



Leadership and Organizational Culture as Drivers of Effective Public Service Delivery

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Abstract: This study examined the interplay between leadership practices and organizational culture as critical drivers of effective public service delivery in public-sector organizations. Despite the prevailing emphasis on structural reforms and performance metrics, this qualitative research highlights the significance of internal organizational dynamics in shaping service outcomes. The study involved in-depth interviews with 35 purposefully selected public-sector employees across various roles. Thematic analysis revealed four interrelated themes: leadership as a cultural cue; organizational culture as an interpretive lens for policy implementation; the role of ethics and accountability in fostering public trust; and the influence of discretion and power dynamics on service delivery. The Findings reveal that leadership influence is primarily exercised through daily sense-making rather than formal authority, with organizational culture mediating how policies are interpreted and enacted in practice. This research contributes to the public administration literature by integrating leadership and culture within an interpretive framework, emphasizing the importance of internal processes in understanding variations in public service delivery outcomes. The implications for leadership development, organizational learning, and governance reform are significant, underscoring the need to shift toward culturally informed leadership practices to enhance the efficacy of public service.

Keywords: Leadership, Public Sector, Organizational Culture, Service Delivery, Sense-Making, Bureaucratic Culture, Employee Engagement

INTRODUCTION

The delivery of public services is a significant challenge in contemporary governance systems, as outlined in the existing literature (Lindholst & Torjesen, 2024). Public service organizations face pressure to provide effective, equitable, and satisfactory services that maintain public trust and legitimacy amid financial constraints, demographic changes, technological advances, and rising citizen expectations (Behl et al., 2022; Pavlidou & Efstathiades, 2021).

Historically, reforms to improve public service delivery have focused on structural, policy, and performance-based interventions influenced by New Public Management. These reforms have prioritized organizational restructuring and performance indicators but have not fully accounted for variations in service delivery outcomes across organizations (Sønderskov, Rønning & Magnussen, 2022; Enang, Asenova, & Bailey, 2022).

Recent studies suggest a shift toward examining internal organizational dynamics, particularly leadership practices and organizational culture, as determinants of service delivery. The understanding of leadership in the public sector has evolved to encompass relational and sensemaking processes that convey meaning and priorities, rather than being

confined to traditional hierarchical roles (Bondzi-Simpson & Agomor, 2021; Bampoh et al., 2024).

Despite operating under similar frameworks, public-sector organizations exhibit significant variability in service delivery outcomes, prompting inquiries into influences that extend beyond policy design (Mortati, Mariani & Rizzo, 2025; Myeni & Singh, 2024). Traditional explanations have focused on external factors, yet researchers increasingly argue that internal processes, including leadership behaviors and cultural norms, are crucial in shaping policy enactment (Bampoh et al., 2024).

However, these internal dynamics remain underexplored in empirical research. Leadership is often treated as a background variable, while organizational culture is typically measured in abstract terms (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2024). There is a knowledge gap regarding how leadership and culture interact to influence discretion, ethical judgment, and accountability in service provision (Kim & Jung, 2022).

Current public administration research is primarily quantitative, focusing on performance metrics (Serrat, 2023). While effective for identifying macro-level trends, these methods often overlook the contextual mechanisms through which leadership and culture shape behavior at the organizational level (Mortati, Mariani & Rizzo, 2025).

Recent reviews indicate a lack of qualitative, process-oriented research examining public servants' perceptions of leadership indicators and cultural expectations (Afshar & Shah, 2025). There is limited empirical understanding of how leadership and culture interact in practice to influence policy interpretation and ethical judgment.

This study aims to investigate the interplay between leadership practices and organizational culture in shaping public service delivery. Employing a qualitative, interpretive approach, the research seeks to explore the organizational processes through which leadership and culture inform decision-making and service outcomes.

This study contributes to public administration research by integrating leadership and culture within a process-based framework (Donald et al., 2026). It addresses calls for qualitative research that emphasizes sense-making and lived experiences in understanding public sector performance (Serrat, 2023). The findings provided actionable insights for leaders and policymakers, highlighting the importance of fostering leadership development and cultural transformation to enhance service delivery.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK / LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is based on Weick's Sense-Making Theory, a robust theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of leadership and organizational culture in public service delivery. This framework is particularly relevant for several reasons, each of which underscores its applicability to this study. Weick's Sense-Making Theory emphasizes the processes by which individuals and organizations interpret and handle complex, uncertain environments. In public service delivery, leaders often encounter myriad challenges, including fluctuating demands, diverse stakeholder expectations, and contextual factors that complicate decision-making (Weick, 1995). By applying this theory, researchers can examine how leaders interpret these complexities, shaping their responses and influencing organizational culture and practices. For instance, in a rapidly changing political or social

landscape, leaders' ability to make sense of their environment directly affects the efficacy of service delivery initiatives (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

Within the framework of Sense-Making Theory, leadership is framed not merely as a function of authority or positional power but as a critical influence on the meaning-making processes within organizations. This perspective aligns closely with the notion that effective leadership is integral to public service delivery (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). By exploring how leaders communicate values, set priorities, and articulate expectations, researchers can gain insights into how these factors shape organizational culture. This dynamic is crucial, as a leader's ability to convey a shared vision can mobilize staff and stakeholders alike, ultimately enhancing the quality and responsiveness of public services (Schein, 2010).

Weick's framework also highlights the interaction between sense-making and organizational culture, emphasizing that cultural norms and values significantly influence the sense-making processes of both leaders and employees. Understanding this interplay can yield critical insights into how a supportive organizational culture fosters effective public service delivery. For example, a culture that encourages open dialogue and learning from mistakes can enhance organizational resilience and adaptability in service provision (Vogus & Sutcliffe, 2007). Recognizing these dynamics allows organizations to cultivate environments that promote collaboration, innovation, and responsiveness to community needs.

An essential aspect of Weick's Sense-Making Theory is its acknowledgment of the iterative nature of sense-making, wherein feedback loops are pivotal. In public service contexts, leaders and organizations must continuously adapt their practices based on feedback from service delivery experiences and community needs (Weick, 1995). This adaptability is crucial for maintaining relevance and effectiveness in service delivery. For instance, organizations that actively solicit and incorporate feedback from citizens can better align their services with the expectations and requirements of the communities they serve (Bovens et al., 2008). This ongoing process of reflection and adaptation enhances the overall quality and impact of public services.

Utilizing Weick's Sense-Making Theory facilitates the emergence of practical implications. The insights drawn from this framework can guide recommendations for leadership development and organizational culture initiatives aimed at enhancing public service delivery. For example, training programs that emphasize sense-making competencies can prepare leaders to handle uncertainty more effectively, fostering an organizational culture that prioritizes learning and adaptability (Bryman, 2013). This practical application of theory can ultimately lead to more effective governance and improved service outcomes.

Leadership in Public Sector Organizations

Leadership is a fundamental driver of performance in the public sector, and its conceptualization has evolved significantly over time. Traditionally, leadership was viewed as hierarchical power and managerial control, emphasizing compliance and efficiency in bureaucratic structures (Sønderskov, Rønning, & Magnussen, 2022; Efstathiades & Pavlidou, 2021). This perspective portrayed leaders primarily as figures ensuring adherence to established protocols.

Contemporary scholarship, however, challenges this view, suggesting that leadership in the public sector is increasingly understood as a relational, contextually situated practice (BondziSimpson & Agomor, 2021; Gustafsson, 2022). It reflects a shift toward understanding leadership as a dynamic process rather than a static set of traits. Weick's Sense-Making Theory is particularly relevant here, as it emphasizes how leaders interpret complex environments and shape organizational culture (Weick, 1995).

Transformational leadership remains influential, focusing on leaders' ability to inspire and foster commitment to shared objectives (Alsaadi, 2025; Ramey, L.J.D., 2022). Empirical studies indicate that transformational leadership enhances employee engagement and service quality in dynamic public environments (Alsaadi, 2025; Behl et al., 2022). However, critics caution that this model may overemphasize individual agency and overlook structural constraints affecting public-sector actions (Cecile, 2022; Sønderskov, Rønning, & Magnussen, 2022).

