



Between Continuity and Change: Support Staff Narratives on Leadership Transition

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Abstract

Leadership transitions in higher education are frequent but challenging, and they deeply affect support staff. Amid these recurring leadership transitions, this study employed a phenomenological qualitative design to explore the lived experiences, challenges they face, coping mechanisms they use to overcome difficulties, insights, and learning of the eight support staff members at Davao De Oro State College (DDOSC), New Bataan Branch. Purposive sampling was employed, with participants selected based on at least 4 years of service at the institution. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal that support staff initially experienced hesitancy, uncertainty, and fear of the unknown, which gradually gave way to adaptation and openness under new leadership. Even with all these challenges, the support staff demonstrated adaptive coping strategies through effective time management, professional discipline, peer collaboration, mentorship, and positive reframing. The institution also played a role by providing training, improving digital resources, and providing sufficient time for adjustment, all of which helped build their resilience. Support staff recognized that change is inevitable and that communication and flexibility are key to navigating change successfully. They recommended practical steps for smoother transitions, such as early, open communication, structured orientations, and collaborative handovers between leaders.

Keywords

leadership transition, higher education, support staff, lived experiences, organizational change

How to Cite

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Author Contributions

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Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards.

INTRODUCTION

Support staff play an essential role in ensuring the continuity of institutional operations during leadership transitions. Administrative personnel, finance staff, records officers, information technology personnel, and other non-teaching employees preserve institutional memory, maintain operational stability, and support the implementation of new administrative priorities. Their contributions are particularly important during periods of organizational change because they bridge institutional knowledge between outgoing and incoming leaders while sustaining essential services. Organizational learning theory explains that accumulated knowledge and shared workplace experiences enable employees

to support organizational adaptation and continuity despite structural change (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). Likewise, collaborative workplace relationships characterized by trust, mutual support, and shared responsibility strengthen employees' capacity to adapt while maintaining organizational performance during periods of uncertainty (Colbert et al., 2016). Studies have further shown that employees who possess proactive dispositions and growth-oriented mindsets are more likely to embrace organizational change, develop new competencies, and respond constructively to evolving institutional demands (Caniëls et al., 2018). Within higher education, collaborative leadership practices and strong partnerships between administrators and professional staff enhance institutional resilience during leadership succession (Whitchurch, 2013). Nevertheless, leadership transitions frequently alter communication channels, reporting relationships, and work expectations, requiring support staff to adjust their professional roles while maintaining organizational effectiveness. Effective communication has consistently been identified as one of the most important determinants of successful organizational change. Transparent internal communication helps employees understand organizational decisions, reduces uncertainty, and promotes greater acceptance of institutional reforms (Li et al., 2021). Conversely, unclear expectations and inadequate communication may increase employee stress before, during, and after organizational change, making adaptation more difficult (Smollan, 2015). Positive workplace relationships and supportive leadership, however, help employees manage these challenges by strengthening trust, collaboration, and organizational commitment (Colbert et al., 2016). These findings suggest that leadership transition should not be viewed merely as an administrative process but as a social and psychological experience requiring institutions to foster supportive environments that encourage flexibility, communication, and employee engagement.

Within higher education institutions, leadership succession presents both opportunities and challenges. Systematic reviews of educational leadership research indicate that effective institutional leadership is closely associated with collaborative organizational cultures, shared governance, and continuous professional learning, all of which contribute to institutional effectiveness during periods of change (Castillo & Hallinger, 2018). At the same time, newly appointed leaders often experience ambiguity as they learn institutional norms, establish relationships, and gain credibility within their organizations (Gearin et al., 2020). Such adjustment processes influence not only leaders themselves but also support staff who must adapt to changing expectations, administrative priorities, and management styles. Consequently, successful leadership transitions require reciprocal trust, open communication, and collaborative relationships between administrators and employees (Cocklin & Wilkinson, 2011).

Despite growing scholarship on organizational change and educational leadership, existing studies have primarily focused on institutional leaders, faculty members, and executive administrators, with comparatively limited attention given to the experiences of support staff. Previous research has examined leadership succession, organizational commitment, employee readiness for change, and institutional performance (Geys et al., 2020; Baker & Manning, 2021), yet relatively few studies have explored how non-teaching personnel experience leadership transition from a phenomenological perspective. Moreover, much of the existing literature emphasizes organizational outcomes rather than the lived experiences, emotional responses, coping strategies, and meaning-making processes of support staff who sustain daily institutional operations. This empirical and contextual gap is particularly evident within Philippine higher education institutions, where research examining support personnel during leadership transition remains limited.

