SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY PUBLISHING HOUSE

SCIENTIFIC PAPERS OF SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY 2026
ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT SERIES NO. 254

PRIMARY MANAGEMENT STYLES IN POLISH NATIONAL PARKS

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Purpose: The article aims to identify the primary management styles in Polish national parks and to analyse employees' perceptions of the leadership practices and decision-making methods exhibited by their managers.
Design/methodology/approach: The objective was pursued through a literature review, analysis of response structures, and the chi-square test of independence. The 2025 study used a diagnostic survey with an original questionnaire on perceptions of superiors' management behaviour. A total of 192 correctly completed questionnaires from employees of 19 Polish national parks were analysed.
Findings: The results show that the effectiveness of management styles in Polish national parks hinges primarily on the ability to adapt management styles to the organisational environment, team, and specific institutional characteristics. Furthermore, the survey has demonstrated that catering for interpersonal relationships, communication, and employee engagement in decision-making improves management style effectiveness[1].
Research limitations/implications: The study is limited by variation in sample sizes across the individual national parks and by reliance on respondent reports. Future studies should use better-balanced samples and more diverse research methods to enable deeper analysis of management styles.
Practical implications: The results highlight the need to improve managerial competencies, especially in relationship management and employee development, and support the design of training programmes to enhance efficiency and employee satisfaction.
Social implications: National park management styles affect how they address their public tasks, collaborate as organisations, and manage natural resources. They can also improve public trust in public institutions.
Originality/value: The study contributes to the body of knowledge on management styles in nature protection institutions, a topic that remains empirically understudied. The results offer new data on management practices in Polish national parks and identify the primary management styles in organisations responsible for environmental protection.
Keywords: management style, national park, managerial roles, leadership.
Category of the paper: Case study.

[1] The study was conducted in collaboration with Dr Beata Pater under the mini-project, 'Determinants of job satisfaction among national park employees juxtaposed with managerial styles under the current labour market conditions' under contract K/6601/2024/WRE. The mini-project was co-financed by the Minister of Science under the 'Regional Initiative of Excellence' programme. Agreement No. RID/SP/0039/2024/01. Subsidised amount PLN 6,187,000.00. Project period 2024-2027.

1. Introduction

Leadership in public organisations is an important domain in management sciences. Still, management styles in nature protection institutions, such as national parks, remain empirically understudied. The article aims to identify the primary management styles in Polish national parks and to analyse employees' perceptions of the leadership practices and decision‑making methods exhibited by their managers. The research problem is to determine what management styles are dominant in national parks, and what factors discriminate between perceptions of management practices among employees.

The author puts forward the following research hypotheses: (H1) the primary management styles in Polish national parks are related-participatory; (H2) perceptions of management decision‑making styles vary by employee gender; (H3) management styles reported by employees are linked to their perceptions of management decision‑making methods. The analysis is founded on a theoretical model that integrates traditional leadership concepts and new theories of management in public organisations.

2. Management styles

Management style is defined as a relatively constant manner in which a manager affects their subordinates. It is manifested in decision‑making, communication, and teamwork organisation (Chemers, 2000; Żukowski, Galla, 2009). Furthermore, it is shaped by the manager's personality traits and the situational environment of the specific organisation as well.

The classical leadership studies pioneered by Lewin, Lippitt, and White proposed three basic leadership styles: autocratic, democratic, and liberal, which were then adapted to account for their orientation relative to tasks, interpersonal relationships, and situational factors (Fiedler, 1964; Stogdill, 1974; Karaszewski, 2008; Avery, 2009; Nahavandi, 2009).

The effectiveness of leadership styles varies by sector due to differences in organizational structures, objectives, and the external environment (Imtiaz, 2025). Modern concepts emphasise the importance of management styles founded on cooperation, employee participation, and support for employee development. The literature indicates such concepts as transformational leadership, which involves inspiring employees and fuelling their potential (Bass, 1990; Nahavandi, 2009).

The present study follows a management style typology that includes the compromiser, developer, autocrat, bureaucrat, related, and participatory styles. The styles vary in the degree of employee participation in decision-making and in the manager's task- or relationship-orientation.

