

 Research Article

# Confluence of Leadership Dynamics, Organizational Politics, and Faculty Morale and Its Impact in Higher Education: An Exploratory Case Study


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## Abstract

This exploratory qualitative case study examines how leadership dynamics and organizational politics shape faculty morale and institutional readiness for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in a mid-sized self-financing college in South India. It analyses how organizational politics influence decision-making, role allocation, and administrative behavior, and how these processes affect faculty participation and institutional culture. The study further derives implications for leadership development and governance reform aimed at enhancing ESD readiness. Drawing on French and Raven's Bases of Power (1959), McGregor's Theory X–Y (1960), Schein's model of organizational culture (1985), and contemporary ESD literature, the study triangulates reflective observations, semi-structured faculty interactions (n = 12), and institutional document analysis (2020–2024). Thematic analysis identified five core themes: administrative centralization, selective delegation, sponsorship politics, cultural inconsistency, and declining faculty engagement. Centralized decision-making and opaque delegation practices reduced faculty autonomy, generated role ambiguity, and redirected effort toward political navigation rather than academic innovation. Conversely, transparent communication, participative governance, and recognition of expert competence were associated with higher levels of trust, engagement, and capacity to integrate sustainability into teaching and institutional practice. The findings suggest that ethical, competence-based, and participative leadership is essential not only for sustaining faculty morale but also for enabling institutional transformation toward ESD. Accordingly, recommendations include governance reform, leadership capacity building, transparent administrative processes, and mechanisms for monitoring organizational climate, which function synergistically to counteract politicized work environments, reinforce ethical and transformational leadership, and strengthen organizational commitment, academic productivity, and the long-term sustainability of higher education institutions.

**Keywords:** Leadership Dynamics, Organizational Politics, Faculty Morale, Participative Governance, Education for Sustainable Development

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership, organizational culture, and faculty morale are foundational to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Contemporary ESD frameworks emphasize participatory governance, transparent decision-making, and supportive institutional climates as prerequisites for sustainability-driven innovation in higher education (Filho et al., 2020; Rieckmann & Barth, 2021). Centralized or politicized leadership constrains collaboration, reduces trust, and limits institutional capacity to mainstream sustainability values into curriculum, research, and community engagement. This study examines how leadership dynamics, i.e., power distribution, communication practices, and organizational politics, shape faculty morale and the institution's readiness to pursue ESD objectives.

## 1.1. Conceptual Rationale and Objectives

The present study explores how leadership dynamics, specifically power distribution, communication practices, and organizational politics, affect faculty morale. It aimed to identify patterns in governance and culture that either sustain or erode motivation and trust. The study aims to:

1. Explore relationships between leadership approaches and faculty engagement.
2. Examine how organizational politics manifests in decision-making and role allocation.
3. Assess effects of administrative behavior on morale, participation, and institutional culture.
4. Derive implications for leadership development and governance reform with specific attention to ESD readiness.

This is an exploratory qualitative case study designed to yield contextualized insights rather than statistical generalizations.

## 2. LITERATURE BACKGROUND

### 2.1. Leadership and Power

French and Raven (1959) identified five bases of power—legitimate, reward, coercive, expert, and referent—arguing that effective leadership depends on their balanced use. In higher education, overreliance on positional authority (legitimate power) often results in compliance rather than commitment, whereas the recognition of expert power enhances faculty motivation and trust (Das & Rao, 2021; Das & Patel, 2023).

### 2.2. Leadership Style and Faculty Motivation

McGregor's (1960) *Theory X and Y* offer a psychological lens to understand leadership assumptions about subordinates. Theory X assumes that people dislike work and require supervision, while Theory Y assumes that individuals are self-motivated and seek responsibility. Studies (Subramanian & Iqbal, 2022; Gupta & Srivastava, 2021) have shown that Theory Y and transformational leadership enhance creativity and faculty engagement.

### 2.3. Organizational Culture and Climate

Schein's (1985) model of culture, such as artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions, explains how misalignment between values and practices damages institutional trust. Previous research (Prakash & Joseph, 2023; Alotaibi et al., 2022) confirms that an authentic alignment between institutional philosophy and leadership behavior sustains morale and performance.