To address this gap, the present study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of support staff during leadership transition at Davao de Oro State College–New Bataan Branch. Phenomenology is particularly appropriate because it seeks to understand the essence of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to a shared phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative inquiry further emphasizes the importance of understanding organizational experiences within their natural settings through rich descriptions generated from participants' narratives (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Conducting rigorous phenomenological interviews also requires careful attention to dialogue, interpretation, and researcher reflexivity to ensure that participants' perspectives are authentically represented (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). By examining participants' experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights, the present study contributes to a deeper understanding of leadership transition beyond administrative viewpoints and highlights the critical role of support staff in sustaining institutional continuity. The findings provide evidence that may guide higher education leaders in developing inclusive leadership transition policies, strengthening organizational communication, and designing employee support mechanisms that foster resilience, collaboration, and organizational stability during periods of administrative change.

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm to explore the lived experiences of support staff during leadership transitions in a higher education institution. Phenomenology was selected because it seeks to understand and describe the essence of participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretivist perspective assumes that reality is socially constructed through individuals' interactions and experiences, making it appropriate for examining how support staff perceived, interpreted, and responded to leadership transition within their workplace. The design aligned with the study's objective of generating an in-depth understanding of organizational change from the perspective of non-teaching personnel.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants who possessed direct experience with leadership transition. Eight support staff members from Davao de Oro State College–New Bataan Branch participated in the study. Participants included administrative personnel, contract-of-service employees, and job-order staff who had rendered at least four years

of continuous service in the institution. Eligible participants were currently employed, directly involved in institutional operations affected by leadership transition, and willing to participate voluntarily. Employees with fewer than four years of service or without direct involvement in transition-related activities were excluded. The sample size was considered sufficient because data saturation was achieved, with no substantially new themes emerging during the later interviews.

Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' experiences. The interview guide was reviewed by subject matter experts to establish content validity and ensure alignment with the study objectives. Prior to data collection, institutional approval and ethical clearance were obtained, followed by the acquisition of informed consent from each participant. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through online platforms according to participant preference and availability. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes documenting contextual observations and non-verbal cues. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and participants were invited to review their transcripts to verify the accuracy and completeness of the recorded narratives.

Analysis

The study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis to examine participants' narratives systematically. The analysis began with repeated reading of the interview transcripts to facilitate data familiarization. Significant statements were then coded to identify meaningful units related to participants' experiences, challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories that evolved into preliminary themes. These themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and clearly defined to ensure coherence and representativeness across the dataset. The final themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and supported by representative participant quotations to strengthen analytical credibility.

Reflexivity

Recognizing that the researcher served as the primary research instrument, reflexivity was maintained throughout the investigation. Continuous reflection was undertaken to identify and manage personal assumptions, professional experiences, and potential biases that could influence data interpretation. Peer debriefing with the research adviser and careful adherence to participants' narratives were employed to minimize subjective interpretation and ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' lived experiences rather than the researcher's personal perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the appropriate institutional ethics review body before the commencement of data collection. Participants received detailed information regarding the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and anticipated benefits before providing written informed consent. Participation remained entirely voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from all transcripts and reports. Electronic data were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher and were used exclusively for academic purposes in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

Limitations and Rigor

The findings should be interpreted within the context of several methodological limitations. The study involved a relatively small number of participants drawn from a single higher education institution, limiting the transferability of findings to other institutional settings. In addition, the reliance on self-reported experiences may have introduced recall bias or subjective interpretation. Despite these limitations, methodological rigor was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, maintenance of an audit trail, and the provision of thick descriptions of participants' experiences. These strategies strengthened the study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the interview data revealed that leadership transition was experienced as a dynamic process characterized by initial uncertainty followed by gradual adaptation. Although participants encountered varying degrees of emotional discomfort and organizational adjustment, they consistently demonstrated resilience by modifying their work practices and maintaining commitment to institutional responsibilities. Three overarching themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Changes in Work Roles and Responsibilities, (2) Emotional Reactions to Leadership Transition, and (3) Changes in Interactions with Administrators.

Theme 1. Changes in Work Roles and Responsibilities During Leadership Transition

Participants consistently described leadership transition as a period requiring adjustments in their daily responsibilities, communication practices, and administrative procedures. Although institutional operations continued without interruption, the arrival of new leaders introduced revised expectations regarding documentation, reporting systems, task prioritization, and workflow coordination. These adjustments required support staff to modify established work routines while ensuring continuity of institutional services.

One participant reflected: "During the leadership transition, I felt hesitant and uncomfortable at first, especially when a new leader was observing my work. However, I tried to take that feeling positively because it gave me the opportunity to show how I perform my tasks and motivated me to become more open to learning and flexible in improving my work." (Participant 1)

The participants' narratives indicate that uncertainty was primarily associated with understanding new expectations rather than resisting organizational change. Initial hesitation gradually evolved into acceptance as employees became more

familiar with new administrative practices and recognized opportunities for professional growth. Their experiences suggest that leadership transition encouraged flexibility, continuous learning, and stronger commitment to institutional responsibilities despite temporary disruptions.

