

Leading Through Change: An Exploration of Police Chiefs' Leadership, Adaptation, and Community Engagement in Transitional Policing Environments

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how police chiefs experienced leadership, institutional adaptation, and community engagement during policing transitions in Zamboanga Sibugay, Philippines. Using a descriptive phenomenological design, it included 16 municipal police chiefs or officers-in-charge selected through total enumeration from two provincial districts. Semi-structured interviews and field notes were analyzed through Colaizzi's seven-step method with member checking. More than 200 meaning units yielded over 70 subthemes and 20 emergent themes. Chiefs described combining participatory, transformational, and discipline-oriented leadership while managing organizational turnover, compliance overload, political pressures, ethical dilemmas, information gaps, reform implementation, and community expectations. Enablers included local government and community partnerships,

experience, resilience, judgment, and emotional regulation; constraints included political interference, limited resources, institutional inertia, and change fatigue. The findings support PROGRAM L.E.A.D. (Leadership Evolution, Adaptation, and Decentralization), integrating leadership development, modernized command culture, personnel support, and standardized turnover protocols. The study concludes that transition effectiveness depends on adaptive judgment and ethical command within supportive institutional structures, rather than on individual resilience alone. The results inform context-sensitive leadership preparation, institutional continuity, and accountable community policing.

Keywords: *police chiefs; transitional policing; adaptive leadership; community engagement; descriptive phenomenology; organizational change*

INTRODUCTION

Police leadership is increasingly shaped by organizational reform, shifting public expectations, evolving security demands, and calls for accountable community-centered service. Philippine National Police (PNP) station commanders must interpret national directives while responding to place-specific risks, local politics, personnel concerns, and community trust. Leadership in these settings is not solely the enforcement of procedures; it also requires contextual judgment, communication, and an ability to maintain institutional continuity during command turnover (Roycroft & Brine, 2021; Elkington et al., 2025).

In the municipalities of Zamboanga Sibugay, differences in geographic access, resources, socio-cultural norms, and local government relationships intensify the challenges of transition. Decentralized implementation can promote flexibility, but it also creates tensions between central standards, local expectations, and the operational independence of commanders. Philippine research on community-oriented policing recognizes that

partnerships with residents and other government actors remain essential to public safety, legitimacy, and accountable service (De Lana et al., 2025; Quijano, 2025).

Research on police leadership has frequently foregrounded institutional outcomes or leadership typologies, leaving comparatively little qualitative evidence on how municipal police chiefs themselves experience transfers of authority, organizational change, ethical pressure, and the implementation of new directives. Accordingly, the present study explored police chiefs' reported leadership styles, lived experiences, dilemmas, adaptive responses, and enabling or constraining circumstances in two districts of Zamboanga Sibugay. It also translated participants' accounts into an empirically grounded leadership-enhancement program. The scope was qualitative and context-specific; it did not measure causal effects or objective station performance.

Literature Review

Adaptive, participatory, and transformational police leadership

Police leadership scholarship treats effective command as a professional practice requiring judgment, learning, and contextual responsiveness. Filstad and Karp (2021) describe the complexity of leadership as enacted in police organizations, while Glomseth and Bentzen (2025) position policing leadership within distinctive organizational settings. Anderson and Sun (2015) question rigid separations among leadership styles, suggesting that commanders may employ different approaches across situations. These perspectives align with the dissertation's treatment of adaptive leadership, transformational leadership, and organizational change as complementary interpretive lenses rather than mutually exclusive models.

Transformational practices are relevant where commanders motivate officers to accept reforms, but organizational direction also requires predictable procedures and fairness. Arnold (2017) connects transformational leadership to employee psychological well-being, and Ginete and Caballero (2025) discuss narratives of authentic transformation within law enforcement. The leadership challenges examined here consequently involve balancing democratic consultation and transformational encouragement with accountability, lawful delegation, and operational discipline (Roycroft & Brine, 2021; Elkington et al., 2025).

Organizational transitions, professional identity, and institutional memory

Transitions may unsettle shared working assumptions, reporting routines, officer confidence, and command legitimacy. Hoel and Barland (2021) examine the place of experience-based learning across police ranks, indicating the value of practices through which operational lessons are passed between leaders. Martin (2022) discusses shifting definitions of police professionalism, while Schneider et al. (2025) relate leadership behavior to the formation of police organizational identity. Together, these studies provide a basis for interpreting the disruption of tacit knowledge and the need for consistent organizational communication.

Police leaders also manage competing expectations from subordinates and central authority. Tyson and Charman (2023) associate organizational justice with retention concerns, while Sklansky (2022) examines challenges of reform in divided settings. The source dissertation's focus on station handovers and repeated policy changes therefore adds an experiential perspective to literature on leadership continuity, personnel adjustment, and the organizational conditions necessary for reform implementation (Glomseth & Bentzen, 2025).