The rise of ethical leadership emphasizes trust, integrity, and accountability (Gustafsson, 2022). Leaders who model ethical behavior and reinforce ethical standards foster climates conducive to fairness and transparency, thereby reducing misconduct and enhancing organizational trust (Gustafsson, 2022; Alsaadi, 2025).

Distributed and relational leadership frameworks challenge the notion that leadership resides solely within formal roles, viewing it as a dynamic process emerging from interactions among various organizational actors (Ramey, L.J.D., 2022). This perspective aligns with collaborative governance models, emphasizing shared responsibility across organizational boundaries (Bondzi-Simpson & Agomor, 2021).

Organizational Culture in Public Administration

Organizational culture is increasingly recognized as a critical element shaping behavior within public-sector organizations (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2024). It encompasses norms, values, and informal practices influencing how members interpret rules and respond to challenges (Pavlidou & Efstathiades, 2021). Unlike formal structures, culture operates implicitly, impacting daily activities through assumed norms (Virgiawan, Riyanto, & Endri, 2021).

Bureaucratic culture has traditionally emphasized strict compliance, which can promote consistency but may also stifle innovation and ethical judgment (Pavlidou & Efstathiades, 2021; Behl et al., 2022). Recent literature emphasizes that rule interpretation is shaped by organizational history and leadership cues (Virgiawan, Riyanto, & Endri, 2021).

Weick's Sense-Making Theory further elucidates how organizational culture shapes decisionmaking. Discretion is a critical lens for examining culture's influence on service delivery, particularly for frontline employees navigating limited resources (Behl et al., 2022; Alsaadi, 2025). Cultures that prioritize learning and trust facilitate adaptive, citizen-centered responses, whereas those dominated by fear inhibit initiative (Imran et al., 2022).

Organizational culture can both constrain and enable actions. Entrenched norms may hinder reforms, while the interplay between culture and leadership can enhance service quality and resilience (Imran et al., 2022; Gustafsson, 2022). This dual nature underscores the need for leaders to engage in sense-making processes that account for cultural contexts.

Leadership-Culture Interaction

Emerging scholarship posits that leadership and organizational culture are mutually constitutive processes (Aggarwal & Agarwala, 2023). Weick's framework demonstrates that leaders shape culture through their actions, while culture influences the perceived legitimacy of leadership styles (Farazmand, 2023). Leadership serves as a cultural barometer, conveying values through everyday practices (Farazmand, 2023; Kim & Jung, 2022).

Understanding the interplay between leadership and culture is crucial for effective service delivery. Leadership messages are interpreted through existing cultural frameworks, such that organizational culture mediates the influence of leadership (Cecile, 2022). This dynamic explains why similar leadership initiatives yield different outcomes across organizations (Kim & Jung, 2022).

Weick's Sense-Making Theory highlights leadership as an ongoing process of negotiating values and priorities within organizations (Serrat, 2023). Culture mediates the enactment of leadership practices, influencing discretion and ethical decision-making (Imran et al., 2022). Integrating this theory into public service delivery analysis offers a comprehensive lens for understanding these complexities.

This study investigates the role of leadership practices and organizational culture in shaping public service delivery. Findings reveal that leadership functions as a sense-making practice, with culture mediating policy interpretation and service outcomes. The interplay of these elements is crucial for maintaining legitimacy and public trust in complex governance environments. By contextualizing leadership, culture, ethics, and discretion within an interpretive framework, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of public administration and informs strategies to enhance service delivery and responsiveness to community needs.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study was guided by research questions that examine the internal organizational processes influencing the provision of public services in public-sector organizations. The focus extended beyond formal structures and performance indicators to examine how leadership and organizational culture impact the implementation of services in practice.

Research Questions

- RQ 1: What is the role of leadership practices and organizational culture in influencing the performance of public service delivery within public sector organizations?
- RQ 2: How do leaders influence shared norms related to ethics, accountability, and service quality within public sector organizations?
- RQ 3: In what ways do organizational cultural norms mediate the interpretation of policies and the exercise of discretion in everyday service delivery?
- RQ 4: How do leadership-culture dynamics account for variations in service delivery outcomes across public sector organizations operating under similar mandates?

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how leadership practices and organizational culture shape the interpretation and implementation of public service delivery in public-sector organizations.

Rationale for Methodology

A qualitative methodology was particularly suitable for this study because it sought to elucidate meaning, sense-making, and lived experiences rather than relying on quantitative measures of cause and effect. Interpretive research underscores how social reality is constructed through human interactions, language, and mutual understanding, making it well-suited to analyzing leadership and culture as socially embedded phenomena (Afshar & Shah, 2025; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2024). Judgment, discretion, and ethical reasoning are integral to delivering public services, elements that cannot be effectively quantified through conventional indicators (Behl et al., 2022). An interpretive design facilitates the exploration of how public servants perceive leadership cues, negotiate cultural norms, and make decisions in institutional contexts. Recent developments in public administration research emphasize the value of qualitative methods in revealing the internal processes that shape policy implementation and service delivery, particularly in complex governance situations (Shafaei et al., 2023; Vivona et al., 2025). This study did not seek statistical generalizability; instead, it prioritizes analytical depth and contextual insights. The research design aligns with the study's questions about how leadership and culture influence interpretation and enactment, thereby necessitating a focus on participants' perspectives and organizational narratives. This methodological approach aligns with contemporary calls for process-based, practice-oriented research in public administration (Mainardi, 2025; Kim & Jung, 2022).

Assumptions

This study rested on several foundational assumptions that informed its research design and objectives. It assumed that internal organizational dynamics, particularly leadership practices and organizational culture, play a pivotal role in shaping public service delivery outcomes. This perspective contrasts with traditional views that prioritize external factors such as resource availability and political oversight (Cecile, 2022). The study conceptualized leadership as a relational and sense-making process rather than merely a formal exercise of authority (BondziSimpson & Agomor, 2021). This assumption holds that effective leadership is integral to public service delivery and emphasizes the relational dynamics between leaders and their teams.

The study further assumes that even public-sector organizations operating under similar legislative frameworks and policies exhibit significant variability in service delivery outcomes (Mortati, Mariani & Rizzo, 2025). This variability is attributed to differing interpretations and enactments of policies, shaped by leadership and cultural contexts. It was also assumed that organizational culture mediates the influence of leadership on service delivery, shaping how policies are interpreted and enacted (Kim & Jung, 2022). This suggests that cultural norms and values significantly affect the effectiveness of leadership practices. Lastly, the research assumed that qualitative methodologies provide deeper insights into

the lived experiences of public servants and the internal processes that influence service delivery, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies (Afshar & Shah, 2025). These assumptions guided the research's focus on qualitative, interpretive methodologies to explore the nuanced interactions between leadership, culture, and public service delivery.

Biases

Although the study aimed for objectivity, several potential biases may have influenced the research findings. Purposive sampling may introduce selection bias, as participants were chosen based on specific criteria related to their experience in public-sector organizations. This could limit the generalizability of findings, as the perspectives gathered may not represent the entire population of public servants. Given the study's focus on the interplay between leadership and organizational culture, there was a risk of confirmation bias, where researchers may unintentionally prioritize data that supports their hypotheses while overlooking contradictory evidence. This could affect the thematic analysis, leading to an incomplete picture of the dynamics at play.

There was also a cultural bias in the study's presumption that the cultural contexts of the selected public-sector organizations are directly comparable. However, cultural differences across regions or sectors may influence how leadership and culture interact, potentially skewing the findings if not adequately accounted for. The qualitative nature of the research relied heavily on the researcher in interpretations during data analysis, raising concerns about interpretive bias, whereby researchers' perspectives and theoretical frameworks may shape the conclusions drawn from the data, potentially distorting the representation of participants' views. Additionally, the researcher's positionality relative to the study context may introduce bias; prior experiences or affiliations with the public sector may influence the interpretations and interactions with participants, potentially affecting the authenticity of the data collected.

