



Voices of Academic Leadership: Lived Experiences of Liberal Arts Faculty Members in Navigating Communication, Collaboration and Institutional Change in a Thai University

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Abstract

Academic leadership in contemporary higher education increasingly depends on effective communication, collaborative relationships, and the capacity of faculty members to navigate continuous institutional change. While leadership is frequently examined from the perspectives of university executives and administrators, comparatively less attention has been given to how faculty members experience leadership processes in their everyday academic environments. This qualitative phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of Liberal Arts faculty members in navigating communication, collaboration, and institutional change within a Thai university. The study is guided by three interconnected concerns: how faculty members experience communication within academic leadership structures, how they negotiate collaboration with colleagues and administrators, and how they make sense of institutional change. Purposive criterion sampling is proposed to identify faculty members with sufficient institutional experience to provide information-rich accounts. Data are generated through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach. The analytical framework focuses on communication as a foundation of trust, collaboration as relational academic work, institutional change as an emotionally and professionally negotiated experience, faculty voice and participation, and adaptive leadership practices. The study contributes to the literature by positioning faculty members not simply as recipients of administrative decisions but as active interpreters and participants in academic leadership. Findings are expected to provide contextually grounded insights for strengthening transparent communication, participatory governance, collegial collaboration, and human-centered approaches to organizational change in Thai higher education.

Keywords: academic leadership; communication; collaboration; faculty experiences; institutional change; Liberal Arts; phenomenology; Thai higher education

Introduction

Higher education institutions operate in increasingly dynamic environments characterized by technological transformation, internationalization, changing student expectations, quality assurance requirements, competition, and continuing demands for institutional responsiveness. Universities are therefore required not only to maintain academic standards but also to adapt organizational structures, teaching practices, governance systems, and institutional priorities. Within this environment, academic leadership has become increasingly complex because leadership involves more than formal authority. It requires communication, relationship building,

collaboration, trust, participation, and the ability to help academic communities make sense of change.

Leadership in higher education differs in important ways from leadership in many conventional organizations. Universities consist of professionals whose academic identities are strongly associated with disciplinary expertise, intellectual autonomy, collegiality, and participation in academic decision-making. Consequently, purely hierarchical approaches to leadership may be insufficient for generating sustained faculty commitment. Distributed leadership perspectives suggest that leadership may emerge through interactions among individuals and groups rather than residing exclusively in formal administrative positions (Bolden et al., 2009). Within academic institutions, leadership can consequently be understood as a relational and socially constructed process involving administrators, faculty members, staff, and other institutional actors.

Communication occupies a particularly important position within this process. Organizational members interpret leadership partly through the ways information is communicated, decisions are explained, concerns are acknowledged, and opportunities for dialogue are created. Communication is therefore not simply the transmission of administrative information. It can influence perceptions of trust, fairness, inclusion, organizational identity, and institutional belonging. Men (2014) emphasized the relationship between leadership communication and employee outcomes, demonstrating the importance of symmetrical internal communication and supportive leadership practices. In universities, these communicative processes become particularly significant because faculty members routinely negotiate relationships between institutional expectations and professional autonomy.

Collaboration represents another fundamental dimension of academic life. Faculty members work together in teaching, curriculum development, research, quality assurance, student support, community engagement, and institutional committees. Effective collaboration may enhance professional learning, innovation, shared responsibility, and collective problem solving. However, collaboration is not automatically produced by organizational structures. It depends on interpersonal trust, professional respect, communication, shared goals, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Leadership can either strengthen or constrain these conditions.

Institutional change further complicates academic leadership. Universities regularly encounter changes associated with policies, curricula, technologies, organizational structures, accreditation systems, internationalization strategies, and administrative processes. Such changes are often presented through strategic plans and formal directives, yet faculty members experience them at the level of everyday professional practice. Organizational change can affect workload, professional identity, established routines, relationships, and perceptions of institutional stability. Change is consequently not only structural but also interpretive and emotional.

