

Bachelor's Programme in International Business

# The Impact of Informal Learning on Leadership Growth and Effectiveness of Later Career Leaders in the Public Sector

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores how later-career leaders in the public sector engage in informal learning to develop their leadership effectiveness. As formal training becomes less central in advanced career stages, the study focuses on how experienced leaders continue to grow through learning embedded in their daily work, peer relationships, and self-reflection. The research is guided by three questions: how later-career leaders engage with informal learning, how they apply it in practice, and how it impacts their effectiveness. Data was collected through nine semi-structured interviews with senior public sector leaders in Finland and analysed using thematic analysis.

The findings reveal four key themes: everyday learning through experience, relational learning processes, cognitive and reflective strategies, and the shaping of leadership practice. Participants reported that learning occurs most often through practical challenges, peer interactions, feedback, and personal reflection. These informal learning processes support adaptability, improve decision-making, and gradually reshape leadership identity. The study highlights the importance of informal learning in sustaining effective public sector leadership and offers insights relevant to leadership development and international organisation contexts.

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**Keywords** informal learning, leadership development, later-career leaders, public sector, reflective practice, mentoring, workplace learning, leadership identity

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### **Tiivistelmä**

Tämä opinnäytetyö tarkastelee, kuinka julkisen sektorin uransa loppuvaiheessa olevat johtajat hyödyntävät arkioppimista kehittyäkseen tehokkaammiksi johtajiksi. Koska muodollisen koulutuksen merkitys vähenee uran edetessä, tutkimuksessa keskitytään siihen, miten kokeneet johtajat oppivat arjessa mm. kollegoiden kanssa käydyn vuorovaikutuksen ja itsearvioinnin kautta. Tutkimus pohjautuu kolmeen tutkimuskysymykseen: miten johtajat kokevat arkioppimista, miten he soveltavat oppimaansa käytännössä ja miten tämä vaikuttaa heidän johtajuuteensa. Kerätty data koostuu yhdeksästä haastattelusta julkisen sektorin organisaatioissa työskentelevien kokeneiden johtajien kanssa. Aineisto analysoitiin temaattisen analyysin keinoin.

Havainnoissa nousi esiin neljä keskeistä teemaa: kokemuksellinen oppiminen arjessa, oppiminen vuorovaikutuksessa, kognitiiviset ja refleктоivat strategiat sekä johtamiskäytännön muotoutuminen. Johtajat kuvasivat oppivansa eniten käytännön haasteiden, toisten kanssa käytyjen keskustelujen, palautteen sekä kriittisen itsetarkastelun kautta. Arkioppiminen tukee sopeutumiskykyä, tehostaa päätöksentekoa ja muokkaa johtajaidentiteettiä ajan myötä. Tutkimus osoittaa, että epämuodollinen oppiminen on keskeinen osa julkisen sektorin johtajuuden ylläpitämistä ja kehittämistä myös uran loppuvaiheessa.

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**Avainsanat** arkioppiminen, johtamisen kehittäminen, kokeneet johtajat, julkinen sektori, vertaistuki, mentorointi, työssä oppiminen, johtajaidentiteetti

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Preface and acknowledgements .....	7
1 Introduction .....	8
1.1 Research Problem.....	8
1.2 Research Questions .....	8
2 Literature review .....	10
2.1 Introduction .....	10
2.2 Conceptual Foundations of Leadership Development .....	10
2.2.1 Theories of leadership development.....	11
2.2.2 Leadership as a lifelong process .....	12
2.2.3 Leadership in context .....	13
2.3 Leadership in Later Careers.....	14
2.3.1 Challenges and opportunities for later-career leaders .....	14
2.3.2 Public sector leadership.....	14
2.4 Informal Learning in Leadership Development.....	15
2.4.1 Mechanisms of informal learning.....	16
2.4.2 Informal learning and career development .....	17
2.5 Integrating Informal Learning with Leadership Development Frameworks.....	18
2.5.1 Theoretical integration .....	18
2.5.2 Practical applications .....	19
2.6 Public Sector Leadership Effectiveness.....	20
2.7 Conclusion.....	21
2.8 Conceptual Framework.....	21
3 Methodology.....	23
3.1 Research Design .....	23
3.2 Data Collection Method .....	23
3.3 Participants .....	24
3.4 Interview Design.....	25
3.5 Data Analysis Method.....	27
3.6 Limitations of Methodology.....	28
4 Analysis, Findings and Interpretation .....	29
4.1 Coding Structure Diagram .....	29
4.2 Coding Table .....	30

4.3	Thematic Analysis .....	32
4.3.1	Everyday learning through experience .....	32
4.3.2	Relational learning processes.....	33
4.3.3	Cognitive and reflective strategies.....	34
4.3.4	Shaping leadership practice .....	35
4.4	Modified Conceptual Model .....	37
4.5	Interpretation and Theoretical Contribution .....	38
5	Conclusions .....	40
5.1	Main Findings .....	40
5.2	Implications for International Business .....	41
5.3	Suggestions for Further Research .....	41
5.3.1	Limitations in current research .....	41
5.3.2	Underexplored areas .....	42
5.3.3	Future research priorities.....	42
	References .....	44

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Mikkeli, 14 April 2025  
Hilla Tervo

# 1 Introduction

Informal learning, or learning achieved outside structured training, has gained attention in the field of leadership development. This interest has grown as organisations recognise that much of the most relevant, timely, and applied leadership learning happens outside formal programmes, particularly in practical settings. Unlike formal training, informal learning is part of day to day working activities, social interactions, reflective thinking, and problem solving. For later-career leaders, whose roles are often shaped by autonomy and responsibility, informal learning can be a primary mode of development (Liu et al., 2020). This includes learning by doing, contextual mentoring, networking, and other feedback seeking activities. The literature is increasingly confirming that informal learning is crucial for leadership effectiveness in general and particularly in the latter stages of one's career when learning is more autonomous and situational (Cerasoli et al., 2018).

## 1.1 Research Problem

While much has been written about leadership development, most studies focus on structured programmes or the early stages of leadership careers. However, informal learning has become increasingly important in leadership development due to its relevance to real-time challenges, flexibility, and capacity to support lifelong learning (Cerasoli et al., 2018; Marsick and Watkins, 2001). It is especially significant for later-career leaders, who are often expected to navigate complex responsibilities with greater autonomy and draw on experiential knowledge rather than formal instruction (Liu et al., 2020). In the context of the public sector—characterised by constant reform, goal ambiguity, and high stakeholder expectations (Andrews and Boyne, 2010; Stazyk and Davis, 2019)—the ability to learn informally becomes vital to sustaining leadership effectiveness. Despite this, little empirical research has explored how later-career public sector leaders use informal learning to develop and shape their leadership. This study addresses this gap by examining the informal learning experiences of later-career leaders in the public sector.

## 1.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. How do later-career leaders in the public sector engage with informal learning opportunities to develop their leadership effectiveness?
2. What strategies do later-career leaders use to integrate insights from informal learning into their leadership practice?

3. How does the integration of informal learning impact the perceived and demonstrated leadership effectiveness of later-career public sector leaders?

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Understanding how leaders learn and perfect the abilities, know-how, and qualities required for success in a variety of organizational situations has drawn significant interest to the multifaceted and dynamic topic of leadership development (Day et al., 2021). The theoretical foundations of leadership development are the main topic of this literature review, which highlights informal learning as a crucial factor in developing adaptability and efficacy, especially for public sector executives in their later careers. The review emphasizes the value of lifelong learning, flexibility, and inclusive organizational cultures in promoting leadership excellence by examining theoretical ideas, real-world applications, and the particular difficulties faced by public sector leaders. By exploring these dimensions, the review addresses how later-career leaders in the public sector engage with informal learning opportunities, the strategies they use to integrate these insights into their leadership practice, and the resulting impact on their leadership effectiveness. In this study, leadership is defined as an organizational role rather than an informal influencing position, emphasizing the responsibilities and learning trajectories of later-career leaders in formal leadership positions.

### **2.2 Conceptual Foundations of Leadership Development**

Leadership development is a complex and multidimensional process, influenced by individual traits, identity evolution, and contextual factors (Day et al., 2021). Understanding the conceptual foundations of leadership development is essential for exploring how informal learning contributes to the growth and effectiveness of later-career leaders in the public sector. Importantly, leadership development matters because leaders directly shape organizational performance, employee engagement, and strategic direction. In today's fast-changing, uncertain, and often turbulent business and policy environments, organizations increasingly depend on leaders who can learn, adapt, and respond with agility. Effective leadership development is also linked to improved organizational performance, strategic adaptability, and employee engagement, especially in environments of rapid change (Day and Harrison, 2007). Developing such leaders—especially those in the later stages of their careers—ensures that organizations benefit not only from accumulated experience but also from leaders who are capable of evolving in step with emerging challenges. This section reviews key theoretical

contributions to leadership development and positions leadership as a dynamic, lifelong learning process.

