From Employment to Empowerment: A Phenomenological Study of Women's Leadership Development in the Service Industry as Basis for Enhancing Technical Vocational Programs

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ABSTRACT

While Filipino women are globally recognized for their exceptional performance in technical and vocational skills, they are constrained by gaps locally in terms of opportunities for leadership capacity building. The Philippines' technical and vocational education and training (TVET) have been focused on providing immediate employment for economic and financial stability. This research expanded this vision by studying how leadership learning and development practices could be embedded within an existing all-female TVET institution. Using the latest iteration of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to generate actionable leadership development strategies, ten themes of leadership growth strategies surfaced from the in-depth interviews.

The findings affirmed that women's voices and lived experiences are a rich source of strategies for institutional growth, with the potential to transform a TVET institution into a launchpad for leadership learning and personal agency. Participants advocated a shift from an exclusively technical model to one that is holistic and humancentered, preparing students to not only gain employment but to lead with capability in service industries. Their experiences translate into ten strategic imperatives for TVET: (1) modelling human-centered educator traits; (2) instilling trust through relational intelligence and communicative competence; (3) personalizing mentorship to support reflective and resilient growth especially during the transition from TVET to workplace; (4) embedding ethical leadership through time-tested, dignity-affirming practices; and (5) integrating leadership development into training and apprenticeship programs. With a robust set of leadership development strategies embedded in the TVET curriculum, skilled women could influence decisions and policies in favor of better and more equitable working conditions that support their wellbeing and family flourishing. The study calls for a continual and systematic cultivation of women's skills by providing leadership development opportunities during and after TVET, thus fostering an attitude of lifelong learning so vital for women to become leaders in service industries. Further research may be undertaken to investigate how leadership literacy may be introduced in basic education, how leadership components may be included in the basic curriculum, and how blended models that pair local institutions with overseas immersion and portfolio-based assessment may be designed. This research seeks to contribute to the TESDA Modernization Act of 2025 by reframing Philippine TVET from being an employment pipeline to an empowering incubator of Filipina leadership in the service industry.

Keywords: Filipino women, technical and vocational education and training (TVET), leadership development, lived experiences, service industry

INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of leadership has been a common topic of scholarship, learning about how one capacitates as a leader remains understudied among women in the service industry (Israel, 2022; National Economic and Development Authority, 2019; David et al., 2017; Hechanova et al., 2006). Recent Philippine studies underscore the need for "targeted initiatives that identify and support high-potential female employees" (Poquiz et al., 2023, p. 47; Cabegin & Gaddi, 2019; Asinas et al., 2019). This research contributes to the national conversation on workforce dignity by formulating a leadership capability-building thrust for women in technical vocational fields. As Philippine society progressed into the 21st century, the demands placed on TESDA schools are rapidly

evolving. TVET institutions must adapt to lifelong learning needs and continually design upskilling or reskilling programs as careers become less linear. Regulatory changes add tedious administrative work, and industry partnerships for internships and job placements require negotiations for fair treatment and better working conditions. This study contributes to that momentum by advocating for the early detection and development of leadership potentials among young women who are pursuing careers in technical and vocational fields. The recommendations aimed to boost the cooperating agencies with a solid orientation toward lifelong learning and leadership development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A historical overview shows that food retail, restaurant, health, and education sectors have been important sources of employment for women all over the world (De Leon, 2023; Ozdemir, 2021). The Southeast Asian region has seen an increasing percentage of women's labor participation based on updates from the World Economic Forum. The National Economic Development Authority (2021) reported that women consistently occupy a higher rate of employment than men in hotel, food, education, and health services. These kinds of jobs often entail thoughtfulness, typically regarded as women's unique strength. However, there was mounting evidence that human care and service-oriented professions are frequently "undermined and underpaid" (Law, 2020). The Women in Hospitality movement reported that women comprised 55.5 percent of the workforce in hospitality in 2017, 23 percent of hospitality company board seats and only one out of 31 CEO positions (WOH, 2019). This shows a disparity between employment rates and representation in decisions and policy making.

