

# Rise of Organizational Spirituality in the New Normal: A Phenomenology through the Lens of HEI Leaders

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of college leaders at Davao del Norte State College (DNSC) regarding organizational spirituality in the new normal. Using a phenomenological approach, five participants were selected through purposive sampling, and their responses were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The data, analyzed using the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method, revealed four key themes: alignment of personal and institutional values, self-care and spiritual practices, fostering a supportive and harmonious environment, and reflection and mindful leadership. The findings showed that these leaders consciously aligned their values with the college's culture, engaged in spiritual practices to enhance their well-being, and promoted a supportive organizational environment. These practices contributed to a reflective and mindful approach to leadership, which was essential in navigating the challenges of the new normal. The study's implications suggested that higher education institutions should support leaders in aligning their values with organizational culture, encourage spiritual practices, and foster environments that enhance well-being. The study also contributed to the literature on spiritual leadership by focusing on leaders' personal experiences, offering new insights into the role of spirituality in leadership. However, the study's small sample size from a single institution limited its generalizability, and future research should include larger, more diverse samples. This study underscored the significance of spirituality in effective, compassionate, and resilient leadership in higher education.

**Keywords:** organizational spirituality, leadership, higher education, phenomenology, new normal, self-care, value alignment.

## INTRODUCTION

The global shift towards the new normal, characterized by unprecedented disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has profoundly impacted higher education institutions (HEIs) worldwide. Amidst the challenges of navigating online learning, maintaining academic standards, and ensuring the well-being of faculty and students, HEI leaders have been thrust into a landscape that demands not only strategic and managerial skills but also a deepened sense of organizational spirituality [9]. Organizational spirituality, which encompasses integrating personal spiritual beliefs and practices into the professional environment, has emerged as a critical factor in fostering resilience, adaptability, and ethical leadership during these turbulent times [4].

Organizational spirituality is not new, but its relevance has been amplified in the context of the new normal. Traditionally, organizational spirituality has been associated with enhanced employee well-being, improved organizational culture, and increased moral and ethical standards [6]. However, the pandemic has introduced new complexities, pushing leaders to draw upon their spiritual beliefs as a source of strength, guidance, and hope [11]. The heightened stress, uncertainty, and isolation experienced by both leaders and their teams have prompted a renewed interest in how spirituality can be harnessed to navigate these challenges effectively.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of spirituality in organizational leadership, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding the specific experiences of HEI leaders in this domain. While studies have explored the role of spirituality in various sectors, the unique pressures and responsibilities faced by leaders in higher education during the pandemic necessitate a more focused examination [10]. Furthermore, existing

research often generalizes the impact of spirituality on leadership without delving into the nuanced, lived experiences of leaders who must balance institutional demands with personal and organizational spirituality.

This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of HEI leaders concerning their spiritual practices and how these practices have influenced their leadership in the new normal. By employing a phenomenological approach, this research aims to provide a rich, detailed account of how spirituality is experienced, understood, and integrated into organizational life by those at the helm of HEIs. The central research question guiding this study is: What are the lived experiences of HEI leaders on organizational spirituality in the new normal? Through this inquiry, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on leadership and spirituality, offering insights that could inform future leadership practices in higher education and beyond.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Organizational spirituality is an evolving concept rooted in various theoretical perspectives that intersect with leadership, ethics, and organizational behavior. At its core, Spiritual Leadership Theory (SLT) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how spirituality can influence leadership practices. Proposed by Fry [7], SLT suggests that spiritual leadership involves motivating and inspiring workers through a sense of calling and membership. This theory posits that spiritual leadership fosters a culture of altruistic love, where leaders and followers find meaning and purpose, leading to increased organizational commitment, productivity, and life satisfaction [8].

In HEIs, the Transformational Leadership Theory also plays a pivotal role in understanding how leaders integrate spirituality into their practices. As Bass [2] articulated, transformational leadership involves leaders who inspire and motivate followers to exceed their own self-interests for the sake of the organization. When combined with spiritual practices, transformational leadership can foster a sense of collective purpose, ethical behavior, and personal growth among faculty and staff [1]. This theoretical intersection between SLT and transformational leadership offers a robust framework for exploring how HEI leaders navigate their spiritual practices in the new normal.