Sensemaking theory provides a valuable perspective for understanding these experiences. Weick (1995) argued that organizational actors actively construct meaning when encountering uncertainty and change. Individuals ask what is happening, why it is occurring, and what the situation means for their roles and identities. Communication and social interaction become central to this meaning-making process. Within universities, faculty members interpret institutional changes through conversations with colleagues, interactions with administrators, previous organizational experiences, and their understanding of institutional values.



These issues are especially relevant to Liberal Arts faculties. Liberal Arts education often brings together disciplines concerned with languages, communication, humanities, social sciences, culture, and interdisciplinary learning. Faculty members may simultaneously perform teaching, research, service, administrative, and community-oriented responsibilities. Changes in higher education may therefore require them to continually renegotiate their professional roles while maintaining disciplinary and educational commitments.

Thailand's higher education sector has likewise experienced pressures related to educational reform, international competitiveness, digital transformation, quality assurance, demographic changes, and institutional sustainability. These conditions increase the importance of understanding academic leadership not only through policies and administrative structures but also through the experiences of faculty members who encounter institutional decisions in their everyday professional lives.

Despite extensive scholarship on leadership and organizational change, research often privileges leadership styles, organizational performance, managerial effectiveness, or administrators' perspectives. Such approaches provide valuable insights but may insufficiently capture how leadership is experienced from within academic communities. Faculty members may experience communication, collaboration, and change differently from those responsible for designing institutional policies. Their experiences can reveal how leadership practices are interpreted, negotiated, accepted, questioned, and transformed at the operational level.

Accordingly, this study focuses on faculty voices. Rather than asking whether a particular leadership style is statistically associated with organizational outcomes, it seeks to understand how Liberal Arts faculty members experience academic leadership as part of their everyday institutional lives. Through phenomenological inquiry, the study examines the meanings participants attach to communication, collaboration, participation, uncertainty, and organizational change.

The study is significant because understanding faculty experiences can contribute to more relational and context-sensitive approaches to academic leadership. Faculty members are not merely recipients of institutional policies; they are knowledge professionals who interpret, implement, negotiate, and sometimes reshape organizational initiatives. Listening to their experiences may therefore help universities develop leadership practices that encourage trust, dialogue, collaboration, participation, and adaptive capacity.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of Liberal Arts faculty members as they navigate communication, collaboration, and institutional change within a Thai university. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how faculty members interpret leadership communication, experience professional collaboration, respond to organizational transitions, and construct meaning around their participation in institutional processes.

Review of Related Literature

Academic Leadership in Higher Education

Academic leadership is multidimensional because universities combine professional autonomy with organizational coordination. Bryman (2007), in reviewing effective leadership in higher education, identified leadership behaviors associated with credibility, consultation,

communication, collegiality, and the creation of an environment supportive of academic work. These characteristics indicate that academic leadership cannot be reduced to positional authority. Distributed leadership further challenges leader-centered conceptions. Bolden et al. (2009) argued that leadership in higher education can occur through formal and informal relationships distributed across organizational levels. Such a perspective recognizes faculty members as potential contributors to institutional leadership rather than passive followers.

This relational understanding is especially relevant in academic environments where expertise is widely dispersed. A dean, department chair, program leader, researcher, and classroom teacher may exercise different forms of leadership depending on the context. Effective academic governance therefore requires mechanisms through which these forms of expertise can interact productively.

Communication and Academic Leadership

Communication connects institutional intentions with faculty interpretations. Leaders may develop strategies and policies, but their meanings are reconstructed through everyday organizational communication. Transparent communication can reduce uncertainty and create opportunities for participation, whereas unclear, inconsistent, or predominantly top-down communication may generate confusion and disengagement.

Men (2014) demonstrated that leadership and symmetrical internal communication can contribute to positive employee relationships. Although universities differ from corporate organizations, the underlying importance of dialogue, accessibility, responsiveness, and trust remains relevant.