Problems that women face in the service industry

Women face many challenges that need to be surmounted if they are to exercise leadership in the workplace. Among these are difficulties in achieving harmony between work and family, lack of professional coaching and managerial or mentoring support, and lack of meaningful interactions (Roces, 2019; Alvero, 2018; Asinas et al., 2019). Harmonizing domestic responsibilities with source of livelihood (Israel, 2022, p. 7859) has persistently been reported in statistical studies. Occupational segregation, undervaluation of women's performance, and significant gap in remuneration have likewise been reported (Darroca et al., 2024, p. 97). A statistical study of women employed identified the following barriers to women's continuing education: the lack of positive attitude for lifelong learning and job-specific training in both formal and informal settings, the lack of effective communication skills, and the perceived lack of equity in opportunities for professional development (Asinas et al, 2019). Thus, training women for leadership is urgent for a better conceptual and practical understanding of how technical and vocational courses could be designed and imparted specifically to women and their needs.

Lived experiences in leadership development

Eldor (2021) illustrated that leadership development is shaped by witnessing the good example of leaders, thereby highlighting the organization's core values and making those concretely manifested in daily work practices. Seen in this light, the topic of leadership development is not confined to the study of individual personal experiences merely, but of these experiences mutually reinforcing one another as a whole. Minani and Sikubwabo (2022) emphasized the importance of developing hands-on skills, which have empowered women to feel independent and, to some degree, self-sufficient.

David Kolb (1984) emphasized human experiences as the impetus for learning. His framework of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting has been widely recognized in adult education literature ("What is experiential learning?" 2023). Accordingly, the experiential learning process engages the person towards deeper levels of self-awareness and self-management, elements indispensable for leadership training (Kumar et al., 2014; MIT Human Skills Matrix, 2020; Covey, 2024). Kistner (2020) explained that occupational well-being is not primarily defined by a specific career as by the sense of purpose and meaningful direction derived from work.

Proving Kolbe's point, Billet's (2017) conceptualization of learning goes deeper than mere technical preparation. He viewed learning as a personalized process that emphasizes the refinement of human attitudes over time. "Unless lifelong learning is seen as a personal fact (i.e., something that arises from and is secured by persons),

it will remain misunderstood and limited in its explanatory power and utility in guiding lifelong education" (Abstract). He draws the differences between "lifelong learning" and "lifelong education" by indicating the former's emphasis on personal fulfillment, human experiences, maturity, the importance of truth, values, and delightful engagement at work as more satisfying than the acquisition of diploma, financial rewards, or social approval.

Consistent with Billett's concept, Andreev (2022) defined learning as that which is focused on the improvement of self and initiated by self. He emphasized how authentic learning is self-motivated, often informal, sometimes at no cost, and often pursued out of keen interest to acquire a new skill, develop one's personality, or expand one's skill set. Seen from this perspective, taking a TVET course holds promise as a form of high-quality education, a pathway to progress and fulfillment, where the practice of leadership may also be achieved.

The complexity of being human reflects the multifaceted nature of learning. Learning happens not by chance or sorely out of external needs, but arises from an intrinsic desire to grow, evolve, and transcend (Cloke, 2024; Ryan, 2013). The harmonious integration of the different dimensions of a person is a characteristic feature of adult learning and this is true in leadership capacity building.

Ogema et al. (2021) have emphasized the importance of motivation, particularly intrinsic motivation, in leadership learning. For McCall (2014), leadership development is a series of experiential learning processes. This is especially true for adults: despite the average adult's capabilities for higher-order thinking, the starting point remains at the level of concrete experiences and the increasing ability to connect the tangible with the transcendentals. Following this theory, job experience is a key part of talent management in the service industry, and deliberate planning for varied learning experiences helps ensure that experiential learnings are maximized. McCall (2014) reported that "When job assignments intended to provide critical experiences are monitored and integrated with other aspects of talent management, they can be extraordinarily useful for raising the level of leadership performance" (p. 20).

Research Gap

Previous studies about women in the service industry have largely consisted of statistical reports about rising employment rates and gender pay gaps. Notwithstanding the invaluable information such studies give, the continual and experiential learning necessary for women to thrive and be recognized as leadership potential in the workplace has not been sufficiently dealt with - an observation confirmed by the Philippine Business Coalition for Women Empowerment (2024).

The theories revealed that though there are different styles to developing or harnessing leadership potentials, real-life human experiences are indispensable factors to leadership capacity-building. How these could be developed through andragogic strategies practices was the challenge tackled in this study. Unlike previous studies, this research did not limit itself to surfacing the barriers that held women back from exercising personal agency—data that has been amply supplied by other studies. Instead, this study sought to address those barriers with actionable insights and strategies from the perspectives and experiences of skilled women in TVET and related industries.