The literature offers various management style typologies. The styles can be classified based on how centralised power is, whether the manager is task- or relationship-oriented, or depending on the degree of employee participation (Stogdill, 1974; Griffin, 2017; Robbins, Judge, 2017). Other authors emphasise the importance of aligning management styles to organisational conditions and the role of related and transformational leadership for organisational effectiveness (Fiedler, 1964; Bass, 1990; Nahavandi, 2009).

The compromiser is a manager who is easily influenced by their surroundings, shuns making decisions, and is generally a yes-man. They overrate participation and focus solely on solving problems currently at hand (Polecki, 2018).

The developer/coach style is founded on the premise that the leader should first of all support the employees in discovering and developing their potential by asking questions (Whitmore, 2017).

An autocratic manager makes all decisions by themselves without consulting the team. They centralise authority, strictly control operational methods, make all decisions, and limit employee participation (Robbins DeCenzo, 2019).

A benevolent autocrat embraces the moral responsibility for their subordinates, wants to provide them with the best possible working environment, but still single-handedly defines their well-being needs (Żukowski, 2004).

In the liberal style, the manager barely intervenes in their subordinates' work. They delegate authority and employ only occasional control. They avoid difficult decisions, delegate complex problems, or put them off (Polecki, 2018).

In the bureaucratic style, the manager follows formal operational and control procedures with respect to their subordinates. They prefer written communication and are attentive to detail. They are businesslike, reliable, and effective. Conflicts are resolved through procedures and regulations (Polecki, 2018).

A relationship-oriented management style focuses on fostering positive relationships within the team and a favourable organisational atmosphere. It promotes employee satisfaction and team stability, but if it is not balanced with task orientation, it can limit organisational efficiency (Nahavandi, 2009).

The democratic style involves significant employee participation in decision‑making and delegation of decision authority. The manager coordinates and moderates the team's efforts, thereby promoting increased employee engagement and better decision quality (Tannenbaum, Schmidt, 1958; Lumbasi et al., 2016). Managers typically demonstrate a leadership style by motivating and inspiring their subordinates. A leadership style, therefore, refers to the way in which a manager chooses to lead and interact with their subordinates (Northouse, 2018).

3. General characteristics of national parks

The national park is one of the most advanced means of environmental protection in Poland. Its primary purpose is to preserve biodiversity and safeguard environmental and landscape qualities. National parks serve scientific, educational, and social functions (Kruk, 2011).

Due to the specific profile of these institutions, their employees exhibit a high level of professional specialisation, and the tasks they pursue require interdisciplinary collaboration. This makes leadership competencies of the management and team management styles highly relevant.

4. Method of the study

The diagnostic survey was conducted in 2025. The author used an original survey questionnaire that included questions about perceptions of the management behaviour of direct superiors.

The questions covered the identification of the management style, the manager's decision-making processes, and the respondents' demographic data.

The sample consisted of 197 employees of 19 Polish national parks. The analysis involved 192 correctly completed questionnaires. The sample consisted of 51% women and 49% men. Most respondents held a university degree (72.4%) and had more than six years of professional experience (58.3%).

Purposive convenience sampling was necessary due to the functional profiles of the institutions. The participation in the anonymous survey was voluntary.

The data were analysed with answer structure analysis and the chi‑square test of independence to identify associations between the qualitative variables. The study was conducted as an anonymous survey among employees of Polish national parks. The questionnaires were distributed directly to the respondents and only to employees of the investigated organisations. Participation was voluntary.

The study population is employees of Polish national parks. Therefore, the results can be situated within the operational context of these institutions and the management styles embedded in their organisational structures. However, note that the varying numbers of respondents across the national parks could limit the sample's representativeness for generalising to the entire population of national park employees in Poland. The differences in respondent numbers across the national parks were due to different return rates. The greater number of employees of Białowieża National Park resulted from their willingness to participate in the study, thereby increasing the institution's representation in the sample.