Recognizing these assumptions and biases was essential in enhancing the study's rigor and credibility. Addressing these factors through reflexivity and transparency was critical for ensuring that the research findings meaningfully contributed to the understanding of leadership and organizational culture in public service delivery.

Research Context and Sampling

The study was situated within public sector agencies responsible for service delivery, where employees routinely interpret policies, exercise discretion, and engage with citizens. Public sector settings are particularly relevant to this study as they operate under formal rules and accountability mechanisms while also needing to respond adaptively to complex and often ambiguous service demands (Vivona et al., 2025).

Sampling Selection

To select participants with direct experience of leadership practices and service-delivery processes, purposive sampling was employed. This strategy is commonly used in qualitative research to ensure that participants possess relevant knowledge and experience related to the inquiry (Cecile, 2022). Participant selection was based on their positions within public-

sector organizations, ensuring inclusion of individuals involved in decision-making, coordination, or direct service delivery.

Participant characteristics varied with respect to organizational roles, responsibilities, and years of professional experience. This diversity enabled the study to capture a range of perspectives on how leadership and cultural norms influence service delivery. The principles of information power and thematic saturation guided the determination of sample size, with data collection ceasing once patterns and themes began to repeat in participant responses (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Narbutaite Aflaki et al., 2023). Interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the 35 participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth one-on-one interviews lasting 60-90 minutes to elicit reflective and narrative responses from participants. The interviews included open-ended questions designed to investigate leadership practices, organizational culture, ethical norms, discretion, and service delivery experiences. Semi-structured interviews are particularly suitable for qualitative studies because they provide consistency while allowing participants to articulate their experiences in their own words (Urquhart et al., 2025).

The theoretical foundations of the questionnaire were grounded in leadership theory, organizational culture studies, and principles of public administration. Specifically, relational and ethical leadership perspectives, cultural understandings of discretion, and policies of enactment were communicated to participants (Gustafsson, 2022). This framework ensured congruence between the research questions and the data collection processes, thereby enhancing the study's internal coherence.

Data Analysis Procedures

After data collection, audio recordings were transcribed into text for analysis. The coding procedure outlined by Creswell (2013) was used to categorize the data, systematically identifying significant themes and patterns. The analysis was conducted using NVivo, which facilitated thematic data analysis through the stages of preparation, familiarization, coding, and theme development.(Okojie, 2025). The findings were interpreted in the context of Weich's sense-making theory, thus examining how the data supported or challenged theoretical propositions regarding leadership and organizational culture as drivers of effective public service delivery.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure credibility, the research adhered to established qualitative standards of credibility, reflexivity, and transparency. Credibility was bolstered through the use of open-ended questions that encouraged deeper reflection, thereby ensuring alignment among research questions, data collection, and analysis (Narbutaite Aflaki et al., 2023; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022). The concept of reflexivity was integral to the research process, involving critical reflection on how theoretical perspectives influenced data interpretation.

Confidentiality and ethical integrity were prioritized throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained to protect respondents' anonymity and to ensure they were not at risk of exposure to their organizations. Data were securely stored and utilized solely for academic purposes. These practices align with contemporary ethical standards for qualitative research in public administration and organizational studies (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2022).

Description of Participants

Participants in this study were selected from public-sector organizations in the USA who were directly engaged in delivering public services. The sample comprised individuals from diverse public-service work environments, holding a range of positions, including frontline staff involved in service delivery, supervisory roles, and senior or managerial positions responsible for coordinating and overseeing the work of other employees. This diversity facilitated a comprehensive exploration of perspectives across different levels of authority and involvement in service-delivery processes. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were assigned in accordance with informed consent regulations. Participants included fifteen females and twenty males, aged from 30 to 60 years.

FINDINGS

This study examined the impact of leadership and organizational culture on effective public service delivery. The research was structured around the following questions:

- RQ 1: What is the role of leadership practices and organizational culture in influencing the performance of public service delivery within public sector organizations?
- RQ 2: How do leaders influence shared norms related to ethics, accountability, and service quality within public sector organizations?
- RQ 3: In what ways do organizational cultural norms mediate the interpretation of policies and the exercise of discretion in everyday service delivery?
- RQ 4: How do leadership-culture dynamics account for variations in service delivery outcomes across public sector organizations operating under similar mandates?

The study identified distinct themes corresponding to each research question: leadership as a cultural cue; decoding organizational culture and policy; ethics, accountability, and public trust; discretion, power, and service-delivery outcomes.

Research Question 1: What is the role of leadership practices and organizational culture in influencing the performance of public service delivery within public sector organizations?

Theme 1: Leadership as a Cultural Cue

The role of leadership practices in shaping organizational culture emerged as a central theme, with participants consistently articulating that daily leadership practices function as cultural cues rather than relying solely on formal authority. **Prisca** highlighted the

importance of clear reporting lines, noting that while they enhance accountability, strict controls can sometimes hinder innovation and responsiveness. She emphasized that leaders who articulate expectations effectively—through concise communication, regular feedback, and mentorship—cultivate a culture of trust and responsibility among staff. She speaks

In our organization, leadership strongly reinforces accountability by requiring clear reporting lines and regular performance updates, thereby strengthening responsibility at every level. However, the accompanying strict controls and heavy emphasis on risk avoidance can stifle innovation and deter individuals from pursuing new approaches. Leaders challenge this cautious culture somewhat by holding open-door meetings in which staff can raise concerns freely and by publicly recognizing excellent service, thereby gradually building a sense of pride and encouraging improved performance. Consistent ethical messaging from senior management has also slowly increased both internal trust and the organization's credibility with the public.

Participant **Samwel** similarly pointed out that visible integrity and transparent communication by leaders significantly bolster internal trust, which is crucial for ethical service delivery. He remarked that regular briefings and transparent emails help clarify individual responsibilities and reinforce accountability, thereby enhancing overall service quality. In his words, “Leadership challenges complacency by setting service targets tied to ethics. My coaching sessions clarified my responsibility to citizens, and I believe that the culture in our organization supports pragmatic rule application”. Conversely, **Jake** expressed concern that a culture heavily focused on rigid adherence to procedures can stifle staff discretion. He noted that mixed signals from leadership undermine trust, fostering a culture in which compliance is prioritized over innovation. He says;

*In our organization, I observe that leaders reinforce accountability primarily through audits, whereas discussions of ethics are limited. During crisis management, it became clear that our leaders value speed over procedure. Rules are often interpreted rigidly, and I often feel that informal check-ins influence outcomes. Mixed signals from leadership weaken trust, and the centralized power structure can be problematic. The limited discretion we have due to strict rules and the low encouragement for reflection leads to differences in outcomes. I believe that effective leaders should promote collaboration and continuous improvement, but our bureaucratic structures often impede these efforts. This sentiment was echoed by **Kiaha**, who described a command-style communication approach that fosters a procedural rather than relational trust among staff.*

The concept of symbolic leadership actions also emerged as significant. Participants cited examples of how leaders' responses to operational challenges, mistakes, or complaints conveyed implicit messages about the organization's values and priorities. For instance, **Omolade** emphasized that leaders who foster learning-oriented discussions rather than blame-oriented ones create an environment in which reflection and improvement are valued. He described scenarios in which leadership responses during crises revealed whether the organization prioritized speed, collaboration, or strict adherence to rules, thereby shaping staff approaches to service delivery under pressure. He says,

Leaders in our organization often model ethical behavior, which significantly influences our work culture. I recall a situation in which our leadership organized a discussion about mistakes rather than assigning blame. This approach not only fosters a learning environment but also empowers us to reflect on our practices. My honest understanding is that leaders actively model ethical conduct and reward staff who demonstrate transparency and fairness. They challenge prevailing norms by organizing mentorship programs and openly rewarding ethical behavior. These consistent actions have gradually fostered a culture that balances compliance with reasonable flexibility and prioritizes service quality and effective delivery.

The notion of role modeling, where leaders demonstrate integrity, fairness, and professionalism, was also crucial in shaping organizational culture. Gakuru noted that overt ethical behavior among leaders significantly enhances staff commitment to service values. On the other hand, inconsistencies between leaders' stated values and their actions can undermine trust and morale, as Linda highlights.