### **2.2.1 Theories of leadership development**

Leadership development refers to the processes through which individuals acquire the skills, knowledge, and personal qualities needed to influence others and achieve organizational goals (Day et al., 2021). Foundational theories propose that leadership progresses through structured phases of cognitive, emotional, and relational maturation, with particular emphasis on identity formation and self-regulation. Lord and Hall (2005) present a pivotal framework distinguishing three stages: surface, intermediate, and deep structures. At the surface level, leadership revolves around observable behaviours and task-specific expertise, whereas intermediate structures pertain to emotional regulation and the development of procedural knowledge. The deepest structures involve the integration of values, self-awareness, and guiding principles, culminating in leadership mastery. This model is particularly relevant to the context of this study as it synthesizes multiple perspectives on leadership development, linking identity formation with deep cognitive and emotional processing. Its structured approach helps to explain how informal learning plays a role in leadership evolution, particularly in later-career leaders who integrate experience-driven insights into their leadership practice.

Upon the Lord and Hall model, Day and Harrison (2007) introduce a multilevel, identity-centred perspective on leadership development. Their model outlines a progression from individual self-awareness to trust-building within relationships and alignment with collective goals. Unlike previous models that emphasize cognitive and emotional development in a structured manner, this approach explicitly integrates identity formation as a continuous and adaptive process shaped by social interactions. This dynamic approach underscores the need for leaders to adapt their identities and actions to diverse organizational settings. Nonetheless, some critics contend that the model's strong focus on identity overlooks the influence of external factors, such as cultural or institutional constraints (Carroll and Levy, 2008).

Expanding on these perspectives, Kouzes and Posner (2016) emphasize that leadership is not an innate ability but rather a skill that can be cultivated. Their practical framework identifies five key practices, including goal-setting and feedback-seeking, that are accessible to anyone committed to deliberate practice. This perspective appears to reinforce elements of the models discussed above, particularly in its emphasis on leadership as a structured and progressive development process. However, unlike Day and Harrison's (2007) identity-centred perspective, which focuses on evolving leadership identity through relational and contextual interactions, Kouzes and Posner's (2016) approach is more pragmatic, offering specific behaviours that can be practiced regardless of identity formation. While these actionable behaviours align with identity-based theories, the framework has been critiqued for its

limited attention to structural challenges and organizational barriers (Bligh, 2017). Collectively, these perspectives illustrate that leadership development is a complex, multifaceted process shaped by personal, relational, and systemic factors.

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) complements these models by emphasizing the role of observation, imitation, and role modelling in leadership development. Leaders often learn informally by observing others in similar roles and replicating effective behaviours, especially in environments that encourage peer interaction and collaborative learning. This theory adds a critical dimension to identity-focused and behaviour-based models by illustrating how learning is socially constructed through interaction.

### **2.2.2 Leadership as a lifelong process**

Day and Sin (2011) assert that leadership can be learned and developed over time, challenging perspectives such as the 'Great Man Theory' that argue leadership is an innate trait. Viewing leadership as a lifelong process suggests that it evolves continuously across the various stages of an individual's life, influenced by cumulative experiences and reflective learning. Liu et al. (2020) propose a lifespan-oriented model, identifying formative experiences—such as mentorship and role modelling—as critical to the early stages of leadership development. These early interactions improve interpersonal skills and self-efficacy, which are foundational for later leadership effectiveness. However, leadership development does not end with these initial stages. Later phases of the lifespan involve deepening expertise, developing strategic decision-making capabilities, and transitioning into mentoring roles (Warhurst and Black, 2014). This suggests that while early mentorship and role modelling lay the groundwork, continuous adaptation and learning are essential for sustained leadership growth across all career stages.

Challenging conventional views that leadership potential diminishes with age, Warhurst and Black (2014, 2017) argue that later-career leaders possess unique advantages, including tacit knowledge and practical wisdom. Their findings highlight the significance of later-career learning, often characterized by a shift towards mentoring and refining leadership approaches. Warhurst and Black (2017) further explore the role of managerial wisdom and identity in later-career leadership, emphasizing that experiential learning continues to shape leadership effectiveness well into the advanced stages of one's career. However, other scholars have pointed out that this view may underestimate the difficulties of remaining adaptable in dynamic organizational environments (Ladkin and Spiller, 2013). They argue that while tacit knowledge and practical wisdom are valuable, they can sometimes lead to rigidity in thinking, resistance to new approaches, or over-reliance on past experiences rather than adapting to emerging trends and shifting workplace dynamics.

Bringing these insights together, leadership as a lifelong process involves an ongoing interaction between personal development and external influences that shape an individual's leadership journey. While Liu et al. (2020) provide evidence of developmental milestones throughout life, Warhurst and Black (2014) emphasize the enduring value of accumulated experience and the wisdom it brings. This synthesis underscores the potential for leadership growth at all stages of life but also highlights the need to address contextual constraints that may inhibit this trajectory.

### **2.2.3 Leadership in context**

Leadership does not occur in isolation but is instead shaped by the organizational and cultural environments in which it is practiced (Day et al., 2021). Context includes the structural, cultural, and social factors that influence leadership behaviours and outcomes (Van Slyke and Alexander, 2006). In public sector organizations, for instance, leaders often navigate resource limitations, political accountability, and competing stakeholder interests. Van Slyke and Alexander (2006) argue that effective leadership in such settings depends on aligning organizational goals with societal values, requiring adaptability and resilience. This is because public sector leaders must balance ethical considerations, long-term social impact, and transparency while operating within strict regulatory frameworks. This often limits their ability to respond as flexibly as their private sector counterparts.

In contrast, private sector leaders typically face different expectations, including profit maximization, shareholder demands, and competitive market pressures (Pinnington, 2011). Unlike public sector leaders who must balance multiple, often conflicting, stakeholder interests, private sector executives are often more directly accountable for financial performance and operational efficiency. While adaptability remains critical in both sectors, public sector leaders must navigate bureaucratic constraints and regulatory scrutiny to a greater extent, whereas private sector leaders have more flexibility in decision-making but face higher expectations for innovation and rapid strategic shifts.

Leslie and Canwell (2010) expand on this idea by examining leadership during times of austerity. Austerity is especially pertinent to public sector leaders as they must continue delivering essential services with increasingly limited budgets, requiring them to make difficult decisions regarding resource allocation, workforce management, and service prioritization. Leslie and Canwell (2010) advocate for distributed leadership models that emphasize collaboration and shared accountability, which are particularly valuable in resource-constrained environments. However, some critiques highlight potential drawbacks, such as the dilution of individual accountability and increased complexity in decision-making (Bolden, 2011).

In conclusion, leadership is deeply contextual, requiring individuals to navigate structural constraints, organizational culture, and external

pressures. Studies by Van Slyke and Alexander (2006) and Leslie and Canwell (2010) underscore how resilience and collaboration are essential for navigating the unique challenges faced by leaders, particularly in the public sector. Together, these perspectives illustrate how individual and contextual factors interact to shape leadership effectiveness.

## **2.3 Leadership in Later Careers**

Leadership in later careers is a unique concept in terms of development, defined by extensive experience, gained wisdom, and the opportunity to guide and mentor the next generation (Liu et al., 2020). This subsection of the chapter considers the challenges and opportunities faced by later-career leaders, with an emphasis on the public sector, where organizational complexity and societal expectations further influence leadership roles.

### **2.3.1 Challenges and opportunities for later-career leaders**

Later-career leadership is shaped by a combination of internal and external factors. Internally, leaders at this stage of their working life often acknowledge the extensiveness of their experience, tacit knowledge, and the evolving of their leadership identity. Warhurst and Black (2014) argue that later-career leaders leverage these attributes to refine their approaches and adapt to organizational changes. Informal learning mechanisms, such as reflective practices and collaboration with peers, play a critical role in helping leaders handle the complexities of this career phase.

Externally, later-career leaders must cope with challenges such as rapid technological advancements, the complexities of managing intergenerational workforces, and maintaining relevance in fast-changing organizational situations. Liu et al. (2020) note that these leaders often focus on two main responsibilities: leading organizational growth and mentoring new talent. This dual focus positions them as central contributors to both institutional resilience and talent development.

However, there are notable drawbacks to later-career leadership. Critics, including Ladkin and Spiller (2013), point to age-related biases and organizational resistance that often prevents senior leaders' expertise from being fully exploited. Such challenges stress the importance of cherishing supportive organizational cultures that value the contributions of experienced leaders and provide opportunities for their continued growth.

These perspectives show that later-career leadership offers opportunities to harness experience and wisdom but also requires adaptability to overcome difficulties. Informal learning practices and an enabling organizational environment are essential for helping leaders thrive during this stage.

### **2.3.2 Public sector leadership**

Due to budget constraints, political accountability, and the need to manage conflicting stakeholder interests, the public sector offers a distinctive and frequently challenging environment for later-career leadership. According to Leslie and Canwell (2010), leaders in the public sector must deal with systemic issues including financial limitations and ineffective bureaucracy, which call for a high degree of flexibility and resilience. These circumstances give later-career leaders a special opportunity to use their knowledge of handling organizational complexity and bringing about significant change.