Respondents were aware of the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their answers. Each respondent completed their questionnaire alone, without supervision, to reduce external influences on their responses.

5. Results

The survey sample consisted of employees of 19 national parks in Poland, with 51% women and 49% men. The largest group was the employees of the Białowieża National Park (31.77%). Other significant groups were from Polesie National Park (11.46%), Słowiński National Park (10.42%), and Wigry National Park (9.90%). The other parks had smaller representation, and none exceeded 7% of the total sample size. The varied sample distribution across the national parks was due to organisational circumstances and respondent availability. The diagnostic exploratory study was intended to identify general patterns of management styles in national parks, rather than offer cross‑park comparisons. The study involved employees from 19 Polish national parks (see Figure 1).

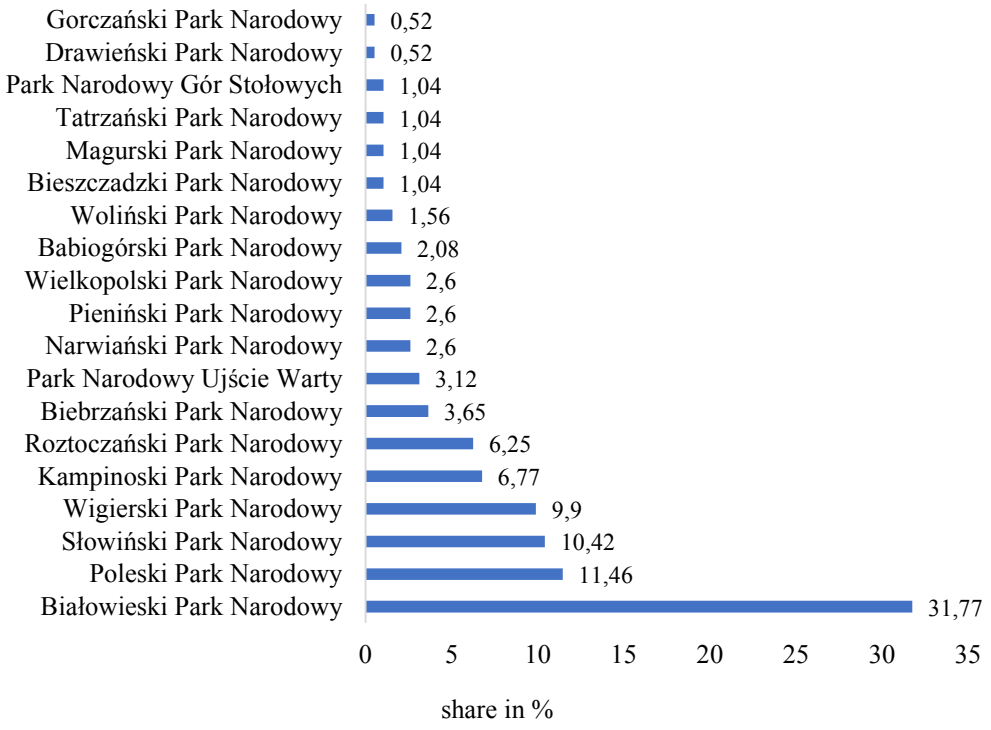


Figure 1. Sampled profile by national parks.

Source: original work.

The anonymous survey was conducted among specialists and operators who reported the primary management-related behaviours of their superiors. The results show differences by gender. Women more often reported consulting decisions and taking others' opinions into consideration. Meanwhile, men more often perceived their superiors as more autonomous and making decisions mainly based on their own knowledge and experience, while limiting consultations. The respondents were asked to indicate a single behaviour typical of their superior from each domain to determine the management style (see Table 1).

Table 1.
The most common answers regarding the management style of the immediate superior

domain	the most common answer	%
the primary management principle	strict but fair	40.1
planning	forwarding requests from superiors	24.4
work organisation	joint decision	23.9
decision-making	considering multiple opinions	24.9
motivating	employee development	29.9
control	objective evaluation	28.9
conflict resolution	compromise	25.9

Source: original work.