Leaders reinforce accountability by setting clear expectations, modeling responsibility, and following through on commitments. They challenge old norms through transparent communication and collaboration during change, gradually shifting us toward greater responsiveness, shared ownership, and continuous improvement. Moments when leaders trusted me with significant change projects and engaged me as a partner rather than a subordinate completely reshaped my professional identity. I began to see myself as a steward of public trust, which significantly strengthened my motivation and ethical judgment.

Her observations reinforce the idea that leadership is not merely about positional authority; it actively shapes the organization's ethical and service-oriented culture.

Theme 2: Organizational Culture and Policy Interpretation

The second theme focused on the influence of organizational culture on the interpretation of formal policies and rules in practice. Participants highlighted the significant role of informal norms and mutual understandings in implementing policies, often deeming these elements more crucial than rigid adherence to procedures.

Many respondents described cultures characterized by strict adherence to rules, in which procedural compliance was prioritized even when it hindered efficient service delivery. In such environments, policies were often interpreted narrowly, leading personnel to express reluctance to exercise judgment for fear of deviating from established protocols.

For instance, one participant, **Omolade**, remarked, "Rules are followed strictly," indicating a culture that emphasized compliance over responsiveness to citizen needs. This strict adherence can lead to frustration among both staff and service users. **Kiaga** elaborated on this issue, stating, "I've felt the pressure to follow procedures rigidly, which leads to frustration for both staff and citizens alike." His experience illustrates how a compliance-oriented culture can stifle innovation and responsiveness, ultimately compromising service quality.

Conversely, other participants characterized organizational cultures that embraced practical interpretations of policies. These more flexible environments encouraged staff to balance formal requirements with contextual judgment, especially when addressing complex or sensitive service cases. **Brian** articulated how organizational culture impacts policy interpretation, stating, “When leaders promote an adaptive interpretation of rules, it allows us to balance formal requirements with the complexities we face in service delivery.” This sentiment underscores the need for a cultural framework that encourages flexibility and responsiveness, enabling staff to handle the complexities inherent in public service. Participant **Chris** collaborated with Brian’s claims when he said;

Leadership decisions on cross-departmental coordination, equitable resource allocation, and developmental (rather than punitive) performance management directly determine service capacity and quality of delivery. At the YMCA where I work, structured planning and shared timeliness reduce duplication and improve participant experience; in academia, clear instructional alignment prevents confusion and enhances learning outcomes. Transparent, mission-aligned choices consistently produce more effective and efficient delivery.

Informal peer practices were also crucial for maintaining cultures that support pragmatic policy interpretation. Colleagues often shared common interpretations of field policies, fostering a shared understanding that enhanced service delivery. **Morgan** noted, “Organizational culture encourages staff to interpret policies flexibly when citizens face genuine difficulties.” His observation highlights the importance of flexibility in addressing complex situations, ensuring that service delivery aligns with community needs. Participants emphasized that organizational culture often persisted even after policy changes. **Njeri** observed, “Even when policies change, our organizational culture tends to persist. Informal check-ins and peer discussions guide how we interpret new policies.” Her insights emphasize the significance of everyday interactions in shaping policy enactment, suggesting that culture acts as a sieve through which reforms are integrated. In this context, participants also reflected on the role of leadership in shaping the organizational culture regarding policy interpretation. Leaders who encourage open dialogue and collaboration foster an environment in which informal norms can thrive. **Omolade** explained,

Leaders shape our ability to adapt by modeling how to interpret policies in context. This flexibility is crucial for addressing complex service cases where strict compliance may be inappropriate. Participating in a structured mentorship program with senior leaders has shaped my understanding of my role. They showed me that service is about citizens, not just tasks. That experience led me to take greater pride in my work and to be more motivated to exceed minimum requirements. Leadership shapes our service capacity through inclusive planning forums, fair resource allocation, and consistent performance feedback. When leaders prioritize citizens’ needs and equip teams with the tools they require, we deliver faster, higher-quality services. Poor resource decisions usually cause bottlenecks.

His perspective highlights the proactive role that leaders can play in promoting a culture that values adaptability.

Moreover, the participants indicated that informal feedback mechanisms—such as peer consultations—were instrumental in managing the complexities of public service delivery. **Carter** remarked, “When we engage in informal discussions, it often leads to better interpretations of policies, allowing us to serve our community more effectively.” This collaborative approach not only enhances policy interpretation but also strengthens team cohesion and morale.

These findings underscore the critical role of organizational culture as an interpretive tool that may exert a greater influence on service delivery outcomes than formal rules themselves. By fostering an environment that values flexibility, collaboration, and contextual understanding, public-sector organizations can enhance their responsiveness to citizens’ needs and improve overall service delivery. Participants’ narratives vividly illustrate the intricate interplay between organizational culture and policy interpretation, revealing that effective service delivery hinges not only on formal policies but also on the lived experiences and interpretations of those who implement them.

RQ 2: How do leaders influence shared norms related to ethics, accountability, and service quality within public sector organizations?

Theme 1: Ethics, Accountability, and Public Trust

The theme of ethics and accountability emerged as a cornerstone of the findings, with participants noting that ethical norms are not merely formal codes but are deeply embedded in organizational culture and reinforced by leadership practices. Rather than viewing ethics solely as a set of directives governing behavior, respondents emphasized the significant roles that leadership behavior and organizational culture play in shaping ethical expectations and practices.

Participant **Diana** emphasized the importance of accountability in her organization, stating,

Accountability is reinforced through performance dashboards, regular reviews, and clear communication from leadership. The flexibility in applying rules is a positive aspect. These practices, combined with recognition programs, have fostered a culture that values measurable results and continuous improvement. Clear, consistent communication from leadership about expectations and service goals helped me understand my role more fully. Seeing how my work contributes to broader outcomes increased my sense of responsibility and motivation.

Her observation underscores that leaders who communicate ethical standards clearly and adaptively can foster a climate of trust and responsibility. This approach not only clarifies expectations but also empowers staff to act with confidence in their service roles.

However, the findings also highlighted a disconnect that arises when ethical expectations are perceived as formal rather than lived experiences. Participant **Kiaha** remarked, “While leaders emphasize ethical standards, the messaging often feels detached, creating resistance to cultural change.” His sentiment reflects a common concern among participants that ethical guidelines are articulated in theory but lack practical application, fostering skepticism among staff. **Anderson** echoed this concern by emphasizing the

importance of leaders modeling ethical behavior. He stated, “When ethical standards are not consistently applied, it could undermine public trust.” This observation underscores the critical role of leadership in either reinforcing or eroding the organization’s ethical climate. If leaders fail to embody the values they espouse, the result can be a culture of disillusionment and disengagement among employees.

One participant poignantly noted, “Ethics messaging is formal, less lived,” indicating a significant gap between espoused values and everyday practices. This disconnect was perceived as detrimental to accountability and conducive to defensive behavior among staff, thereby undermining their willingness to take initiative or engage effectively with service users. Participants’ descriptions of internal ethical climates often linked them to public trust and organizational legitimacy. A robust framework of ethical leadership and culturally sanctioned accountability was deemed essential to maintaining citizen trust in governmental bodies. **Delores** emphasized the importance of ethical leadership in shaping responsibilities and advocating for fairness and transparency. She noted,

When leaders prioritize ethics, it sets the tone for how we engage with the community. Ethical behavior is reinforced when leaders consistently model fairness, transparency, and respect. When ethical issues are handled openly, it builds deep trust with communities and strengthens perceived legitimacy.