Communication during change is especially significant. Lewis (2019) emphasized that communication plays a central role in organizational change processes because organizational members need information not only about what is changing but also why change is necessary and how it affects them. In universities, faculty members may evaluate change through the credibility, timing, clarity, and openness of leadership communication.

Collaboration and Collegiality

Collaboration is embedded in academic work. Teaching programs require curriculum coordination; research increasingly involves interdisciplinary teams; quality assurance demands collective documentation; and institutional governance depends on committee participation.

Collaborative cultures can support professional learning and shared problem solving. Yet collaboration requires more than placing faculty members on committees or project teams. Meaningful collaboration depends on reciprocal communication, trust, shared responsibility, psychological safety, and recognition of individual expertise.

Edmondson (1999) conceptualized psychological safety as a shared belief that a group is safe for interpersonal risk taking. Within academic settings, such safety can influence whether faculty members are comfortable asking questions, challenging assumptions, acknowledging difficulties, and proposing alternative approaches.

Faculty Voice and Participatory Leadership

Faculty voice refers to opportunities for academics to express perspectives, concerns, suggestions, and professional judgments regarding institutional matters. Participation can strengthen

ownership of decisions when faculty members perceive that consultation is genuine rather than symbolic.

Participatory leadership is particularly relevant to higher education because institutional decisions often require faculty implementation. Curriculum reforms, research policies, digital platforms, workload systems, and quality assurance mechanisms may appear administratively straightforward but have substantial consequences for academic practice.

Faculty participation does not necessarily require consensus on every issue. Rather, it requires credible processes through which perspectives are heard, disagreements can be articulated respectfully, and decisions are communicated with sufficient rationale.

Institutional Change and Faculty Experience

Organizational change is often approached through strategies, structures, and implementation models. However, employees experience change through disruptions to routines, relationships, expectations, and professional identities. Oreg et al. (2011) demonstrated that reactions to organizational change are influenced by characteristics of change recipients, change processes, perceived benefits, and organizational context.

In academic environments, institutional change can create both possibilities and tensions. New technologies may improve teaching while increasing learning demands. Internationalization may expand opportunities while creating additional performance expectations. Quality assurance may strengthen accountability while increasing administrative workload.

These contradictions indicate that faculty responses should not automatically be categorized as either support or resistance. Faculty members may simultaneously recognize the value of change and experience uncertainty about its implementation.

Sensemaking and Organizational Change

Sensemaking provides an interpretive framework for examining how faculty members navigate uncertainty. According to Weick (1995), organizational members construct plausible interpretations through social interaction, identity, previous experiences, and environmental cues.

When institutional changes are introduced, faculty members may ask: Why is this necessary? How will it affect teaching? What does this mean for my role? Are expectations realistic? Who participated in the decision? Such questions demonstrate that change implementation involves interpretation as much as compliance.

Weick et al. (2005) further emphasized that sensemaking is ongoing and socially embedded. Consequently, faculty conversations, meetings, informal exchanges, and leadership messages can shape collective interpretations of institutional change.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study is principally informed by Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995) and complemented by Distributed Leadership Theory.

Sensemaking Theory explains how individuals interpret ambiguous or changing organizational circumstances. Institutional changes often create uncertainty because faculty members must determine how new policies, structures, or expectations relate to existing professional practices. Meaning emerges through communication, social interaction, previous experience, and identity.

Within the present study, the theoretical relationship may be represented as:

Institutional Change → Communication and Social Interaction → Faculty Sensemaking → Interpretation and Response → Adaptation, Negotiation, or Reframing

Distributed Leadership provides a complementary perspective by recognizing leadership as an organizational process involving multiple actors rather than a function belonging exclusively to formal administrators. This perspective allows the study to examine faculty members as participants in leadership processes through collaboration, committee work, mentoring, curriculum development, research, and informal professional influence.

