

# Transformational Leadership Experiences of Overseas Filipino Educational Leaders

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## Abstract

This study employed Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the transformational leadership experiences of overseas Filipino educational leaders working in Thai schools during the first semester of School Year 2024–2025. Using in-depth interviews, data were gathered from six Filipino school leaders employed in private and international schools in Bangkok and analyzed through holistic, selective, and detailed reading approaches. Four themes emerged: ethical leadership in a cross-cultural educational space, cultural tension and adaptive becoming, sustaining hope and inspiration in multicultural contexts, and relational, growth-oriented leadership. Findings indicate that Filipino leaders consistently demonstrated honesty, fairness, professionalism, and cultural humility; adapted to Thai hierarchical and communicative norms; maintained emotional steadiness within multicultural teams; and fostered teacher development through individualized, culturally responsive mentorship. Their practices reflected the core dimensions of transformational leadership—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—integrated with Filipino values such as *pakikipagkapwa* and *malasakit*. The study concludes that Filipino educational leaders in Thailand exemplify a culturally responsive and relationally grounded form of transformational leadership shaped by the convergence of Filipino and Thai cultural values. These findings offer implications for leadership development programs in the Philippines, emphasizing ethical sensitivity, cross-cultural adaptability, and relational care in preparing globally competent educational leaders.

**Keywords:** transformational leadership; Filipino educational leaders; cross-cultural leadership; Thai educational context

## I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a multifaceted concept shaped by the contexts in which it is practiced and experienced. In education, transformational leadership has emerged as a prominent and effective leadership style, emphasizing inspiration, innovation, and the empowerment of individuals to achieve exceptional outcomes (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). This approach has been shown to foster positive school cultures, enhance teacher motivation, and improve student achievement across diverse educational settings (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Zhong, 2024).

In Thailand, transformational leadership plays a critical role in navigating a culturally diverse educational system characterized by harmony, respect for authority, and consensus-based decision-making (Whitehouse, 2021). As globalization continues to reshape education through changing societal demands, technological advancements, and global mobility, educational leaders are increasingly required to

demonstrate cross-cultural adaptability and culturally responsive leadership (Zhong, 2024). Transformational leadership, with its focus on idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration, provides a flexible framework for leading across cultural boundaries (Bass, 1985).

For Filipino educational leaders working in Thai schools, leadership presents both opportunities and challenges. These leaders bring with them Filipino cultural values such as *kapwa* and *pakikisama*, which emphasize relational, community-oriented, and compassionate leadership (Jocano, 2001). However, they must also adapt their practices to align with Thai cultural norms, including hierarchical structures, respect rituals such as the *wai*, and collective decision-making processes (Hofstede, 1980; Whitehouse, 2021). Balancing Filipino relational leadership with Thai cultural expectations requires continuous negotiation and adaptation.

While transformational leadership has been widely studied in both Philippine and Thai educational contexts, limited research has examined how Filipino leaders enact and adapt transformational leadership within foreign educational systems such as Thailand's. Existing studies highlight the effectiveness of transformational leadership in promoting teacher collaboration, motivation, and professional growth (Leithwood, 1994; Zhong, 2024), yet the lived experiences of Filipino leaders operating in cross-cultural environments remain underexplored. Understanding how these leaders navigate cultural differences and implement transformational practices is essential for advancing leadership theory and practice in increasingly globalized educational settings.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores the transformational leadership practices of Filipino educational leaders working in Thai schools and examines how their cross-cultural experiences inform leadership development in the Philippine educational landscape. By focusing on leadership adaptation and cultural responsiveness, the study contributes to cross-cultural leadership scholarship and offers insights for preparing globally competent Filipino educational leaders both at home and abroad.

## II. FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This study is anchored in transformational leadership theory as conceptualized by Burns (1978) and further developed by Bass (1985, 1998). Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring and motivating followers to achieve higher levels of performance and personal growth beyond transactional exchanges. Bass identified four core dimensions—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—which serve as the central analytical lens of this study.