The relationship between spirituality and organizational leadership has been the subject of increasing academic inquiry, particularly in times of crisis. One research examined how religious practices shaped leadership decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic [9]. They found that leaders who integrated their spiritual beliefs into their professional roles were better equipped to manage crises, maintain morale, and foster organizational resilience. Similarly, one study highlighted the role of organizational spirituality in enhancing resilience among healthcare professionals, suggesting parallels in educational settings where leaders face similar stressors [4].

In higher education, another research explored the impact of spirituality on leadership practices during the pandemic [10]. Their study revealed that HEI leaders who engaged in spiritual practices reported higher levels of emotional stability, ethical decision-making, and a greater sense of community within their institutions. This research underscores the importance of spirituality in maintaining leadership efficacy in challenging times. However, while these studies provide valuable insights, they often generalize across different sectors without focusing specifically on the unique context of HEIs. Moreover, existing research tends to emphasize the outcomes of spiritual leadership rather than leaders' lived experiences and daily practices.

Despite the growing body of literature on organizational spirituality and leadership, there remains a notable gap in understanding how HEI leaders experience and enact spirituality in their professional roles, particularly in the context of the new normal. Most studies focus on the outcomes of spiritual leadership, such as enhanced resilience and ethical behavior, but there is a lack of research that delves into the lived experiences of leaders who are actively integrating spirituality into their organizational practices [9, 10].

Additionally, while transformational leadership has been extensively studied in various contexts, its intersection with spiritual leadership within HEIs during a global crisis remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by providing an in-depth phenomenological exploration of HEI leaders' lived experiences with organizational spirituality in the new normal. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding

of how spirituality is practiced and perceived by leaders in higher education, offering new insights that could inform both theory and practice in this field.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore and describe the lived experiences of HEI leaders regarding their spiritual practices in the new normal. As a qualitative research approach, phenomenology was particularly suited for this study as it sought to uncover the essence of participants' experiences and the meanings they ascribed to these experiences [14]. By focusing on the subjective experiences of college deans, this study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how organizational spirituality was perceived and enacted in the context of higher education leadership during a global crisis.

The participants of this study were the five college deans of Davao del Norte State College (DNSC) in Panabo City, Philippines. These individuals were chosen through purposive sampling based on their leadership roles and direct involvement in the administration of their respective colleges during the new normal. Purposive sampling was a non-probability sampling method that allowed the researcher to select participants most likely to provide rich and relevant data [16]. The selection of these participants ensured that the study focused on individuals with significant leadership responsibilities and insights into organizational spirituality within the context of an HEI.

Data were gathered using two qualitative methods: in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Each participant underwent a semi-structured in-depth interview to explore their personal experiences, perceptions, and practices related to organizational spirituality. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into specific areas of interest while ensuring that key topics were covered [12]. The participants participated in a focus group discussion following the individual interviews. The FGD provided a platform for collective reflection and dialogue, enabling participants to share and compare their experiences in a collaborative setting. This method also allowed the researcher to observe the dynamics of group interaction and how a collective understanding of spirituality in leadership might emerge [13].

The collected data were analyzed using the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen phenomenological data analysis method. This method involved several systematic steps to extract significant statements, formulate meanings, and identify themes that reflected the essence of the participants' lived experiences [14]. The analysis process included the following steps: 1) The researcher began by setting aside personal biases and preconceptions to approach the data with an open mind [14]; 2) All relevant statements were identified and given equal weight, ensuring that each piece of data was considered for its contribution to understanding the phenomenon; 3) Significant statements were grouped into themes that represented the core aspects of the participants' experiences; 4) The researcher developed a detailed description of what the participants experienced regarding organizational spirituality; 5) This involved describing how the experiences occurred, including the context and conditions that influenced the participants' experiences; and 6) Finally, a comprehensive narrative was constructed that captured the essence of the lived experiences of HEI leaders concerning organizational spirituality in the new normal.

Ethical considerations were meticulously observed throughout the data collection process to minimize potential risks to participants and maximize their benefits. Before participation, all participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the data collection methods, and their rights as participants. Written consent was obtained, ensuring participants understood they could withdraw from the study without any negative consequences [15]. The author used pseudonyms in all transcripts, reports, and publications to protect participants' identities. Additionally, all data were stored securely, and only the researcher had access to the raw data. Confidentiality was strictly maintained to ensure the participants' responses could not be traced back to them individually [3].