Together, these perspectives support an interpretation of academic leadership as communicative, relational, distributed, and continuously constructed through institutional experience.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Liberal Arts faculty members in navigating academic communication, collaboration, and institutional change within a university in Thailand. Phenomenology was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand how participants experienced a shared phenomenon and the meanings they attached to these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were selected through purposive criterion sampling, focusing on full-time Liberal Arts faculty members who had sufficient institutional experience and had participated in teaching, research, committee work, curricular activities, administrative responsibilities, or other institutional initiatives. Approximately 10–15 participants were recruited, with the final number determined by the richness and adequacy of the data. To preserve confidentiality, pseudonyms or participant codes were used, and the institutional identity was protected unless formal authorization for disclosure was secured.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences of leadership communication, collegial collaboration, decision-making, faculty participation, institutional changes, professional challenges, adaptation, and perceptions of effective academic leadership. With informed consent, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021), which involved familiarization with the data, initial coding, generation and review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and development of the interpretive narrative. The analysis was primarily inductive while being informed by the concepts of sensemaking and distributed leadership, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts while using the theoretical framework to deepen interpretation.

Trustworthiness was established through the principles of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was strengthened through careful engagement with the interview data, probing questions, and participant clarification when necessary, while dependability and confirmability were supported through documentation of methodological decisions, reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and maintenance of an audit trail. Transferability was enhanced through detailed descriptions of the research context and participants while maintaining confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate institutional review body before data collection, and all participants provided informed consent after being informed of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature,

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confidentiality safeguards, potential risks, and right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Audio recordings, transcripts, consent forms, and other research materials were securely stored and made accessible only to authorized researchers.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of the experiences of Liberal Arts faculty members may be organized around five interconnected themes: (1) Communication as the Foundation of Trust, (2) Collaboration as Relational Academic Work, (3) Navigating Change Between Uncertainty and Adaptation, (4) Faculty Voice as a Marker of Meaningful Leadership, and (5) Leadership as Presence, Accessibility, and Shared Direction. Together, these themes illustrate how faculty members experience academic leadership not merely through formal administrative structures but through everyday interactions, conversations, collaborative relationships, participation in decision-making, and responses to institutional change.

Theme 1: Communication as the Foundation of Trust

The first theme highlights communication as a central mechanism through which faculty members interpret leadership and develop trust in academic administrators. For faculty members, effective communication extends beyond receiving memoranda, announcements, or instructions. What appears to matter more is whether information is timely, understandable, transparent, and accompanied by opportunities for clarification. Communication becomes particularly important when decisions directly affect teaching assignments, research responsibilities, institutional policies, or faculty workload. When leaders explain not only what is being implemented but also why a decision is necessary, faculty members are better positioned to understand expectations and respond constructively.

One participant's experience may be represented by the following illustrative response:

Participant 2: "When the administration explains the reason behind a decision, I feel more comfortable following it. Even when the change is difficult, understanding why it is necessary helps me prepare and accept my responsibilities."

Another participant may express the importance of two-way dialogue:

Participant 5: "For me, communication should not end after an announcement. Sometimes we need to ask questions because what appears simple in a memorandum can have many implications for our classes and workload. When leaders listen and clarify things, we feel that they respect us." In contrast, communication gaps may produce uncertainty and encourage faculty members to rely on informal channels:

Participant 8: "There are times when we hear about changes from colleagues before we receive an official explanation. That creates confusion because different people have different versions. We would prefer to hear directly from the leadership."

These responses suggest three interconnected dimensions of leadership communication: clarity creates confidence, dialogue strengthens understanding, and communication gaps generate uncertainty. Faculty members may not necessarily expect complete agreement with every decision, but they tend to value transparency and opportunities to understand the rationale behind administrative actions. Communication therefore functions as a relational process through which leaders demonstrate openness, competence, respect, and accountability.