### 2.4. Organizational Politics

Mintzberg (1983) describes politics as intrinsic to organizations. Political activity becomes dysfunctional when it manipulates decision-making for personal or positional advantages. Studies (Hassan & Mehmood, 2023; Nayak, 2022) have indicated that such politics erode fairness and collegiality, leading to disengagement.

### 2.5. Faculty Morale

Faculty morale represents collective psychological well-being and identification with institutional goals (Locke 2021). Factors, such as recognition, autonomy, and communication, influence morale. Punia and Behera (2022) found that psychological safety enhanced job satisfaction and research productivity.

Prior studies converge on three major themes: authoritarian leadership tends to erode faculty morale; organizational politics diminish perceptions of fairness and trust; and participative leadership fosters innovation and institutional stability. Building on these insights, the present study extends the existing understanding by demonstrating how such leadership dynamics and political behaviors manifest in the lived

experiences of faculty members within higher education settings, influencing both organizational culture and professional engagement.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Design

An exploratory qualitative case study covering 2020–2024, combining reflective observations, informal semi-structured discussions, and document analysis to develop an in-depth institutional narrative.

#### 3.2. Participant Identification and Informal Discussions

Participants were selected purposively to ensure relevance to governance processes. Inclusion criteria: full-time faculty with >5 years of continuous service and regular engagement in academic or administrative duties during 2020–2024. Exclusion criteria: newly appointed faculty (<25 years), visiting/adjunct instructors, and staff without exposure to institutional decision-making. Informal faculty discussions were semi-structured, guided by broad prompts on leadership, decision-making, and morale, and conducted opportunistically during departmental meetings, committee interactions, and informal workplace exchanges. Twelve (n=12) faculty members from diverse departments participated across the period. Verbal informed consent was obtained prior to recording notes; no audio recordings were retained to preserve confidentiality.

#### 3.3. Data Collection Procedures

Reflective observations: Conducted approximately twice monthly (45–90 minutes/session) in formal meetings, review sessions, and administrative interactions. Field notes were written immediately after each session.

Informal discussions: Opportunistic semi-structured conversations lasting 20–40 minutes; notes captured content and contextual tone.

Document analysis: Systematic review of internal documents (meeting minutes, circulars, committee reports, policy memos, org charts) for 2020–2024 to capture pre-existing practices and recent transitions. Documents were catalogued, timestamped, and reviewed for patterns in decision-making, delegation, and communication.

#### 3.4. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) structured the analytic process. Steps undertaken:

1. Data familiarization through repeated reading of field notes and documents.
2. Open coding to generate descriptive codes (leadership actions, delegation patterns, communication failures, morale indicators).
3. Axial coding to cluster codes into candidate themes (centralization, selective delegation, political alignment, cultural inconsistency).
4. Theme refinement through cross-source triangulation (observations ↔ discussions ↔ documents).
5. Final theme definition and narrative synthesis.

Credibility and trustworthiness strategies included: triangulation across data types, peer debriefing with an external senior academic who reviewed code–theme mappings, and informal member checking with two participating faculty members who validated the interpretation of core themes. All identifying details were anonymized, and analysis emphasized systemic patterns rather than individual appraisal.

### **3.5. Institutional Context**

The case is a mid-sized self-financing Arts and Science higher education institution in the Tirupattur district of Tamil Nadu, South India. It offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs in commerce, management, computer science, and the humanities, with ~120 faculty and ~2,500 students. Governance is centralized, with key operational and strategic decisions concentrated among senior management (Correspondent/Trustee, Principal, and executive officers). This configuration reflects governance patterns common to many private Indian colleges and provides a relevant setting to examine the interplay of leadership, politics, and faculty morale.

### **3.6. Case Selection Rationale**

The institution was purposively selected because: (1) its centralized governance offers a strong context to study power concentration effects; (2) leadership and administrative transitions occurred during 2020–2024, permitting observation of change processes; (3) departmental diversity permitted comparison of perceptions across disciplines; and (4) its representativeness of many Indian self-financing colleges increases the transferability of insights.