According to Vivona (2023), the public sector is placing more and more focus on entrepreneurial leadership that combines innovation and democratic principles. With their institutional memory and strategic vision, later-career executives are especially suited to put these tactics into practice, increasing organizational efficacy while upholding accountability to stakeholders in the public sphere. Budget constraints and limited access to formal leadership development programs make informal learning an essential mechanism for skill enhancement in the public sector. This environment presents a unique setting for leadership development, where informal learning plays a crucial role. Furthermore, Froehlich et al. (2014) emphasize the value of encouraging organizational cultures in promoting informal learning, which enhances leaders' capacity to address the unique difficulties present in public sector settings.

However, experience is not enough to ensure long-term efficacy. Critics like Seidle et al. (2016) contend that in order to handle new issues like technology disruptions and changing societal demands, public sector executives must likewise embrace continuous learning. Maintaining effective leadership in the public sector requires this interaction between using collected expertise and practicing adaptive learning.

In conclusion, public sector later-career leadership is rewarding and challenging. In an environment that is changing quickly, leaders may successfully negotiate systemic issues and contribute to organizational success by integrating their wealth of knowledge with a dedication to lifelong learning.

Later-career leadership is a dynamic and complex stage of growth. At this point, leaders use their wealth of knowledge and insight to guide others, stimulate creativity, and adjust to changing organizational needs. While Leslie and Canwell (2010) and Vivona (2023) highlight the unique difficulties faced by public sector leaders, Warhurst and Black (2014) and Liu et al. (2020) highlight the chances for development and influence during this stage. When taken as a whole, these viewpoints highlight how important flexibility, informal learning, and supportive organizational cultures are to helping later-career leaders succeed.

## **2.4 Informal Learning in Leadership Development**

Leadership development can occur through both formal and informal learning. While formal learning consists of structured programs such as leadership courses and workshops, informal learning is often described as unstructured, experiential, and self-directed. This study focuses on informal learning because it offers continuous, adaptive growth that aligns with the contextual nature of leadership discussed earlier. Informal learning plays an essential role in leadership development by cultivating continuous growth outside formal training programs (Marsick and Watkins, 2001). This type of learning includes activities such as seeking feedback, engaging in mentoring relationships, practicing reflection, and collaborating with peers. This chapter delves into the mechanisms by which informal learning contributes to leadership growth and explores its application in career progression, with a particular focus on later-career leaders in the public sector.

#### **2.4.1 Mechanisms of informal learning**

The mechanisms supporting informal learning are central to leadership development, allowing individuals to acquire skills, knowledge, and behaviours through their daily experiences. Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning helps explain this process by conceptualizing learning as embedded in social participation. Informal learning often unfolds within communities of practice, where leaders learn through active engagement, shared problem-solving, and interaction with peers in real-world settings. Cerasoli et al. (2018) highlight behaviours such as collaborative problem-solving and feedback-seeking as crucial drivers of informal learning. Their meta-analysis demonstrates how these practices not only enhance individual performance but also lead to more organizational benefits. For instance, feedback-seeking provides leaders with valuable external validation and actionable insights, promoting both self-awareness and professional growth.

Milligan et al. (2014) emphasize that self-regulated learning is key to informal leadership development, explaining that leaders frequently take part in activities like networking and reflecting on their experiences. These activities enhance decision-making capabilities and enable leaders to handle complex organizational challenges effectively. Garrick (1998) adds to this discussion by explaining how informal learning is influenced by an organization's culture and social environment. He argues that informal learning is relational by its nature, shaped by interactions and shared experiences. However, critics like Boud and Middleton (2003) caution that informal learning may reinforce existing power imbalances and inequalities within organizations if not intentionally supported or managed.

Building on this critique, more recent scholarship argues that the accelerating pace of global change—including digital transformation, climate instability, and geopolitical uncertainty—has introduced leadership challenges for which there are few historical precedents (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). In such contexts, informal learning must not only transmit existing knowledge

but also support adaptive capacity and experimentation. Leaders increasingly require informal learning environments that promote collective sense-making and real-time problem-solving, as traditional, codified knowledge often falls short in conditions of high complexity and volatility.

#### **2.4.2 Informal learning and career development**

Informal learning plays a particularly significant role in career development, equipping leaders with the adaptability and resilience required to succeed in dynamic environments (Kwon and Cho, 2020). Knowles' (1975) Self-Directed Learning Theory reinforces this view, emphasizing that adult learners—particularly those in later stages of their careers—tend to take initiative in identifying and pursuing learning opportunities that align with their developmental goals and organizational roles. Warhurst and Black (2014) emphasize the importance of informal learning for later-career leaders, arguing that experienced professionals often rely on informal learning practices such as mentoring and reflective exercises to refine their skills and adapt to evolving organizational contexts. Additionally, informal learning facilitates the transfer of tacit knowledge, enabling seasoned leaders to mentor younger colleagues and preserve institutional expertise.

Kwon and Cho (2020) explore how informal learning supports career adaptability, particularly in quickly changing industries. Adaptability, in this sense, is a crucial aspect of leadership development, as it allows leaders to refine their approaches and acquire new skills in response to evolving challenges. Their research demonstrates that professionals participating in activities such as peer collaboration and problem-solving are better prepared to address shifting organizational demands. Froehlich et al. (2014) extend this discussion by studying how leadership styles and organizational cultures affect informal learning. They find that transformational leadership and supportive workplace cultures strengthen the positive effects of informal learning on employees, ultimately enhancing their career progression and performance outcomes rather than solely benefiting the leader.

Despite its many advantages, reliance on informal learning has some challenges. Critics, including Marsick and Watkins (2001), argue that the unstructured nature of informal learning can lead to variability in leadership development outcomes. Additionally, lack of time, resources, or opportunities can make it harder for marginalized groups to experience informal learning (Eraut, 2004). These challenges underscore the need for organizations to create inclusive environments that support diverse learning pathways.

Synthesizing these insights, informal learning is a central element of career development, particularly for leaders in the later stages of their careers. Warhurst and Black (2014) emphasize its importance in refining leadership skills, while Kwon and Cho (2020) and Froehlich et al. (2014) show empirical evidence of its effectiveness in flexible and supportive settings. Together, these perspectives highlight the transformative potential of informal learning

in shaping leadership trajectories and enabling long-term career success. This is further supported by Dewey's (1986) foundational ideas on learning from experience and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, which stress the importance of reflection, active experimentation, and iterative learning cycles in developing effective leadership capabilities.

To conclude, informal learning is an effective and necessary component of leadership development, operating through mechanisms such as feedback-seeking, reflective practice, and mentoring. Theories such as Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning, Knowles' (1975) self-directed learning, and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning highlight how informal learning is socially embedded, self-initiated, and grounded in experience. These perspectives explain why informal learning is especially effective for later-career leaders who often draw on accumulated knowledge and peer-based interactions. Cerasoli et al. (2018) and Milligan et al. (2014) offer strong evidence for the role of informal learning in enhancing performance, while Warhurst and Black (2014) address its critical value for later-career leaders. Despite challenges such as structural barriers and potential inconsistencies in outcomes, informal learning remains a powerful tool for promoting adaptability, resilience, and career progression. By maintaining an inclusive environment that supports informal learning, organizations can ensure its benefits are accessible to all, maximizing leaders' potential.

## **2.5 Integrating Informal Learning with Leadership Development Frameworks**

Incorporating informal learning into frameworks for leadership development improves leaders' flexibility, creativity, and capacity to handle difficult problems. Critical connections between theoretical leadership models and their real-world implementation in organizational settings are made possible by mechanisms including reflective practice, mentoring, and feedback-seeking. The theoretical foundations of incorporating informal learning with leadership frameworks are examined in this chapter, along with its practical application, with a focus on later-career public sector executives.

### **2.5.1 Theoretical integration**

The importance of informal learning in developing leadership skills is becoming more widely recognized in contemporary frameworks for leadership development. Leadership is a multifaceted process that encompasses individual, relational, and collective elements, according to Day et al. (2021). This perspective is supported by informal learning strategies like self-regulation and teamwork, which build self-awareness and improve leaders' capacity for cooperative problem-solving. These tools give executives the ability to modify their actions and match their plans with changing company objectives.

Incorporating key theoretical frameworks strengthens the interpretation of how informal learning shapes leadership development. Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory positions leadership development as occurring through participation in communities of practice, where knowledge is co-constructed through shared experiences and peer interactions. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory adds that role modelling and observational learning are central to informal leadership development, especially in peer or mentor-based settings. Knowles' (1975) Self-Directed Learning Theory highlights the proactive nature of senior learners, who often guide their own leadership development through informal, context-specific opportunities.

Additionally, Dewey's (1986) and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning models provide a lens to understand how leaders learn through action, reflection, and adaptation. These theories collectively support the view that informal learning fosters not only knowledge acquisition, but also adaptability and identity formation—especially relevant for later-career leaders navigating evolving public sector challenges. By integrating these frameworks, informal learning can be better conceptualized as a dynamic and socially-embedded process of leadership growth.

The interaction between formal and informal learning is highlighted by Ardichvili et al. (2016), who support leadership initiatives that encourage both. They suggest a hybrid strategy that combines structured instruction with chances for experiential learning, introspective exercises, and feedback-seeking. This method enables leaders to relate abstract ideas to practical problems. Critics like Eraut (2004) warn, however, that practical obstacles like time restraints and a lack of organizational support for informal learning initiatives may prevent such integration.

