



Transformational Leadership as a Strategy for Addressing Organisational Inertia

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Abstract

The main aim of the study was to critically evaluate whether transformational leadership can be a strategy to address organisational inertia in South African Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). In recent years, globalisation, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, and the increasing demand for digital competencies have significantly reshaped the higher education landscape, requiring institutions to foster innovation and adaptability. Many institutions continue to experience organisational inertia, manifested through resistance to change, high staff turnover, and reduced motivation, which are often associated with transactional leadership styles that prioritise stability over innovation. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study employed unobtrusive research methods through documentary analysis, complemented by semi-structured interviews with selected participants from a South African PHEI. Data were analysed using ATLAS.ti (version 2023) to generate and refine themes through the code-and-retrieve function. The findings confirmed that transformational leadership, characterised by inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration, plays a critical role in mitigating organisational inertia by enhancing employee engagement and fostering adaptability. The study concluded that developing transformational leadership capacity is essential for PHEIs to remain competitive, responsive, and future-focused within an increasingly complex educational landscape. All literature cited was published between 2019 and 2024.

Keywords: Transformational leadership; transactional leadership; organisational inertia; Newton's Law of Inertia; Private Higher Education Institute.

1. Introduction

Due to the globalisation of education, escalating competition, and the emphasis on competence through new technologies, South African Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) are highly competitive, with numerous institutions vying for a share of the market (Lubinga, Maramura & Masiya, 2023:6). Global trends, such as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the increasing demand for digital skills, and the emphasis on lifelong learning, are reshaping higher education both globally and in South Africa (Lubinga et al., 2023:7). Consequently, PHEIs need to align their curricula, teaching methods, and infrastructure with these trends to maintain organisational relevance and prepare students for the future workforce. Lubinga et al. (2023:7) further contend that PHEIs must embrace technology, foster innovation, and adopt effective leadership styles to drive institutional growth, a point also emphasised by Singh, Steel, and Singh (2021:141) as essential for thriving in the digital age.

In this rapidly evolving and complex landscape, the role of leadership styles driving change becomes pivotal. Dong (2023:21) explains that while transactional leaders may have preferred the advancements and efficiencies offered by new technologies, focusing on clear roles, tasks, and performance metrics to provide stability and clarity, this approach is not always effective in fostering the innovation and

adaptability required to navigate complexities. This preference for stability and clear metrics has led to organisational inertia, where employees in PHEIs are resisting change, remaining stuck in established routines, and showing lower motivation to adapt to new technologies and methodologies, which can result in high staff turnover.

High staff turnover can significantly impact institutional effectiveness and further intensify organisational inertia within PHEIs. Adriano and Callaghan (2020:1) highlight that high staff turnover leads to more than just a numerical loss; it also results in a loss of institutional knowledge, diminishing productivity, and contributing to organisational inertia. Ahmad, Nawaz, Ishaq, Khan, and Ashraf (2023:2) agree and examine the reasons for high staff turnover within PHEIs through the lens of social exchange theory, which is considered the gold standard for understanding workplace behaviour and employee well-being.

Additionally, Adriano and Callaghan (2020:2) note that transactional relationships and disrupted work-life balance can contribute to high staff turnover, making it crucial for PHEIs to prioritise work-life balance and manage internal conflicts effectively. Similarly, Nguon (2022:76) examines the absence of job satisfaction in the fast-paced environment of PHEIs and confirms that it contributed to high staff turnover. Job satisfaction is characterised as an emotional response and an individual's attitude towards their job situations, with positive feelings arising from positive work experiences, according to Nguon (2022:77), which raises the question of what type of leadership best cultivates such experiences.

Transformational leadership plays an important role in this regard by indirectly influencing employees' affective commitment to the change process, motivating them to exceed expectations, as identified in literature dating back to 1978, as explained by recent findings (Khan, Amin & Saif, 2022:6). Transformational leadership, characterised by inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration, according to Khan and Amin (2021:6), can be particularly effective in motivating employees to embrace change. Internationally, studies highlight that while transformational leadership enhances institutional performance, it is often overshadowed by transactional models that prioritise efficiency over equity (Kgarimetsa & Naidoo, 2024:3). Similarly, international research by Kenku and Idowu (2023:67) examines the influence of transformational leadership in PHEIs, particularly in responding to policy changes and technological advancements. Their findings indicated that transformational leadership empowers employees and supports equitable and inclusive practices (Kenku & Idowu, 2023:67). These global findings suggest that the challenge of overcoming inertia in the face of globalisation is not unique to the South African context.

Leaders must address the elimination of personal inertia by encouraging continuous learning, openness to change, and proactive skills development among their employees (Dagar & Sisodia, 2023:722). By setting clear goals, providing support, and facilitating collaboration, leaders can empower employees to overcome resistance to change and contribute to institutional growth and competitiveness (Khan, Amin & Saif, 2022:6). Therefore, it is imperative for PHEIs to prioritise the development of effective leadership styles that drive change. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the necessity of appointing transformational leaders to address organisational inertia within South African PHEIs.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Organisational Inertia

The term “organisational inertia” refers to resistance to change and the tendency to maintain existing structures, processes, and practices (Ashok, Madan, & Dzandu, 2021:2246). Ashok et al. (2021:2246)

further defined organisational inertia as the inability to adapt internally when faced with significant external pressures. Inertia can obstruct progress and hinder adaptation and institutional learning to the evolving educational landscape. Dong (2023:21) explains that organisational learning constitutes a crucial aspect of any learning institution, leveraging its knowledge assets to enhance performance. Institutional learning transcends individual learning, encompassing systems, values, cultures, and regulations that persist despite employee turnover. Its focus lies in enhancing individuals' behaviour and competencies to enable the organisation to better adapt to its surroundings. Woelders (2020:15) suggests that institutions struggle to keep up with the external environment, leading to inertia, especially when organisational leaders fail to respond promptly to environmental cues.

In such contexts, it is important to recognise that change can occur at any point in an organisation for many different reasons. The Burke-Litwin model for organisational performance and change identifies the different drivers of change (French, Mahat, Kvan, & Imms, 2022:115). Figure 1 below illustrates the complex interplay of internal and external factors that influence organisational performance and change. It consists of 12 key components grouped into two categories, namely transformational factors and transactional factors. This model uses arrows to identify which organisational variable influences other variables, and it distinguishes transformational and transactional factors in organisational behaviour and change.