## **4. FINDINGS**

### **4.1. Centralization and Power Imbalance**

A recurring theme across the data is the high degree of administrative centralization. Decision-making authority, particularly concerning committee assignments, event coordination, and policy implementation, was concentrated within a limited group of administrators. While such centralization was often justified as a means of improving efficiency and maintaining institutional coherence, faculty members perceived it as restricting autonomy and academic freedom.

This perceived imbalance in power created a sense of dependency, where faculty felt compelled to seek administrative approval for even routine academic decisions. The concentration of authority reduced opportunities for shared dialogue and collective problem-solving, weakening the participatory culture traditionally valued in academic institutions. Over time, this dynamic contributed to feelings of alienation, diminished ownership, and decreased professional motivation.

### **4.2. Selective Delegation and Perceived Inequity**

Another prominent finding relates to how leadership roles and administrative responsibilities were delegated. Several appointments and committee leadership positions were assigned to junior faculty members without clearly defined selection criteria. Although these appointments were officially framed as opportunities for capacity building, they were frequently perceived by senior staff as inconsistent with institutional norms of merit and experience.

This selective delegation generated perceptions of inequity and fragmented the sense of teamwork. Senior faculty members expressed concern that their contributions and institutional knowledge were undervalued, while newly appointed coordinators felt heightened pressure to prove themselves under administrative scrutiny. The resulting environment fostered competition rather than cooperation, undermining collective morale and collegial trust.

### **4.3. Organizational Politics and Role Ambiguity**

Evidence from discussions and institutional records indicated that informal political processes often influenced administrative decisions. Alignment with particular senior figures appeared to enhance visibility and access to institutional opportunities, reinforcing perceptions of favouritism. Such “sponsorship politics,” as conceptualized by Mintzberg (1983), created ambiguity in responsibilities and blurred lines of accountability. Faculty members described instances of overlapping duties, unclear authority in committees, and shifting expectations without prior consultation. This uncertainty contributed to confusion, reduced

role clarity, and hindered effective collaboration. The time and energy that could have been directed toward academic innovation or research were frequently diverted toward navigating organizational politics, reducing overall institutional efficiency.

#### **4.4. Cultural Inconsistency and Value Erosion**

A striking finding concerns the gap between the institution's espoused values and its enacted practices. Official communications and mission statements emphasized empowerment, inclusivity, and innovation, yet daily administrative actions reflected greater control and supervision. This disconnect led to perceptions of inconsistency and diminished trust in institutional rhetoric.

Faculty expressed that the cultural environment encouraged compliance over creativity, resulting in reduced enthusiasm for proposing new initiatives. The erosion of shared values not only weakened internal trust but also affected the institution's external image, as innovation and collaboration—cornerstones of higher education—were perceived to have been replaced by procedural rigidity and administrative dominance.

#### **4.5. Faculty Morale and Institutional Impact**

The interplay of centralized authority, selective delegation, and political behaviour had a measurable impact on faculty morale. While most faculty continued to fulfil their professional obligations, there was a noticeable decline in voluntary participation in research projects, training programs, and extracurricular initiatives. Informal feedback suggested that many faculty members felt disillusioned about recognition and professional growth.

The decline in morale had ripple effects on institutional outcomes. Reduced collaboration among staff hindered interdisciplinary initiatives, while diminished enthusiasm among experienced faculty weakened mentorship for early-career academics. Over time, this disengagement subtly affected the institution's productivity, innovation, and student experience. These findings reinforce earlier studies (Locke, 2021; Punia & Behera, 2022) that link faculty morale directly to institutional performance and student outcomes.

#### **4.6. Need for Rebalancing Power and Participation**

The overarching conclusion emerging from the findings is the urgent need to restore balance between managerial control and faculty participation. Excessive centralization and opaque delegation practices, while administratively convenient, constrain the intellectual independence fundamental to higher education.

Institutions thrive when authority is exercised through consultation and when decision-making acknowledges professional competence rather than hierarchical position. Reinstating participative governance mechanisms, such as representative academic councils, transparent selection processes, and structured communication channels, can help rebuild morale and trust. A shift toward balanced leadership, emphasizing collaboration over control, is essential for revitalizing institutional culture and ensuring sustainable academic excellence.

