

Employee Engagement and the Facilitation of Reformatory Change within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service

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ABSTRACT

Employee engagement has increasingly emerged as a critical determinant of organisational transformation within public sector institutions. In correctional systems undergoing reform, employee engagement plays a central role in shaping institutional culture, reform adoption, policy implementation, and organisational sustainability. This paper examines the role of employee engagement in facilitating reformatory change within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS). The study is grounded in organisational change theories, participatory management perspectives, and institutional reform literature. The findings reveal that employee engagement within ZPCS primarily facilitates reform awareness rather than deep institutional participation. While officers and inmates generally understand the objectives of reformatory change, limited participatory platforms, inconsistent recognition systems, hierarchical organisational structures, and enduring punitive institutional cultures constrain meaningful engagement. The paper concludes that sustainable reformatory change within correctional institutions requires participatory leadership, inclusive communication systems, employee empowerment, continuous training, and institutional cultures aligned with rehabilitation-oriented correctional philosophies.

Keywords: employee engagement, reformatory change, correctional reform, Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service, organisational change, participation, institutional culture.

1. Introduction

Globally, correctional systems are increasingly transitioning from punitive institutional models toward rehabilitation-oriented approaches that prioritize inmate reintegration, behavioural transformation, and human rights-based correctional management [1] [2]. This shift reflects broader developments in criminology, public administration, and organisational reform, where correctional institutions are now expected to function not merely as mechanisms of punishment but as institutions of rehabilitation and social reintegration [3]. In Zimbabwe, this transformation became constitutionally embedded following the establishment of the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS) under the 2013 Constitution. The transition from the Zimbabwe Prison Service to ZPCS represented a deliberate effort to align the country's correctional system with contemporary international

correctional standards emphasizing rehabilitation, reintegration, and humane treatment of offenders [4]. However, implementing reformatory change within correctional institutions involves more than policy reform and structural adjustments. It requires behavioural, cultural, and institutional transformation supported by active participation from organisational members.

Employee engagement is increasingly recognized as a fundamental factor in organisational transformation processes [5] [6]. Within correctional institutions, frontline officers and employees directly shape inmate experiences, institutional culture, operational practices, and reform implementation outcomes [7]. Consequently, the success or failure of reformatory initiatives depends significantly on the extent to which employees are informed, involved, empowered, and committed to institutional change.

This paper examines the role of employee engagement in facilitating reformatory change within ZPCS. Drawing from empirical findings presented in Chapter Four and conclusions and recommendations outlined in Chapter Five, the paper explores how employee engagement shapes reform implementation, institutional culture, organisational participation, and reform sustainability within Zimbabwe's correctional environment.

Citation: Moses Cyril Ngawaite Chihobvu (2026). Employee Engagement and the Facilitation of Reformatory Change within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service.

Journal of e-Science Letters.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51470/eSL.2026.7.2.105>

Received: 16 March 2026

Revised: 20 April 2026

Accepted: 17 May 2026

Available: June 22 2026

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2. Literature Review and Theoretical Anchors

Employee engagement has become a central concept within organisational behaviour, public administration, and change management literature. The concept broadly refers to the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural commitment employees demonstrate toward organisational objectives and institutional processes [8].

Engaged employees exhibit higher levels of motivation, participation, organisational commitment, and willingness to contribute toward institutional goals.

Participatory management theory emphasizes that employees are more likely to support organisational change when they are actively involved in decision-making processes, communication structures, and institutional problem-solving [9]. Participatory engagement strengthens institutional ownership and enhances organisational legitimacy.

Institutional theory further explains how employee engagement is influenced by organisational norms, traditions, and institutional cultures [10]. Correctional institutions are often characterized by deeply entrenched hierarchical and punitive cultures that limit employee autonomy and participatory decision-making. In such contexts, reformative change requires deliberate efforts to transform organisational values and behavioural expectations.

Lewin's change management model also highlights the importance of employee engagement during organisational transformation. Successful change requires organisational members to move through processes of unfreezing, changing, and refreezing [11]. Employee engagement is particularly important during the unfreezing stage, where employees must understand and internalise the need for change.

Systems theory similarly conceptualizes organisations as interconnected systems where institutional outcomes are shaped by interactions between people, structures, leadership, technology, and external environments [12].

Employee engagement therefore affects not only individual behaviour but also broader institutional performance, communication systems, organisational culture, and reform implementation.