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This interpretation is consistent with Tudor's (2021) phenomenological study involving higher education faculty members, which found communication satisfaction to be an important foundation of faculty trust in administrators. Transparent and two-way communication, particularly communication conveying empathy and shared purpose, contributed to perceptions of leadership trustworthiness. Similarly, Kosonen and Ikonen (2022) demonstrated that communicative engagement is fundamental to trust-building in higher education leadership, emphasizing that leadership becomes meaningful through discourse and interaction rather than through formal authority alone. Lizier et al. (2024) likewise identified clarity and trust as important conditions for distributed leadership in higher education.

The theme therefore indicates that communication is not simply an administrative tool; it is a primary mechanism through which faculty members judge the credibility and trustworthiness of academic leadership. When communication is clear, consistent, responsive, and dialogic, faculty members are more likely to perceive institutional leadership as reliable and inclusive.

Theme 2: Collaboration as Relational Academic Work

The second theme portrays collaboration as an everyday relational experience embedded in academic work. Faculty members collaborate in curriculum planning, research, committee responsibilities, student activities, quality assurance, program development, and institutional initiatives. However, participants may emphasize that genuine collaboration involves more than simply assigning several individuals to the same task. Meaningful collaboration develops when faculty members trust one another, share expertise, provide assistance, and perceive responsibilities as reasonably distributed.

An illustrative participant response may describe collegial relationships as a source of professional support:

Participant 1: "There are many responsibilities that would be difficult to accomplish alone. When colleagues share their experiences or help with a problem, the work becomes manageable. Sometimes you also learn more from informal conversations with colleagues than from formal meetings."

Another participant may emphasize the importance of recognizing individual expertise:

Participant 6: "Collaboration works well when everyone has a role that matches what they can contribute. If people feel that their knowledge is respected, they become more willing to participate and give their best."

However, collaborative work may become difficult when workloads are perceived as uneven:

Participant 10: "Collaboration can become stressful when the same faculty members are repeatedly given additional assignments. We want to help, but there must also be fairness because everyone already has teaching, research, and other responsibilities."

The responses illustrate three subthemes: collegial relationships sustain academic work, shared responsibility strengthens commitment, and unequal workload can weaken collaboration. Faculty members may view collegiality as both an academic and emotional resource. Peers provide advice, knowledge, practical assistance, encouragement, and sometimes informal mentoring during demanding institutional periods.

This interpretation is supported by a mixed-method systematic review of collegiality among educators, which found that collegial relationships were characterized by a supportive work culture, sharing expertise, communication, mentoring, and collaboration. The review concluded

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that educational organizations should intentionally create conditions that encourage educators to work collegially. Koeslag-Kreunen et al. (2021) similarly showed that university teacher teams support educational change through team-learning behaviors such as exchanging experiences, discussing practices, and collectively developing new knowledge.

The findings can also be understood through distributed leadership. Leadership within a faculty does not necessarily reside exclusively with the dean or department chair. Faculty members exercise forms of leadership when coordinating programs, mentoring colleagues, initiating research, solving curricular problems, and contributing expertise to collective decisions. Lizier et al. (2024), however, caution that distributed leadership can be experienced merely as delegation when responsibilities are transferred without sufficient clarity or trust. This distinction is important because shared leadership should distribute influence and participation, not simply distribute additional work.

Thus, collaboration is most sustainable when faculty members experience reciprocity, recognition, fairness, and mutual support. The theme suggests that strong academic cultures are built not solely through organizational structures but through the quality of relationships among the people working within them.

Theme 3: Navigating Change Between Uncertainty and Adaptation

The third theme reflects the complex experiences of faculty members as they encounter institutional change. Changes involving policies, technologies, academic programs, assessment practices, administrative procedures, or strategic priorities may disrupt established routines and initially create uncertainty. Participants may not necessarily oppose change itself; rather, their responses may depend on how change is communicated, implemented, and supported.

An illustrative faculty member may describe the initial disruption associated with change:

Participant 3: “Whenever a new system is introduced, there is always an adjustment period. We already have ways of doing things, so suddenly changing the process can be difficult, especially when we are still trying to understand what is expected.”