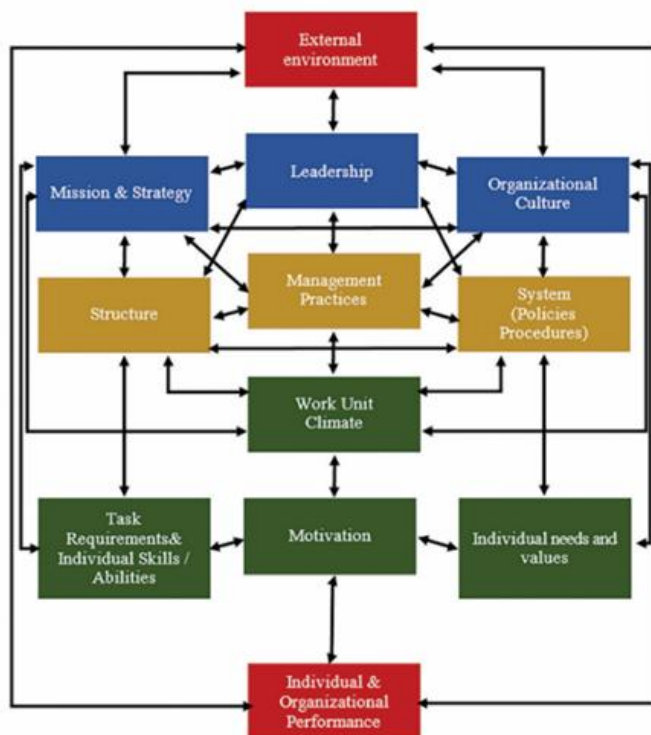


Figure 1. The Burke-Litwin model for organisational performance and change (Nica, 2022:45).

According to French et al. (2022:115), the “external environment” represents the input, and “individual and organisational performance” represents the output. Tambusay and Aisyah, (2024:38) is of the opinion that the upper segment of the Burke-Litwin model typically embodies transformational variables. These variables signal the need for members to adopt new behaviours when interacting with the external environment and external forces. These external forces necessitate behavioural adjustments to effectively navigate the evolving environment. Encountering resistance amid these behavioural changes is common, contributing to the intricacy of these transformations (Tambusay & Aisahyah, 2024:38). The capacity for institutional adaptation in response to external stimuli is a critical aspect of resilience. Within the institutional framework, these variables centre on day-to-day adaptations.

2.2 Transformational Leadership

According to Sidik, Desywan, Raharjo and Pradana (2024:241), the notion of transformational leadership can be traced back to approximately 1978, marking the conceptualisation of two distinct leadership paradigms, namely transactional leadership and transformational leadership. While transactional leaders centre their attention on work standards and task-driven objectives, often leveraging organisational authority, transformational leadership is characterised by an emphasis on human values (Sidik et al., 2024:241). In a similar manner, Mittal and Pani (2020:100) highlight the critical role of leadership in PHEIs, emphasising its contribution to institutional development by fostering trust. They proposed that a leader's fundamental duty is to authentically communicate the reality of the institution to those under their guidance. Sidik et al. (2024:241) note that transformational leaders exhibit an innovative and creative disposition, cultivating an environment conducive to growth, experimentation, and open communication. This nurturing approach stimulates innovation and effective business outcomes. Transformational leaders also play a crucial role in articulating the organisation's vision and mission, establishing a foundation of credibility, and fostering a culture driven by knowledge. Transformational leaders possess the capacity to inspire their followers toward exceptional performance, according to Le, Hamid and Mansor (2025:96), confirming the considerable impact of transformational leadership on performance, responsibility, and accountability in an organisation. This view is further supported by the research conducted by Ashok et al. (2021:13), which validates the crucial role of transformational leadership in spearheading organisational transformation and cultivating a climate conducive to innovation. This is achieved through multifaceted means, such as facilitating and managing organisational changes, fostering interpersonal trust, embracing technological advancements, and producing a motivational drive for individual growth.

Mittal and Pani (2020:100) examined the effects of transformational leadership on employee creativity and performance, focusing on the mediating role of idea-sharing. The four dimensions of transformational leadership, namely idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration, are discussed by Le et al. (2025:102), who note that these dimensions serve as essential factors in fostering an environment characterised by the inspiration, motivation, and empowerment of followers, culminating in a holistic framework for catalysing creativity, enhancing performance, and promoting idea dissemination.

2.3 Idealised influence

Idealised influence assumes a paramount role whereby leaders act as role models, eliciting admiration, trust, and reverence from their followers (Ashok et al., 2021:6). Transformational leaders are recognised as idealised influencers and are considered role models because they exhibit ethical and moral behaviours (Ashok et al., 2021:6). Such leaders not only demonstrate ethical standards, but also maintain unwavering integrity, and a firm commitment to purpose (Heenan, Lafferty & McNamara, 2024:557). These qualities contribute to an organisational culture rooted in trust, empowerment, and an unwavering dedication to shared objectives.

2.4 Individualised consideration

Transformational leaders discern their followers' needs, thereby increasing their own capacity to empower their followers. This empowerment occurs through cultivating a supportive environment where differences are respected and individuality is valued. Kirichu, Ngugi and Karanja (2024:649) highlight the significance of these leaders in establishing meaningful connections and listening attentively to their followers' achievements and growth, strengths and weaknesses. Active listening and

attentiveness enhance the performance of individuals within the organisation. These leaders understand the unique needs and aspirations of individuals and tailor their leadership approach accordingly (Kirichu et al., 2024:216).

2.4 Intellectual Stimulation

According to Chukwuma and Zondo (2024:407), intellectual stimulation produces innovative ideas and solutions for complex institutional challenges. Transformational leaders proactively encourage followers and foster an environment for the free flow of ideas and insights. In this context, they promote an ecosystem where individual autonomy is harnessed, decision-making is delegated, and critical thinking is cultivated (Chukwuma & Zondo, 2024:407).

2.5 Inspirational Motivation

Transformational leaders create an environment of open communication and experimentation, nurturing the generation of innovative ideas (Kayago & Omari, 2024:224). This aligns with the objective of this study, which is to determine which leadership styles South African PHEIs should consider when appointing leaders to address organisational inertia. Kayago and Omari (2024:224) assert that transformational leaders believe individuals are drawn to inspirational leaders. Such leaders communicate their expectations by modelling high standards and challenging their followers. They are optimistic, forward-thinking, and help their followers achieve more than they thought possible, giving them a sense of purpose and meaning.

2.6 Change Management: Newton's Law of Inertia

Despite their original formulation to describe the behaviour of physical entities, Newton's Laws of Inertia offer a conceptual framework to explain the dynamics underlying leadership and institutional conduct. Meiliyadi, Arizona, Wahyudi and Damayanti (2025:276) agree with Newton's Law of Inertia: that an object's momentum persists unless an external force intercedes. This principle resonates with human behaviour, where individuals are innately predisposed to uphold prevailing states. Such behaviour manifests as resistance, which preserves inertia. Parallel to an object's reluctance towards motion, Beresford-Dey (2025:32) notes that individuals often display resistance to change from their present state. In this context, transformational leaders emerged as external catalysts heralding change, motivating employees to overcome inertia. By articulating a compelling vision and inducing action, Haddock-Fraser, Scoffham and Rands (2018:240) mentioned that leadership that leads for sustainability propels the institution into innovative trajectories. Just as objects tend to maintain their current state of motion unless acted upon by an external force, individuals in an organisation exhibit a predisposition to uphold prevailing states, resulting in resistance to change.

Newton's second law, the Law of Acceleration, indicates that the change in momentum of an object is proportionate to the applied force, and materialises in the direction of the force (Levin & Lowell de Solorzano, 2024:02). In a figurative sense, Du Preez and Le Grange (2024:240) observe that this law correlates with the role of transformational leadership in expediting change within an institution. Through strategic actions, transformational leaders apply force to drive change initiatives, steering the organisation toward its desired objectives. Institutional growth initiatives serve as the applied force that increases employees' desire to remain in the organisation (Du Preez & Le Grange, 2024:240). Transformational leaders, by strategically implementing growth opportunities and initiatives, exert a force that encourages employees to embrace change and advancement within the institution. By acting as catalysts for change, transformational leaders embody the role of external forces that propel employees toward embracing new directions and initiatives.