While the theories give due emphasis to lived experiences as pivotal to leadership growth, a gap exists in the strategies through which those skills are interwoven in technical and vocational programs. Technical skills, if presented with no human pivot, could render leadership and human flourishing out of reach for women who are being prepared for a largely manual or care-oriented work, bereft of proactive attitudes for integral personal development.

Despite the potential of life-centric stories in generating evidence that could inform policies and practices, a cursory look at existing research revealed that the number of research studies conducted using qualitative methods remains modest compared to quantitative studies. It is a missed opportunity to listen to the voices of skilled experts when re-designing programs that give greater relevance to end-users. "Lived experiences" as a method corresponds to the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA)'s recommendation, which

advised researchers to have "greater sensitivity of women's work in data collection methods" (Cabegin & Gaddi, 2019, p. 65) to fully capture women's situations. Because their lived experiences and anecdotal records are not typically sought by policymakers, decision-makers, or industry employers, more research should be conducted along these lines to help bring about "a just and equitable industry that requires commitment to empower women to thrive in all facets of this sector" (Darroca et al, 2024, p. 105). This study aimed to contribute to the growing literature by listening to their narratives.

Statement Of the Problem

This research sought to address the following questions:

1. How do women in the service industry experience and interpret their leadership growth and responsibilities?

2. How do women make sense of the actions and experiences that have shaped their leadership attitudes and capabilities?

3. What insights and strategies for leadership capacity building emerged from women's lived experiences in the service industry?

Significance Of the Study

For the female trainees of technical vocational schools. Although this study focused on the lived experiences of women previously affiliated with a single agency, the cohorts of trainees, both current and future, stand to gain from the enhanced training models and strategies that constitute the findings of this study. Embedding leadership literacy into training can help shift the narrative from employability alone to one of human flourishing and leadership agency.

For the adult skilled women who were the principal participants in this research. The study served as a platform for reflection, reconnection, and contribution to their alma mater. Their involvement fostered a renewed sense of purpose and affirmed their role as knowledge-bearers and future mentors.

From an industry aspect, this study supports the development of human capital. While technical and vocational training have been programmed to provide the hard skills needed for the growing demands of the labor market, training programs do not typically equip women with personal and professional capacities seen as determinants of personal growth, leadership, and integral human development.

For TVET trainers, this research represents a significant effort to address vital elements that may have been overlooked in existing TVET programs. By researching the meaning participants attach to leadership learning and combining their perspectives, the study can help develop a shared understanding of how to enhance the curriculum with a leadership-oriented approach to skills subjects, viewing students as active rather than passive learners. Teachers can benefit from the anticipated changes, such as blending existing courses with leadership components.

For policy makers, this study amplifies the thrust to create a better hub and interface between the work industry and training institutions. The recommendations can inform future research about women and leadership, and drive positive changes in educational practices.

The results are transferable to a broader audience of women who are inclined to the technical vocational path and thus may apply to other similar institutions belonging to the wider population of interest.

METHODOLOGY

Within a qualitative approach, a phenomenological research design was employed to delve deep into the leadership development experiences of women in the service industry. Specifically, the study utilized the most

recent iteration of the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) by Jonathan Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin (2022) as its methodological framework, allowing for the co-constructive exercise of listening to, describing, and interpreting how the women participants made sense of their leadership journeys.