The study was designed to minimize potential psychological or emotional distress. Participants were assured that there were no right or wrong answers and that their honesty was valued. The focus on organizational spirituality, a generally positive and personal subject, was approached with sensitivity and respect, ensuring that participants felt comfortable and supported throughout the process [16]. Moreover, the study provided participants with an opportunity for self-reflection and professional development. Engaging in the interviews

and FGDs allowed them to articulate and reflect on their spiritual practices and leadership roles during a challenging time, which could contribute to their personal and professional growth [12]. Through these ethical practices, the study ensured that all participants' dignity, rights, and welfare were upheld while contributing valuable insights to organizational spirituality in higher education.

## FINDINGS

The lived experiences of the college deans at Davao del Norte State College (DNSC) reveal a profound integration of spirituality into their leadership practices during the new normal. Through a phenomenological analysis of the responses provided by the five participants, several key themes emerged, shedding light on how these leaders navigate their roles with a strong emphasis on organizational spirituality.

### A. Theme 1: Alignment of Personal and Institutional Values

One of the most prominent themes from the participants' responses is the deliberate alignment of personal values with the institutional culture. Several deans mentioned ensuring their values resonate with the College's ethos. One participant shared, "I ensured my values matched the College's culture. I adjusted some values that do not match the institutional culture." This adjustment process indicates a conscious effort to harmonize personal beliefs with broader organizational values, essential in fostering a cohesive and spiritually grounded leadership approach.

This theme highlights the significance of self-awareness among the deans as they continuously reflect on their values and how these align with the institution's goals. The need for alignment suggests that leaders perceive their spiritual practices not only as personal endeavors but as integral to their professional responsibilities and the organization's overall health.

### B. Theme 2: Self-Care and Spiritual Practices

Another recurring theme is emphasizing self-care and incorporating spiritual practices into daily routines. Participants described various activities to maintain their spiritual well-being, enhancing their leadership capabilities. One dean emphasized the importance of self-care by saying, "I find time to pause from the always busy routine to exercise my body, put my brain to rest through meditation and reflection." This statement illustrates the recognition that spiritual leadership requires regular self-renewal to remain effective.

Moreover, the participants mentioned specific practices such as prayer, meditation, and relaxation as essential to their spiritual routine. These activities help them manage stress, maintain focus, and sustain their energy levels amidst the challenges posed by the new normal. For instance, another dean noted, "Relaxing, having 'me' time." Alone in my office, particularly during lunch, just letting my mind wander for possibilities." This practice of solitude and contemplation underscores the importance of spiritual self-care in maintaining a balanced and grounded leadership approach.

### C. Theme 3: Fostering a Supportive and Harmonious Environment

Creating and maintaining a supportive and harmonious working environment emerged as a critical theme in the participants' responses. The deans strongly desired to cultivate positive relationships with colleagues and contribute to a workplace culture that promotes mutual support and well-being. One participant mentioned, "I always want to establish harmonious relationships with colleagues, spread good vibes, and have a supportive working environment." This commitment to fostering a positive atmosphere reflects the deans' understanding of organizational spirituality's role in building a healthy and productive work environment.

Furthermore, the participants recognized the impact of their spiritual strength on the broader organizational culture. One dean remarked, "If a leader in DNSC is spiritually strong, the organization's culture will be healthy, and he will function as a bridge between managers and workers so that they may communicate effectively and feel equally accountable for achieving organizational objectives." This statement underscores the belief that spiritual leadership benefits the individual leader and contributes to the organization's overall success and health.



by promoting a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility.

#### **D. Theme 4: Reflection and Mindful Leadership**

The final theme identified in the findings is the practice of reflection and mindful leadership. The deans described reflection as enhancing their decision-making processes and staying attuned to their institution's needs. One participant shared, "Through prayer and finding time to relax," emphasizing how spiritual reflection is intertwined with their leadership practices. This mindful approach allows the deans to lead with intention, ensuring that their actions align with their spiritual values and the needs of the College.