Meiliyadi et al. (2025:276) note that Newton's third law stipulated that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. While this law may not have a direct application in addressing organisational inertia, it emphasises the interplay of actions and reactions within the organisational setting. Transformational leaders initiate actions to counter inertia, producing responses from employees and the organisation (Yan, 2024:22). These responses can either reinforce change endeavours or produce resistance, highlighting the necessity for leaders to consider their actions and anticipate resultant reactions. As transformational leaders take action to combat inertia, they evoke distinct responses from employees through self-insight, which is a metacognitive process for stimulating adaptive change (Kamp, Bakker, Tims & Demerouti, 2020:325). Understanding the multidimensional relationship between leadership actions and employee perceptions becomes paramount for steering change effectively.

Malherbe (2024:5) explains that according to psychoanalytic theory, worker inertia encompasses individual responses in the presence of uncertainty or unpredictability. In scenarios where direct resistance to change may not manifest, individuals experience low productivity when grappling with uncertainty amid challenges. Kamp et al. (2020:330) warn that such unproductivity can escalate into individual crises and, ultimately, into individual pathology. Inertia and resistance have significant implications for decision-making. Yan (2024:22) suggests that resistance to change may assume habitual dimensions, and inertia represents a conscious decision to maintain the current state rather than actively resist change.

Similarly, Ashok et al. (2021:2246) delineate two distinct categories of inertia: resource inertia and routine inertia. Resource inertia emanates from the theory of resource dependency, marked by a reluctance to invest in employees, attributed to constraints in internal strategic decision making, and an inherent bias towards maintaining the status quo (Perini, 2021:12). Routine inertia, on the other hand, referred to the entrenchment of organisational patterns, causing entrenched processes to self-perpetuate through repetition (Perini, 2021:12). Both resource and routine inertia align with the principles of Newton's Law of Inertia.

Ashok et al. (2021:2246) identify three components of inertia. The first is cognitive inertia, which involves the influence of cognitive biases and mental models on decision-making. This occurs when decision-makers resist change in favour of the status quo, despite awareness that alternatives may be more advantageous (Chikosi, 2020:12). Factors such as risk aversion and a desire for stability contribute to cognitive inertia. The second component, behavioural inertia, entails adherence to established routines, processes, and conduct despite evolving circumstances (Doeze Jager, Born & Van der Molen, 2022:437). The third component, affective inertia, intersects with emotional engagement and attachment within the organisation. Emotional attachment to current practices hinders the adoption of novel approaches (Doeze Jager et al., 2022:437), causing resistance to change due to fear of uncertainty and potential disruption.

There are no specific opposing views on Newton's Laws of Motion in relation to transformational leadership as a strategy to overcome organisational inertia, as its application in leadership and organisational behaviour is rarely discussed. Charbonneau, Nicol, Chalmers, Kato, Yamamoto, Walshe, and Critchley, (2020:285) suggest that Newton's Law of Inertia, particularly the concept of inertia, can be applied metaphorically to understand and address organisational inertia through transformational leadership.

2.7 Study Purpose and Objectives

The main purpose of this conceptual framework was to determine which leadership styles should be considered by a South African PHEI when appointing leaders to address organisational inertia. The study of organisational inertia and transformational leadership in a South African PHEI aimed, first, to determine the reasons for high staff turnover; second, to identify the gaps that prevented organisational change within the organisation; and third, to examine whether transformational leadership served as a strategy for addressing organisational inertia.

2.8 Aim

The study aimed to identify a solution to organisational inertia by presenting transformational leadership as a key indicator of the successful transition from inertia to forward movement in South African PHEIs.

2.9 Research Questions

The main research was formulated as follows:

Which leadership styles should PHEIs consider when appointing leaders to address organisational inertia?

The following are secondary research questions for this study:

- Which leadership styles in senior management do Heads of Departments (HoDs) in a South African Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI) find most effective in addressing organisational inertia?
- What positive aspects of the internal organisational environment encourage HoDs in a South African PHEI to remain committed to the organisation?
- How do the HoDs in a specific South African PHEI perceive the influence of leadership styles in facilitating organisational growth?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research design was selected to investigate the research problem. Qualitative research is characterised by its capacity to capture narratives, lived experiences, meanings, views, opinions, and perceptions of participants, yielding descriptive data articulated in the participants' own words (Thomas & Zubkov, 2023:104). This approach enabled an in-depth understanding of the research topic, facilitated by the application of rigorous and systematic procedures.

The rationale for selecting a qualitative approach was its focus on the acquisition and analysis of data in the form of words, categories, themes, and codes (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpiro, 2019:90). This approach proved instrumental in explaining the underlying motivations and rationales behind the research participants' responses. By adhering to established methodological principles and techniques, qualitative researchers minimise bias and subjectivity, thereby enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of their findings.

3.2 Population and Sampling

3.2.1 Population

The study population was defined based on an understanding of leadership within the context of South African PHEIs. The inclusion criteria for the study population consisted of employees employed as

HoDs in a selected PHEI with at least five years' experience in PHEIs. Employees who did not meet these criteria were excluded from the study.

To conduct a thorough examination of the subject matter, the primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews. Following the guidance of Rose and Johnson (2020:18), the interviews comprised open-ended questions that elicited first-hand perspectives and insights into the complex dynamics and practices prevailing within the institution. The selection of semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method was underpinned by several considerations. These interviews provided the flexibility and depth necessary for a comprehensive exploration of the research themes. Their open-ended nature enabled participants to freely articulate their viewpoints and experiences, yielding rich insights into organisational inertia and transformational leadership.

3.2.2 Sampling Frame

A purposive sampling frame was employed to ensure a systematic and structured approach to participant selection, thereby enhancing the validity, representativeness, and transferability of the research findings. The sampling frame served as a structured database that included all relevant entities within the population of interest, which, in this study, comprised individuals working in the selected PHEI. It encompassed all relevant departments with a knowledge of leadership and organisational inertia.

3.2.3 Sampling Technique

Given the diverse roles and perspectives within the study population, a purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants possessed the necessary knowledge and expertise.

3.2.4 Sample Size

Ten participants from various departments in the selected PHEI were interviewed for this study. The sample size was determined based on the specific sampling frame established during the planning phase. This procedure involved selecting a subset of employees from the PHEI who met the criteria for participation in the study. The study sample comprised 10 heads of departments (HoDs), collectively representing 10% of the staff population.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were implemented throughout the research process. Data were collected from a purposive sample of participants within a South African Private Higher Education Institution (PHEI).

The researcher served as the primary instrument for both data collection and analysis, consistent with qualitative phenomenological inquiry. Semi-structured interviews featuring open-ended questions were conducted to capture the participants' lived experiences. The interviews followed a guide that was pilot-tested and iteratively refined. All interviews were conducted in a professional and confidential setting, digitally recorded (with consent), and meticulously transcribed verbatim, ensuring participants felt comfortable in expressing their views openly.