The framework is further supported by empirical and educational leadership scholarship. Podsakoff et al. (1990) operationalized transformational leadership behaviors into measurable components, while Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) demonstrated its effectiveness in enhancing teacher performance, organizational capacity, and student outcomes. Northouse (2019) emphasized transformational leadership as a values-based and change-oriented approach suited to diverse educational contexts. Complementary perspectives from Kouzes and Posner's (2012) leadership practices model and Amabile and Kramer's (2011) progress principle reinforce the importance of vision, empowerment, intrinsic motivation, and professional growth within transformational leadership.

Situating transformational leadership within a cross-cultural context, the framework integrates Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions and the GLOBE leadership theory (House et al., 2004) to explain how cultural values shape leadership behaviors. Filipino educational leaders in Thailand navigate cultural contrasts such as higher power distance, collectivism, and consensus-oriented decision-making, while sustaining

Filipino relational values including *kapwa*, *pakikisama*, and *bayanihan* (Jocano, 2001; Tiongzon et al., 2024). This cultural convergence informs how transformational leadership is enacted in multicultural school environments.

The framework also accounts for the legal and policy environment governing education in Thailand. Key policies—including the National Education Act B.E. 2542 (1999), the Teachers and Educational Personnel Council Act B.E. 2546 (2003), the Private School Act B.E. 2550 (2007), and the Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (2008)—define leadership roles, professional standards, curriculum expectations, and governance structures for both Thai and foreign educators. Regulations from the Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC) and immigration and labor laws further shape leadership practice by influencing employment conditions, professional stability, and administrative responsibilities.

Guided by these theoretical, cultural, and policy foundations, the framework examines how Filipino educational leaders enact and adapt transformational leadership within Thai schools. By integrating leadership theory, cross-cultural dynamics, and institutional contexts, the study addresses a gap in the literature and offers insights into culturally responsive and globally relevant educational leadership.

### III. OBJECTIVES

This study explored the transformational leadership practices of overseas Filipino educational leaders in Thailand during the first semester of the School Year 2024–2025. It examined their lived experiences in practicing transformational leadership within the Thai educational context, including how they adapt their leadership approaches to cultural and institutional expectations. Furthermore, the study investigated the implications of these leadership practices for the Philippine educational landscape.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research question: What are the transformational leadership experiences of Filipino educational leaders in Thailand?

### IV. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design using hermeneutic phenomenology, as articulated by Max van Manen, to explore the lived experiences of Filipino educational leaders practicing transformational leadership in Thai schools. The study focused on understanding how these leaders perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their leadership practices within a cross-cultural educational context. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that allowed participants to provide reflective accounts of their leadership experiences, adaptations, and interactions within their respective institutions. Van Manen's (1990) holistic, selective, and detailed reading processes guided the analysis to uncover essential themes and meanings embedded in the participants' narratives.

The study was conducted in three selected schools in Bangkok, Thailand, during the first semester of the School Year 2024–2025. These schools were purposively chosen to represent diverse educational settings and leadership contexts, including private and internationally oriented institutions with varying curricular frameworks and organizational structures. The selection of these schools enabled the exploration of transformational leadership practices across different institutional environments within a multicultural setting.

Participants included six purposively selected Filipino educational leaders currently holding formal or informal leadership roles in the selected schools. Selection criteria included Filipino nationality, active engagement in leadership responsibilities, and at least one year of professional experience in the Thai educational system. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and all

responses were treated with strict confidentiality. Participation was voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any point without consequences.

A researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide served as the primary research instrument. The guide was designed to align with the core dimensions of transformational leadership and was reviewed and validated by a panel of experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and ethical compliance. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were returned to participants for validation to ensure accuracy and credibility of interpretation. Reflective field notes and researcher memos were also used to support data interpretation and enhance analytical rigor.

