



## Ploughing New Ground: Exploring the Critical Traits of Leaders of Farmer Producer Organizations

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Continuous learning, convincing power and vigilance were identified as major required traits for FPOs.
- With content analysis, business and personal traits of FPO leaders were identified.
- While identifying or appointing an FPO leader, care should be taken regarding leadership traits.

### ARTICLE INFO

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Informed Consent of the participants and appropriate anonymization

### ABSTRACT

Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) are a vital component of the agriculture sector, numerous many studies have been done on them. Earlier studies have mentioned that leadership is a significant concern in FPOs and emphasized the importance and necessity of strong leadership in FPOs. However, rare research has been done explicitly on FPO leadership. Hence, this study identifies critical traits of actively operating FPO leaders. The study was carried out from 2023-2024 and data used in this research were collected from April 01 to July 15, 2023. Snowball sampling was used to select the participants. The study used a qualitative approach. Twenty in-depth semi-structured interviews with FPO leaders were conducted in Maharashtra. Each interview was transcribed, and content analysis was done by ATLAS.ti 7.5.16 software to examine the data. Findings from the identified codes reveal that FPO leaders possess a few unique traits as it a new form of organization having a blend of corporate and cooperative organizations. These unique traits are convincing power, establishing personal relations with members, gaining farmers trust etc. The study's findings will aid stakeholders in creating policies for selecting influential FPO leaders or training current leaders to enhance FPO outcomes.

### INTRODUCTION

FPOs are one of the critical constitutional innovations for the progress of farmers and rural people, improving their socioeconomic circumstances, increase their collective bargaining power, gaining access to resources, expanding farmers' knowledge about better technologies and management techniques to ensure good quality for higher returns (Parthiban et al., 2015; Nikam et al., 2019; Kumari et al., 2022; Sahoo et al., 2024; Vavilala et al., 2024). FPOs are intended to enhance farmers' quality of life by enabling forward

linking and organising them for the procurement of inputs (Kumar et al., 2023). FPOs are collaborative entities established by farmers to enhance their collective bargaining power, gain access to resources, and improve their socio-economic conditions to support this objective, the Central government introduced the "Formation and Promotion of Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)" scheme.

From inception, several FPOs were registered and working well in their area. Contrarily, only a tiny minority of the many FPOs operating in India today have been able to deliver on their

commitments (Bikina et al., 2018). Numerous research studies state that leadership is essential in running FPOs effectively, and unappropriated leadership is one of the challenges FPOs face. Influential leaders are the backbone of thriving companies. Acknowledging that influential leaders do not always need the same qualities in all businesses is essential. Since various sectors have varied working procedures, leaders must have the necessary skills according to their industry. To know the success factors of the leader for running a successful organization, identifying leaders' attributes will help to get a deep understanding of the organization's success in terms of leadership (Tiwari & Raman, 2022).

FPO is the newest form of agriculture collectives, so various studies have been done on a similar subject. Earlier studies have mentioned that leadership is a significant concern in FPO. Some articles have noted that inept leadership is a major problem FPOs face. The article by (Deka et al., 2020) mentioned that leadership is one of the key elements in motivating farmer members for collective activities. The article by (Bhanot et al., 2021) stated that inadequate leadership is one of the significant issues FPOs face. Leadership is a significant problem in FPO (Bishnoi & Kumari 2020; Nithya & Vaishnavi 2022). The study by (Kumari et al., 2021) indicated that leadership is critical in determining the FPOs effectiveness. Hence, the researchers have conducted this study to get new insights regarding the attributes of actively operating FPO leaders. The study starts by evaluating the current literature on the topic to comprehend the leadership qualities of FPOs. Thus, the literature demonstrates that there has been relatively modest research on FPO leadership. Hence the study used an exploratory study design through qualitative approach, followed by content analysis and identifying the characteristics of actively operating FPO leaders.