This perspective reinforces the belief that ethical considerations are foundational to effective public service delivery. Participants expressed deep concern about the unequal application of ethical standards or selective enforcement, which could erode public trust and diminish the legitimacy of public-sector organizations. Participants articulated a shared understanding that ethics functions as an organizational practice significantly shaped by leadership and culture, with far-reaching implications for interactions between organizations and their service users. Participant **Dika** provided a compelling perspective when she stated, “When organizational culture emphasizes transparency and accountability, it strengthens public trust in service delivery.” She elaborated,

Citizens are more likely to view services as fair and legitimate when they know the organization prioritizes ethical considerations in its operations. Leadership shapes ethical norms primarily through consistent messaging about integrity and fair decision-making. When leaders model transparency and treat everyone equitably, it strengthens internal trust and increases public confidence in our services. Ethical breaches are typically addressed through formal disciplinary procedures that emphasize fairness and learning over punishment alone.

This connection between ethical practices and public trust is essential to legitimizing public sector organizations and enhancing their ability to meet community needs effectively. **Ryan** added depth to this discussion by asserting, “Ethical leadership is not just about avoiding mistakes; it’s about actively creating a culture of trust and respect.” He emphasized that when leaders prioritize ethics, they set the tone for how staff interacts with one another and with the community, ultimately shaping the public’s perception of the organization.

The theme of ethics and accountability emerged as a cornerstone of the findings, with participants noting that ethical norms are not merely formal codes but are deeply

embedded in organizational culture and reinforced by leadership practices. Rather than viewing ethics solely as a set of directives governing behavior, respondents emphasized the significant roles that leadership behavior and organizational culture play in shaping ethical expectations and practices.

Theme 2: Discretion, Power, and Service Delivery Outcomes

This theme illustrates the intricate relationship among discretion, power dynamics, and service delivery outcomes in public-sector organizations. Participants identified discretion as an indispensable component of public service provision, particularly for frontline employees working in contexts marked by scarce resources and high demand. Discretion is not merely a personal choice; it is essential for effectively addressing citizens' diverse and often complex needs. **Andries** articulated the necessity of discretion, stating,

Discretion is essential to our work, particularly when handling complex cases. When leadership empowers us to exercise our judgment, it enhances our ability to provide effective service. Shared governance structures allow input from different levels. Leadership deliberately incorporates frontline and mid-level perspectives, thereby improving decision quality and staff ownership. Discretion is supported when accompanied by proper oversight and documentation. Leadership trusts staff to exercise sound judgment, especially in situations that require empathy or flexibility.

Her insights emphasize that discretion enables frontline employees to tailor their responses to the unique circumstances of each case. This flexibility is particularly critical in environments where standard procedures may not adequately address individual situations.

However, participants also noted that the scope of discretion is often constrained by hierarchical structures and prevailing cultural values. These factors shape the extent to which frontline employees can effectively respond to citizens' needs. **Achartz** highlighted the challenges posed by hierarchical dynamics, remarking,

I have observed that, although we are encouraged to be accountable, senior staff often dominate decision-making. Leadership decisions are mostly top-down and control-oriented. This often leads to slower responses and less adaptive service delivery, particularly when rapid decisions are required. Rules are applied very mechanically, with little room for interpretation. This ensures consistency but frequently undermines policies intended to allow flexibility to improve citizen outcomes.

This observation underscores how power dynamics can restrict frontline staff's ability to engage meaningfully with citizens, thereby limiting access to decision-making processes that directly affect service delivery.

Some respondents expressed concern about the marginalization of junior staff. One participant pointedly remarked, "Senior staff dominates decisions," while another indicated that ideas were "filtered upward selectively." Such power dynamics can foster a culture in which frontline employees feel disempowered, thereby limiting their ability to exercise discretion. This marginalization can create a disconnect between the organization's leadership and personnel who interact directly with the public, leading to decisions that

may not fully reflect community needs. The implications of these dynamics can be profound, potentially leading to service outcomes that fall short of public expectations.

Conversely, other participants recounted positive experiences in which supportive leadership actively encouraged discretion. **Aisha** emphasized, “When leaders trust us to exercise judgment, we can tailor our responses to better serve citizens.” Her perspective underscores the importance of a culture that fosters trust and empowers employees to act in the best interests of service users. This empowerment is crucial for creating a responsive service-delivery environment, enabling frontline staff to adjust their approaches in response to real-time feedback and community needs. Participant **OMA** provided additional context by reflecting on the variability of discretion across teams. She stated,

I think the culture of discretion varies significantly across teams. In some areas, staff feel empowered to make decisions, while in others, strict adherence to rules limits our ability to respond effectively.

This observation underscores the importance of supportive leadership in fostering an environment that values discretion and adaptability in service delivery. Teams that promote open dialogue and collaboration are more likely to cultivate an environment in which discretionary actions are seen as acceptable and even necessary.

Fatima noted that while discretion offers flexibility, it can also lead to inconsistencies in service delivery if not effectively guided by leadership. She remarked,

While it provides flexibility, discretion can also lead to inconsistencies in service delivery if not effectively guided by leadership. Discretion is encouraged in social and welfare cases but tightly controlled in financial or legal matters. Leadership trusts staff to act in good faith within clear ethical guidelines.

This underscores the need for clear frameworks and support systems that enable staff to exercise discretion judiciously while maintaining accountability. The dynamics of power within the organization significantly influence how discretion is exercised, and supportive leadership serves as a crucial mediator in this process.

Participants also recognized the value of informal coping strategies, such as peer consultation, which were essential for managing service pressures in constrained environments. These informal networks enabled staff to share experiences, provide mutual support, and manage the complexities of public service delivery more effectively. **Ryan** expressed this sentiment, stating, “We often rely on each other to figure things out; it’s a way to share the burden of difficult cases.” Such collaborative approaches not only enhance individual decision-making but also contribute to a more cohesive team dynamic.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that discretion is culturally and politically organized, highlighting its complexity as a collective decision-making process rather than a purely individual one. These insights deepen understanding of how leadership, organizational culture, and power dynamics interact to shape outcomes in public service delivery. By recognizing the intricate relationships among these elements, public-sector organizations can better address the challenges of service provision and enhance their effectiveness in meeting citizens' needs. By fostering an environment that values discretion, promotes open communication, and empowers frontline staff, public-sector organizations can improve service-delivery outcomes and strengthen relationships with the communities they serve.

This approach not only enhances responsiveness but also cultivates a culture of trust and accountability, ultimately leading to more effective public service delivery. The narratives shared by participants vividly illustrate the complexities of discretion and power dynamics, providing critical insights for future research and practice in the public sector.

RQ 3: In what ways do organizational cultural norms mediate the interpretation of policies and the exercise of discretion in everyday service delivery?

The findings of this research question indicate that organizational cultural norms play a pivotal role in shaping how policies are interpreted and how discretion is exercised in public service delivery.

Theme 1: Cultural Frameworks and Policy Interpretation

Organizational culture significantly influences how employees interpret and implement policies and procedures. In public-sector organizations, cultural norms often shape the lens through which policies are viewed, leading to varying interpretations even when formal guidelines are identical. This variability is critical because it directly affects the effectiveness of service delivery. Many participants asserted that organizational culture influences discretion in policy interpretation. **LOPEZ** articulated this perspective, stating,

Our organizational culture strongly influences how we interpret and implement policies. I have found that when leaders promote an adaptive interpretation of rules, it enables us to balance formal requirements with the complexities of service delivery. Our organizational culture encourages a highly cautious interpretation of rules, primarily to avoid any risk or audit issues. While this approach ensures consistency and protects the organization legally, it often undermines policies intended to allow flexibility and responsiveness in serving citizens. Staff tend to adhere more closely to the letter of the rule than to its spirit.

Her insights underscore the importance of adaptability, which is essential for effective service delivery. A culture that fosters innovation and flexibility enables employees to interpret policies in ways that support creative problem-solving. **Mwanzia**, another participant, echoed this sentiment, stating,

When we feel empowered to use our discretion, we can find solutions that work for our community. It's not just about following the rules; it's about understanding the spirit of those rules.

This underscores the idea of discretion in managing the complexities of public service, enabling staff to tailor their approaches to real-world situations.