All data were transcribed and coded using ATLAS.ti (version 2023) to identify emerging themes. In reporting the findings, the researcher avoided the use of the first-person narrative to maintain objectivity and uphold scholarly rigour (Mishra & Dey, 2022:187).

3.4 Data Analysis Approaches

Data analysis in this study followed a deductive coding approach, chosen deliberately to extract meaningful insights from the wealth of information collected during the interviews. Deductive coding is a method of qualitative data analysis that involves applying predefined categories or codes to the data based on existing theories, concepts, or frameworks (Rose & Johnson, 2020:2). Using a deductive approach enabled the examination of pre-existing categories and theories, enabling a structured analysis of the data based on established concepts. Structuring the analysis around established concepts ensured a rigorous examination of specified factors, contributing to a comprehensive understanding within this unique context.

3.4.1 Data Analysis Process

All transcribed data were analysed using ATLAS.ti (version 2023) to conduct a Thematic Analysis following the six-phase approach outlined by Rose and Johnson (2020:2).

Step 1: Record data and prepare memos

Detailed and accurate documentation was maintained, including comprehensive notes and transcripts of interviews. To ensure precise data capturing, audio recordings were also used. These records were secured in a locked cupboard, and an online file with password protection is maintained for added security.

Step 2: Label and archive data

To facilitate the analysis process, the collected data were organised, since transcribing audio recordings results in a substantial amount of detail. All data were labelled and categorised according to the themes derived from the comprehensive data, with reports including extracts of the transcripts in support of these themes.

Step 3: Review research objectives

To initiate analysis, the research objectives were reviewed to organise data and sharpen the focus of the analysis.

Step 4: Analyse contextual and demographic data

Demographic data were categorised to gain a deeper understanding of the context in which the data were collected. In qualitative research, demographic characteristics of a sample refer to the socio-demographic factors describing the participants. For this study, the researcher used a phenomenological approach, involving semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted with participants who met the demographic criteria previously described using a purposive sampling technique. Using a deductive approach, the aim was to comprehensively understand the experiences and perceptions of academic managers, HoDs, and senior lecturers in a South African PHEI.

Step 5: Data evaluation and coding

The purposive sampling process included 10 participants employed as HoDs, with one HoD also representing executive leadership, as well as one senior lecturer. To analyse the qualitative data, ATLAS.ti (version 2023) was employed. This software facilitated several key steps: importing diverse qualitative data types, creating a comprehensive coding scheme to organise the data effectively, and coding the data according to the established scheme. ATLAS.ti also allowed the integration of

demographic information, such as survey data related to participants, and supported a thorough exploration of relationships between data types, aided by visualisation tools that helped identify patterns. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the analysis in response to the research question.

Step 6: Identify and summarise themes

Once the initial codes were identified, the data were categorised into relevant themes. Table 2 below presents examples of themes and sub-themes used during the data analysis.

3.4.2 Triangulation Procedures

Credibility was maintained through methodological triangulation, which involved combining multiple data sources and collection methods to corroborate findings and provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Triangulation was a key strength of a qualitative research approach, increasing confidence in the research findings, minimising the potential method-specific bias, and strengthening the overall credibility of the research (Rashid et al., 2021:2874). Combining conceptual analysis and documentary analysis with semi-structured interviews corroborated findings. The researcher was the primary instrument for both data collection and analysis. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a clear audit trail of data collection, while confirmability was supported using direct quotations from participants to reflect authentic perspectives and minimise research bias (Mishra & Dey, 2022:187).

Data were collected from a sample of participants selected through purposive sampling within a South African PHEI. The researcher served as the primary instrument for both data collection and analysis, consistent with qualitative phenomenological inquiry.

As a result, the qualitative questionnaire below, according to Table 1, was represented by codes from Code 1 to 10.

Table 1. Qualitative Questionnaire

Code	Interview Questions
Code 1	How would you describe the current leadership style in the organisation? Do you think it is more transactional or more transformational?
Code 2	In your opinion, which specific leadership style is important in driving change: the transactional or transformational leadership style?
Code 3	How do leaders communicate the need for change to employees?
Code 4	How important is feedback and support in your opinion, and do you feel that you are getting the guidance and support that you need to be successful at your job?
Code 5	What role do leaders play in creating a culture that supports change and continuous improvement?
Code 6	Have you ever experienced a situation where your workplace seemed to resist change?
Code 7	What strategies have been used to build buy-in and support for change initiatives?
Code 8	Have you ever experienced or observed high staff turnover rates in private higher education?

Code 9	Are you satisfied with your current job?
Code 10	How do you feel about the work-life balance at your job? Are you able to maintain a healthy balance between your work and personal life?

An in-depth discussion of the 10 codes followed into themes. Under each theme, there was a sub-category correlating with the theme. In the table following the analysis, Table 2 represents the 10 different themes and sub-categories as recorded in ATLAS.ti (version 2023).

Table 2. Participants' perceptions of identified leadership style

Theme	Theme name
THEME 1	Identified leadership style
Sub-category	Transactional leadership style
Sub-category	Transformational leadership style
THEME 2	Leadership style driving change
Sub-category	Transactional leadership style
Sub-category	Transformational leadership style
THEME 3	Leadership communication
Sub-category	Effective/ineffective change communication
THEME 4	Leadership feedback and support
Sub-category	Feedback and support available/not available
THEME 5	Innovation and creativity in support of change
Sub-category	Leadership creates a culture in support of or not in support of change
THEME 6	Workplace resistance to change
Sub-category	Resistance to change is evident/not evident
THEME 7	Employees buy-in
Sub-category	Employees' buy-in occurring/not occurring
THEME 8	High staff turnover
Sub-category	High staff turnover evident/not evident
THEME 9	Job satisfaction/dissatisfaction
Sub-category	Job satisfaction/dissatisfaction
THEME 110	Work-life balance
Sub-category	Work-life balance evident/not evident

3.4.3 Data Analysis

To analyse the collected qualitative data, ATLAS.ti (version 2023) was employed. This software facilitated several key steps: importing diverse qualitative data types such as interview transcripts, creating a comprehensive coding scheme to organise the data effectively, and coding the qualitative data in line with the established scheme. ATLAS.ti (version 2023) also enabled the integration of demographic information, such as survey data related to the participants, and supported a thorough

exploration of relationships between data types, aided by visualisation tools that helped identify patterns. Based on the analysis, conclusions were drawn pertaining to the research question.

Deductive coding was used to examine the interview data (Mishra & Dey, 2022:187), which necessitated the application of a predefined set of categories or tags. In this study, thematic analysis was employed to examine the collected data through a systematic five-step process, centred on the categorisation of coded words. ATLAS.ti (version 2023), trusted for its adeptness in managing textual data and guiding analysis, was utilised throughout this process to ensure rigorous and structured data interpretation.