Ethical considerations, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity, were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. All data were securely stored in password-protected digital files accessible only to the researcher and will be disposed of after the prescribed retention period in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings and discussion of the lived experiences of overseas Filipino educational leaders in Thai schools. Guided by Van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology, the study explored leadership as relational, ethical, culturally situated, embodied, and temporal. Four existential themes emerged from participants' narratives: (1) living out ethical leadership in a cross-cultural educational space, (2) dwelling in cultural tension and adaptive becoming, (3) sustaining hope and inspiration amid multicultural realities, and (4) nurturing others through relational and growth-oriented leadership. These themes illustrate how Filipino leaders enact transformational leadership while negotiating moral, relational, and cultural complexities.

### Theme 1: Living Out Ethical Leadership in a Cross-Cultural Educational Space

Filipino educational leaders in Thai schools experienced ethical leadership as a deeply relational and culturally responsive practice. One leader shared,

“As a Filipino leader in the Thai educational system, I model ethical behavior and integrity by leading with honesty, fairness, and respect for Thai culture. I ensure transparency in decisions, treat all staff equally, and handle conflicts professionally...”

This statement reflects ethical leadership as a lived moral experience, enacted through relational interactions rather than formal rules (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; House et al., 2004). Ethical practice was also expressed in professionalism and culturally informed decision-making:

“I also uphold professionalism, avoid biases, and always prioritize what's best for students and staff. By balancing Filipino resilience with Thai values, I build trust and strong leadership in the school community.”

Leaders emphasized the importance of understanding colleagues' religions and cultural norms, stating, “We work in a diverse environment, so we must always practice professionalism and maintain harmonious relationships with everyone. It is also important to have general knowledge of our colleagues' religions and cultures to avoid unintentional disrespect.”

These reflections demonstrate how ethical leadership is relational, culturally sensitive, and aligned with Van Manen's (1990) concept of lived space. Leaders further highlighted inclusive practices that foster motivation and relational trust:

“In a multicultural school, I inspire my team by balancing Thai and international values, ensuring everyone feels valued and heard. I keep motivation high through recognition, teamwork, and growth opportunities

while fostering respect, open communication, and shared goals. By leading with optimism and cultural awareness, I create a supportive and motivated team.”

This aligns with transformational leadership principles emphasizing individualized consideration, inclusion, and authentic concern for well-being (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Podsakoff et al., 1990). Ethical dilemmas also emerged when balancing business interests with educational values:

“Challenge was balancing business interests with educational values in some schools. I stayed firm in advocating for students while finding solutions that aligned with both ethics and institutional goals.”

Leaders demonstrated moral courage, negotiating institutional pressures while maintaining integrity and learner-centered priorities (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Overall, ethical leadership among Filipino leaders in Thailand was enacted through transparency, professionalism, cultural humility, and relational tact, creating trust and harmony in multicultural educational communities.

### **Theme 2: Dwelling in Cultural Tension and Adaptive Becoming**

Leadership identity for Filipino educational leaders in Thailand was continuously shaped through navigating cultural tensions and adapting to local norms. One reflection illustrates this adaptive process:

“Balancing my Filipino leadership identity while aligning with Thai cultural norms and expectations requires a combination of adaptability, self-awareness, and respect for both cultures. As a Filipino leader in a Thai educational setting, I navigate the differences in leadership styles while ensuring that my approach remains effective, culturally sensitive, and aligned with the school’s mission.”

Cultural tension was experienced as an opportunity for growth, requiring emotional intelligence and cultural attunement (Earley & Ang, 2003; Sarwar et al., 2023). Leaders emphasized fostering trust and teamwork while respecting authority, stating,

“A key aspect of my Filipino leadership identity is fostering community and teamwork. I respect authority and decision-making structures while gradually building trust and encouraging open dialogue in ways that align with Thai values of harmony and respect.”