Conversely, some participants expressed concerns about a culture that emphasizes strict compliance. **Kiaga** stated, "I've felt the pressure to follow procedures rigidly, which leads to frustration for both staff and citizens alike." This rigidity can stifle discretion and responsiveness, ultimately hindering service quality. **Sophie** added,

In some departments, there's a fear of making a decision that deviates from the norm. This creates a culture in which people simply follow orders rather

than think critically. Leadership style, particularly whether supervisors are supportive or rigid, accounts for most differences in efficiency and morale across similar units, even under the same policies and staffing constraints.

This tension between compliance and flexibility illustrates how cultural context can either empower employees to use their discretion effectively or constrain their ability to adapt to specific situations.

The findings also indicate that organizational culture establishes feedback loops that can enhance or inhibit policy interpretation. For example, a culture that values open communication and learning from mistakes fosters a more nuanced understanding of policies, enabling adjustments informed by practical experience. **Monari** explains further.

Informal check-ins and peer discussions inform our interpretation of new policies.

Through these conversations, we determine how to apply the rules coherently. Leadership decisions about coordination, resource allocation, and communication during challenges significantly affect service delivery. When leaders are visible and supportive, we deliver more consistent and responsive services. Leaders' physical presence in the field and their willingness to listen during advisory group meetings have the greatest influence. Staff views these as proof that leadership values frontline experience and ethical service.

Her emphasis on everyday interactions underscores their significance in shaping policy interpretation. **Morgan** explained the importance of flexibility, stating, "Organizational culture encourages staff to interpret policies flexibly when citizens face genuine difficulties." This flexibility enables employees to handle complex situations effectively, ensuring that service delivery aligns with community needs. **Fatima** provided additional context, saying, "Flexibility in interpretation is crucial, especially in emergency situations. If we stick too closely to the rules, we can miss opportunities to help people." Such adaptability is essential for addressing the unique challenges that arise in public service, where standard procedures may not always suffice. **Jake** reiterated the need for adaptive interpretation, adding, "In our organization, I see that the focus on rigid adherence to policies can stifle our ability to adapt to changing situations." His frustration reflects the challenges staff face when organizational culture does not support responsiveness, underscoring the potential negative consequences for service delivery. **Omolade** further emphasized the role of leadership in shaping adaptability by modeling how to interpret policies in context. "This flexibility is crucial for addressing complex service cases where strict compliance may not be appropriate," he noted, thus reinforcing the idea that leaders play a vital role in fostering a culture that values discretion and adaptability. **Diana** echoed this, stating, "When leaders demonstrate how to interpret policies with context in mind, it empowers us to do the same. It builds a culture of trust and understanding."

In summary, organizational cultural norms are a significant mediator of policy interpretation and the exercise of discretion in public service delivery. By fostering a culture of flexibility, open communication, and adaptive practices, public-sector organizations can enhance their responsiveness and effectiveness in meeting the diverse needs of the communities they serve. Understanding these dynamics provides valuable insights into how

to improve service-delivery outcomes while managing the complexities inherent in public-service contexts. Through the rich narratives shared by participants, it is evident that a supportive organizational culture not only facilitates more accurate policy interpretation but also cultivates a more engaged and responsive workforce better able to meet citizens' needs. As such, public-sector organizations must prioritize cultural frameworks that empower employees, foster adaptive practices, and encourage ongoing dialogue to enhance their overall effectiveness in service delivery.

Theme 2: Leadership Practices as Cultural Catalysts

This theme highlights the critical role of leadership in shaping organizational culture and, by extension, in shaping how policies are interpreted and discretion exercised within public-sector organizations. Leaders serve as cultural barometers, profoundly influencing the values, norms, and behaviors that guide employees' daily work. Their actions and attitudes set the framework within which employees operate, affecting not only policy compliance but also motivation to exercise discretion responsibly.

A key finding from the interviews was that leaders who embody and model ethical behavior foster an environment in which organizational norms prioritize accountability and service quality. Such leaders send implicit messages about acceptable practices, fostering a culture that encourages employees to exercise discretion aligned with the organization's vision. **Dika** emphasized this point, stating,

Effective leaders engage in sense-making processes that clarify how policies should be interpreted within the organizational context. By articulating a clear vision and providing context for policy implementation, leaders help employees handle complexities and uncertainties.

Her insights underscore the importance of leadership in guiding staff through the intricacies of public service, ensuring employees feel equipped to interpret policies effectively. **Dika's** narrative illustrates how a leader's ability to contextualize policies can mitigate ambiguity, thereby fostering an environment in which employees feel empowered to act. **Aisha** further contributed to this discussion by highlighting the role of vulnerability in leadership. She remarked,

When leaders own their mistakes and show vulnerability, it creates a safe space for innovation. We feel encouraged to take calculated risks in our service delivery because we know our leaders understand that not everything will go as planned.

This sentiment underscores that a leader's willingness to acknowledge failures can cultivate a culture of learning and adaptability, both essential to effective service delivery. **Aisha's** observation suggests that leaders who model resilience and openness foster a supportive work environment, encouraging employees to engage in creative problem-solving without fear of retribution. **LIAM** echoed **Aisha's** sentiment, noting, "Leaders who are transparent about the challenges they face help us feel more connected to the organizational mission. It inspires us to think critically about how we can improve our practices." His perspective further underscores that transparency in leadership not only informs employees but also motivates them to align their efforts with the organization's goals. **Ryan's** narrative illustrates how transparency enhances trust and collaboration,

fostering a culture where employees feel invested in the organization's success. Participant **THOMPSON**'s experiences also reflect the positive impact of participative leadership on organizational culture. He stated,

I have observed that a leader who actively seeks feedback and encourages open dialogue fosters a culture in which everyone feels valued. It is not merely about following orders; it is about contributing ideas and feeling empowered to effect positive change.

Thompson's insights underscore the importance of inclusive leadership in fostering an environment conducive to innovation and responsiveness. His experience shows that when leaders invite input and foster dialogue, they enhance employee engagement and a sense of ownership of their work. Furthermore, **Fatima** emphasized the importance of understanding and empathy in leadership.

She remarked,

In our organization, leaders who acknowledge the complexities we face make it easier for us to exercise discretion. They understand that sometimes we need to step outside the guidelines to serve our community effectively.

This highlights how empathetic leadership can foster a culture of discretion and adaptability, enabling employees to handle the challenges inherent in public service. **Fatima**'s narrative illustrates that when leaders are aware of the operational realities staff face, they foster a supportive environment in which discretion is seen as a valuable tool rather than a deviation from established protocols.

In conclusion, these leadership practices described by participants serve as vital cultural catalysts that shape how organizational norms are established and maintained. By modeling ethical behavior, fostering open communication, and promoting a culture of learning and accountability, leaders can significantly influence how policies are interpreted and how discretion is exercised in daily operations. The narratives shared by participants underscore the importance of effective leadership in shaping a responsive and adaptive organizational culture. This alignment not only enhances the quality of service delivery in public-sector organizations but also contributes to the overall effectiveness and legitimacy of these institutions in meeting the diverse needs of the communities they serve. By prioritizing leadership practices that promote ethical behavior and open dialogue, public sector organizations can cultivate a culture that empowers employees, ultimately leading to more innovative and effective service delivery. Insights from participant narratives provide a robust framework for understanding the intricate dynamics among leadership, culture, and public service, thereby informing future research and practice in this critical area.

RQ 4: How do leadership-culture dynamics account for variations in service delivery outcomes across public sector organizations operating under similar mandates?

Theme 1: Leadership-Culture Alignment and Misalignment

The narratives provided by participants highlighted the critical role of alignment between leadership practices and organizational culture in determining service delivery outcomes.

Instances of effective service delivery were characterized by adaptive and responsive practices, in which leadership messages were closely aligned with cultural norms that prioritize learning, collaboration, and professionalism.

Participant **BRANDON** noted,

When leadership practices align with our organizational culture, they create an environment in which we can be responsive and flexible in our service delivery. Alignment between leadership and a collaborative culture explains why some organizations deliver far better services than others. Where leaders and culture work together, the same policies produce excellent results.