### **2.5.2 Practical applications**

Incorporating informal learning into frameworks for leadership development requires intentional tactics meant to create settings that encourage ongoing learning and development. Feedback-seeking and reflection are two crucial behaviours that close the gap between formal training and its real-world implementation in the workplace, according to Sparr, Knipfer, and Willems (2017). By using these techniques, leaders can absorb the knowledge gained from organized learning sessions and modify their tactics to fit the needs of the company.

Froehlich et al. (2014) provide examples of how supportive organizational cultures and transformative leadership enhance the effects of informal learning. For instance, their research on Austrian banks revealed that CEOs who participated in mentoring and cooperative learning made better decisions and were more effective leaders. These results highlight how important it is to match organizational culture with informal learning programs to optimize their potential impact.

In order to promote leadership development through informal learning, Wahat et al. (2013) stress the value of mentorship and difficult assignments. In addition to improving leaders' practical skills, real-world difficulties inspire creativity and resilience. However, critics like Boud and Middleton (2003) caution that informal learning runs the risk of ignoring marginalized groups and maintaining current power structures in the absence of proper oversight. This warning emphasizes how crucial inclusive practices and deliberate planning are when putting informal learning initiatives into action.

These real-world examples show how informal learning can be transformative when included into leadership frameworks. Wahat et al. (2013) stress the importance of experiential learning opportunities, whereas Froehlich et al. (2014) and Sparr, Knipfer, and Willems (2017) offer practical solutions. All of these observations point to the necessity of deliberate and careful attempts to incorporate informal learning into leadership development initiatives.

## **2.6 Public Sector Leadership Effectiveness**

Effective leadership in the public sector is essential for navigating complex stakeholder demands, ensuring democratic accountability, and delivering public value under conditions often marked by austerity, regulation, and limited resources (Leslie and Canwell, 2010; Van Slyke and Alexander, 2006). These pressures create an environment that requires public sector leaders to be both adaptive and strategic, often without the benefit of flexible structures or rapid feedback mechanisms seen in the private sector.

Later-career leaders hold a vital role in this context. With their institutional memory, tacit knowledge, and strategic oversight, they are well-positioned to lead through complexity and uncertainty (Warhurst and Black, 2014; Liu et al., 2020). However, remaining effective in such roles requires continuous learning—especially given the pace of technological change, intergenerational workforce dynamics, and evolving societal expectations (Seidle et al., 2016).

This is where informal learning becomes crucial. In settings where formal development opportunities are often limited, informal learning through mentoring, reflective practice, and peer collaboration offers a sustainable way for later-career leaders to remain engaged, responsive, and capable. For example, transformational and entrepreneurial leadership principles—such as adaptability, innovation, and alignment with public values—are increasingly important, but they must be contextually learned and applied through lived experience (Paarlberg and Lavigna, 2010; Vivona, 2023).

As such, this thesis focuses on how public sector leaders nearing the end of their careers continue to develop and sustain their leadership effectiveness—not through formal training alone, but through ongoing, experience-

driven learning practices that respond to the dynamic conditions of public service.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This literature review concludes by highlighting the complex nature of leadership development and the crucial role that informal learning plays in influencing leadership effectiveness, especially for public sector executives in their later careers. Some gaps in the literature remain although current research provides useful theoretical insights and useful frameworks. Among these include the absence of longitudinal research to document the iterative character of informal learning, the minimal attention paid to intersectionality in leadership development, and the inadequate comprehension of the ways in which organizational culture and hybrid learning models impact leadership results. Future studies that fill in these gaps may offer a more thorough knowledge of how leaders develop and change, which will eventually guide tactics to promote inclusive, flexible, and resilient leadership in a range of organizational contexts.

## **2.8 Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework describes how leaders in the public sector improve their leadership effectiveness through an ongoing process of informal learning over time, particularly in the later stages of their career. Based on informal and experiential learning theories, the model explains that organizational culture, as well as other individual factors, including one's leadership identity and career level, shape how an informal learning opportunity is approached by a leader. With respect to the public sector, the informal learning practices of mentoring, feedback-seeking, reflection, and collaboration enable leaders to strengthen their leadership identity and their identity as a public servant. By applying the insights gained from informal learning, leaders enhance their strategic thinking, develop more flexibility, and increase their presence in the public sector. Crucially, this process is not one-directional: good leaders do not simply adapt to the climate; they also shape the culture, mentor new leaders, and cultivate a climate of learning. This cyclical dynamic reinforces informal learning, enabling leaders to continuously improve, which is especially important in the later stages of career development.

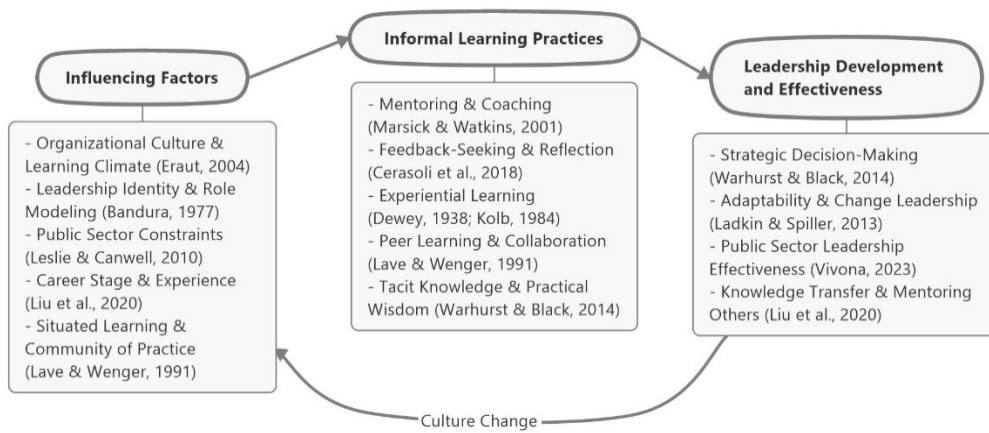


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study uses a qualitative research approach to investigate how informal learning helps public sector late-career leaders become more successful leaders. The primary reason for choosing a qualitative approach is that leadership development through informal learning is inherently complex, nuanced, and highly context-dependent. This design makes it possible to explore the unique and subjective nature of individual learning experiences in depth. It also allows for a thorough analysis of perceptions, lived experiences, and learning processes that would be difficult to measure quantitatively.

The interpretivist research paradigm, which emphasizes people's subjective experiences to understand social reality, fits well with a qualitative design (Silverman, 2011). An interpretivist approach allows for a thorough analysis of how public sector leaders view and interact with informal learning opportunities over the course of their careers, as leadership development is a continuous process influenced by contextual and experiential elements (Liu et al., 2020).

For this study, the qualitative approach is especially beneficial because leadership development is fundamentally contextual and individual, necessitating methods that let participants express their own experiences rather than categorizing them. According to Silverman (2011), qualitative approaches work best when the objective is to comprehend concepts and processes from the viewpoint of the participant rather than to test existing hypotheses. Open-ended interviews are a useful tool for capturing how leaders reflect on and implement their learning experiences into their leadership practice because informal learning is essentially unstructured and spontaneous (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

This study's qualitative, interpretivist research design guarantees that leadership development is investigated holistically and contextually, allowing a nuanced investigation of the ways in which informal learning enhances leadership effectiveness in later stages of a career. This design is particularly relevant for understanding long-term developmental processes, as it enables participants to reflect on past learning experiences, adaptation to new leadership challenges, and the evolving role of informal learning in their professional growth.

### **3.2 Data Collection Method**

The primary data collecting method used in this study is semi-structured interviews, which corresponds with Saunders et al.'s (2009) statement that flexible yet structured methods for collecting data are beneficial for qualitative research. Participants can talk about their individual learning experiences in semi-structured interviews, which enables comparison of responses while embracing new viewpoints.

While providing flexibility for fresh, spontaneous insights to surface, the semi-structured interview method ensures that all participants address the key topics. The interview questions for the study were created using well-known theories of learning and leadership, guaranteeing that the investigation stays theoretically and empirically grounded. In order to improve the reliability and coherence of the data collected, Saunders et al. (2009) stress the significance of matching interview design with conceptual frameworks. By concentrating on how leaders themselves see their own growth over time, this method enables a deeper understanding of leadership learning in the public sector.

### **3.3 Participants**

Each of the study's participants were recruited through personal connections using a volunteer sampling approach. The population from which the sample was drawn consisted of senior leaders working in Finnish public sector organizations, including municipal and regional companies in fields such as energy, healthcare, and textile services. Due to the specialized nature of the research, this method was selected since it guaranteed access to experienced public sector leaders in their late careers who could offer valuable perspectives on leadership development and informal learning. In accordance with the study's emphasis on leadership development in later career stages, the selection criteria were that participants had to be 50 years of age or older. According to lifelong leadership development theories (Liu et al., 2020), leaders at this stage are more likely to rely on experience, tacit knowledge, and informal learning mechanisms to improve their effectiveness as leaders. Therefore, the set age threshold was helpful in ensuring relevance of the results.