The first step in thematic analysis involved being immersed in the data to gain a comprehensive understanding of its content. In the second step, the researcher initiated the coding process, which entailed identifying meaningful segments within the data and assigning descriptive labels or codes to these segments (Khosravi, Zare, Mojtabaeian & Izadi, 2024:2). In the third step, the focus shifted to organising the generated codes into potential themes or patterns. Once these preliminary themes were identified, the fourth step required a critical review and refinement of the themes to ensure that they accurately represented the data. The primary objective during this stage was to align the themes with the research objectives, thereby enhancing the overall quality and validity of the analysis. In the fifth and final step, the researcher defined and named the themes, providing each with a clear and concise description. This process involved developing a well-defined identity and descriptive name for each theme to encapsulate its representation within the data. Defining and naming the themes was essential for preparing them for interpretation and reporting, as it provided a structured framework for communicating the findings of the analysis (Khosravi et al., 2024:2).

Systematic labels or codes were affixed to data segments based on their relevance to the research objectives (Khosravi et al., 2024:2). These codes served as descriptors encapsulating the essence of the data. Open coding, according to Chen, Lotsos, Cheng, Wang, Zhao, Hullman and Horn (2024:5), includes identifying and labelling recognised patterns, deconstructing them into discrete elements, comparing for commonalities and disparities and probing the underlying phenomena. Following open coding, the subsequent step involved the implementation of axial coding, seeking correlations and relationships among established themes to merge related themes into coherent clusters (Chen et al., 2024:6). The researcher grouped similar highlighted themes from various participant narratives and transferred them to a document. Concurrently, divergent instances within identified patterns, trends, and themes were meticulously noted from participant narratives, offering novel insights that expanded the researcher's comprehension of the text. Selective coding represented the conclusive phase in grounded theory methodology and included the refinement and culmination of themes extracted from the document, featuring themes extracted from participants' narratives. This phase involved the refinement of these themes into a smaller number of central themes. The 10 initial codes culminated in 10 themes for further analysis.

3.4.4 Ethical Considerations

The research commenced only after obtaining formal ethical clearance from the selected South African PHEI. Institutional permission was granted, authorising the researcher to collect data from employees within the institution. Once institutional consent had been secured, individual informed consent was sought from all prospective participants. Consent forms were distributed, clearly outlining the purpose of the study and affirming each participant's right to voluntary participation. Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty and without providing a reason.

Avoiding physical, emotional, and psychological harm was a central ethical priority. Efforts were made to minimise potential emotional discomfort, and provisions for counselling support were arranged should participation evoke any unforeseen distress. Participants were fully informed about the research objectives, the use of findings, any funding sources, and potential risks associated with the study. Furthermore, the design and structure of the research questions were carefully constructed so as not to exceed the ordinary experiences encountered in participants' daily professional lives.

In this study, participation was entirely voluntary, and no form of coercion, undue influence, or incentives was used to persuade individuals to take part.

4. Results

Theme 1: Current Leadership Style in the Organisation

The results distribution indicated that most participants described the leadership style as transactional, emphasising structure, task-orientation, deadlines, and performance monitoring. Seven out of 10 participants described the leadership style as transactional, 3 out of 10 described the leadership style as a combination of transactional and transformational, and 0 participants selected a transformational leadership style.

Table 3. Theme 1: Participants' perceptions of identified leadership style

Leadership Style	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Transformational	0	0.0
Transactional	7	70.0
Combination of transformational/transactional	3	30.0
Participants' comments on identified leadership styles		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	"It is definitely more transactional."	
P2	"Transactional."	
P3	"In my opinion, it is more transactional than transformational."	
P4	"Transactional and transformational."	
P5	"Definitely transactional and deadline driven."	
P6	"Transactional."	
P7	"Transactional."	
P8	"More transactional."	
P9	"Hybrid leadership."	

P10	“60% transformational and 40% transactional.”
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Theme 2: Leadership style driving change

The results indicated that all 10 participants emphasised that a transformational leadership style can drive meaningful change. None of the participants believed that a transactional style could foster sustainable institutional change.

Table 4. Participants’ perceptions of leadership style driving change

Leadership Style	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Transformational	10	100.0
Transactional	0	0.0
Combination of transformational/transactional	0	0.0
Participants’ comments on the leadership style driving change		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	“Not transactional for me, then it must be more transformational.”	
P2	“To create a culture of innovation and transformational change so that the people can see their value and that we can coach or mentor them through the change.”	
P3	“Transformational. I respond well to positivity and communication.”	
P4	“Not transactional, but transformational.”	
P5	“I will not say transactional.”	
P6	“An inspired transformational leader can use their experience better.”	
P7	“More of an interactive transformational conversational leadership style where you get the buy-in from the people.”	
P8	“Less interested in transactional authority and more interested in serving the working community.”	
P9	“Definitely transformational leadership. I believe that the work that we’re doing is going to be replaced by digitalisation and become 100% transactional. We are going to lose that personal touch.”	
P10	“Transformational, I think it goes hand in hand. You can’t expect the company to move forward if the people don’t buy into it.”	

Theme 3: Leadership Communication

The results distribution indicated that 7 out of 10 participants were dissatisfied with communication from leadership, and 3 out of 10 participants indicated that leadership communication was sufficient.

Table 5. Participants' comments on leadership communication

Leadership Communication	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Effective change communication	3	30.0
Ineffective change communication	7	70.0
Participants' comments on leadership communication		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	"I'm going to focus on one specific change that is coming. It was actually brought to the Exco level as a statement. By the time it goes to Manco, people feel unsure, because the decision will have an impact on their job."	
P2	"Big change coming and have given extensive presentations on where they want to see the organisation in the next five to 10 years."	
P3	"I have to go back to the flat organisational structure. It is very easy to do the communication and get the buy-in and support for the changes, but it is not always the norm in the organisation. There are many changes taking place without any consultations; it becomes a decree: 'As from today'."	
P4	"Change is normally communicated via the Teams platform with a written post... During the company days, where visions and missions are shared and also then we are kind of informed of changes to come."	
P5	"It was on a platform communicated in a very nice manner, and the staff was giving the reassurance that jobs will not be in jeopardy, you know, they will not lose their jobs, and they will be fine."	
P6	"Leadership needs to communicate change early. If there's a need, then there's obviously something that needs to be fixed or changed or implemented, and then there's a problem. If the employees can understand what the problem is, they can be part of the solution, and leaders need to implement that."	
P7	"With communicating change, they need to acknowledge that this is our problem, but let's work together in finding the solution."	
P8	"I don't feel like change is being communicated well, as it mostly gets communicated on a company day, for instance, when we do a	

	five-year vision and then all the planned changes are being discussed.”
P9	“A lot of the forecasting happens in the initial year in January. It sets the tone; it sets where we’re going and why we are doing what we’re doing. I don’t think there is a lot of buy-in from all levels of the hierarchy, and that creates a challenge in the adoption of change.”
P10	“The start of the communication was with management first. Not everyone knew about it, which is explainable as it is a big change and it affects everything, and it was confidential for a while, just between management. Then it was rolled out to the greater organisation, to the employees, and they have been informed on what is going to happen.”

Theme 4: Leadership feedback and support

The results distribution indicated that out of the 10 participants, 5 indicated that feedback and support were lacking.

Table 6. Participants’ perceptions of feedback and support

Leadership Communication	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Feedback and support are available	5	50.0
Feedback and support are available	5	50.0
Participants’ comments on feedback and support		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	“Not always guidance, but definitely feedback.”	
P2	“I received adequate feedback and support.”	
P3	“I don’t get support.”	
P4	“From others who are high-level managers, I don’t get feedback and support.”	