Ethical command, political pressures, and human resources

Public-service leadership requires a legally grounded response to both official instructions and informal external demands. Karimullah (2024) addresses tensions between law enforcement professionalism and political interests; Hogg et al. (2012) explain how leadership is shaped by shared institutional identity. These discussions illuminate the ethical challenge of maintaining organizational authority and stakeholder relationships without permitting partisan interference in operational choices or compromising constitutional safeguards (Vito et al., 2024).

The human consequences of command transitions also deserve attention. Violanti et al. (2017) describe major occupational stressors affecting police health, while Garbarino et al. (2013) link work-related strain and mental health challenges within policing. Ayorinde et al. (2025) explore police well-being and adaptive shift

management, and McCanlies et al. (2018) connect social support and resilience to psychological outcomes among officers. These studies support consideration of personnel welfare, mentorship, and psychosocial support alongside procedural reform.

Community partnerships and learning during reform

Community legitimacy depends upon sustained relational work, not only enforcement outputs. Nilsson and Jonsson (2023) examine police-community relations in a postaccord context, and Jabber et al. (2023) discuss servant leadership challenges in policing. Alamban et al. (2022) examine the relationship of police image, personnel performance, and perceptions of neighborhood crime. Within Zamboanga Sibugay, these lines of scholarship provide a foundation for analyzing commanders' coordination with residents, municipal officials, and external stakeholders in evolving security environments.

An ethical and adaptive approach to community policing also requires continuous institutional learning. Renner et al. (2025) emphasize safety, resilience, and group dynamics in high-risk police operations. Workman-Stark (2020) explores cultural pressures within police organizations, further emphasizing why reforms must attend to internal norms as well as formal structures. Taken together, these sources indicate that the ability to adapt during transition is conditioned by support systems, shared learning, available resources, and the quality of relationships inside and outside the station (De Lana et al., 2025; Quijano, 2025).

Theoretical and conceptual integration

The dissertation integrated adaptive leadership, transformational leadership, the philosophy of community policing, organizational change, socio-ecological systems, and phenomenological inquiry. Adaptive leadership foregrounded nonroutine problems and contextual learning; transformational approaches foregrounded motivation and shared direction; community policing addressed legitimacy through partnership. The organizational and ecological perspectives situated these processes within provincial governance, the PNP hierarchy, and the relationship between commanders, personnel, and communities (Filstad & Karp, 2021; Nilsson & Jonsson, 2023).

These perspectives informed an Input–Process–Output research paradigm. The inputs were reported leadership styles, experiences, ethical dilemmas, policy adaptation, and enabling or constraining influences; the process was phenomenological interviewing and Colaizzi analysis; and the outputs were descriptions of leadership experiences and a proposed institutional enhancement program. Figure 1 reconstructs the source's IPO diagram, retaining its core logic and feedback orientation while improving readability. The framework guided interpretation of lived experiences and the translation of themes into program components, not a claim of experimentally verified outcomes.



Figure 1. *Input–Process–Output paradigm of the study*

METHODS

Research Design

The study used a qualitative descriptive phenomenological approach to document and interpret police chiefs lived experiences of organizational transition. It centered participants' accounts of leadership styles, decisions, ethical dilemmas, personnel relations, adaptation to policies and reforms, and community interaction. The dissertation described the analysis as an interpretive process grounded in significant statements rather than numerical hypothesis testing.

Research Locale

The research was conducted in municipal police stations in the first and second districts of Zamboanga Sibugay, Philippines. The first district covered Alicia, Buug, Diplahan, Imelda, Mabuhay, Malangas, Olutanga, Payao, and Talusan; the second covered Ipil, Kabasalan, Naga, Roseller Lim, Siay, Titay, and Tungawan. Coastal, rural, and semi-urban contexts provided variation in geography, community relations, material resources, and policing concerns.

Participants and Sampling Technique

Total enumeration was used: the 16 identified municipal police chiefs or officers-in-charge were considered, comprising nine from the first district and seven from the second. Each station contributed one informant, who was directly responsible for administrative, personnel, operational, and community-facing decisions. Participation remained voluntary and was contingent upon informed consent. Data collection took place in the second semester of academic year 2025–2026.

Research Instrument

The researcher used an open-ended semi-structured interview guide developed from the study questions and related literature. It explored leadership practices, communication, decision-making, ethical tensions, organizational reforms, community partnerships, and transition supports. The dissertation reports expert content review and pilot testing with a nonparticipating police leader, followed by refinements to improve relevance, clarity, and sensitivity; statistical questionnaire reliability testing was not part of this qualitative approach.