### **5. DISCUSSION**

The observed dynamics have direct implications for ESD. Inclusive leadership and distributed governance are prerequisites for integrating sustainability into curricula and institutional practice (Morton et al., 2024; Fadeeva & Mochizuki, 2020). Centralization and opaque processes not only harm morale but also reduce the institution's capacity to mobilize faculty for sustainability teaching, transdisciplinary research, and community engagement—key elements of SDG-aligned ESD. Rebalancing authority, institutionalizing transparent selection and delegation practices, and enhancing communication channels

will strengthen institutional readiness for ESD initiatives. Faculty morale thus emerges not only as a human resource concern but as a structural precondition for sustainability-oriented institutional change.

## **6. POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS**

### **6.1. Governance Reform**

From an Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) perspective, higher education institutions must institutionalize inclusive and representative academic governance structures. Transparent committee selection processes and a clear delineation of authority can enhance shared responsibility, reduce power asymmetries, and support democratic decision-making essential for sustainable institutional cultures.

### **6.2. Leadership Development**

ESD-oriented leadership requires academic leaders to demonstrate ethical integrity, participatory engagement, and emotional intelligence in managing change. Structured leadership development programmes focusing on reflective practice, collaborative decision-making, and sustainability competencies can foster facilitative leadership that supports long-term institutional resilience.

### **6.3. Transparency and Digital Governance**

Digital governance mechanisms aligned with ESD principles can improve transparency, accountability, and stakeholder trust within academic institutions. Public disclosure of policies, workload norms, and committee decisions through digital platforms minimizes ambiguity and strengthens procedural justice in governance practices.

### **6.4. Recognition Frameworks**

Sustainable academic systems require recognition frameworks that value teaching quality, mentoring, community engagement, and the integration of sustainability principles alongside research outputs. Broadening performance metrics beyond publication counts encourages balanced academic contributions and supports the social mission of higher education under ESD.

### **6.5. Monitoring Organizational Health**

Regular assessment of organizational climate and faculty well-being is critical for sustaining healthy academic ecosystems. Institutionalized feedback mechanisms, supported by internal well-being committees, enable evidence-informed interventions that align staff welfare with sustainable development goals.

### **6.6. Regulatory Action**

Accreditation and regulatory agencies such as IQAC, NAAC, and UGC can play a transformative role by embedding participatory governance, ethical leadership, and faculty well-being within quality assurance frameworks. Aligning accreditation indicators with ESD values can incentivize institutions to adopt more inclusive, humane, and sustainability-oriented governance practices.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

This exploratory case study demonstrates that leadership dynamics and organizational politics significantly influence faculty morale, trust, and institutional effectiveness. Administrative centralization, selective delegation, and opaque decision-making were found to diminish engagement and collegiality, whereas transparent governance, participative leadership, and recognition of academic expertise strengthened trust and innovation. By drawing on established leadership and organizational culture theories,

the study highlights the need for ethical, inclusive, and competence-based leadership to restore morale and align institutional practices with espoused values. Importantly, these leadership behaviours also shape the institution's readiness for Education for Sustainable Development: participative and transparent governance enables sustainability integration, while hierarchical or politically driven cultures impede it. Strengthening shared governance and fostering trust are therefore critical to achieving both academic excellence and long-term institutional resilience.

## 8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study's qualitative scope emphasizes depth over breadth, and its findings should be interpreted as contextually grounded, rather than universally generalizable. While the single-case approach provides rich insights into leadership dynamics, future research could explore comparative studies across diverse institutional settings to validate and extend these findings. Quantitative approaches, such as survey-based morale indices or structural equation modelling, can further illuminate the causal relationships among leadership behavior, trust, and institutional outcomes.

Longitudinal research could also investigate how specific leadership reforms, governance models, or faculty development initiatives affect morale, innovation, and institutional culture over time. Acknowledging these boundaries enhances interpretive clarity and provides a foundation for future scholars to examine how participative leadership can strengthen organizational resilience and academic excellence in higher education. Future research may also examine student outcomes and sustainability competencies as downstream effects of leadership and morale.

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**Research Ethics.** This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards, institutional regulations, and applicable national research guidelines. Institutional identity has been anonymized to protect organizational confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and strict measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents throughout the research process.

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