Participants also observed improvements in organizational efficiency after the transition. Changes such as clearer reporting structures, more systematic documentation, enhanced accountability, and increased use of digital technologies were viewed as strengthening institutional operations. Although adapting to these changes initially increased workloads, participants generally perceived the new procedures as contributing to improved organizational effectiveness.

These findings support the view that organizational change requires employees to modify work practices while maintaining operational performance. Successful adaptation is facilitated when institutions provide clear direction, consistent communication, and structured implementation of new procedures, thereby reducing uncertainty and promoting employee engagement (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015; Oreg et al., 2011). The findings likewise demonstrate that accumulated institutional knowledge enables employees to integrate previous work experiences with newly introduced administrative practices, thereby preserving organizational continuity while supporting innovation (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). Overall, the findings highlight that support staff function as essential contributors to organizational stability during leadership succession. Their willingness to adapt, combined with institutional support, enables higher education institutions to sustain operational continuity despite changes in leadership.

Theme 2. Emotional Reactions to Leadership Transition

Leadership transition also generated diverse emotional responses among participants. Feelings of uncertainty, apprehension, curiosity, and cautious optimism characterized the early stages of adjustment as participants sought to understand the priorities, expectations, and leadership styles of incoming administrators. One participant shared: "At first, I felt uneasy because leadership transitions usually bring uncertainty and challenges in the workplace. However, I tried to remain professional, stay open to the changes, and focus on continuing my work while gradually adjusting to the new leadership." (Participant 1)

Another participant explained: "Every leader has a unique approach. Because transitions often involve new heads or designees, I felt a little worried about whether my designation would be reduced or increased." (Participant 2)

These accounts suggest that emotional reactions were largely influenced by uncertainty surrounding future responsibilities rather than resistance to organizational change. Participants were primarily concerned about adapting to new expectations while maintaining satisfactory work performance. Nevertheless, they consistently demonstrated professionalism, openness, and willingness to cooperate throughout the transition process. As participants gained greater familiarity with the new administration, feelings of uncertainty gradually diminished and were replaced by confidence and acceptance. Many eventually perceived leadership transition as an opportunity to broaden their professional capabilities, strengthen workplace relationships, and contribute more effectively to institutional development. This progression illustrates that emotional adaptation developed alongside increasing trust, communication, and organizational familiarity.

The findings indicate that employees' emotional responses to organizational change are shaped by their perceptions of uncertainty and by the availability of effective coping resources. Supportive communication, emotional regulation, positive reframing, and collaborative relationships enabled participants to manage workplace stress while sustaining professional commitment (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006; Fteiha & Awwad, 2020; Anderson et al., 2022). Likewise, employees who perceive greater organizational support are more likely to develop trust, organizational commitment, and readiness to embrace change, thereby facilitating smoother leadership transitions (Kurtessis et al., 2017).

These findings underscore the importance of recognizing the emotional dimension of leadership transition. Beyond implementing administrative changes, institutional leaders should establish communication mechanisms, provide timely guidance, and foster supportive workplace relationships that strengthen employees' confidence and resilience throughout the transition process.

Theme 3. Changes in Interactions with Administrators

Leadership transition influenced not only participants' work responsibilities but also the quality of their interactions with administrators. Participants described an initial period of adjustment during which both support staff and newly appointed leaders sought to understand one another's communication styles, expectations, and approaches to decision-making. This period required patience and openness as both parties established new working relationships within the evolving organizational environment. One participant explained: "Before the leadership transition, we were still trying to understand each other since we were not yet familiar with the leadership style and expectations of the new administrators. However, as time went on, I learned to adapt and became more comfortable with the new leadership." (Participant 1)

As familiarity increased, participants observed noticeable improvements in communication and administrative coordination. Several reported that interactions became more collaborative, reporting procedures became clearer, and organizational expectations were communicated more consistently. These developments strengthened mutual trust and promoted more efficient coordination among offices, allowing employees to perform their responsibilities with greater confidence. The findings suggest that effective leadership transition depends not only on changes in formal leadership but also on the development of constructive interpersonal relationships between administrators and employees. Trust, open communication, and mutual understanding enabled participants to interpret organizational changes positively and facilitated smoother adaptation to new leadership. These observations reinforce the view that organizational change is most successful when communication is transparent and employees are actively involved in the transition process, thereby reducing uncertainty and strengthening organizational commitment (Cocklin & Wilkinson, 2011; Hong et al., 2020).