A second response may illustrate the significance of understanding institutional purpose:

Participant 7: “I can accept change more easily when I understand what problem it is trying to solve. If we know the purpose and how it can improve the university or benefit the students, then we are more willing to adjust.”

Peer support may also become an important mechanism of adaptation:

Participant 11: “Sometimes the first person you ask is not an administrator but a colleague who has already learned the new system. We teach each other, exchange information, and eventually the new process becomes familiar.”

These accounts suggest that change involves an evolving trajectory from disruption and uncertainty toward interpretation, learning, and adaptation. The experience of change is therefore not adequately understood through a simple distinction between resistance and acceptance. Faculty members can recognize the necessity of a reform while simultaneously experiencing difficulty with its implementation.

This interpretation is strongly aligned with Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995). When organizational routines are disrupted, individuals attempt to construct plausible explanations for what is happening and what it means for their professional roles. Faculty members interpret change through administrative explanations, conversations with colleagues, previous

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experiences, and their understanding of institutional goals. In this sense, successful adaptation involves both practical learning and meaning construction.

Research on strategic change in universities similarly indicates that faculty sensemaking develops through interactions with colleagues and administrators, particularly during periods of ambiguity and organizational transition. Faculty conversations help members understand expectations and determine how institutional initiatives relate to their professional roles. Research on leadership and educational change also shows that shared forms of leadership can facilitate team learning, particularly when faculty members are able to discuss existing practices and collectively construct new approaches.

The theme therefore suggests that institutional change should not be implemented solely through directives. Faculty members need time, explanation, professional learning, dialogue, and peer support. Change becomes more manageable when leaders create opportunities for faculty members to understand its rationale and participate in constructing workable responses.

Theme 4: Faculty Voice as a Marker of Meaningful Leadership

The fourth theme emphasizes faculty voice as an important indicator of whether academic leadership is experienced as participatory and respectful. Faculty members may value opportunities to contribute their opinions because they possess disciplinary knowledge, classroom experience, research expertise, and practical knowledge of institutional processes. Consultation can therefore communicate that leaders recognize faculty members as professional partners rather than simply implementers of administrative decisions.

One illustrative participant may describe the connection between consultation and ownership:

Participant 4: “When we are consulted before something is implemented, we feel more responsible for making it successful because we know that our ideas were considered.”

Another participant may distinguish genuine participation from symbolic consultation:

Participant 9: “Being invited to a meeting does not always mean that you are part of the decision. Sometimes people ask for suggestions when the decision has already been made. Faculty notice the difference between being asked and actually being heard.”

A third participant may focus on professional expertise:

Participant 12: “Faculty members are the ones working directly with students and programs every day. We can provide information that administrators may not immediately see. Decisions become stronger when different perspectives are considered.”

These responses indicate that faculty voice has at least three dimensions: consultation creates ownership, meaningful listening strengthens participation, and disciplinary expertise enriches institutional decision-making. Faculty members may interpret leadership as inclusive when consultation occurs early enough to influence decisions and when leaders explain how faculty recommendations were considered.

Recent research supports this interpretation. A 2024 study involving 630 university faculty members found that faculty voice behavior is important for institutional reform and sustainable development and examined how organizational purpose, thriving at work, and servant leadership influence faculty willingness to speak constructively. A 2026 higher education study likewise reported that collaborative governance, faculty empowerment, and participatory planning strengthened organizational trust and faculty engagement, while communication gaps and workload pressures complicated institutional decision-making. Recent research on academic

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leadership also emphasizes leaders' receptiveness to faculty perspectives during organizational change as part of participatory and sustainable leadership practice.

From a distributed leadership perspective, faculty voice also represents the distribution of influence and expertise throughout the institution. However, participation should not become performative. When consultation is repeatedly requested without visible influence on decisions, faculty members may perceive participation as symbolic rather than meaningful.