### **Adapting to hierarchical structures and indirect communication was essential, as expressed in:**

“My initial belief was that foreign leadership would primarily drive international best practices. However, I now understand that true leadership success in Thai schools comes from balancing global educational principles with local values and traditions. Foreign leaders can thrive in Thai schools if they respect cultural norms, build relationships, and introduce changes gradually.”

### **Understanding Thai indirectness was crucial:**

“Being aware of communication differences—such as the indirect approach in Thai culture—has helped me integrate my leadership style better in a cross-cultural setting.”

These experiences highlight Van Manen’s (1990) concepts of lived relation and lived body, where leadership is embodied in relational sensitivity, tone, gestures, and responsiveness to subtle cultural cues. By harmonizing Filipino relational values (*pakikipagkapwa*, *malasakit*) with Thai norms of harmony, gentleness, and hierarchy, leaders cultivate trust, collaboration, and receptivity to change (Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995; Komin, 1991; Hallinger, 2020).

### **Theme 3: Sustaining Hope and Inspiration Amid Multicultural Realities**

**Sustaining hope emerged as an embodied and relational practice that anchors multicultural teams amid uncertainty. Leaders described clear and consistent communication as key:**

“In a multicultural team, misunderstandings can sometimes arise due to differences in communication styles. To overcome this, I ensure that my communication is clear, consistent, and accessible to everyone.

I encourage open dialogue, where team members can share their thoughts and ask questions without hesitation.”

**Providing development opportunities further nurtured hope:**

“By keeping everyone informed about the progress towards our goals and any challenges we may face, I maintain trust and ensure that the team remains united in its purpose. Finally, I recognize the importance of providing opportunities for professional growth and development. I ensure that my team has access to training and resources that can help them grow in their roles and contribute more effectively to the school’s goals.”

**Emotional attunement and conflict management were also central:**

“While I am accustomed to addressing issues head-on, I learned that in the Thai context, addressing conflict directly and publicly could be seen as confrontational and damaging to relationships. To overcome this, I adopted a more discreet and private approach when addressing conflicts, focusing on finding solutions that preserved harmony while upholding ethical standards.”

**Routine engagement and follow-up meetings created consistency and relational stability:**

“I typically conduct follow-up meetings, such as cohort meetings, to address any challenges or concerns that may arise. These meetings provide an opportunity for open dialogue, allowing team members to express any difficulties they are facing.”

Sustaining hope in multicultural teams aligns with Van Manen’s (1990) lived body and lived time, demonstrating the importance of emotional presence, rhythmic interactions, and psychological safety (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010).

**Theme 4: Nurturing Others Through Relational and Growth-Oriented Leadership**

Filipino leaders nurtured others as a relational, culturally responsive, and growth-oriented practice. One shared,

“Furthermore, I focus on continuous learning and development, providing personalized training and growth opportunities. I encourage my team to set individual goals, while also aligning them with the broader team objectives, ensuring they feel motivated to contribute in a way that respects both their professional growth and cultural identity.”

**Leaders emphasized individualized support:**

“To provide personalized support that addresses the unique cultural and professional needs of my staff, I first make an effort to get to know each team member individually...” and “I provide personalized support by understanding my staff’s cultural and professional needs. For Thai staff, I respect hierarchy and *Kreng Jai*, offering gentle guidance.”

These narratives reflect transformational leadership’s principle of individualized consideration and Van Manen’s (1990) lived relation, where leadership is enacted through attentive, culturally sensitive, and relationally grounded practices. By combining relational care with professional development, leaders create psychologically safe spaces that nurture trust, motivation, and engagement (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Day, 2000; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995). Even in the face of communication challenges and hierarchical constraints, nurturing becomes an opportunity to deepen relational connection and foster leadership maturity, embodying Filipino values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *malasakit*.