Data Gathering Procedure

Following institutional permission and coordination with the police stations, informants were briefed on the study and provided written consent. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the stations or through secure online platforms as needed; each lasted approximately 45–90 minutes. With consent, interviews were recorded and supplemented with field observations. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, reviewed for accuracy, and returned to informants in full or summarized form for confirmation and clarification.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were examined using Colaizzi's seven stages: repeated reading, extracting significant statements, interpreting formulated meanings, clustering related meanings, drafting an exhaustive description, deriving the fundamental structure, and returning the synthesis to informants for validation. The source reports over 200 initial meaning units, over 70 subthemes, and 20 emerging themes. Member checking was completed through visits to the police stations on May 26–27, 2026; participants confirmed or clarified the interpretation of their narratives.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher reported prior ethical clearance and institutional permissions, informed consent, the right to decline questions or withdraw, confidential handling of records, and the use of pseudonyms (for example, "Police Chief A"). The interview design avoided unnecessary sensitive operational intelligence or personally

identifying details. Cultural sensitivity, respectful scheduling, and nonmaleficence were observed throughout data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis organized the informants' accounts around five substantive questions and the resulting institutional program. Although 20 emerging themes were reported in the dissertation, the tables below consolidate their principal conceptual groupings for article presentation and should not be read as replacement statistical estimates. They remain a synthesis of interview narratives rather than population-level prevalence figures.

Leadership styles used in transitional policing

Police chiefs described leadership as a deliberate blend rather than a single dominant style. Participatory and adaptive leadership included listening to personnel, involving sections in planning, delegating authority, and shifting command styles when operations required faster decisions. Transformational leadership emphasized role-modeling and motivating officers to support reform, while organizational discipline and institutional compliance provided predictable command boundaries. One informant described a democratic approach open to suggestions, whereas another explained adapting toward autocratic command during operations. This coexistence of flexibility and structure corresponds to scholarship on professional practice and the overlap among leadership models (Anderson & Sun, 2015; Filstad & Karp, 2021; Ginete & Caballero, 2025).

Table 1. *Themes concerning leadership styles*

Reported theme	Manifestation in the participants' accounts
Participatory and adaptive leadership	Consultation, shared decision-making, delegation, situational versatility
Transformational leadership	Vision, encouragement, exemplary conduct, personnel development
Organizational discipline and institutional compliance	Formal command, procedural accountability, lawful direction

Lived experiences of command transition

Assuming station command involved maintaining vertical communication with police headquarters while cultivating horizontal communication with personnel and local stakeholders. Chiefs described supportive dialogue, confidential handling of human relations problems, and development of community rapport, alongside the need for analytical decisions and rapid operational adaptation. Operational strain arose from program shifts, heavy compliance requirements, infrastructure limitations, communication isolation, insufficient turnover records, and incomplete local histories. These experiences illustrate why experience-based learning and the protection of institutional memory matter during rotational assignments (Hoel & Barland, 2021; Martin, 2022; Schneider et al., 2025).

Table 2. *Lived-experience categories during organizational turnover*

Experiential area	Source-derived synthesis
Communication and relationships	Upward reporting, participative consultation, multi-stakeholder engagement
Decision-making and authority	Metrics/compliance, analytical assessment, delegated autonomy, disciplined command
Operational and human-resource strain	Compliance overload, unfamiliar terrain, infrastructure gaps, handover deficits
Resistance management	Policy explanation, constructive participation, empathetic listening and local diagnosis

Leadership challenges and ethical dilemmas

Participants faced policy mismatch, scarcity of material and fiscal resources, political intervention, subordinate resistance, and administrative accountability burdens. Ethical dilemmas concerned the boundary between superior directives and personal conscience; the use of sanctions versus supportive leadership; and the need to reject political pressure that conflicted with legal obligations. Chiefs emphasized impartial treatment, evidence-based systems, integrity in data reporting, and transparent handling of public resources. These findings illustrate the tension between institutional identity, external patronage, and professional autonomy noted in police leadership literature (Karimullah, 2024; Sklansky, 2022; Hogg et al., 2012).

Table 3. *Source-derived organizational and ethical challenges*

Cluster	Reported pressures or response
Institutional and operational friction	Headquarters–local policy conflicts, uncertain information, administrative saturation
Political and fiscal pressure	Local interference, scarcity, resource transparency and operational independence
Ethical accountability	Legal neutrality, rights protection, responsibility for subordinates, resistance to data manipulation
Personnel challenges	Change fatigue, organizational subcultures, opposition to incoming command

Chiefs also recognized the stress associated with long hours, competing public demands, and the personal accountability of command. Supportive supervision was described as necessary to sustain personnel morale while applying lawful discipline. These experiences accord with research on police stress, social support, and psychological resilience (Garbarino et al., 2013; Violanti et al., 2017; McCanlies et al., 2018; Ayorinde et al., 2025).