The answers demonstrate that the primary management style is related and consultative, which combines expectations with fairness and employee development. Work planning and decision-making were mainly based on cooperation, considering the opinions of others, and a search for compromise.

Task structure demonstrated a combination of task‑oriented and participatory approaches, while motivation was dominated by development orientation. In terms of control, the respondents reported objective evaluation of performance and conflict resolution through compromise. Communication with employees consisted mainly of forwarding information about tasks and requisites.

These results confirm that the management styles are mostly based on cooperation, consultation, and orientation towards interpersonal relationships.

The respondents indicated that the most common management styles exhibited by their direct managers were compromiser (26%) and developer (25%) (see Figure 2).

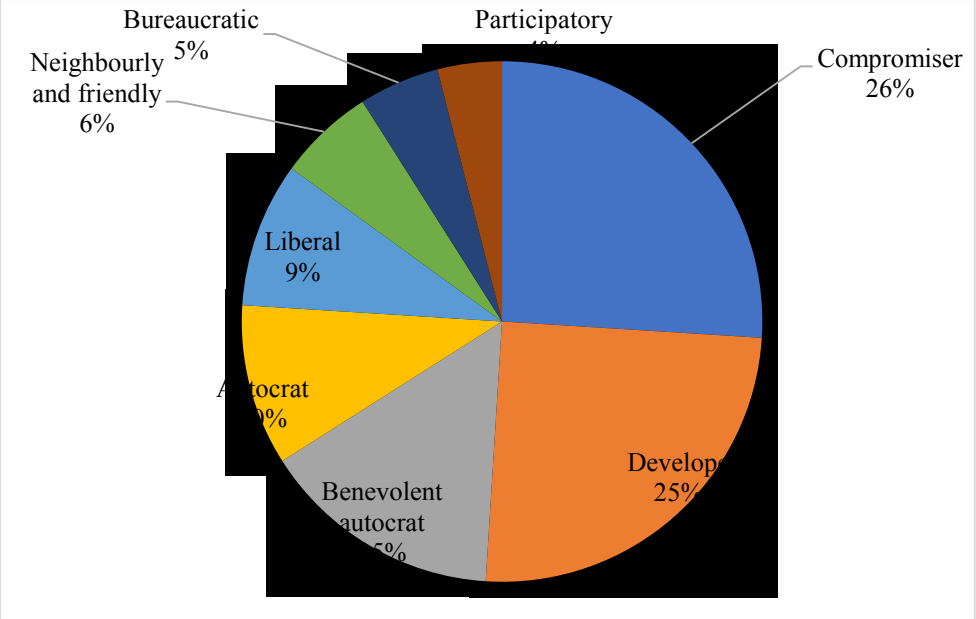


Figure 2. The primary management styles exhibited by direct managers in the national parks (n = 192). Source: original work.

The employees reported related and participatory management styles oriented towards cooperation and employee development. The compromiser style promotes harmony and a positive atmosphere; however, it can harm the effectiveness of decision-making. The developer style supports competence-building and the expansion of the organisation's potential, which is important in public institutions tasked with complex environment-related work. The variables included management style, decision-making methods, and respondent demographics (Table 2).

Table 2.
Variable operationalisation

Variable	Indicator	Measurement scale	Measurement method
Management style	Dominant manager behaviour	nominal	selection of a single management style
Decision-making method	Degree of decision independence	nominal	respondent's declaration
Respondent's sex	Woman/man	nominal	demographic question
Education	Level of education	ordinal	demographic question
Job seniority	Years of professional experience	ordinal	demographic question

Source: original work.

The above operationalisation of the variables indicates that the study was based mainly on qualitative, nominal and ordinal, variables. The central variable was management style, identified from the reported evaluations of managers' behaviour. The demographic variables make up the sample profile, which helped analyse different perceptions of management style depending on respondents' characteristics (Table 3).

Table 3.
Respondent's sex versus perceptions of decision‑making methods

Variable	chi-square χ^2	df	p	Cramér's V
Sex × decision-making method	6.69	7	0.462	0.18

Source: original work.