The study revealed that Filipino educational leaders in Thai schools enact transformational leadership as an ethical, relational, and culturally responsive practice. Ethical leadership emerged as a daily moral commitment, enacted through honesty, fairness, professionalism, and cultural respect. Leaders consistently anchored their decisions in integrity while navigating challenges such as Thai indirect

communication, hierarchical norms, and pressures from business-oriented school owners. These findings align with research emphasizing that ethical leadership is not only a matter of formal compliance but is grounded in daily relational practices that integrate moral values with contextual sensitivity (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Hallinger, 2020). By consistently demonstrating ethicality, leaders foster trust, relational harmony, and credibility in multicultural school settings.

Cultural tension was experienced as a meaningful space for adaptation and growth. Leaders continuously balanced Filipino relational expressiveness with Thai expectations for emotional harmony and deference to authority. This process required sensitivity to subtle nonverbal cues, adjustments in communication styles, and modulation of leadership behavior to align with hierarchical norms and high power-distance expectations. These experiences reflect Van Manen's (1990) notion of lived space and lived relation, showing that effective leadership in multicultural contexts requires attunement to cultural subtleties and relational dynamics (Earley & Ang, 2003; Sarwar et al., 2023; Holmes & Tangtongtavy, 1995). The adaptive process demonstrates that cultural tension can be leveraged as an opportunity for developing intercultural competence and refining leadership identity.

Sustaining hope and motivation within multicultural teams was grounded in calm presence, clear communication, and emotional patience. Leaders served as stabilizing figures during recurring misunderstandings and culturally influenced communication gaps, providing reassurance through consistent engagement and culturally sensitive dialogue. The findings support literature emphasizing the role of relational and emotional leadership in promoting resilience, psychological safety, and cohesion in diverse teams (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). By embedding hope in relational practices rather than motivational rhetoric, leaders maintained team cohesion and promoted trust despite the complexities of cross-cultural communication.

Nurturing others was enacted as a relational and growth-oriented practice shaped by Filipino values of pakikipagkapwa and malasakit. Leaders provided individualized support, recognized teachers' strengths, and tailored mentorship according to cultural expectations, fostering professional development while respecting Thai norms of hierarchy and emotional harmony. Challenges such as kreng jai, language barriers, and differing levels of teacher openness required ongoing patience, cultural sensitivity, and relational attentiveness. These findings align with transformational leadership literature emphasizing individualized consideration, relational warmth, and mentorship as central to fostering professional growth and engagement (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Van Manen, 1990).

Overall, the findings indicate that Filipino educational leaders enact transformational leadership as an ethical, culturally attuned, hope-sustaining, and relationally nurturing practice. Ethical leadership provides moral grounding; cultural tension serves as an adaptive space for growth; hope and motivation are maintained through relational and emotional practices; and nurturing promotes professional development in culturally responsive ways. Together, these themes illustrate leadership as a lived, embodied, relational, and morally grounded phenomenon in multicultural educational contexts, integrating Filipino values with Thai cultural norms (Burns, 1978; Van Manen, 1990; Komin, 1991; Bass & Riggio, 2006).

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

Filipino educational leaders in Thailand exemplify a culturally responsive form of transformational leadership that combines idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration with Filipino values and Thai cultural expectations. Their leadership is marked by compassion, adaptability, professionalism, and a commitment to teacher growth and

organizational harmony. The findings show that effective leadership in multicultural contexts requires ethical practice, emotional intelligence, and cultural awareness. By blending Filipino relational values with Thai norms of respect and harmony, these leaders demonstrate that transformational leadership is a lived experience shaped by culture, identity, and relational dynamics. Their practices provide valuable insights for developing educators capable of leading in diverse and global educational environments.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed: Filipino educational leaders in Thailand should adopt culturally responsive strategies that integrate Filipino values with Thai norms to foster trust and collaboration. Teachers and staff may engage in relational mentoring and culturally sensitive professional development to enhance motivation and belonging. Thai schools and stakeholders are encouraged to promote cross-cultural awareness and inclusive practices to improve school climate and staff satisfaction. Filipino leaders in the Philippines can apply lessons from cross-cultural leadership to strengthen teacher motivation, relational trust, and inclusive school cultures.

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