To ensure a diverse representation of leadership experiences across various public sector industries, the final sample comprised of eight CEOs from public sector organizations as well as the director of a Welfare Region. The majority of participants were CEOs because they possess long-term, strategic leadership experience, making their input particularly valuable for understanding how informal learning influences high-level leadership decision-making and professional development. This sample size was thought to be suitable for capturing in-depth, intricate narratives while preserving the viability of thematic analysis, given the nature of qualitative research. All

identifying information was anonymised to preserve participant privacy, and organizational names were left out to maintain confidentiality and ethical compliance. The study guarantees that the results represent genuine, first-hand viewpoints on informal learning and its significance in leadership effectiveness by selecting senior public sector executives with a wealth of professional experience.

Participant	Role	Industry	Interview	Date	Duration
Participant 1	CEO	Textile Services	In person	23.2.2025	25 min
Participant 2	CEO	Business Support Services	Teams	24.2.2025	20 min
Participant 3	CEO	Textile Services	Teams	25.2.2025	25 min
Participant 4	CEO	Energy Utility	Teams	25.2.2025	30 min
Participant 5	Director of a wellbeing services county	Social and Healthcare Services	Teams	5.3.2025	25 min
Participant 6	CEO	Textile Services	Teams	7.3.2025	20 min
Participant 7	CEO	Textile Services	Teams	7.3.2025	20 min
Participant 8	CEO	Textile Services	Teams	7.3.2025	20 min
Participant 9	CEO	ICT Services	Teams	11.3.2025	20 min

Table 1: Participant information

### 3.4 Interview Design

To maintain the study's theoretical and empirical foundation, the interview questions were created to align with recognized leadership and learning theories. Drawing upon the theories presented in the following table, each question was thoughtfully constructed to explore key subjects in informal learning and leadership development.

Interview question	Theory focus
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1	How have you learned, and continue to learn to develop your leadership effectiveness?	Day et al. (2021) – Lifelong Leadership Development: Leadership development is a continuous, adaptive process influenced by experience and reflection
2	What type, or types, of informal learning have you found most valuable and why?	Marsick & Watkins (2001) – Informal Learning Theory: Identifies informal learning mechanisms that drive leadership development.
3	Would you say that formal or informal learning approaches have been more influential/valuable to you in developing as an effective leader?	Eraut (2004) – Non-Formal Learning Theory: Contrasts formal and informal learning and their impact on leadership growth.
4	Can you describe a specific experience where informal learning (rather than formal training) significantly influenced your leadership approach?	Warhurst & Black (2014, 2017) – Tacit Knowledge & Practical Wisdom: Experience-based learning shapes leadership decision-making.
5	How do you seek and apply feedback from colleagues, employees, or stakeholders?	Cerasoli et al. (2018) – Feedback-Seeking & Informal Learning: Feedback as a core mechanism for self-improvement. Day & Harrison (2007) – Identity-Based Leadership: Leadership as an evolving identity shaped by interactions.
6	Have you been mentored for leadership development, or have you mentored others for this purpose?	Liu et al. (2020) – Lifespan Leadership Development: Mentorship is key at different career stages. Froehlich et al. (2014) – Organizational Learning Culture: Knowledge-sharing. strengthens leadership effectiveness.
7	Have there been moments where you had to adapt or change a long-held leadership belief based on new informal learning experiences? Can you share an example?	Liu et al. (2020) – Lifespan Leadership Development: Leaders refine leadership identity over time. Ladkin & Spiller (2013) – Leadership Adaptability: Experience-based learning vs. resistance to change.
8	Have you had a leadership role model at any stage in your career? How important have they been in influencing your	Marsick & Watkins (2001) – Informal Learning: Knowledge transfer through mentoring & peer learning. Day et al. (2021) – Contextual

	leadership approach at that point in time/stage?	Leadership: Leadership development shaped by organizational culture. Bandura, A., & Walters, R. H. (1977) – Social learning theory.
9	Beyond the workplace, have any off-the-job experiences (e.g., volunteering, personal hobbies, travel, or community involvement) influenced your leadership development? If so, how?	Marsick & Watkins (2001) – Informal Learning: Learning extends beyond the workplace through diverse experiences. Liu et al. (2020) – Lifespan Leadership Development: Personal experiences outside work contribute to leadership adaptability and growth.
10	Reflecting on your career, what advice would you give to future public sector leaders about the role of informal learning in leadership development?	Liu et al. (2020) – Lifespan Leadership Development: Later-career leaders focus on guiding the next generation. Froehlich et al. (2014) – Learning Culture: Creating environments that foster informal leadership learning.

Table 2: Interview questions

The interviews lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes each and were conducted in Finnish to allow participants to express themselves fluently and comfortably. This helped ensure the authenticity and depth of their responses. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent to support accurate data capture. After each session, the recordings were transcribed verbatim, and key segments relevant to the analysis were translated into English. This translation was carried out carefully to preserve the meaning and nuance of the original statements.

### 3.5 Data Analysis Method

Thematic analysis, a qualitative technique that makes it feasible to find patterns, themes, and connections within a dataset, was used to examine the interview data (Silverman, 2011). This method was selected because it enables a methodical investigation of the ways in which leaders characterize their experiences with informal learning, hence enabling the evaluation of the ways in which informal learning contributes to the growth of leadership over time. Thematic analysis also facilitates comparative comparison among various public sector contexts, assisting in the identification of similarities and differences in leadership development procedures. This approach guarantees that results stay rooted in participant narratives while also permitting

theoretical interpretation within the larger framework of leadership development by classifying the data into thematically structured categories.

All interviews were thoroughly transcribed at the start of the analysis process, and the transcripts were then read several times to make sure the data was familiar. Following that, a coding framework was created using both previously established theoretical ideas and newly discovered themes in the data. Finding important terms and ideas regarding knowledge-sharing processes, leadership identity development, and informal learning processes was the first step in the open coding process. Following the organization of them into more general categories, these codes served as the basis for theme structures that represent the key elements of informal learning-based leadership development. A coding table was used to document the process, detailing how raw data segments were categorized into themes and sub-themes. Through this structured approach, the analysis ensures that the study remains rigorous, transparent, and aligned with the conceptual framework, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of leadership learning in late-career public sector executives.

### **3.6 Limitations of Methodology**

One limitation of this study is that all interviews were conducted in Finnish, as it was the native language of every interviewee. This choice was taken to guarantee that participants could freely and naturally express themselves, which was crucial when talking about personal and challenging educational experiences. Because nuances of meaning and emotional depth might have been lost if the interviews had been held in English, conducting them in the participants' first language probably resulted in more honest and comprehensive responses. This also implies that there may be a chance of minor interpretive changes when transcripts are translated into English for the study. Even though the integrity of the participants' stories was carefully preserved, it's possible that some nuanced meanings or cultural expressions were not properly translated.

Due to practical resource limitations, the majority of the interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, which is another limitation regarding the data collection method. The absence of physical presence may have affected the level of engagement and non-verbal communication cues, even though doing the interviews virtually offered flexibility and enabled wider participation. Additionally, the natural flow of certain conversations may have been affected by technical difficulties like slow internet connectivity or minor delays in the sound. Despite these difficulties, an attempt was made to provide a relaxed interview setting and promote candid communication, guaranteeing that participants had sufficient time to elaborate on their experiences.

## **4 Analysis, Findings and Interpretation**

In this chapter the results of the study are presented using thematic analysis based on the literature and research questions. The analysis is based on interviews with nine public sector leaders in their later careers and their captures on the engagement, integration, and results of their informal learning endeavours. This structure has been created through what Silverman (2011) refers to as iterative coding and constant comparison as well as theoretical frameworks on informal learning (Eraut, 2004; Marsick, 2001), leadership development (Day and Harrison, 2007), and workplace practice (Boud and Middleton, 2003).

The data is organised around four overarching themes: everyday learning through experience, relational learning processes, cognitive and reflective strategies, and shaping leadership practice. These themes reflect the dynamic and multifaceted ways in which later-career leaders continue to evolve through informal learning, despite their extensive experience.

### **4.1 Coding Structure Diagram**

The coding structure diagram below visually maps the thematic organisation of the findings of this thesis. The diagram consists of branches leading to four main themes in which the main aspects of how later-career public sector leaders engage with and benefit from informal learning are captured. The most significant codes extracted from the interview data are listed beneath each subject, which is further divided into subthemes. The diagram displays the progression from abstract categories to concrete learning manifestations.