Adapting to reforms and emerging security demands

Adaptation involved converting central mandates into locally workable operations through structured evaluation of personnel capability, collaborative strategic planning, orientation during daily assemblies, and filtering memoranda for legal compliance. Chiefs sought to preserve procedural integrity while introducing digitized workflows and updated security approaches. They encouraged an adaptive mindset through example, mentoring, contextual flexibility, and interpersonal engagement. The findings suggest that implementation is shaped by both leaders' competence and the institutional conditions supporting change, consistent with accounts of professional learning and high-risk police operations (Hoel & Barland, 2021; Renner et al., 2025).

Enabling and constraining factors

Local government partnerships, community support, stakeholder confidence, and logistical assistance provided important enabling conditions, particularly in resource-constrained stations. Conversely, political patronage, interference in command decisions, outdated infrastructure, limited equipment, and internal resistance constrained adaptation. At the individual level, the chiefs identified situational awareness, decision-making maturity, integrity, emotional self-regulation, cross-cultural understanding, and practical expertise as essential capacities. The combination of external relationships and internal resilience aligns with scholarship on community-oriented policing, professional legitimacy, and organizational culture (Nilsson & Jonsson, 2023; Quijano, 2025; Workman-Stark, 2020).

Table 4. *Factors shaping leadership adaptation*

Enabling conditions	Constraining conditions
LGU assistance and external stakeholder cooperation	Political patronage and operational interference
Community legitimacy and active coordination	Limited fiscal and technical resources
Professional preparation, resilience, cultural competence	Change fatigue, subordinate resistance, information deficits

Proposed PROGRAM L.E.A.D.

The dissertation proposed PROGRAM L.E.A.D. (Leadership Evolution, Adaptation, and Decentralization) to reduce the recurring disruption of command rotations. The proposal is an intended intervention, not a program demonstrated to be effective through an implementation trial. Its four pillars address the training, cultural, psychosocial, and documentary gaps identified in the interviews. A standardized turnover archive and an initial local diagnosis are intended to preserve tacit knowledge and enable incoming chiefs to make informed decisions. Institutional reinforcement would be provided through PNP training and human resource structures, oversight, and relevant local-government partnerships (Roycroft & Brine, 2021; Tyson & Charman, 2023; Vito et al., 2024).

Table 5. *Four pillars of the proposed PROGRAM L.E.A.D.*

Pillar	Proposed components
1. Institutionalized leadership development	Transitional executive training, peer mentorship, communication and innovation laboratories, inclusive planning
2. Modernization of PNP command culture	Participatory administration, service orientation, cultural competency, community-centered policing, fiscal transparency
3. Holistic personnel support and incentives	Wellness and family support, digital upskilling, adaptability recognition
4. Standardized transition and operations	Digital turnover records, 10-day contextual diagnosis, legal and human-rights screening

The study's proposed monitoring measures include reduced operational transition lag, improved morale and perceived procedural fairness, stronger institutional integrity, and enhanced public trust. They are targets for future evaluation rather than outcomes observed in the present study. The use of structured organizational support responds to interview accounts of reliance on personal resilience and the need for continuity across successive command assignments (Ayorinde et al., 2025; Elkington et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

The lived experiences of 16 municipal police chiefs show that transitional policing demands an integrated command approach combining participatory dialogue, transformational inspiration, situational flexibility, and non-negotiable legal discipline. Turnover can disrupt organizational memory, morale, operational priorities, and community relationships; adaptation is further complicated by political influence, scarce resources, changing mandates, and ethical pressures. Chiefs relied on judgment, accumulated experience, emotional regulation, community engagement, and professional integrity to navigate these pressures. Their accounts emphasize that institutional mechanisms for leader preparation, ethical safeguards, personnel support, and systematic handover are required so that successful transition does not depend solely on an individual chief's resilience. PROGRAM L.E.A.D. translates the reported needs into a proposed framework that merits structured implementation and evaluation.

Recommendation

National PNP leadership may pilot PROGRAM L.E.A.D., institutionalize structured digital turnover protocols, and balance quantitative indicators with attention to internal procedural justice, morale, and public trust. Police leadership academies and training services may introduce required modules on adaptive command, change management, ethical decision-making, cultural intelligence, and peer mentoring. Regional and provincial leadership offices may provide legal-policy assistance, transition coaching, and technical support for newly appointed station commanders.

Incoming municipal police chiefs may conduct participatory planning, timely contextual diagnostics, lawful and transparent resource management, and continuous communication with their personnel. Local government officials may provide predictable logistical support while respecting the operational and legal independence of policing decisions. Subsequent research should test the feasibility, acceptability, and effects of the proposed program in other provincial and urban contexts, and should examine personnel and community perspectives alongside the chiefs' accounts.

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