performing their work responsibilities.

Transformational leaders who provide clear direction, inspiration, support, and recognition create a positive working environment that fosters employee engagement and motivation. Employees who perceive their leaders as supportive and inspiring are more likely to develop a strong sense of belonging to the organization and demonstrate higher levels of motivation.

This finding is consistent with the studies conducted by Putri and Eliyana (2021) and Wijaya and Saputra (2023), which found that transformational leadership positively influences employee motivation. Therefore, organizational leaders should continuously strengthen communication, provide constructive feedback, and demonstrate exemplary behavior to maintain high levels of employee motivation.

### 3.2.3 Effect of Employee Competence on Employee Performance

The results show that employee competence has a positive and significant effect on employee performance, with a path coefficient of 0.328. This finding indicates that improvements in employee competence are associated with higher levels of employee performance.

Employees who possess strong competencies are more capable of performing their tasks efficiently, minimizing work-related errors, and producing higher-quality outcomes. Competence enables employees to apply their knowledge and skills effectively, resulting in greater productivity and better job performance.

This finding supports the study by Hidayat (2021), which reported that employee competence significantly contributes to performance improvement. In the context of PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI, employee competence is particularly important because operational activities require technical expertise, accuracy, and a thorough understanding of organizational procedures. Therefore, continuous investment in education, training, and employee development programs is necessary to enhance employee performance.

### **3.2.4 Effect of Leadership Style on Employee Performance**

The results indicate that leadership style has a positive but statistically insignificant effect on employee performance, with a path coefficient of 0.067 and a p-value of 0.515. This finding suggests that leadership style alone is not sufficient to directly improve employee performance.

One possible explanation is that PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI operates within a structured organizational environment characterized by established standard operating procedures (SOPs), performance indicators, and clearly defined job responsibilities. Under such conditions, employee performance is more strongly influenced by individual competence, technical capabilities, work experience, and personal motivation than by leadership style alone.

Furthermore, employees may already possess a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, making their performance less dependent on direct leadership influence. Consequently, leadership appears to exert its influence indirectly through work motivation rather than directly affecting performance outcomes.

This finding highlights that leadership remains important within the organization; however, its primary contribution lies in enhancing employee motivation, which subsequently improves employee performance.

### **3.2.5 Effect of Work Motivation on Employee Performance**

The findings demonstrate that work motivation has a positive and significant effect on employee performance, with a path coefficient of 0.612. This represents the strongest direct effect among all variables influencing employee performance.

The result indicates that highly motivated employees are more likely to exert greater effort, demonstrate stronger commitment, and achieve superior work outcomes. Employees with strong motivation tend to perform their duties more effectively and contribute positively to organizational success.

This finding is consistent with the studies conducted by Dewi et al. (2025) and Sari et al. (2022), which concluded that work motivation significantly improves employee performance. Within PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI, motivation serves as a critical factor in encouraging employees to achieve operational targets and organizational objectives.

Factors such as fair reward systems, career development opportunities, supportive leadership, and a conducive work environment can strengthen employee motivation and ultimately enhance performance.

### **3.2.6 Mediating Role of Work Motivation**

The mediation analysis revealed that work motivation significantly mediates the effect of employee competence on employee performance (T-statistic = 3.220;  $p = 0.001$ ). The significant indirect effect indicates that employee competence contributes to employee performance through the enhancement of work motivation. Furthermore, because the direct effect of employee competence on employee performance remained significant ( $\beta = 0.328$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ), work motivation was identified as a partial mediator. This finding suggests that employee competence improves performance both directly and indirectly by fostering higher levels of work motivation, which subsequently lead to better employee performance.

In addition, work motivation was found to significantly mediate the effect of leadership style on employee performance (T-statistic = 5.143;  $p < 0.001$ ). The significant indirect effect demonstrates that leadership style influences employee performance through the enhancement of work motivation. However, the direct effect of leadership style on employee performance was not statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.067$ ;  $p = 0.515$ ), indicating that work motivation serves as a full mediator. This finding implies that leadership practices do not directly improve employee performance; instead, effective leadership fosters higher levels of work motivation, which in turn drive improvements in employee performance.

The findings of this study highlight the crucial role of work motivation as an underlying mechanism that explains how employee competence and leadership style contribute to enhanced employee performance. Within the context of PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI, improvements in employee competence and the implementation of effective leadership practices are expected to yield greater performance outcomes when supported by higher levels of employee work motivation. Therefore, organizations should not only focus on developing employee competencies and leadership effectiveness but also prioritize strategies aimed at strengthening employee motivation to achieve sustainable performance improvements.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the effects of employee competence and leadership style on employee performance through work motivation as a mediating variable at PT Perkebunan Nusantara IV Regional VI. Based on the results of the PLS-SEM analysis, it can be concluded that employee competence has a positive and significant effect on work motivation. Likewise, leadership style was found to have a positive and significant effect on work motivation. Employee competence also positively and significantly influences employee performance. However, the direct effect of leadership style on employee performance was not significant. Furthermore, work motivation was found to have a positive and significant effect on employee performance. The coefficient of determination indicated that the proposed model was able to explain 64.8% of the variance in work motivation and 86.2% of the variance in employee performance, demonstrating substantial explanatory power. The mediation analysis revealed that work motivation significantly mediates the relationships between employee competence and employee performance, as well as between leadership style and employee performance. Work motivation acted as a partial mediator in the relationship between employee competence and employee performance, while it served as a full mediator in the relationship between leadership style and employee performance. These findings highlight the importance of employee competence, effective leadership practices, and work motivation in improving employee performance. Therefore, organizations should strengthen employee competency development programs, enhance leadership effectiveness, and implement strategies that foster employee motivation in order to achieve sustainable performance improvement.

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