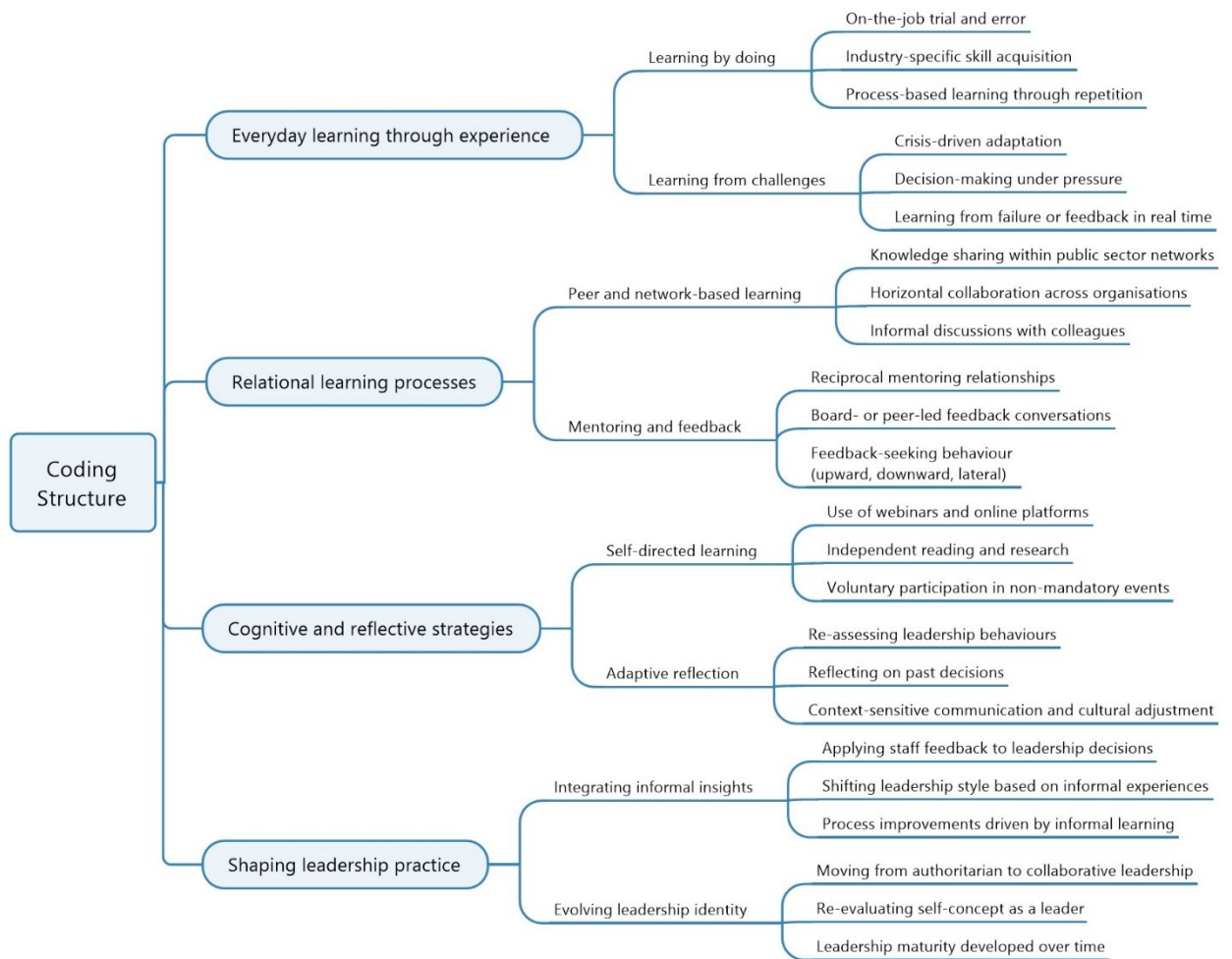


Figure 2: Coding structure diagram

## 4.2 Coding Table

The coding table shows how experienced public sector leaders engage in informal learning as a blend of social experiences like peer engagement, mentoring, reflection, and active problem-solving. Informal learning's impact on leadership behaviour, decision-making and identity over time is vividly illustrated in the example quote that is integrated within the corresponding thematic codes provided in the table. It shows that learning in these contexts is deeply relational, situational, and self-directed, often triggered by challenges or feedback. Cumulatively, the entries demonstrate rich data on the role of informal learning in effective leadership and development across different positions and organizational contexts.

	Code	Theme	Quote
1	Learning by doing	Everyday learning through experience	Participant 6: "Everything from setting up the facility to hiring staff to understanding the process was learning on the job."
2	Crisis-driven learning	Everyday learning through experience	Participant 3: "The first year felt like a crash landing, starting from making a loss and working through the pain."
3	Peer dialogue	Relational learning processes	Participant 9: "Professional networks have been the most impactful. I've been part of many, and helped found some."
4	Informal mentoring	Relational learning processes	Participant 9: "We met weekly (with a former board chair) and he was very willing to help. It was like having a mentor."
5	Adaptive reflection	Cognitive and reflective strategies	Participant 6: "For example, when I worked in hotels, I picked up certain ideas. But here I've had to adjust a lot—especially with personnel."
6	Self-directed learning	Cognitive and reflective strategies	Participant 2: "That's what I would encourage: notice the learning moments in your everyday work and do more of what helps you grow."
7	Structured feedback seeking	Relational learning processes	Participant 2: "The higher you are in the organization, the harder it is to get feedback. As a CEO, you have to actively ask for it."
8	Role model influence	Shaping leadership practice	Participant 2: "A few CEOs I worked closely with really became role models for me. They've shaped my leadership far more than any inspirational speaker or book."
9	Application of informal insights	Shaping leadership practice	Participant 4: "When I was being assessed for the CEO role, psychologists told me I could afford to think decisions through a bit more. So I realized I had adjusted my style based on earlier feedback and then needed to re-adjust again."
10	Leadership identity reorientation	Shaping leadership practice	Participant 1: "I used to be more timid when I was younger. That sometimes came across as more authoritarian—I was the boss, giving orders. But over time, I've learned to ask more than tell."

Table 3: Coding table

## 4.3 Thematic Analysis

### 4.3.1 Everyday learning through experience

The most vivid insight derived from the data is the role of actual, experience-based learning in the professional growth of the later-career public sector leaders. This theme, which is composed of two key subthemes identified as learning by doing and learning from challenges, underscores the contextual and tacit facets of leadership evolution, especially in situations where the complexity and ambiguity of the organizations exceed the provision of formal training.

A number of respondents explained their challenges in building their leadership capacity through direct participation in novel settings. Participant 6 for example, stated:

*“I often say that everything I know, I’ve learned here, day by day.”*

With no prior knowledge of the laundry business, the participant’s learning was necessarily informal and based on the work she was supposed to perform. This is a view which claims that informal learning is the most significant form of learning within an organization which is governed by spontaneity, experience, and the daily life of the organization (Eraut, 2004).

Similarly, Participant 4 described how early in his leadership career, a few of his subordinates pressed him to make quicker decisions, even if imperfect:

*“I remember early in my career, when I became production manager at a power plant, my team asked me to make decisions faster—even if they weren’t always perfect.”*

This example shows how real-time feedback in multivariate environments may trigger behavioural modification. Participant 4's change of behaviour is a classic example of what Kolb (1984) terms ‘experiential learning’, which refers to learning as a process whereby experience is transformed into knowledge. By considering this situation and changing his style of leading, the participant displayed the experience, reflection, and action cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, and active experimentation which underlines experiential learning theory.

The distinguishing features of these accounts is the self-initiated, contextual aspect of learning. Instead of using a theoretical framework, these leaders used physically and socially interactive tools and self-evolving techniques relevant to the work environment. This also goes to support Dewey’s (1986) view that says experience is not simply the setting in which education takes place, but is, instead, the essence from which valuable learning emerges. In

addition, it shows the extent to which informal, experiential learning enhances leadership flexibility and effectiveness even for older and more experienced professionals who hold many formal qualifications.

All things considered, these results show that everyday work continues to be an effective learning environment. Later-career leaders view "learning by doing" as a constant process of development rather than a remedial activity, particularly when faced with new challenges or sector shifts. As a result, it serves as an essential foundation for sustaining and growing leadership effectiveness in the public sector over time.

#### **4.3.2 Relational learning processes**

The second foremost theme of the analysis pertains to the relational learning processes, which were vital for the public sector leaders in the later stages of their careers in enhancing their leadership effectiveness. This theme includes two interrelated subthemes of peer and network-based learning and mentoring and feedback. These subthemes construct the social dimension of informal learning, which happens through interaction, dialogue, and social exchange with other people.

Participants pointed out the significance of professional networks and peer relations in the execution of their leadership responsibilities specifically in the public sector. Participant 8 remarked:

*"Since we don't compete with each other, we can share knowledge, experience, and support freely. That's been a massive asset for me as a newcomer."*

This excerpt illustrates the enabling role of peer networks, particularly in public sector inter-organizational collaboration, in providing both knowledge and social support. Such narratives exemplify the notion of communities of practice as proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991), where situated learning results from participative engagement in shared activities with other members. These networks do not only socialize the leaders into new beliefs and expectations but also reinforce their identity as leaders by providing them with socialization.

As with the stories, mentoring and feedback were noted as significant aspects of informal learning by many participants. For example, Participant 2 said:

*"I've had mentors and have mentored others. If the partnership works—if you're on the same wavelength—it leads to fast and meaningful learning."*

Such experiences are consistent with Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which argues that a person learns through observing and interacting with

other people within their social context, particularly when such interactions are perceived credible and relevant. Participant 2's experiences of being both a mentor and a mentee further support Cerasoli et al.'s (2018) argument that mentoring enhances informal learning outcomes by promoting reflection, challenge, and shared meaning-making.