P5	"I would say it's terrible, because I don't get feedback and support."
P6	"I think looking at management, specifically my line managers, they're all busy and have a lot on their plates."
P7	"I feel like I don't get much support."
P8	"I like leaders to be strong and to the point to me, to give feedback."
P9	"Yes, I think everybody's busy, and if you're looking at the dynamics of the organisation, but I'm satisfied."
P10	"Yes, there's always the question of availability, but the resources are there. Being coached through it and being prepared for it, it is there."

Theme 5: Innovation and creativity in support of change

The results distribution indicated a mixed perception regarding innovation in support of change, where 4 out of 10 participants indicated that there is a culture in support of change, whereas 6 out of 10 participants indicated that the institution does not have a culture in support of change.

Table 7. Innovation and creativity in support of change

Innovation and creativity in support of change	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Leadership is creating a culture in support of change	4	50.0
Leadership is creating a culture not in support of change	6	60.0
Participants' comments on innovation and creativity in support of change		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	"It is negative, because if you are always being questioned on why you want to do this, is this really necessary. It makes you feel at the end of the day, so why do I bother? That thing actually stops creativity or innovation because, you know what? Why must I think about a better idea? If it's in any case just my idea, it's going to be stopped."	
P2	"I have not seen scope for that kind of innovation and creativity yet within the company."	
P3	"Many times, we would suggest a change to what we are doing, and it would just be shut down, because it is not the way that management wants it, or they haven't thought about it like that."	

P4	“This is a difficult question because I am allowed to think out of the box, because that is actually expected to think out of the box and to be creative... that is for me a yes, but then to actually action it, I can’t just go with it, I need to first take it to a higher level and put my proposal out there and actually get the authorisation to continue.”
P5	“I think there are opportunities to grow and to innovate and to change systems, and I just think that when ideas have been brought up, they have maybe been shot down, so I don’t think currently there’s room for it. Although it is encouraged in practice, it doesn’t actually get followed through due to various criticisms or time constraints.”
P6	“I think by not micromanaging people, they allow people to come up with an idea. This creativity is thinking out of the box – how can I do better every day? So I think the company, by not micromanaging us, gives us that opportunity to be creative in our roles and to bring out the best in everybody.”
P7	“I think if we look at the master picture, there’s not much space for creativity because it is brand-related, and... everyone needs to stick to a certain brand or look or feel for the company.”
P8	“Yes, often creativity is inspired, based on a super urgent deadline or a massive change in a very short time, to find a way to work with what you have. I don’t think it hinders creativity, but I do think it hinders the creative quality.”
P9	“I experience that there is motivation in the institution regarding the following: it is continuously being propagated to us, to build a thriving organisation and culture, centred around freedom and responsibility, to hire problem solvers and use failure as a tool, to encourage greater transparency and collaboration between each other.”
P10	“To foster innovation and creativity in our field and especially in tertiary education.”

Theme 6: Workplace resistance to change

The results distribution indicated that 6 out of 10 participants perceived resistance to change as evident in the workplace, and 4 out of 10 participants found subtle forms of resistance, but it was not evident due to compliance.

Table 8. Participants’ perceptions of resistance to change

Workplace resistance to change	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Resistance to change evident	6	60.0

Resistance to change not evident	4	40.0
Participants' comments on workplace resistance to change		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	"I can't say that I've experienced that in higher education previously. But resistance, yes. They don't really want to go with the flow."	
P2	"They must just change."	
P3	"Resistance is everywhere; people do not like change."	
P4	"If change was better communicated and if people were more involved and felt that they had valuable input, it would have made a difference."	
P5	"Everywhere, people do not like change."	
P6	"I think most people, for the most part. Our employees are very easily adaptable."	
P7	"I don't think there's much resistance. There are a lot of suggestions, but I wouldn't say that this is resistance at all."	
P8	"No, change is always welcome."	
P9	"It is a challenge; it doesn't matter who you are, but my skillset taught me that change is a natural part of life."	
P10	"You are working with different personality types, and some personalities need a lot more reassurance and a lot more stability before they are willing to accept change. I think because the system that we are using has been a baby of certain people, and they don't tend to let go and acknowledge that there is a better product out there already. I think that's the small little things with their own little resistance to change because of the emotional attachment to it."	

Theme 7: Employee Buy-In

The results distribution indicated that 8 out of 10 participants perceived that employee buy-in is not occurring, whereas 2 out of 10 participants observed some level of employee buy-in.

Table 9: Participants' perceptions on employee buy-in

Employee Buy-In	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Employee buy-in occurring	2	20.0

Employee buy-in is not occurring	8	80.0
Participants' comments on employee buy-in		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	“Not always, people can say anything, to try to get buy-in.”	
P2	“I don't believe there is a strategy to get people's buy-in. I think a decision is made to make a change, and it is enforced whether we like it or not.”	
P3	“I do know they have some buy-in, but some are still concerned.”	
P4	“Either you fit, or you don't fit. To share the vision and the mission, to share the goals with the people and actually to get their buy-in. Not just to say this is what we are going to do, but actually to involve people as part of the process.”	
P5	“I don't think there's a buy-in. It's usually an executive decision, which is then communicated within the organisation when the change needs to start being implemented.”	
P6	“Staff feel abandoned by management, and they don't see the leaders every day as they used to before. They feel that they have to manage things on their own, and they don't like the change, or implementing new things or moving things around. I think they're actually afraid because they don't know the full picture and nobody's telling them the full picture.”	
P7	“I think so, yes. People are very curious. So, I think, definitely, if there's change or something is happening, then people do want to be aware because obviously as a company it's affecting your job, it's affecting your salary, which is affecting your lifestyle.”	
P8	“Not being valued and seen. Certain changes need to happen without the buy-in from anybody. I think the reason people are afraid of change is that they don't know the full picture, and that's why people tend to move away from change.”	
P9	“It is very easy to do the communication and get the buy-in and support for the changes, but it is not always a reality.”	
P10	“I think the reason people are afraid of change is that they don't know the whole story, and that's why people tend to move away from change.”	

Theme 8: Staff turnover

The results distribution indicated that 8 out of 10 participants indicated that high staff turnover is prevalent within the institution.

Table 10: Participants' perceptions on staff turnover

High Staff Turnover	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
High staff turnover evident	8	80.0
High staff turnover not evident	2	20.0
Participants' comments on high staff turnover		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	“Yes, definitely, because they don’t feel secure, and trust is very important.”	
P2	“Yes. Buy-in is done out of fear, not out of buying in. Especially in cases where the decision that’s made does not make sense academically, so why are we doing this? Then you just do it and implement the change for the sake of it, because you don’t want to lose your job, or you don’t want to get your warning.”	
P3	“Yes, definitely, and not only in this institution, but also in other institutions as well. I think the reason is better opportunities, better salaries, growth, and then in some cases it is people who are unsure about job security as well, that change happened too fast, and people don’t feel safe anymore.”	
P4	“I do know they have some buy-in.”	
P5	“Definitely a lack of support, and employees are being overworked and underappreciated.”	
P6	“I have observed it. They both served high turnover rates. I think it stems from frustration that people want to implement things or want to move things forward, but they’re held back for various reasons.”	
P7	“Yes, especially recently.”	
P8	“This is the only education space that I’ve been in, and I don't think that I've ever noticed a high employee turnover. I think it’s sporadic.”	
P9	“It is a flat organisational structure. If I just demand things without consulting you, whatever the means might be, that will have an impact on how leaders communicate the needs for change, unless it’s a strategic change like acquisition.”	
P10	“I think if everybody knows the bigger picture and not only your departmental picture, of the way the company wants to move forward with innovation and technology specifically, and then if everybody knows about it.”	