## METHODOLOGY

Maharashtra state in India was chosen as a sample unit for the study because, according to the PIB report, it has the highest rate of FPO registration (PIB, 2022). The exploratory study design was incorporated to preserve flexibility while reviewing the traits of the leaders from the unexplored industry. This viewpoint led researchers to use a qualitative study methodology to explore the ideal leadership traits of FPO leaders. The qualitative research technique helps to seek a thorough explanation of the particular phenomena, find cases, and understand people's personal and leadership experiences (Bluhm et al., 2011; Mashele & Alagidede, 2022). Data was gathered over six months. Twenty leaders underwent in-depth interviews to examine leadership in FPO, who were carefully chosen as participants using the snowball sampling method. At first, to get information on actively operating FPOs, the data of FPOs were collected from different government portals and personal networks, discussing with personnel who are actively working with FPOs. The method aids researchers in identifying leaders currently operating FPOs who have been involved with FPOs from the start.

The sample size was 20, but repetitions started after the sixteenth interview. Each interview lasted between forty and forty-five minutes. A recording of the call/interview was made with consent. Face-to-face interviews constituted 60 per cent of the total,

while video calls or telephone discussions accounted for 40 per cent of the interviews. The interviewees were given code numbers from P1 to P20 to protect their privacy and confidentiality. The interviews were recorded, and content analysis was used to get insights from the data (Kuknor & Bhattacharya, 2021). To enhance validity and obtain rich data, the researchers utilized full audio and complete video recording equipment during interviews (Gray, 2017). Quick notes were taken for essential details, and after conducting 20 interviews, verbatim transcripts were created. The English questionnaire was translated into Marathi to facilitate participants' comfort and sincerity. Subsequently, all Marathi interviews were translated back into English to ensure consistency.

Respondent validation, allowing interviewees to review and edit their transcribed records, was implemented to ensure the accuracy of the gathered data. Each participant received transcripts for evaluation (Maxwell, 2005). To support the validity of this primarily qualitative inquiry, quasi-statistics, such as word clouds and frequency counts, were utilized using Excel and ATLAS.ti 7.5.16 software. Multiple coding involving subject-matter authorities helped assess data accuracy. Early themes were scrutinized, and the report was revised based on expert feedback and recommendations, aligning with the approach suggested by (Maxwell, 2005). ATLAS.ti is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program that analyzes qualitative data for qualitative research, quantitative research, and mixed methodologies research. In the first stage, codes were generated in ATLAS.ti through reviewing each transcript. Ninety codes were generated. To get more insights from all 90 identified codes, all codes are segmented into business and personal traits. Business traits are the traits or skills identified in FPO leaders that help conduct different business activities efficiently. These traits include the skill of convincing farmers to work as a collective, marketing, predicting business risks for the future and trying to find measures in advance, and collaboration. Personal traits are traits that FPO leaders have in their personality, including continuous learning, Self-motivation, and perseverance.

## RESULTS

### Most frequently used words by the participants

The initial stage in examining the data regarding the traits of actively operating FPO leaders was implementing the data visualization process. The extensive text-based data was assessed using the word cloud approach, and insights were gained through analyzing the data. Several words are shown in Figure 1, with varying sizes and variances, some bolder than others. Words differ in size and intensity based on how frequently they appear in the transcripts of the interviews that were studied (Tiwari & Raman, 2022). From Figure 1, it can be interpreted that 'members' was the most frequently used word with 151 repetitions, followed by FPO (112), business (104), market (68) and knowledge (64). Other words highlighted through the word cloud include 'decisions,' 'team,' 'farming,' 'risk,' 'produce,' 'problems,' 'vision,' 'learning' and 'technology'. It further generated the understanding that the participants knew the members' needs, that is, marketing. By specifying the company's vision, they also have concerns about