This theme suggests that the deans view leadership as a holistic practice that requires strategic thinking and spiritual mindfulness. By integrating reflection into their routine, they can navigate the complexities of their roles with greater clarity and purpose.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to explore and describe the lived experiences of HEI leaders regarding their spiritual practices concerning their organization in the new normal. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with five college deans from Davao del Norte State College (DNSC), several key themes emerged: alignment of personal and institutional values, self-care and spiritual practices, fostering a supportive and harmonious environment, and reflection and mindful leadership. This discussion will connect these findings to the research question, compare them with existing literature, and explore the practical, theoretical, and policy implications, as well as the limitations of the study.

The research question guiding this study was: What are the lived experiences of HEI leaders on organizational spirituality in the new normal? The findings reveal that organizational spirituality is deeply embedded in the leadership practices of the college deans, who consciously align their values with institutional culture, engage in self-care and spiritual activities, and strive to create a supportive and harmonious working environment. These leaders also practice mindful reflection, integrating their spiritual beliefs into their decision-making processes. These findings directly address the research question by providing a nuanced understanding of how spirituality influences leadership in higher education during unprecedented challenges.

The findings of this study align with existing literature that underscores the importance of spirituality in leadership, particularly in challenging contexts. For instance, one study highlights that spiritual leadership practices, such as value alignment and reflective practices, are associated with increased organizational effectiveness and employee well-being [17]. The emphasis on value alignment in the current study resonates with Fry's model of spiritual leadership, which suggests that leaders who align their personal and organizational values can inspire a shared vision and foster a positive organizational culture [7].

The theme of self-care and spiritual practices also aligns with studies that emphasize the role of spiritual practices, such as meditation and reflection, in enhancing leadership effectiveness [5]. The participants' focus on self-care and maintaining spiritual well-being suggests that these practices are essential for sustaining leadership effectiveness, particularly in the face of the new normal's stress and uncertainty.

However, the findings also diverge from some aspects of existing literature. For example, while previous research often focuses on the outcomes of spiritual leadership for followers, such as increased motivation and job satisfaction [7, 17], this study highlights the personal experiences of leaders themselves, shedding light on how spirituality impacts their own well-being and leadership style. This shift in focus from the effects on followers to the lived experiences of leaders provides a new perspective on organizational spirituality.

#### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study have several practical implications for higher education institutions. First, the importance of value alignment suggests that institutions should consider how their organizational culture and values align with the personal values of their leaders. Providing opportunities for leaders to reflect on this

alignment could enhance their engagement and effectiveness. Additionally, institutions might consider offering resources and support for leaders to engage in self-care and spiritual practices, recognizing that these activities contribute to their overall well-being and leadership capacity.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on spiritual leadership by emphasizing the lived experiences of leaders. The findings suggest that future research on spiritual leadership should consider the outcomes for followers' and leaders' personal experiences and well-being. This shift in focus could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of spiritual leadership in various organizational contexts.

At the policy level, the findings suggest that higher education institutions should develop policies that promote and support spiritual practices among leaders. This could include formal recognition of the role of spirituality in leadership development programs and policies that encourage self-care and reflection as integral components of effective leadership. Such policies could foster a more holistic approach to leadership development in higher education.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of organizational spirituality in higher education leadership, it has limitations. The study's small sample size, limited to five college deans from a single institution, may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample to include leaders from multiple institutions and diverse educational contexts to explore whether the findings are valid across different settings.

Additionally, this study focused exclusively on the experiences of leaders. Future research could investigate how organizational spirituality impacts followers, such as faculty and staff, within the same context. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how spiritual leadership influences organizational culture.

Finally, the study used qualitative methods to explore the participants' experiences. While this approach provided rich, in-depth data, future research could incorporate mixed methods to quantitatively measure the impact of spiritual practices on leadership outcomes, thereby strengthening the evidence base for the role of spirituality in higher education leadership.

### CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the centrality of organizational spirituality in the leadership practices of HEI leaders in the new normal. The alignment of personal and institutional values, the integration of self-care and spiritual practices, the fostering of a supportive environment, and the practice of mindful reflection are all crucial aspects of how these leaders navigate their roles in challenging times. By connecting these findings to existing literature and exploring their practical, theoretical, and policy implications, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of spiritual leadership in higher education. Future research should continue to explore this area, considering the perspectives of both leaders and followers, to further elucidate the role of spirituality in fostering effective, compassionate, and resilient leadership.

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