This alignment empowers staff to make timely decisions and enhances overall effectiveness. His observation underscores the need for leaders to embody the organization's values, thereby fostering an environment conducive to innovation and responsiveness. When leadership aligns with cultural expectations, employees feel empowered to act in ways that meet the diverse needs of the community.

Conversely, a misalignment between leadership intentions and entrenched cultural norms can lead to inconsistencies and resistance to change. **Wairimu** provided a contrasting perspective, sharing her firsthand experience of misalignment:

I have seen how initiatives introduced by leadership often falter when they conflict with entrenched cultural norms. Senior leaders control agendas and decision-making spaces. Junior and frontline staff are rarely involved, meaning that practical knowledge from the ground almost never shapes important decisions. The primary reason some organizations perform better is the degree to which leadership enforces organizational culture. Strict, compliance-heavy leadership produces average or poor outcomes even when policies are identical.

This disconnect can perpetuate outdated practices, limiting the organization's ability to adapt and serve effectively. **Wairimu's** experience illustrates the pitfalls of leadership initiatives that overlook existing cultural frameworks, which can lead to unproductive outcomes and employee disengagement. **Omar** encapsulated the relationship between leadership and culture, stating, "Organizations with leadership that emphasizes community responsiveness and ethical judgment tend to achieve better results." This insight underscores the importance of aligning leadership with organizational culture to improve service delivery outcomes. **Omar's** observations show that when leaders prioritize community needs, they not only enhance service quality but also foster a culture of responsiveness and ethical behavior. **Linda** emphasized that leadership practices that promote collaboration and shared ownership help shift the culture toward greater responsiveness and continuous improvement. "When leaders embody these values, it creates a positive feedback loop," she noted, highlighting the role of leadership in fostering a supportive environment. **Linda** elaborated,

We thrive when leaders actively involve us in decision-making. This not only strengthens our commitment to the organization but also yields more innovative solutions to the challenges we face. Leaders shape ethical norms through transparency, consistency, and fairness. When they address

breaches calmly and focus on learning, internal trust soars and public confidence follows. Inconsistent handling breeds skepticism quickly. Hierarchical structures often silence frontline knowledge while amplifying senior authority. Only when leaders deliberately create cross-level forums do we get informed, responsive decisions that reflect reality on the ground.

Her insights suggest that effective leadership can catalyze cultural transformation, thereby improving service delivery outcomes. **Samwel** further illustrated the impact of leadership decisions, stating, “When leaders prioritize realistic workloads and clear communication, it enhances our ability to meet the needs of the community.” This emphasis on alignment between leadership and culture is crucial for effective service delivery. **Samwel’s** narrative highlights that practical leadership decisions, grounded in an understanding of employee capacities, can significantly enhance organizational performance.

Additionally, Participant **DILLINGHAM** noted that leadership culture significantly shapes discretion and accountability: “When leaders encourage open dialogue and input from frontline staff, it leads to better decision-making and outcomes.” His emphasis on inclusive leadership practices aligns closely with the broader theme of cultural alignment, suggesting that a culture of openness and collaboration is integral to effective service delivery. **LINDA** further articulated,

The more leaders demonstrate a commitment to collaboration, the more likely we are to adapt our practices to align with changing community needs. It creates a culture where everyone feels responsible for the outcomes.

This perspective reinforces the idea that leadership not only shapes the immediate operational environment but also instills a sense of collective ownership among employees, enhancing their investment in organizational objectives. Participant **HUFFERMAN** added his perspective, stating,

When our leaders make decisions based on data and community feedback, it fosters trust. We know they care about getting it right, and that encourages us to go the extra mile in our roles

His insights emphasize that trust emanating from data-informed decision-making strengthens the connection between leadership and culture, motivating employees to engage wholeheartedly in their work.

These findings suggest that organizational culture mediates the influence of leadership, contributing to the observed discrepancies in service delivery outcomes among public organizations with similar mandates. When leadership practices align with the cultural context, organizations are better positioned to respond effectively to community needs, thereby enhancing service quality and employee engagement.

Theme 2: Service Delivery Outcomes

Participants linked the dynamics of leadership-culture relationships to service delivery outcomes, underscoring that the interplay between these two elements is crucial for achieving positive outcomes. Effective alignment between leadership and organizational culture not only facilitates responsiveness and flexibility but also enhances the overall

quality of service provided to the community. **CALLAHAM** emphasized this connection, stating,

When our leaders are attuned to the culture, we can respond more effectively to community needs. It's about understanding the nuances of what the community requires and adapting our services accordingly. Our culture supports the flexible yet principled enforcement of rules. Staff feel empowered to adapt policies when doing so better serves citizens, which usually aligns with the intent behind the rules.

His observation highlights how a harmonious relationship between leadership and culture enables employees to respond swiftly and appropriately to changing demands.

Conversely, participants noted that misalignment between leadership practices and cultural expectations often led to inflexibility and ineffectiveness. **Kiaha** shared,

I have seen initiatives that look great on paper fail miserably in practice because they didn't resonate with our cultural values. When leaders introduce changes that clash with our established ways of working, it creates confusion and resistance.

This sentiment underscores the challenges organizations face when leadership initiatives do not account for the prevailing cultural context, resulting in a disconnect that can impede service delivery. Participants indicated that supportive leadership played a pivotal role in empowering them to make timely decisions and enhancing coordination among teams. **BARWICK** remarked,

Supportive leaders create an environment where we feel empowered to make decisions without constantly seeking approval. This agility is crucial in public service, where needs can change rapidly.

His narrative reinforces the idea that effective leadership fosters employees' sense of autonomy, enabling them to respond more effectively to community needs. On the other hand, limited discretion and unclear expectations were cited as significant barriers to effectiveness. **BRYANT** stated,

When we're given rigid guidelines without room for interpretation, it stifles our ability to adapt to specific situations. We end up feeling like cogs in a machine rather than engaged public servants.

This perspective highlights the detrimental effects of overly prescriptive policies that preclude discretion, ultimately undermining service quality. Notably, participants asserted that policy differences alone were not solely responsible for variations in service outcomes. Instead, the interpretation and enactment of policies, shaped by leadership actions and the cultural context, were most important. **SHAWN** reflected,

What really makes a difference is how we interpret these policies in our daily work. Leadership plays a crucial role in setting the tone for how we approach our responsibilities.

His insights emphasize that successful service delivery relies on more than just adherence to established guidelines; it requires an understanding of the context in which these policies are applied.

This perspective underscores that service delivery outcomes stem from complex internal processes rather than from the mere implementation of uniform policies. **MELISSA** encapsulated this idea, stating, “It’s not just about following rules. It’s about how we as a team interpret those rules in the context of our community. That’s where the real impact happens.” Her narrative reinforces the notion that leadership and cultural dynamics significantly influence how policies are enacted, ultimately affecting the quality and effectiveness of service delivery. In summary, the narratives provided by participants elucidate the intricate relationship among leadership, culture, and service-delivery outcomes. When leadership practices align with organizational culture, they create an environment conducive to flexibility, responsiveness, and high-quality service. Conversely, misalignment can lead to rigidity and inefficiency, underscoring the importance of cultivating alignment between leadership and culture to achieve optimal service delivery in public-sector organizations.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study highlights the intricate dynamics between leadership practices and organizational culture in shaping public service delivery outcomes. Through participants' narratives, it became evident that leadership serves as a cultural cue, shaping interpretations of values, ethics, and expectations. The interplay between leadership and culture mediates policy implementation and shapes the exercise of discretion, ultimately affecting the quality of service delivery. Recognizing these dynamics equips public-sector organizations to manage challenges effectively, thereby fostering greater public trust and satisfaction with their services.

By understanding and leveraging the insights from this research, public-sector organizations can enhance their practices and better meet the needs of the communities they serve, ensuring more responsive and effective public service. This alignment not only improves operational efficiency but also cultivates a culture of accountability and ethical behavior, essential to the legitimacy and success of public institutions.

Ultimately, insights from participant narratives provide a robust framework for understanding the intricate dynamics among leadership, culture, and public service. As organizations strive to enhance their effectiveness, a concerted effort to align leadership practices with cultural norms will be vital to fostering an environment that supports innovation, accountability, and community responsiveness.