Bryman (2004) argues for the qualitative approach being "consistent with and adaptable to the values of women" (p. 22), emphasizing that "only research on women that is intended for women will be consistent with the wider political needs" (p. 23). Scholars have noted an affinity between women's studies and the qualitative approach that naturally allows "feminist sensitivity to come to the fore, focus on women's experiences, listen and explore shared meanings between women to reformulate agendas" (pp. 288-289). This observation is echoed by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) which prompted researchers to exercise "greater sensitivity of women's work in data collection methods to capture more fully their situations" (Cabegin & Gaddi, 2019, p. 65). "Participation of women in leadership positions brings diverse perspectives…that enable them to nurture leadership skills" (Ismail et al., 2023, p. 11).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is deemed appropriate for this study for a number of reasons: first, the topic searches not for measurement but for the meaningfulness of lived human experiences; second, the researcher's background explained in the introduction allows her to be adequately familiar yet objectively distant to the phenomenon under study - an important element of phenomenological effectiveness; third, the narratives of experience beg for an analysis as a composite whole rather than as fragments or pieces; and fourth, participants with slightly varying work exposure, but all possessing leadership experience in service industries, were selected purposefully for the study, as required by a phenomenological study. The strength of its design lies in its potential to find underlying themes, capture the nature of experiences, and thus contribute more effectively towards improvement or transformation in a given context. This process lends itself to uncover both commonalities and nuances across the participants' lived experiences (Patterson, 2018). It proves to be a relevant research design for addressing complex educational issues, especially where women are involved, because it engages women participants as persons and co-researchers, not simply laborers, workers, or respondents (Englander & Morley, 2021).

The sample consisted of twenty-four participants. All participants had more than five years of leadership experience and were presently or previously affiliated with a single institution. The purposeful selection, based on the participants' affiliation to a particular context and leadership background, represents "a perspective, rather than a population" as required in phenomenological studies (Smith et al., 2009, p. 49). Leadership qualification refers to management, supervisory, or team leadership roles in either a service industry such as culinary, food and beverage, catering, food entrepreneurship; or a leadership role in a TVET institution that offers these courses.

Table 1. Demographics of the Participants

Demographics	Participants (n=24)	Percent
Formal education		
technical vocational diploma	15	62.50
undergraduate coursework	3	12.50
college diploma or higher	12	50
Leadership experience		
< 10 years	12	50
> 10 years	12	50
Areas of specialization		
Food and catering services	19	79.17
Housekeeping services	18	75.00
Business & entrepreneurship	8	33.33
School management	5	20.83

To ensure that the data to be gathered were deep and diverse, participants were chosen based on an even split of <10 years and >10 years of leadership, as shown in Table 2. The table also specifies relevant domains or areas

of specialization that align with the phenomenon under study: the leadership development of women in the service industry.

In favor of depth over breadth, the sample size was intentionally small and manageable to ensure a rich and nuanced understanding of unique lived experiences. As Smith et al. (2009) note, "IPA studies are conducted on relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample" (p. 3). Alase (2017) stated that "the essence of conducting an IPA research study with homogenous participants is to get a better gauge and understanding of the overall perceptions among the participants' lived experiences" (p.13). Creswell (2013) also stated that "all participants [should] have lived experiences of the phenomenon being studied" (p. 155), where depth is emphasized more than breadth. What matters in an IPA study is that participants had a common experience of the phenomenon and that their selection reflected the homogeneity of the participants.

This study selected participants who have successfully transitioned from skilled work to leadership responsibilities in service industries. The twenty-four participants selected for this study constituted a defined group for whom the research problem had relevance. All participants possessed leadership, managerial, or supervisory experience in hotel, restaurant, catering, food business, or entrepreneurship, housekeeping, or related service industry, or in TVET as a trainer, assessor, mentor, supervisor, school director, manager, or human resource officer. All participants were presently or formerly affiliated with the institution either as a member of the management, faculty, or training staff, or pool of resource persons; or as graduates of the dual training system. As this is a study about leadership growth and development, it was imperative that the participants had a minimum of three years of supervisory, managerial, or team lead experience in the service industry.

To minimize bias and ensure ethical treatment, the screening criteria were transparent, objective, and consistently applied. They were communicated openly and in writing and were applied equitably.

Research Instruments

This study utilized three instruments: (a) semi-structured interviews to elicit personal narratives about leadership growth; (b) observations in-situ, to capture behaviors in authentic and real-life settings; and (c) written testimonies available to the public. While not the primary source of interpretative phenomenology, the observation protocol allowed for bolstering an in-depth understanding of the phenomena and convergence with the oral interview accounts, strengthening the credibility of the study. Figure 5 shows the interplay of the sources from which data were taken. As a confirmatory source, the researcher undertook non-participant, unobtrusive observation for five days.