Participants' experiences further indicate that support staff function as important custodians of institutional knowledge during leadership transitions. Their familiarity with organizational procedures, historical practices, and operational systems

enabled them to assist incoming administrators while maintaining continuity of institutional services. This reflects the central role of organizational learning in sustaining institutional effectiveness, where accumulated knowledge is preserved and transferred across leadership changes to minimize operational disruption (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that leadership transition is a collaborative process requiring reciprocal trust, effective communication, and shared responsibility. Institutions that cultivate inclusive leadership practices and recognize the contributions of support staff are more likely to strengthen organizational cohesion and maintain operational stability during administrative succession.

Theme 4. Challenges Encountered During Leadership Transition

Participants identified leadership transition as a period characterized by multiple organizational challenges, including uncertainty regarding changing responsibilities, increased workloads, stricter documentation requirements, communication adjustments, and the need to learn unfamiliar administrative procedures. Although these challenges varied according to participants' specific roles, they collectively reflected the complexities associated with adapting to organizational change. One participant shared: "Some of my tasks increased because I had to learn and adapt to new processes and systems. I also needed to communicate more often with my coworkers to ensure the transition was implemented smoothly." (Participant 8)

Another participant noted: "I observed stricter documentation of work outputs. Certain duties required more coordination with administrative offices, which eventually resulted in clearer accountability and more structured workflows." (Participant 7)

These experiences demonstrate that leadership transition required employees to balance additional responsibilities while continuing to deliver essential institutional services. Participants experienced temporary uncertainty as they adjusted to new administrative expectations; however, these demands gradually became opportunities to strengthen professional competence, organizational discipline, and collaborative work practices. The findings indicate that challenges associated with leadership transition are not solely obstacles but also mechanisms through which organizational improvement occurs. Procedural changes, revised reporting systems, and increased accountability encouraged participants to develop new competencies and adopt more efficient work practices. Similar patterns have been observed in organizational change research, where periods of uncertainty often stimulate learning, adaptability, and innovation when supported by effective leadership and structured communication (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015; Oreg et al., 2011).

Participants also demonstrated considerable resilience despite the pressures associated with transition. Rather than resisting organizational changes, they adopted flexible approaches to learning new systems, strengthening workplace collaboration, and maintaining service quality. Such responses suggest that organizational resilience is fostered when employees perceive change as manageable and receive adequate institutional support. Positive coping resources, clear communication, and supportive organizational environments have been shown to reduce workplace stress and facilitate successful adaptation during periods of organizational transformation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). These findings underscore the importance of comprehensive transition planning within higher education institutions. Providing clear guidance, structured orientation, realistic workload expectations, and continuous communication can minimize uncertainty while enabling support staff to adapt more effectively to changing organizational demands. Such strategies not only strengthen employee well-being but also enhance institutional resilience and continuity throughout leadership succession.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the lived experiences of support staff during leadership transition at Davao de Oro State College–New Bataan Branch using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The findings revealed that leadership transition is a multidimensional organizational process characterized by initial uncertainty, emotional adjustment, and gradual adaptation. Participants experienced changes in work roles, communication patterns, reporting structures, and administrative expectations. Although these changes initially generated hesitation, anxiety, and concerns regarding organizational stability, support staff demonstrated resilience by maintaining professionalism, embracing continuous learning, collaborating with colleagues, and adapting to evolving institutional demands. The study further established that successful leadership transition depends not only on administrative succession but also on effective communication, inclusive leadership practices, institutional support, and mutual trust between leaders and support staff. Participants recognized that organizational change creates opportunities for professional growth, improved operational efficiency, and strengthened institutional collaboration when managed transparently and strategically. These findings contribute context-specific evidence to the literature on organizational change by highlighting the often-overlooked experiences of non-teaching personnel within Philippine higher education institutions. The study addresses an important contextual gap by demonstrating that support staff serve as critical custodians of institutional continuity whose knowledge, adaptability, and commitment substantially influence the success of leadership transitions.

Based on the findings, higher education institutions should establish comprehensive leadership transition frameworks that prioritize early communication, structured orientation programs, collaborative turnover procedures, and participatory decision-making. Incoming administrators should communicate organizational expectations clearly, recognize the institutional knowledge of support staff, and encourage meaningful employee participation throughout the transition process. Institutions should also strengthen mentoring initiatives, professional development programs, and employee wellness interventions that enhance organizational resilience and readiness for change. At the policy level, institutional leaders are encouraged to develop formal succession planning guidelines that preserve institutional memory while promoting continuity of operations during administrative transitions. Such policies should recognize support staff as strategic partners in institutional governance and organizational development. Future research may extend this

investigation by including multiple higher education institutions, larger participant populations, and comparative analyses across public and private universities. Mixed-methods or longitudinal research designs may further examine how leadership transitions influence employee engagement, organizational culture, institutional effectiveness, and long-term organizational resilience over time.

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