**Table 2.** Codes and the related statements of the participants

Codes	Statements
Continuous learning	P8: "I have attended leadership training, YouTube, and read books, but one thing is that leadership will not be built by attending one training program or reading one book. It is a continuous process. As we get updates on mobile, we also have to update ourselves."
Convincing power	P16: "In 2020, we celebrated our second company registration anniversary. We have selected 20 progressive farmers and provided them with the 'Krishi Sanman Award.' The tears of the farmers were shed while receiving the awards; I also felt pleased that we had given them unforgettable memories. We have given them trophies. In their entire life, they have not received that much appreciation. After seeing this, other farmers also approached me about joining FPO."
Vigilance	P1: "We have faced price drop-related problems in onion, so now, in advance, we are trying to find an alternative to a solution to store it. We try to connect with warehouses. <i>Maharashtra Vikas Mahamandal</i> is there for warehousing, so we contact them when we predict such price drop-related problems."
Allocation of responsibilities	P15: "This is 100% teamwork; align a good team, delegate responsibilities. Moreover, set realistic goals for what you are going to achieve."
Adopting new technologies and Innovations	P18: "We all have made efforts for it, and that's why this has happened. We have worked as a team, that's why this has happened. Anyone can replace me. Hence, as a leader, I believe I have to go ahead with farmers, and then only we will succeed."
Gaining Farmers trust	P2: "Initially, they did not believe when we started the project. Their attitude is like, why are we doing this for them? and that is free of cost. At starting we faced the problem of making one farmer's group in one village. Then, after seeing the result and transparency, they started trusting us." P15: "There are many market traders, but sometimes they procure from farmers and don't give them good returns. Sometimes, they also give late payments, and farmers have to take much follow-up to take payments from them, but we, as an FPO, have our own office and primary processing unit, so they trust us they know if this person did something wrong, we can come here directly."
Members satisfaction	P20: "The main factor of success is member's satisfaction. So members should be satisfied. If they are satisfied, then automatically the company will be successful." P6: "Member satisfaction is our main objective, and we did that. Whatever commitments we had given to members, we fulfilled them."
Personal relations with members	P1: "Sometimes members come up with personal problems like children's education or medical issues; we try to help them as much as possible from our end."
Self-Motivating	P7: "People have always told me this fruit is best in India, but its shelf life is not more than two days. At that time, I realized there was something loop fall that we needed to address, which motivated me to take it further. So when I came back, today we became one of the best FPOs in India to export this fruit from India to other countries."
Accepting new ideas from members	P1: "Farmers always try to do something innovative to increase their produce. In the case of fertilizers, they come to us with innovative fertilizer application methods so that they can use less fertilizer while covering all crops effectively. We listen to their ideas, check them, and if we find it effective, we try to disseminate it among other farmers."
Perseverance	P15: "Just registering FPO should not be the ultimate goal. You have to make it work, and this is not 2-3 months' work. Making strategies will take 2-3 years, and you have to give that much time. You should maintain continuity of that. If you are ready to wait, to keep your patience, and to fight, then only one can come to this FPO business; otherwise, you will waste your time."
Going ahead along with all	P15: "As a leader, you must bind BOD, Employees, and members. You have to go ahead and take them with you."
Learning by experiencing	P16: "For onion trading, the main challenge is that there is no nearby market for onion in our area. Many onion sellers, traders, and even farmers have faced fraud cases. We also faced such problems and decided to open our centres in Kerala to do guaranteed business. After that, we ensured that when we transport our onions to Kerala, we will make some profit or not face any fraud."
Personal values	Empathy_P1: "Farmers come with their Goat and sheep to the weekly market. In that weekly market, farmers were cheated. They face many problems. They have to travel with the animals, they have to bear its cost, and they face mental disturbance. So we started working for them." Honesty_P12: "We have done honest business with the company. We have considered it our duty to be honest with the company."
Fairness & transparency	P15: "Whenever companies face ups and downs, we share it with members; all these things should be crystal clear and transparent like a family. Shareholders are the foundation, so if the foundation is not good, then there are chances that your company may collapse."

in their field. This knowledge they can inculcate in their business is another crucial trait that FPO leaders learn by experiencing.