Figure 1: Sources of Data
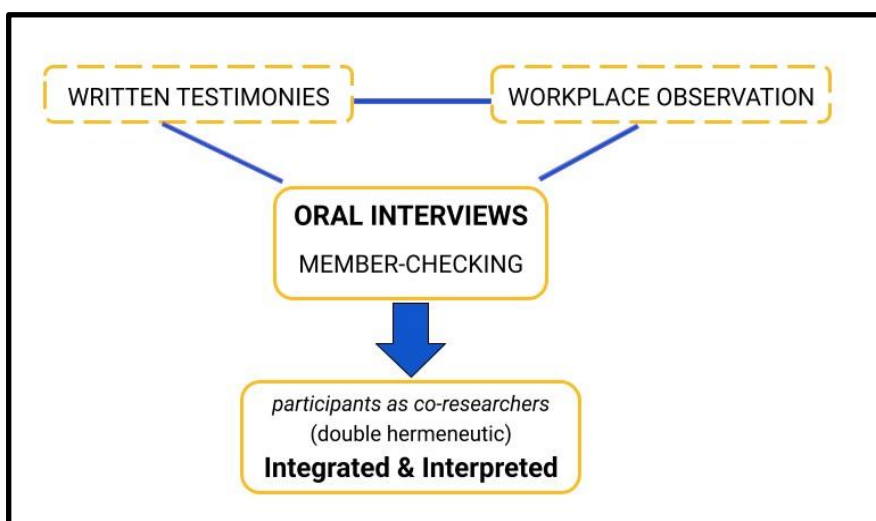
There were fifteen written testimonies and some photographs published online and in print, which served as a subtle source of information to the researcher.

Instrument Validation

The instruments used in this study were made entirely by the researcher. These were subjected to examination by a panel of experts for a period of four months, and then afterwards revised and improved based on their feedback.

Internal validity, or the coherence between the research questions and the research tools, refers to the capacity for the interview questions to yield responses that are likely to meet and match the objectives of the research.

Credibility was achieved through member checks of the interview transcripts. Of the twenty-four participants, four provided further elaboration of their responses.

Transferability or the extent to which the findings may be applied to other similar situations is supported by this study's aim of providing a contextual and coherent understanding of the inferences from the participating individuals.

Dependability or the possibility of repeating the same study was supported by providing an in-depth description of the methodology. The researcher used a facilitative and appreciative style of questioning to help maintain focus, encourage an adequate level of disclosure, and reach mutual understanding. Building trust through respectful dialogue, ensuring informed consent, and using participants' preferred language fostered openness. Flexibility in the interview structure, such as allowing storytelling, accommodated different speaking styles.

The interviewees were encouraged to give answers in their own words and to elaborate if responses had been ambiguous or if the researcher wished the narrative to go deeper or be more specific. Self-reported experiences were verified with member-checking, and analyses were combined with on-site observations and document study to strengthen the trustworthiness of the results.
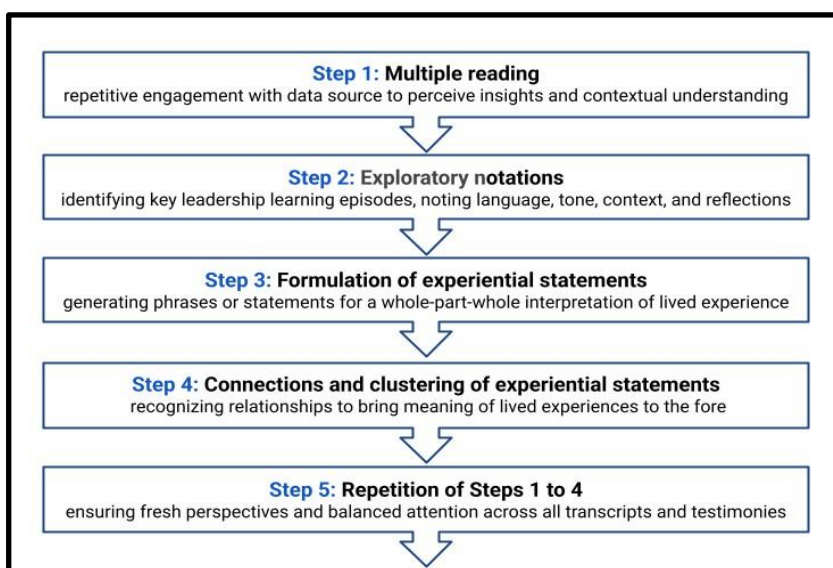
Data Analysis

This study utilized the updated IPA terminology based on the 2022 edition by Smith et al. The use of experiential statements over codes gave high fidelity to the lived experiences of the participants. Nine analytical steps were employed in this study, described sequentially in succeeding paragraphs.