Feedback, especially if given openly and in a safe psychological environment, was also noted to be vital in learning about leadership. Participant 9 spoke of having very good rapport with his board chair:

*“We had an agreement to speak very directly—no sugarcoating. We gave each other feedback regularly, and neither of us got offended.”*

This underscores how trust enables sincere conversation which, as Bligh (2017) argues, is crucial for leadership development. Constructive feedback is especially useful because it makes leaders more self-aware and responsive, which are important attributes of effective leadership in complex environments.

The findings from this theme suggest that later-career leadership involves a relationally rich environment of informal learning. Participants reported significant progress rooted in human connection, whether through feedback exchanges, mentorship ties, or collegial discussion. Informal learning, according to Boud and Middleton (2003), is a process that is embedded in shared experiences and connections at work rather than occurring in isolation. These relationship dynamics have a particularly significant influence on leadership practice and maintaining professional development in the public sector, where collaboration is often crucial to effectiveness.

#### **4.3.3 Cognitive and reflective strategies**

Another critical highlight from the data was the implementation of self-regulation and reflection in leadership skill development, especially with regard to older leaders. This theme consists of two intricately connected subthemes of self-directed learning and adaptive reflection. These methods capture the proactive self-focused scope of informal learning, which is not only targeted but also critically self-reflective whereby leaders thoughtfully endeavour to acquire knowledge and evaluate their conduct in order to enhance their effectiveness.

There was a remarkable presence of self-directed learning in the narratives of all respondents. Participant 2 noted:

*“Whether speaking at or attending events, or participating in peer discussion sessions, those have really helped.”*

This comment demonstrates a clear intention of self-improvement through proactive participation in development activities, which is consistent with

Marsick and Watkins' (2001) informal learning designation as often self-initiated and embedded in daily working practices. Self-directed learning gives leaders the opportunity to acquire relevant and important knowledge in a timely manner which is especially essential in highly volatile environments where formal training infrastructures lag behind practice. This also captures what Kwon and Cho (2020) called an informal learning behaviour in the context of career progression.

Also, it emerged how leaders use adaptive reflection to evolve within complex social and organisational contexts. For instance, Participant 7 described how being part of a multicultural organisation made him reconsider how he communicates:

*“I’ve always thought of myself as respectful and open-minded, but in this role, I’ve had to become even more conscious of how I act and communicate.”*

This illustrates a cognitive transformation where contextual shifts compel leaders to rethink their behavioural change strategies. Such reflection is critical to learning from experience, as remarked by Kolb (1984), who points out that reflective observation is one of the major steps in the learning cycle. The participant's case also illustrates Day and Harrison's (2007) identity-based model of leadership development, where self-awareness and flexibility are identified as key variables in the transformational process.

These examples demonstrate how both reflective and cognitive approaches clear the path to technical proficiency and improve leaders' social and emotional intelligence. With deep consideration and active knowledge gathering, leaders change their behaviour to fit the changing expectations of the employees and the organization. Therefore, such activities are critical for the continuous development of a leader, in support of Ardichvili et al. (2016) who emphasize the role of reflection and autonomy as the foundation of sophisticated leadership learning.

In sum, cognitive and reflective strategies allow later-career leaders to stay sharp, responsive, and growth-oriented. These forms of informal learning are particularly valuable in the public sector, where leaders often face ambiguous and shifting conditions that require nuanced, context-sensitive judgment.

#### **4.3.4 Shaping leadership practice**

The final theme considers how informal learning takeaways become incorporated into everyday leadership activities and identity growth over time. This theme contains two interconnected subthemes of integrating informal insights and evolving leadership identity. Collectively, these results illustrate that informal learning encompasses more than just the gaining of

information; rather, it leads to putting the learned aspects into practice and incorporating them to one's philosophy regarding leadership.

Participants explained how bits and pieces of informal learning influenced particular leadership actions and decisions. For example, Participant 2 stated:

*“One time I was leading an organizational change based on input from supervisors. Later, I realized I should have consulted frontline employees—the ones actually doing the work. When I changed my approach and asked employees directly, the change went much more smoothly. That was a clear lesson learned through experience.”*

This example shows how changes in strategy can arise as a result of feedback received from informal learning environments. It also shows how leaders may shift from being more autocratic to democracy-oriented as they gain experience in a given organization. These changes illustrate the claim made by Andrews and Boyne (2010) that leadership practices which aid responsiveness and internal communication in organizations are beneficial to organizational performance.

The informal learning processes resulted in important changes in how participants viewed and experienced themselves as leaders. Participant 1 said:

*“I used to be more timid when I was younger. That sometimes came across as more authoritarian—I was the boss, giving orders. But over time, I've learned to ask more than tell.”*

His story captures a transformation of dominant leadership traits associated with control into those associated with collaboration. This is in line with Day and Harrison's (2007) multilevel identity-based model of leadership development which, as pointed out, suggests that identity results from social processes of interactions and reflections rather than being something absolute.

Other participants noted that their leadership styles changed gradually over time as a result of informal, experiential learning. Participant 6 remarked that there were practices she had learned in her previous roles which she attempted to use at her new job but did not work. She, therefore, adjusted her leadership style through reflection on the needs of her team and the organization. This is similar to what Carroll et al. (2008) propose, that leadership should be seen as practice—emergent, situated, and continuously reconstructed through action.

These findings suggest that informal learning does not only provide additional support to formal leadership development, but also profoundly influences the way leaders think, feel, and act. Informal learning experiences foster heuristic behaviour and self leadership, hence, achievement of personal

and organizational values. Hereby informal learning nurtures self-identity alongside long-term leadership effectiveness, especially in the multifaceted public sector environments. Liu et al. (2020) argue that active experience-based learning is necessary for leaders to grow both morally and skilfully throughout their careers.

To summarize, informal learning motivates the continuous transformation of how leadership is practiced. More experienced leaders utilize inter- and intra-role feedback, self-reflection, and interactions not only to develop new tactics but also to redefine how they contextually practice effective leadership.

#### **4.4 Modified Conceptual Model**

Drawing on the thematic findings and informed by the literature reviewed, this section presents a revised conceptual model that better reflects how informal learning shapes leadership development among later-career leaders in the public sector. Unlike the original theoretical framework, which followed a more linear sequence of influencing factors, learning practices, and outcomes, this revised model responds to empirical evidence by portraying informal learning as a dynamic, interactive process. At the centre of the model is the later-career public sector leader, who engages in three mutually reinforcing domains of informal learning: experiential, relational, and reflective-cognitive. These domains are not only influenced by the broader organizational and sectoral context but also contribute to the continuous reshaping of leadership identity over time.

Experiential learning refers to practical, on-the-job learning, particularly during moments of transition, crisis, or high uncertainty. Participants described how learning through action and adaptation—sometimes through trial and error—allowed them to become more confident and responsive leaders. Relational learning, on the other hand, captures the social nature of informal development. It includes learning from peers, mentors, and teams, where leadership behaviours are refined through observation, modelling, and interaction. Reflective-cognitive strategies emerged as equally vital, as participants often described learning through introspection, self-directed inquiry, and critical reassessment of past decisions. These learning modes align with the theoretical perspectives of Kolb, Dewey, Lave and Wenger, Bandura, Marsick and Watkins, and Knowles. Importantly, these domains do not operate in isolation; they are interconnected and cyclical, reinforcing each other as the leader evolves.

Positioned at the base of the model is the evolving leadership identity, shaped and reshaped by these informal learning processes. This identity shift reflects deeper changes in how leaders understand their role and purpose, particularly in later stages of their careers. The work of Day and Harrison

(2007) and Warhurst and Black (2014) highlights how identity-based development and practical wisdom are especially relevant during these later stages. The entire learning process is situated within the public sector context, represented at the top of the model, where institutional constraints, sector-specific pressures, and cultural expectations shape the availability and nature of informal learning. Feedback loops further illustrate how practice, learning, and identity are recursively linked. Together, this modified model presents a more context-sensitive and practice-informed lens for understanding leadership development through informal learning beyond mid-career.