The chi-square test analysis (Table 3) did not reveal a statistically significant association between respondents' sex and perceptions of how their managers make decisions $\chi^2(7) = 6.69$, $p = 0.462$, $V = 0.18$. No differences in the distribution of respondents' answers were statistically significant.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The present results indicate that the main management styles in the national parks are those based on cooperation, interpersonal relationships, and employee development. These results are consistent with the premises of the situational leadership theory and transformational leadership concepts (Fiedler, 1964; Bass, 1990).

The dominance of the compromiser style may suggest the pursuit of good relationships and low conflict rates. In addition, the high level of the developer style suggests an orientation towards employee competence and the organisation's potential building.

The character of public institutions is conducive to styles based on cooperation and interpersonal relationships, while management effectiveness hinges mostly on the social competencies of the managers. Furthermore, the study identified different perceptions of how decisions are made. Women more often indicated the consultative approach, while men reported decision independence (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Dębicka, 2023). The results reveal the specific profile of management styles in environmental protection. It is strongly oriented towards public mission, exhibits a high level of employee specialisation, and has a relatively stable organisational structure. Under these circumstances, management effectiveness could be strongly linked to interpersonal competencies and relationship-building ability, rather than to an orientation towards economic performance, as confirmed in previous studies on management in public organisations (Mehrabi et al., 2013).

The results also confirm the premises of the situational approach in leadership theory, which proposes that the degree of adaptation of behaviour and operational methods by the management depends on the organisation's specificity, employee team characteristics, and management style (Chemers, 2000). Relationship-oriented styles in national parks could be promoted by the specific attributes of tasks that require cooperation, high levels of responsibility, and employee engagement.

The study contributes to the body of knowledge by providing insights into management styles within environmental protection institutions, a topic that remains relatively underexplored. The results suggest the need for further studies on factors affecting the effectiveness of management styles in public organisations and their impact on the efficiency of public service and the functioning of employee teams.

Hypotheses were verified by analysing the structure of the respondents' answers and using the chi‑square test of independence for qualitative variables.

Hypothesis H1 proposed the dominance of the related and participatory styles in national parks. According to the results, the most common styles were compromiser (26%) and developer (25%), which partially confirms the hypothesis.

Hypothesis H2 concerned the association between the respondent's sex and their perceptions of decision‑making methods used by their superiors. The chi‑square test did not reveal a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2(7) = 6.69$; $p = 0.462$). Therefore, this hypothesis has not been confirmed. A significant association was found between the management style and decision‑making method ($\chi^2(49) = 166.04$; $p < 0.001$).

Higher education was reported by 72.4% of the sample. Over fifty‑eight per cent had more than six years of professional experience, which indicates a high level of competencies and employment stability. The results reveal predominance of management styles grounded in cooperation and employee support, typical of public organisations in the environmental domain.

Recommendations

The present results indicate that the effectiveness of management styles in national parks depends largely on management's alignment with the organisation's and the employee team's specific characteristics. The study identified the need to develop communication, cooperation, and shared employee decision-making competencies among the management, which may improve management effectiveness in environmental protection institutions. Participatory management styles and conditions for vertical dialogue are advisable for national park management practice. Further studies on the determinants of the effectiveness of public organisation management styles are recommended, involving a broader research sample and diversified research methods.

Research limitations

The study is limited by the survey method, which relies on subjective employee input. The results reflect mostly their perceptions of management styles, which may limit the potential for a full generalisation to all national park employees in Poland.

Further research

Future research should conduct a broader analysis using a larger, more balanced sample of employees from all Polish national parks to achieve a more representative evaluation of management styles in these institutions. The analysis could also gain a new dimension by employing qualitative methods, such as in‑depth interviews with management, and by investigating the impact of organisational factors, such as job seniority, job position, or the organisational structure of the parks, on perceptions of management styles and decision-making processes.

Acknowledgements

Co-financed by the Minister of Science under the 'Regional Initiative of Excellence' programme. Agreement No. RID/SP/0039/2024/01. Subsidised amount PLN 6,187,000.00. Project period 2024-2027.

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