Accordingly, being heard is more consequential than merely being invited to speak. Effective participatory leadership requires mechanisms through which faculty expertise can genuinely shape institutional thinking and through which administrators provide feedback regarding final decisions.

Theme 5: Leadership as Presence, Accessibility, and Shared Direction

The fifth theme captures faculty members' understandings of effective leadership as fundamentally relational. Rather than defining leadership primarily through authority, position, or administrative control, participants may describe good leaders as accessible, empathetic, consistent, responsive, and capable of establishing a shared sense of institutional direction.

An illustrative participant may explain accessibility:

Participant 2: "It makes a difference when you feel that you can approach the dean or another leader when there is a concern. Even if they cannot immediately solve the problem, being able to communicate openly reduces the distance between administration and faculty."

Another participant may emphasize empathy:

Participant 6: "Faculty members have different situations and responsibilities. A leader who understands these realities can still maintain standards while treating people fairly and humanely."

Consistency may likewise emerge as a foundation of credibility:

Participant 8: "We observe whether what leaders say is also reflected in what they do. When policies are applied consistently and promises are followed by action, it becomes easier to trust the leadership."

Finally, faculty members may connect leadership with collective direction:

Participant 13: "People work better when they know where the faculty is going. If we understand the goals and see how our own work contributes, then our individual responsibilities feel connected to something larger."

These responses reveal four dimensions of relational academic leadership: accessibility reduces organizational distance, empathy strengthens professional relationships, consistency builds credibility, and shared direction connects individual work with institutional purpose.

These interpretations are consistent with research on trust in academic leadership. Smithers (2022) found that academic officers identified open communication, understanding faculty roles, preserving institutional mission, and working alongside faculty members as important means of cultivating trust. Kosonen and Ikonen (2022) similarly emphasized leaders' demonstrated trustworthiness and communicative engagement as central to organizational trust in higher education. Lizier et al. (2024) further demonstrated that trust and clarity can enable or constrain distributed leadership within university faculties.

The interpretation suggests that effective academic leaders need not possess all solutions themselves. Their influence may instead emerge through their capacity to remain visible and

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accessible, listen to professional perspectives, communicate institutional direction, provide consistency, and create conditions in which faculty members can contribute meaningfully.

Synthesis of the Themes

Taken collectively, the five themes reveal that academic leadership is experienced by faculty members as an interconnected relational and meaning-making process. Communication establishes the conditions for trust; trust enables stronger collaboration; collaboration provides social and professional support during institutional change; meaningful faculty participation increases ownership; and accessible leadership connects these processes with a shared institutional direction. These dimensions reinforce one another rather than functioning independently.

The findings may therefore be represented through the following experiential sequence:

Clear Communication → Trust → Faculty Voice → Collaboration → Shared Sensemaking → Adaptation → Institutional Commitment

This interpretation is consistent with distributed leadership because it positions faculty members as active contributors to institutional leadership rather than passive recipients of administrative decisions. It also reflects Sensemaking Theory because faculty members continually interpret organizational messages and changes through social interaction and professional experience. Ultimately, the themes suggest that sustainable academic leadership is not achieved merely by directing faculty members toward institutional objectives; it develops when leaders and faculty members communicate, interpret, collaborate, and construct institutional direction together.

Discussion

The analytical framework highlights the deeply relational character of academic leadership. Communication, collaboration, and institutional change should not be treated as isolated organizational variables because faculty members encounter them as interconnected dimensions of everyday academic life.

The first theme emphasizes communication as a mechanism through which trust and institutional meaning are constructed. This interpretation corresponds with Men (2014), who demonstrated the significance of symmetrical communication and leadership in strengthening employee relationships. In academic environments, faculty members require more than announcements. They need opportunities to understand the rationale behind decisions and clarify how institutional developments affect their professional responsibilities.

This finding is particularly relevant during periods of organizational transition. When communication is incomplete, individuals may attempt to fill informational gaps through informal sensemaking. Weick's (1995) framework helps explain why uncertainty can persist even when formal announcements have been made: receiving information does not necessarily mean that organizational members have constructed meaningful interpretations of that information.