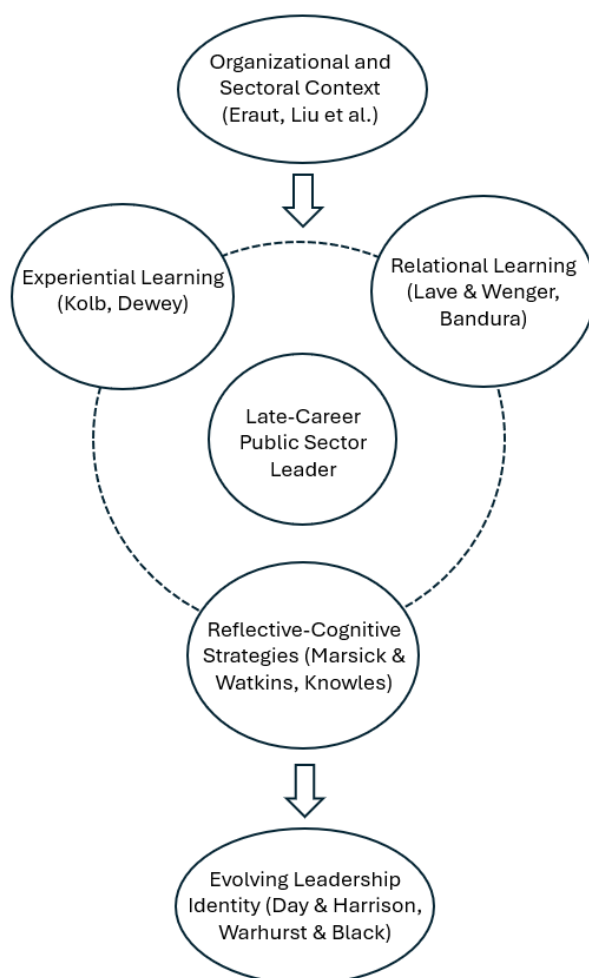


Figure 4: Modified conceptual model

#### 4.5 Interpretation and Theoretical Contribution

The findings of this study support and extend established theories of informal learning by highlighting how late-career leaders in the public sector

engage in dynamic and overlapping modes of learning. The experiential domain described by participants as learning through navigating uncertainty, crises, and new responsibilities aligns closely with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle and Dewey's (1986) view of experience as the foundation of meaning-making. However, this study suggests that such learning is not isolated but deeply entangled with relational and reflective practices. These results also resonate with Marsick and Watkins' (2001) notion that informal learning is embedded in daily practice, while adding nuance by showing how later-career leaders use reflection to critically challenge long-standing habits and redefine their leadership identity.

The emphasis on relational learning, particularly through mentorship, peer dialogue, and role modelling, reinforces Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of communities of practice and Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Yet this study expands those frameworks by showing how such learning becomes more reciprocal and intentional in later career stages. Leaders described themselves not only as recipients of knowledge but also as active transmitters of institutional wisdom. This bi-directional exchange suggests that later-career leaders serve as both learners and learning agents—an insight that extends existing identity-based development models (Day and Harrison, 2007; Warhurst and Black, 2014). Their learning is as much about sustaining personal relevance as it is about supporting organizational resilience.

The revised conceptual model presented in section 4.4 captures this dynamic learning process. Unlike earlier static models, it illustrates how informal learning domains shape and are shaped by an evolving leadership identity that interacts with public sector constraints. By visualising learning as cyclical and feedback-driven, the model contributes a more flexible and practice-oriented framework for understanding leadership development in late-career stages. This contribution builds on the lifespan development perspective (Liu et al., 2020) and positions informal learning as central not only to competence building but also to the redefinition of leadership itself in complex, resource-constrained environments.

## 5 Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate how public sector executives in their later careers exploit informal learning to improve their effectiveness as leaders. The study looked into how experienced leaders continue to learn outside of formal programs and how such learning impacts their practice, considering the growing complexity and change within public sector organizations. The study was guided by the following three research questions:

1. How do later-career leaders in the public sector engage with informal learning opportunities to develop their leadership effectiveness?
2. What strategies do later-career leaders use to integrate insights from informal learning into their leadership practice?
3. How does the integration of informal learning impact the perceived and demonstrated leadership effectiveness of later-career public sector leaders?

This study extends our knowledge of how leadership development takes place outside of traditional educational models by concentrating on informal learning. It expands on earlier research that views informal learning as a key component of leadership development (Eraut, 2004; Marsick and Watkins, 2001), particularly in complex settings like the public sector (Andrews and Boyne, 2010; Day and Harrison, 2007). Later-career leaders are strategic, active learners who continuously adapt through relational, experiential, and reflective learning techniques, according to the findings, which are reported in chapter 4.

### 5.1 Main Findings

This study investigated how public sector executives in their later careers use informal learning to improve their effectiveness as leaders. The results, which were derived from nine in-depth interviews, showed that even at later career levels, informal learning continues to be crucial to leadership growth. Everyday learning through experience, relational learning processes, cognitive and reflective techniques, and the development of leadership practice were the four main themes that surfaced.

The significance of experiential learning is confirmed by the leaders' reports that a significant amount of their personal growth came from hands-on problem-solving, especially in new positions or emergency situations. Strong relational mechanisms for learning were identified, including peer networks, mentorship connections, and feedback, particularly when it is honest and founded on trust. Additionally, several individuals showed self-directed

learning behaviours, like independently exploring professional content and critically evaluating their efforts to enhance future performance.

Importantly, the study discovered that informal learning is actively incorporated into behaviour and decision-making rather than being merely abstract. Leaders frequently modified their strategies, challenged long-held beliefs, and adopted more inclusive and contextually aware leadership philosophies. Over time, these practices contributed to a reorientation of leadership identity, grounded in authenticity, adaptability, and relational effectiveness rather than formal authority. These observations highlight how leadership development is dynamic and how important informal learning is for leaders of all ages.

## **5.2 Implications for International Business**

The study's conclusions have significant implications for international business, especially when considering international development projects, cross-border leadership assignments, and worldwide public-private partnerships. The ability to adapt through informal learning becomes a strategic asset as later-career executives increasingly operate in multicultural and international circumstances. The study emphasizes the value of experiential and interpersonal learning in preparing executives to adapt to changing stakeholder demands, foreign regulatory environments, and local cultural expectations without only relying on formal training. This realization is especially relevant to global business settings where success requires leadership authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and adaptability. Additionally, organizations that conduct business internationally may find it beneficial to establish peer learning networks, promote cross-border mentorship, and provide reflective areas that facilitate ongoing, unofficial leadership growth at all career phases.

## **5.3 Suggestions for Further Research**

The existing research on leadership development and informal learning offers important insights into how leaders change and evolve, especially in the public sector and later in their careers. Nevertheless, there are still a lot of unanswered issues in both theoretical models and empirical research, which emphasizes the need for more investigation. This section lists the shortcomings and suggests possible directions for further research to advance the field.

### **5.3.1 Limitations in current research**

The existing literature fails to comprehensively account for informal learning mechanisms in leadership outcomes because of the weaknesses in cross-

sectional study designs (Cerasoli et al., 2018; Froehlich et al., 2014). The effects of informal learning on leadership effectiveness require a longitudinal study design. Moreover, the self-reported nature of the data puts the credibility of the findings, especially those that pertain to the complex interplay between learning behaviours and leadership development, at risk (Marsick and Watkins, 2001).

Through the analysis, it is evident that there is still a significant gap which oversimplifies the concept of intersectionality when it comes to leadership development. In the public sector issues related to gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status are underrepresented (Mujtaba et al., 2010). These issues are essential in explaining the patterns of inequality in the availability of informal learning as well as how multistage leaders deal with functional and contextual obstacles in their growth paths.

### **5.3.2 Underexplored areas**

Organizational culture constitutes a large, neglected domain of informal learning mechanisms. Froehlich et al. (2014) support the argument of cultures being influential, but little work has been done on how organizational culture dynamics relate to leadership styles, informal learning processes, and their results. Additionally, the relationship between formal and informal learning in leadership training is poorly researched, particularly in hybrid programs, which seek to integrate independent learning with traditional educational structures (Ardichvili et al., 2016).

Another area requiring further attention is later-career leadership. Although Warhurst and Black (2014) highlight the potential of later-career learning, more research is needed to explore how leaders in this stage balance mentoring roles with their ongoing professional development. Understanding the informal learning trajectories of later-career leaders could be beneficial in developing strategies to optimize their effectiveness while managing their specific challenges.

### **5.3.3 Future research priorities**

Longitudinal studies focused on leadership capture change over time and should be the focus of future research, as they can offer valuable information on the effects of behaviours such as informal learning, feedback, mentoring, and reflective practice on the leadership development process (Sparr et al., 2017). Additionally, these studies might look into the long-term effects of informal learning on both individual leaders and their teams.

Another important aspect for further study is intersectionality in the leadership development process. Consideration of how systemic biases such as gender, culture, and resource availability shape informal learning processes related to the growth of leaders is essential for more inclusive understanding of leadership development. Non-Western regions, where public sector leadership operates under unique cultural and institutional conditions, would

especially benefit from comparative analysis across sectors and regions (Mujtaba et al., 2010).

Moreover, examination of how formal and informal learning integrate also needs further attention. Research could evaluate the effectiveness of hybrid leadership programs in enhancing capabilities and improving organizational performance (Ardichvili et al., 2016; Seidle et al., 2016). For the public sector, studies could examine how hybrid models can be used to address common challenges in the sector such as resource constraints, political pressures, and the need to meet diverse stakeholder demands.

The shortcomings pinpointed in the existing literature reveal an absence of comprehensive analysis on informal learning and leadership development. By addressing methodological limitations, exploring underexamined areas such as intersectionality and organizational culture, and prioritizing longitudinal and comparative studies, future research can significantly enhance our understanding of how leaders grow and thrive in complex environments. These efforts will not only advance theoretical knowledge but also contribute to the development of more inclusive and effective leadership practices, particularly in the public sector, where leadership has the potential to influence the society significantly.

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