Multiple reading

First, the researcher had multiple reading sessions of the interview transcripts to immerse herself into the data and recall the atmosphere and context of each of the interviews. This stage, often referred to as "immersion", served as a foundation for the subsequent steps. Figure 8 outlines the initial five-step analytic process for interpreting experiential data, from immersion to thematic synthesis through iterative reading.

Figure 2: Steps 1-5: IPA Initial and Iterative steps

Step 1: **Multiple reading**
repetitive engagement with data source to perceive insights and contextual understanding

Step 2: **Exploratory notations**
identifying key leadership learning episodes, noting language, tone, context, and reflections

Step 3: **Formulation of experiential statements**
generating phrases or statements for a whole-part-whole interpretation of lived experience

Step 4: **Connections and clustering of experiential statements**
recognizing relationships to bring meaning of lived experiences to the fore

Step 5: **Repetition of Steps 1 to 4**
ensuring fresh perspectives and balanced attention across all transcripts and testimonies

Exploratory notations

Second, the researcher made notations on the transcript. The researcher identified points for discussion from the clean verbatim transcripts. Member checking was likewise implemented at this point of the analytical process.

Formulation of experiential statements

Third, the researcher formulated experiential statements, striking a balance between being specific and grounded on data, and abstract enough to be conceptual (Smith et al., 2022, p. 87). These experiential statements — sentence or phrase-length—combined the participant's experience with the analyst's initial interpretation. The researcher focused on the phrases and concepts from the previous stage to identify these experiential statements.

Connections and clustering of experiential statements

The researcher identified connections between the experiential statements and grouped similar statements into clusters based on conceptual relationships. At this stage, the researcher moved beyond the details of the transcript and made an "analytic shift" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91).

Repetition of Steps 1 to 4

Once the experiential statements were organized based, the researcher moved on to the transcript of the next participant, re-applying Steps One through Four, seeing the data at hand with fresh eyes, and ensuring that any preconceptions from prior analysis did not influence the review of the next transcript. Horizontalization was applied as a technique in which all pieces of data were seen as valuable, avoiding any prioritization during the initial analysis.

Compilation of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs)

The researcher grouped the significant statements into larger categories referred to as Personal Experiential Themes (formerly known as "superordinate themes").

Figure 3: Steps 6   9: IPA Compilation of Findings
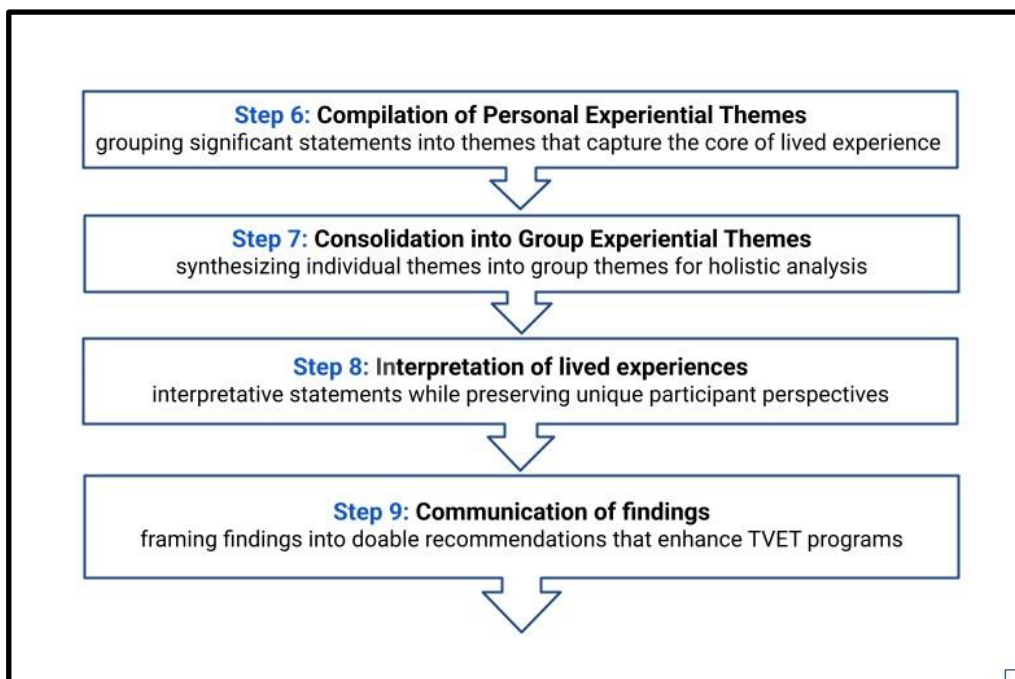
The preceding figure presents the final stages of the analysis, from the synthesis and interpretation of individual themes to translation of actionable recommendations. Smith and Nizza (2022) described PETs as an aggregation or integration of multiple statements, "an expression of the convergence" (p. 46) of the multiple experiential statements (p. 94), capturing the main idea of the experiential statements within it, and reflecting their convergence (p. 45).