Registering for FPO requires proper documentation; hence, leaders should be aware of the documentation for FPO compliance. At the start of FPO, the leader should be able to identify the skills and capacities of the registered farmers, and accordingly, they have to allocate responsibilities to each. They should accept new ideas from the members, as many progressive and innovative farmers can give good suggestions that may help other farmers. FPO leaders should adopt new technologies and Innovations in FPO. As an FPO is a collective organization, leaders should get feedback from members and experts on activities involving FPOs.

As farming is the core activity in the FPO business, all other activities in the company depend on farming. Farming may be affected due to several factors, such as bad climate, untrained farmers, and disease-pest attacks. At the same time, even if farm produce is harvested well, the marketing of the produce can be a hindrance; hence, FPO leaders should be vigilant in predicting future risks and making alternative arrangements. The personal values that FPO leaders have found are Self-motivation, patience, hard work, and perseverance. As FPO is not an individually owned firm and its main objective is to empower farmers by providing them assistance in terms of best practices for enhanced productivity, quality inputs, and access to fair and remunerative markets Hence, FPO leader should have an approach to ‘Go ahead along with all’ by identifying government benefits to FPO, making efforts to avail the same. Another important factor from the FPO leaders is that avoiding political influence in the FPO is also necessary, and leaders should take care of it.

The findings have several managerial implications. The starting part of forming an FPO is to communicate its vision and objectives to farmers and fulfill small commitments to farmers regarding marketing their produce, helping them get benefits from the government. This helps build trust among farmers, and ultimately, they take an interest in working with FPO. As members are the main component of FPO, building personal relations with members by providing personal attention to members’ needs helps FPO leaders understand the farmer’s problems in 360 degrees; personal issues may relate to or hamper their farming work. Intimate relations with members help farmers discover the root causes, which may help convert their challenges into opportunities. Getting members involved in FPO is a small achievement, but leaders have a primary task to motivate members throughout the journey. FPO leaders should care for members and not lose interest in FPO. Leaders must keep sharing updates on each activity with members, motivating members by arranging lectures and method demonstrations of farming activities. Leaders should arrange visits, study tours, and training programs for farmers. One of the ways of motivating farmers is to facilitate them with rewards for the best-performing farmers in terms of quality and quantity of produce. Decision making is an essential part of FPO Management. The insights from the leaders in this study shared that FPO leaders should involve farmers while selecting crops, cultivating practices, and making other decisions directly related to farming or processing. The decisions such as collaborations, marketing, and branding should involve BOD, Executives, and experts in the field. Fifth as collaboration is critical

to any business, FPO is no exception; FPO leaders can collaborate with other segments of the agribusinesses to benefit from both technical guidance and agri inputs. Sixth though FPO is a collective form of organisation, dividing roles and responsibilities among each member of FPO, including BOD, executives, members, and employees, make each feel responsible for that activity, which helps improve productivity. Finally, leaders should focus on members’ satisfaction first, which can ultimately help to achieve active organisational success by going ahead with all.

## CONCLUSION

Leadership plays a crucial role in FPO functioning. As FPO is a new concept of collective farming, a need for unique leadership traits has emerged. To properly operate an FPO by fostering the necessary abilities and attributes, an FPO leader must first and foremost transform farmers’ perspectives about leaders and farming. This research sets the bar for what qualities and skills FPO leaders should adopt to operate an FPO better. A few participants suggested that it would be helpful if, while identifying or appointing an FPO leader, government agencies take care of that person who should have the above-listed traits. If not, he/she is willing to gain and build the skills and attributes. The government should identify such enthusiastic individuals and appoint them as FPO leaders rather than see FPO formation as a target and appoint a leader for formality. It is recommended that future research focus on identifying relationship between FPO leadership and FPO performance quantitatively by utilizing the proper statistical analysis.

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