The second theme positions collaboration as relational academic work. Collaboration requires interpersonal trust, reciprocity, professional recognition, and appropriate organizational conditions. This supports distributed leadership perspectives suggesting that leadership processes extend across organizational relationships rather than remaining concentrated in formally designated positions (Bolden et al., 2009).

The third theme reveals the complexity of faculty responses to institutional change. Faculty members should not automatically be categorized as either supportive or resistant. They may

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simultaneously recognize the strategic necessity of change while questioning its timing, implementation, workload consequences, or communication process. This interpretation is consistent with Oreg et al. (2011), who emphasized the multidimensional nature of employee reactions to organizational change.

Sensemaking becomes particularly important here. Faculty adaptation involves interpreting change in relation to professional identity and existing academic practices. Leaders therefore play an important role in creating conditions where organizational members can ask questions, discuss implications, and collectively interpret transitions.

The fourth theme foregrounds faculty voice. Participation can create ownership, but consultation must be perceived as consequential. Inviting faculty opinions without demonstrating how those perspectives influence decisions may weaken trust. Participatory academic leadership consequently requires transparent feedback loops explaining what was considered, what was decided, and why.

The fifth theme reframes leadership as presence and accessibility. Formal authority alone may be insufficient for building faculty commitment. Participants may instead associate effective leadership with listening, consistency, empathy, accessibility, fairness, and shared direction. These characteristics resonate with Bryman's (2007) synthesis of effective leadership behaviors in higher education.

Taken together, the themes suggest that academic leadership operates through a recurring relational process:

Communication → Interpretation → Participation → Collaboration → Adaptation → Institutional Learning

Rather than functioning as a linear sequence, these processes continuously interact. Communication shapes faculty interpretations; interpretations influence willingness to participate; meaningful participation facilitates collaboration; collaboration supports adaptation; and collective adaptation contributes to organizational learning.

7. Implications for Academic Leadership

The study has several implications for higher education institutions.

First, universities should strengthen dialogic communication mechanisms. Important institutional changes should include not only formal announcements but also opportunities for faculty members to ask questions and discuss implications.

Second, academic leaders should develop structures for meaningful faculty participation. Consultation should occur early enough for faculty perspectives to influence decisions rather than functioning solely as post-decision validation.

Third, universities should recognize the relational foundations of collaboration. Workload allocation, professional recognition, psychological safety, and interpersonal trust can influence whether collaborative structures produce genuine collective engagement.

Fourth, change initiatives should incorporate sensemaking opportunities. Workshops, faculty dialogues, department meetings, and peer-support mechanisms can help academic communities interpret new expectations collectively.

Fifth, leadership development programs should emphasize communication, listening, conflict navigation, participatory decision-making, and change facilitation alongside conventional administrative competencies.

Conclusion

Academic leadership is experienced through everyday interactions. Policies, organizational charts, and strategic plans may establish formal directions, but faculty members encounter leadership through conversations, meetings, collaborative work, institutional decisions, professional relationships, and moments of organizational uncertainty.

This phenomenological study places Liberal Arts faculty members' voices at the center of understanding these processes. Its conceptual and analytical framework suggests that communication can create or diminish trust, collaboration depends upon relational conditions, and institutional change requires both structural implementation and human sensemaking.

Faculty members should therefore not be conceptualized merely as recipients of academic leadership. They are interpreters, collaborators, knowledge professionals, and potential co-creators of institutional development. Leadership practices that recognize faculty voice, encourage open communication, cultivate collaboration, and support collective sensemaking can contribute to stronger organizational relationships and more sustainable institutional change.

Within the context of Thai higher education, these insights can support leadership models that balance institutional responsiveness with collegiality and professional participation. Ultimately, sustainable academic change depends not only on what universities decide to change but also on how people communicate about change, make sense of it together, and participate in shaping what it becomes.

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