Consolidation into Group Experiential Themes

The researcher condensed and grouped the PETS based on some type of commonality (Smith et al. 2022, p. 101). Hence, GETs are the synthesized or condensed versions of earlier PETs (Smith et al., 2022, p. 100), the representation of various PETs as a whole (p. 101-102), highlighting what was central in the participants' experiences, in the form of a table that included excerpts from the transcripts.

Interpretation of the Lived Experiences

The researcher synthesized the thematic findings into comprehensible and readable statements that are tightly aligned to the research questions and objectives. The analysis partly incorporates "an interpretive component, acknowledging that individuals are inherently engaged in meaning-making processes" (McLeod, 2024). McCall (2014) explains, "People with potential [who] are allowed to engage in strategically relevant experiences, and… learn the lessons from those experiences increases the probability of having… leadership talent" (p.23). In line with this, the researcher avoided fragmenting or deconstructing the participants' lived experiences in a way that might diminish their unique contributions to the study.

Communication of Findings

Once the findings were framed as a comprehensible and actionable set of recommendations corresponding to the conceptual framework, the phenomenological process is concluded. The communication phase follows next, when the researcher shares the findings with stakeholders, emphasizing actions, reflections, and strategies that promote women's leadership development in TVET. The findings were then translated into strategies, addressing how leadership capacity can be integrated into TVET programs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ten thematic responses to the research questions emerged from the interviews. The responses have been framed as General Experiential Themes (GETs), the primary expressions of findings in IPA (Smith et al., 2022, p. 98), written as a sentence or phrase that encapsulates the lived experiences and their interpretation, with both participants and researchers reflecting IPA's double hermeneutic where they co-construct meaning via member checking and verifications (Smith et al, 2022; Smith and Nizza, 2022).

In response to the first research question, five Group Experiential Themes (GETs) emerged as pivotal lived experiences that contributed to, or have impacted on, the leadership attitudes and capabilities of the participants in this study. Actions perceived essential to leadership growth and development are: (1) the conscious and deliberate effort to lead by example through clear expository speaking and skillful demonstration of one's craft or expertise; (2) strategic self-improvement in communicative competence and relational intelligence; (3) active cultivation of selfhood through habits of self-care, specifically reflection, commitment to priority-focused behavior, recreational activities such as hobbies, and family leisure; (4) habitual engagement in self-directed learning through the application of informal means of learning; and (5) exposure to local and international standards. Figure 4 shows these findings at a glance:

Figure 4: Group Experiential Themes

1. Leading by example through showmanship and the skillful demonstration of one's craft or expertise

2. Strategic self-improvement in communicative competence, social know-how, and relational intelligence.

3. Cultivation of habits of self-care: reflection; leisure, family recreation; life coaching or mentorship

4. Self-directed learning: observation, systematic note-taking, journaling of best practices

5. Benchmarking and exposure to world class standards

Figure 4 maps the first five interwoven themes on leadership development, showing the interplay of modeling expertise, relational acumen, learning agency, personal formation, and exposure to global standards. From the outset, the participants reveal that leadership is a dynamic integration of active presence and purposeful practice.

Prominent among the participants' responses is the *intentionality* and *deliberate nature* of practicing the above actions, until these become deeply ingrained good habits. As P1 put it, "If it's not a habit or part of your nature, [these actions] will not make a leader." P2 affirmed, "Leadership has to be learned; it's a process of continuous formation. One must not only want it but know how to become one." Data displays and discussion of each of the themes, numbered 1 to 5, follow.