3. Methodology

This paper draws from a mixed-methods research design employing a convergent parallel approach. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered across selected ZPCS facilities. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to assess the statistical relationship between employee engagement and reformative change outcomes. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with correctional officers, administrators, and institutional staff. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative transcripts, and triangulation was used to integrate and validate findings from both methodological strands.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis through SEM assessed the direct and mediated relationships between employee engagement and reformative change. Path coefficients and significance levels were computed to evaluate statistical contributions. Qualitative thematic analysis identified recurring themes including participatory engagement, communication barriers, recognition systems, institutional culture, and employee perceptions of reform. Data triangulation was employed to strengthen interpretive validity and develop a contextually grounded understanding of employee engagement dynamics within ZPCS.

5. FINDINGS

Employee Engagement and Reformative Change

Path / Relationship	Standardized Beta (β)	p-value	Statistical Significance	Hypothesis Status
Employee Engagement $\rightarrow$ Reformative Change	0.102	0.191	Insignificant	Not Supported (Direct)

Statistical Result: Beta (β) = 0.102, $p = 0.191$ (Statistically Insignificant)

Application Narrative: Structural Equation Modelling indicates that Employee engagement exhibits a positive but statistically insignificant effect on the reformative change management process. This path coefficient reflects that while staff members are generally aware of reform mandates, their engagement is largely informational rather than participatory. The lack of deep operational involvement limits employee ownership, resulting in compliance without active behavioural contribution to the institutional shift.

The qualitative findings provide deeper insight into the nature of employee engagement within the institution. Participants reported improvements in communication and interaction between officers and inmates, suggesting that some elements of reformative culture are gradually emerging. However, participants also noted persistent structural barriers to meaningful engagement including limited participatory platforms, inadequate recognition systems, and hierarchical institutional structures that constrain frontline officer involvement in reform decision-making.

The triangulated findings indicate that employee engagement within ZPCS remains fragmented and personality-driven rather than systemically institutionalised. Reform participation is often dependent on individual leadership styles and departmental cultures rather than structured organisational systems. This creates inconsistency in reform implementation across different facilities and institutional levels.

The findings further reveal that entrenched punitive occupational cultures continue to limit transformative engagement among some officer groups. Employees socialized within traditional punitive correctional frameworks may perceive rehabilitation-oriented reforms as threatening to established professional identities and operational routines.

6. Discussion

The findings reveal that employee engagement within ZPCS operates primarily as a reform awareness mechanism rather than a comprehensive participatory transformation system. This distinction is theoretically significant because organisational change scholarship consistently demonstrates that sustainable institutional transformation requires deep employee participation rather than surface-level awareness (Albrecht et al., 2015).

The persistence of hierarchical organisational structures and punitive occupational cultures creates fundamental tensions between rehabilitation-oriented reform objectives and institutional behavioural norms. Participatory management theory suggests that meaningful employee engagement requires structural reform of organisational systems capable of creating genuine participatory opportunities rather than superficial consultation processes.

The personality-driven nature of engagement within ZPCS highlights a critical institutional vulnerability.

Where engagement depends on individual leadership preferences rather than systemic organisational mechanisms, reform sustainability is significantly threatened by leadership transitions, personnel changes, and institutional reorganisations.

7. Policy Recommendations

First, ZPCS should develop structured employee participation frameworks that create formal platforms for officers and staff to contribute to reform planning, implementation, and evaluation processes. Formalised participation mechanisms strengthen institutional ownership and reduce reform resistance.

Second, institutional communication systems should be strengthened to improve information flow between leadership and frontline staff regarding reform objectives, progress, and institutional expectations. Transparent communication reduces uncertainty and builds organisational trust.

Third, recognition and reward systems should be institutionalised to acknowledge and reinforce reform-oriented employee behaviours. Consistent recognition signals institutional commitment to rehabilitation-oriented professional practice.

Fourth, continuous training and professional development programmes should be established to equip officers with the competencies, values, and skills necessary for implementing reformative correctional practices. Training reduces competency-related resistance and strengthens professional identity alignment with reform objectives.

Fifth, institutional culture transformation strategies should systematically challenge punitive occupational norms and promote rehabilitation-oriented values throughout the organisational hierarchy.

8. Conclusion

This paper examined the role of employee engagement in facilitating reformative change within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service. The findings demonstrate that employee engagement contributes positively toward reform awareness but falls short of facilitating comprehensive participatory transformation. Employee engagement within ZPCS remains fragmented, inconsistently institutionalised, and constrained by hierarchical structures, punitive occupational cultures, and limited participatory platforms.

Sustainable reformative change requires moving beyond awareness-level engagement toward structured participatory systems capable of embedding rehabilitation-oriented values into institutional culture and daily operational practices.

This requires organisational restructuring, leadership commitment, systemic communication improvement, recognition systems, continuous professional development, and deliberate cultural transformation strategies aligned with ZPCS's constitutional rehabilitation mandate.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service or any government institution. This paper is intended for academic and policy discourse purposes only.

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