Theme 9: Job satisfaction

Participants' responses indicated universal job satisfaction within the institution. The distribution of results indicated that 10 out of 10 participants indicated job satisfaction.

Table 11: Job satisfaction/dissatisfaction

Job satisfaction/ dissatisfaction	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Job satisfaction evident	10	100.0
Job dissatisfaction evident	0	0.0
Participants' comments on job satisfaction		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	"I am satisfied with my job. I think I'm at the level that I can handle transactional change."	
P2	"The factors that contribute towards job descriptions are not necessarily directly linked to leadership."	
P3	"I'm not super happy, but I'm not <i>not</i> happy either. 7/10."	
P4	"I am satisfied with my job."	
P5	"I love my job, and I love my team. I would say 9/10."	
P6	"I really enjoy the challenges. 8/10."	
P7	"With my current job, very satisfied. 7/10."	
P8	"I would say 8/10."	
P9	"Job satisfaction is high; I don't have issues with progression. I have enough experience to understand the change process that I will have to adapt."	
P10	"Because you are valued and because of the transformational aspect in my department, 10/10."	

Theme 10: Work-life balance

The participants indicated challenges in achieving work-life balance within the institution. The results distribution indicated that 7 out of 10 participants reported that work-life balance is not evident, whereas 3 out of 10 participants indicated their ability to maintain a satisfactory balance between work and personal life.

Table 12: Participants' feedback on work-life balance

Work-life balance	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Work-life balance evident	3	30.0

Work-life balance not evident	7	70.0
Participants' comments on work-life balance		
Participant number	Verbatim quotation	
P1	“Very difficult, because of the dual role currently, but even people who do not have a dual role have difficulty balancing life and work together at the same time, because we are a fast-paced company. Everything must happen fast, and you must have multiple things running at the same time. I take a lot of work home, I work in the evenings, and I work over the weekends. So work, work-life, is not balanced, is not there.”	
P2	“The expectation, that’s low on staff versus the reality is not even close to being comparable. The expectation of this work forces members to take work home after hours and spend time after hours, thus never really switching off to really have a life outside of the company.”	
P3	“It offers a work-life balance, which I haven’t had before. I do sometimes feel I have too much time not doing anything, and I work well in a structured environment where I work towards something and know what is expected of me.”	
P4	“Everything happens fast.”	
P5	“It’s a struggle because you have to make decisions every day on whether you should try to make a deadline or spend time with your family and cook a healthy supper.”	
P6	“There is none.”	
P7	“I have noticed that the more overtime you work, the more it’s expected from you to work overtime.”	
P8	“Yes, what I like about the way I am working that there is a way to manage it well. It is healthy enough that it doesn’t get mandated or boring.”	
P9	“I have always maintained a balance between work and life, and I think that comes with experience. You can take on a lot more; you plan your day and leisure time and balance that out.”	
P10	“With regard to coming from previous higher educational institutions, I’ve learnt my lessons with regard to how to balance your personal life and your work life.”	

5. Discussions and Implications of the Study Findings

Theme 1: Current Leadership Style in the Institution

The results showed that leadership within the institution is predominantly transactional, with 70% of participants identifying it as such and none perceiving it as purely transformational. The research question on the nature of leadership styles in the institution suggests that leadership focuses primarily on task completion, deadlines, and compliance. Compared to prior studies, transactional leadership is

often associated with high task efficiency, but is limited in innovation, adaptability, and employee engagement. The divergence between the institution's transactional orientation and the broader need for adaptability may stem from historical leadership norms and systemic pressures prioritising task completion over empowerment and collaboration.

Implications for Theory

The findings highlight the need to investigate how transactional and transformational leadership elements interact in PHEIs, particularly in environments with strong performance-driven cultures.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should integrate transformational behaviours into existing practices to balance efficiency with empowerment, innovation, and engagement.

Implications for Policy

Leadership development policies should prioritise transformational competencies to support institutional agility and responsiveness.

Theme 2: Leadership style driving change

The results indicated unanimous support for transformational leadership as the most effective style for driving change, with 100% of participants endorsing it and none viewing transactional leadership as suitable. This directly addresses the research question regarding which leadership style facilitates institutional change and aligns with prior studies, highlighting transformational leadership as critical for fostering inclusivity, collaboration, and effective communication. This strong preference for transformational leadership contrasts with the institution's existing transactional practices, likely explained by a historical reliance on task-focused approaches.

Implications for Theory

The findings reinforce transformational leadership as central to overcoming organisational inertia and facilitating change in PHEIs.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should implement inclusive, collaborative change strategies that reflect transformational leadership principles.

Implications for Policy

Institutions should invest in leadership development programmes that cultivate transformational behaviours necessary for effective change implementation.

Theme 3: Leadership Communication

The results indicated that leadership communication regarding organisational change is largely perceived as ineffective, with 70% of participants expressing dissatisfaction and only 30% reporting satisfaction. This addresses the research question concerning how leaders facilitate change through

communication, and aligns with prior studies showing that insufficient, delayed, or top-down communication often leads to employee disengagement and resistance to change. These communication practices diverge from transformational leadership principles, where communication is expected to be open, timely, and collaborative. The divergence may result from hierarchical structures and procedural rigidity.

Implications for Theory

The findings reinforce communication as a foundational mechanism in transformational change processes.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should adopt consistent, transparent, and two-way communication to strengthen engagement and reduce resistance.

Implications for Policy

Formal communication protocols should be established to promote transparency, feedback, and collaboration across the institution.

Theme 4: Leadership feedback and support

The findings indicate mixed perceptions regarding leadership feedback and support, with half of the participants satisfied and half dissatisfied. This aligns with prior studies highlighting that inconsistent feedback can undermine employee engagement and development. Inconsistencies may stem from high workloads, competing priorities, or unclear expectations that limit leaders' ability to provide regular feedback.

Implications for Theory

The results highlight consistent feedback as an essential component of transformational leadership, crucial for trust and employee development.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should prioritise structured and meaningful feedback to enhance engagement and development.

Implications for Policy

Institutions should formalise structured feedback systems and leadership training to ensure consistent support.

Theme 5: Innovation and creativity in support of change

The findings indicated a mixed perception of innovation and creativity in support of change, with 40% of participants acknowledging a supportive culture, while 60% reported barriers that inhibit creative practice. This aligned with prior studies emphasising that organisational culture and leadership practices significantly influence employees' capacity and ability to innovate. These divergences may arise from hierarchical decision-making, uneven leadership practices, and management priorities discouraging experimentation.

Implications for Theory

The findings support the link between transformational leadership and environments that enable creativity and innovation.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should remove structural and cultural obstacles, provide channels for idea implementation, and balance rapid response demands with quality innovation.