The findings indicate that the interplay between leadership practices and organizational culture significantly influences public service delivery in public-sector organizations. Leadership serves as a cultural indicator that shapes how values, ethics, and expectations are interpreted. Moreover, the implementation of policies, along with considerations of ethics and discretion, is mediated by the existing organizational culture. Variations in leadership-culture alignment provide a framework for understanding why service delivery outcomes differ among ostensibly similar institutional contexts. Collectively, these results underscore the importance of examining internal organizational dynamics to enhance understanding of public service delivery practices, thereby enriching the ongoing discourse in public administration.

Table 1: Themes and Analytical Categories

Research Questions	Corresponding Themes	Constructs	Constraints
RQ1: What is the role of leadership practices and organizational culture in influencing the performance of public service delivery within public sector organizations?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership as a Cultural Cue Organizational Culture and Policy Interpretation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership: Effective leadership shapes organizational culture and service delivery. Culture: Organizational culture influences employee behavior and decision making. Communication: Clear communication fosters trust and accountability among staff. Trust: Trust in leadership enhances team collaboration and morale. Accountability: A culture of accountability ensures responsible service delivery. Innovation: Encouraging innovation leads to improved public service outcomes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compliance: Strict compliance can hinder creativity and adaptability. Rigidity: Rigid adherence to procedures often stifles employee discretion. Authority: Overemphasis on authority can undermine collaborative efforts. Control: Excessive control may restrict responsiveness to community needs.
RQ2: How do leaders influence shared norms related to ethics, accountability, and service quality within public sector organizations?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Ethics, Accountability, and Public Trust Discretion, Power, and Service Delivery Outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethics: Ethical leadership sets the standard for organizational behavior. Accountability: Shared accountability enhances trust and service quality. Trust: Trust between leaders and staff is crucial for effective service delivery. Leadership: Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping ethical norms and practices. Norms: Organizational norms dictate the expected behavior of employees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disconnect: A disconnect between stated ethics and practice can erode trust. Formality: Formal ethical guidelines may fail to resonate with employees. Resistance: Resistance to cultural change can hinder ethical improvements.
RQ3: In what ways do organizational cultural norms mediate the interpretation of policies and the exercise of discretion in everyday service delivery?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Cultural Frameworks and Policy Interpretation Leadership Practices as Cultural Catalysts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Culture: Culture mediates how policies are interpreted and enacted. Interpretation: Adaptable interpretation of policies enhances service effectiveness. Discretion: Discretion allows employees to respond to unique service situations. Flexibility: Flexibility in policy application is essential for addressing complexities. Collaboration: It improves policy understanding and implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rigidity: Rigid policies limit the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Compliance: Overly strict compliance can undermine discretionary decision-making. Limitations: Limitations in cultural support can restrict policy adaptability.
RQ4: How do leadership-culture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership-Culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alignment: Alignment between leadership and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Misalignment: Misalignment between

<p>dynamics account for variations in service delivery outcomes across public sector organizations operating under similar mandates?</p>	<p>Alignment and Misalignment</p> <p>2. Service Delivery Outcomes</p>	<p>culture enhances service delivery.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership: Leadership decisions shape organizational responsiveness and effectiveness. • Culture: A supportive culture fosters employee engagement and commitment. • Responsiveness: Responsiveness to community needs is critical for successful service delivery. • Empowerment: Empowering employees promotes initiative and effective decision-making. 	<p>leadership and culture leads to operational inefficiencies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflexibility: Inflexibility in leadership can hinder necessary adaptations. • Resistance: Resistance to change can obstruct improvements in service delivery.
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DISCUSSION

This section synthesizes the study's findings in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework within contemporary public administration discourse. The results yielded three key arguments: first, leadership in public-sector organizations is primarily a sense-making practice that influences behavior through daily cues rather than formal authority. Second, organizational culture mediates governance performance by shaping how policies are interpreted and implemented. Third, ethics and discretion are critical processes linking internal dynamics to institutional legitimacy and public trust.

Leadership as a Sense-Making Practice

The findings support the view of leadership as a sense-making practice, emphasizing communication, symbolic actions, and role modeling as influential sources of leadership. This aligns with relational and interpretive approaches, suggesting that leaders create and negotiate meanings within organizations (Raju et al., 2025). Leadership cues are often interpreted implicitly, and leaders' reactions to challenges shape organizational ethos, favoring either learning or compliance (Sorour et al., 2021).

The results challenge traditional leader-centric models, highlighting that leadership effectiveness depends on the contextual interpretation of practices within cultural frameworks. Leaders do not create meaning in isolation; their actions are intertwined with organizational norms and informal practices. This observation critiques heroic leadership paradigms that overlook the relational aspects of leadership in bureaucratic settings (Ongaro et al., 2025).

Culture as Mediator of Governance Outcomes

This research demonstrated that organizational culture mediates the relationship between formal governance arrangements and service delivery outcomes. Policies are interpreted through culturally constituted norms and shared assumptions, shaping daily decision-making. Compliance-driven cultures often restrict interpretive flexibility, causing

frustration among employees and the public. In contrast, cultures that emphasize professional judgment enable a more responsive approach to citizens' needs (Lindholst & Torjesen, 2024).

The impact of leadership on culture-mediated governance outcomes varies; identical leadership practices can yield different effects across cultural contexts. This finding underscores that leadership and culture are mutually constitutive processes, highlighting why structural reforms often fail to achieve sustainable improvements (Bolman & Deal, 2026).

Ethics, Discretion, and Institutional Legitimacy

The prominence of ethics and discretion was evident, with participants asserting that ethical expectations are embedded in culture and reinforced by leadership. Consistent modeling of ethical standards fosters greater confidence among employees in exercising judgment. Conversely, ambiguity in ethical standards can lead to risk aversion and defensive decision making, emphasizing the need for ethical leadership to maintain public trust (Myeni & Singh, 2024).

Discretion is essential in public service delivery but is unevenly distributed and influenced by hierarchical power dynamics. Support for discretion is shaped by organizational culture, illustrating that discretion is a collective process rather than an individual choice (Cecile, 2022).

Contribution to Public Administration Theory

This study contributed to leadership theory in public administration by framing leadership as a sense-making practice enacted through daily interactions. It also expands the literature on organizational culture, demonstrating how culture mediates governance outcomes. Furthermore, it integrates ethics and discretion within an interpretive framework, linking internal processes to service delivery performance.

The findings underscore the need for qualitative research that builds on empirical data to understand governance practices (Kinder & Stenvall, 2024). This contribution enhances academic discourse and offers practical implications for improving public administration.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings highlight the need to recognize leadership and organizational culture as primary levers for effective governance reforms. Leadership development should shift from focusing solely on managerial competencies to prioritizing ethical, relational, and sense-making skills. Programs should emphasize ethical leadership as a dynamic practice and foster cultural awareness to improve responsiveness in diverse contexts.

At the organizational level, integrating institutional learning into public-sector systems is crucial. Cultures that view mistakes as learning opportunities promote greater discretion and flexibility in service delivery. Policymakers should implement systems that encourage reflection and knowledge exchange across organizational levels.

Service improvement strategies must abandon rigid policy frameworks and acknowledge the role of internal dynamics in shaping outcomes. Interventions should incorporate cultural diagnostics and participatory processes to resonate with specific organizational contexts (Kamara et al., 2024).

Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledged limitations due to its qualitative design, which may not be universally generalizable. Future research should explore comparative studies across diverse public-sector organizations and undertake longitudinal qualitative studies to track changes over time (de Príncipe, 2021).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated how leadership practices and organizational culture shape public service delivery. Findings revealed leadership as a sense-making practice, with culture mediating policy interpretation and service outcomes. This interplay extends beyond service provision to encompass institutional legitimacy and public trust.

By contextualizing leadership, culture, ethics, and discretion within an interpretive framework, this research enhanced understanding of public administration and informed governance reforms. Ultimately, this study contributed to the development of more responsive and trustworthy public institutions.

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