Implications for Policy

Policies should encourage experimentation, collaborative innovation, and calculated risk-taking through formal incentives and support structures.

Theme 7: Workplace resistance to change

The results showed that workplace resistance to change was prevalent, with 60% of participants perceiving it as evident, and 40% noting subtler forms of resistance. Participants attributed resistance to emotional attachments, communication gaps, individual dispositions, and a broader cultural aversion to change. Variations in perceptions may reflect differences in departments, personal adaptability, or historical experiences with change initiatives.

Implications for Theory

The findings emphasise the importance of accounting for both overt and covert resistance within change management theory.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should adopt emotionally intelligent, inclusive strategies that acknowledge employee concerns and increase engagement.

Implications for Policy

Policies should institutionalise participatory processes and feedback mechanisms that reduce resistance and strengthen readiness for change.

Theme 8: Employee Buy-In

The findings indicated that employee buy-in for institutional change was largely lacking, with 80% of participants perceiving insufficient engagement, and only 20% observing some level of buy-in. Participants attributed low buy-in to a top-down approach, limited involvement in decision-making, and inadequate communication, which aligns with prior studies linking engagement to participatory practice. Differences in buy-in may relate to variation across departments and individual experiences with communication and participation.

Implications for Theory

The findings reinforce participatory change theories, demonstrating that involvement is central to commitment and engagement.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should employ inclusive decision-making and transparent communication to strengthen commitment and reduce scepticism.

Implications for Policy

Institutions should formalise structures for consultation, participatory planning, and ongoing feedback.

Theme 9: High Staff Turnover

The findings showed that high staff turnover is perceived as prevalent by 80% of participants, while 20% observed stability in staffing. Participants attributed turnover to issues of trust, employee insecurity, and uncertainty about job stability, aligning with prior research that indicates organisational culture, leadership practices, and employee engagement significantly influence retention in private higher education institutions. Differences in perception may reflect departmental variance, personal experiences, or differing levels of exposure to organisational change.

Implications for Theory

The findings emphasise trust and leadership stability as critical components of retention models in PHEIs.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should strengthen communication, employee support, and alignment of organisational objectives to reduce turnover.

Implications for Policy

Institutions should implement retention strategies that address systemic contributors to turnover, including job security and organisational trust.

Theme 10: Job Satisfaction

The findings indicated that all participants reported high levels of job satisfaction, reflecting overall contentment and fulfilment in their roles. Participants attributed this satisfaction to their adaptability, competence, team dynamics, and work enjoyment. The positive experience diverges from negative perceptions in other themes such as workload and communication, suggesting that satisfaction may be role- or team-specific and influenced by intrinsic motivation rather than institutional systems.

Implications for Theory

The findings broaden understanding of job satisfaction as multifaceted, influenced by personal, team, and contextual factors.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should continue strengthening team cohesion, professional development, and meaningful work opportunities.

Implications for Policy

Policies should support career development, recognition systems, and structures that maintain high satisfaction levels.

Theme 11: Work-life balance

The results indicated that work-life balance is largely lacking, with 70% of participants reporting difficulties due to high workloads, multitasking, and tight deadlines, while only 30% perceived a satisfactory balance. This aligned with prior studies showing that demanding organisational environments and blurred boundaries between work and personal life negatively impact employees' well-being and performance. Perceptions diverged based on individual coping strategies, role flexibility, and departmental workload distribution.

Implications for Theory

The findings highlight work-life balance as a critical variable influencing well-being, engagement, and institutional performance.

Implications for Practice

Leaders should implement flexible work practices, provide workload support, and promote a culture that values well-being.

Implications for Policy

Institutions should formalise guidelines and resources that support sustainable work-life balance.

6. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to determine which leadership styles should be considered by South African PHEIs when appointing leaders to address organisational inertia. The findings showed that the prevailing leadership style in the organisation was predominantly transactional, which participants perceived as limiting in terms of inspiring, motivating, and fostering innovation, thereby constraining adaptability, and employee engagement.

Transformational leadership was consistently viewed as more effective for driving change, promoting inclusivity, collaboration, and organisational progress. Communication and feedback from leadership were identified as inconsistent and insufficient, contributing to resistance to change, low employee buy-in, and a culture of fear-driven decision-making, despite some structures for support and coaching. Barriers to innovation, including hierarchical approval processes and management preferences, further inhibited the practical implementation of change-oriented initiatives, while minor changes were found to have significant impacts, consistent with the chaos theory principle.

Despite these challenges, participants reported high job satisfaction linked to competence, adaptability, and positive team dynamics, although work-life balance remained a concern for the majority due to excessive workloads and blurred boundaries. Overall, the findings highlighted the need for transformational leadership, consistent communication, inclusive participation, and supportive structures to enhance adaptability, engagement, and effectiveness.

Based on the study's findings, the institution should adopt a transformational leadership approach that emphasises inclusivity, collaboration, and empowerment. The data show that leadership is predominantly transactional, with limited participation and constrained decision-making (Theme 1). This organisational inertia hinders adaptability and responsiveness. A leadership orientation that actively fosters shared agency is therefore essential to enable movement, engagement, and innovation.

The findings also highlight communication gaps as a critical barrier to effective change, with 70% of participants reporting dissatisfaction with leadership communication (Theme 3). These gaps contribute to employee disengagement and resistance. To address this, the institution should prioritise timely, transparent, and comprehensive communication across all hierarchical levels. Establishing structured communication channels, feedback loops, and regular updates strengthens clarity, builds trust, and enhances organisational buy-in.

Furthermore, the results indicate that employees require stronger and more consistent guidance to navigate operational and organisational complexities (Theme 4). Enhancing support structures, including clear role definitions, structured feedback mechanisms, and accessible leadership support,

enables staff to function with greater confidence, reduces uncertainty, and improves performance outcomes.

The study also reveals misalignment between departmental objectives and the broader institutional vision, which weakens team cohesion, job satisfaction, and commitment (Themes 2 and 8). Leaders should ensure alignment by connecting departmental goals to the strategic vision, fostering positive team dynamics, and providing meaningful professional challenges. These actions improve staff engagement, reduce turnover intentions, and cultivate a resilient organisational culture.

Finally, the findings show that high workloads and blurred role boundaries compromise employee well-being and institutional adaptability (Theme 11). Leaders should restructure workloads, clarify role expectations, and promote work-life balance, including flexible scheduling and equitable task distribution. These measures enhance well-being and strengthen the institution's capacity to respond to change.

7. Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges several limitations. Examining organisational inertia, leadership styles, and change dynamics within a single PHEI makes it difficult to fully isolate cause-and-effect relationships. The qualitative design and geographic specificity may limit the generalisability and transferability of findings. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential response biases and subjective interpretations.

8. Directions for Future Research

Future research could explore the application of Newton's Law of Inertia and other theoretical models to inform leadership strategies in PHEIs, providing deeper insights into the mechanisms sustaining organisational inertia. Expanding this research across multiple institutions and contexts may validate and extend the findings, supporting the development of practical, evidence-based strategies for cultivating adaptive and transformative leadership in South African private higher education.

8. Declarations

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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