Theme 1. Leading by example through effective expository speaking and skillful demonstration of one's craft or expertise.

Across the participants' accounts, active modelling emerged as a key leadership act that consists primarily of two skills: clear, expository speaking and the skillful demonstration of one's knowledge, craft, or expertise. Considered must-haves for leaders in the service industry, they define showmanship, a conscious and highly visible leadership by example.

Table 2 presents Group Experiential Theme 1, along with selected quotes that give a glimpse of the different facets of leadership by example and highlight the participants' their shared belief in leadership as an embodied act of showmanship. The letter P stands for participant while the number after it refers to one of the twenty-four participants.

Table 2. Group Experiential Theme 1

Response to RQ1 Theme 1		Excerpts from experiential statements
Leadership by example; showmanship and skillful demonstration of knowledge and expertise	P2	*if you've never worked or gone through personal training in the industry, it shows.*
	P5	*As a leader, you have to be the first to think about solving a problem and then be an example for others to follow.*
	P6	*Others have to see that bosses are willing to learn - not just in culinary, but in analytical thinking, decision-making, etc.*
	P8	*Show and affirm that you've mastered your craft and have valuable expertise to share with others.*
	P9	*It's not delivering but understanding the "why" behind what we do, the intangible goal that's more than just a plate of food*
	P10	*I use a show-and-tell method by demonstrating...[and] giving instructions to test if they can follow—orally or in other formats.*
	P11	*Young people don't like being told what to do, so I keep instructions brief and encourage them to take initiative. I lead by example—doing it first, then telling them, "You can do it, too."*
	P12	*When I learn anything, I would teach it to others.... then improve my skills*
	P13	*For me, to be a leader is to serve. I love the idea of a servant leader... real leadership is flexibility, adaptability.*
	P14	*I try to lead by example and learn to delegate as well.*
	P15	*Do and explain. When my trainer explained the how and why of the task, the logic of it all helped me to do it as instructed.*
	P18	*Leadership is not commanding, but leading by example, being on the ground, knowing what's happening...not feeling afraid or ashamed to make mistakes.*

* P is the pseudonym for participants; the number after it refers to one of the twenty-four participants.

Demonstration of expertise, coupled with clear expository skill, was found essential to building credibility and followership. Leadership was thus experienced as a relational and performative practice: directing or delegating by doing, modeling by serving, and influencing by example. The participants consistently interpret leadership as

something anchored in approachability and the skillful sharing of one's craft or expertise. The recognition of establishing "balance - not distance - helps subordinates understand your role and position while being helpful and approachable" (P17), highlighting an important nuance of exemplary leadership. "People will admire and respect you only if they see you true to your word" (P21). P2 captured this ethos succinctly: "I learned from [experience] that I can't demand from others what I myself don't do. Before delegating work, I must first be willing to do it. Until I've worked with them, I would not know what my subordinates were capable of." Participants reveal that the ability to explain the reasons behind one's actions and decisions is vital for leadership and followership.

A leader doesn't just sit in the office, working on calculations or planning. Those are part of the job, but the mindset has to be one of service and adaptability. A real leader is ready to step into any role… knowing how to do and explaining well, being willing to serve. (P13)

In this manner, the leader exercises adaptability, and influences others to become adaptable to change as well - a trait viewed as necessary for effective leadership (Human Skills Matrix, 2024; Simpson, 2023). The importance of knowing how to give the reasons behind one's actions and decisions has been strongly emphasized by the participants as part of accountability. P4 explained: "As a leader, I'm expected to demonstrate the logic behind what I do and speak. In my current role, it's important to give reasons and be accountable." P15 summed it all up with a single statement: "You've got to walk your talk."

At the heart of this theme lies the primordial importance of clarity in words and deeds; coherence in speech and conduct are perceived as necessary qualities of an emerging leader. The aforementioned experiential statements constitute what may be interpreted as active showmanship and conscious leadership by example, concurring with the literature that leadership development is shaped not only by one's personal experiences, but by the collective experiences of people within an organization, mutually reinforcing positive examples of leadership conduct (Eldor, 2021). This theme echoes Eldor's description of leadership as manifested and visible competence and credibility. These qualities improve not only an establishment's service quality but also the employees' productivity and morale, as it creates an environment where role models multiply; and where role models exist, the likelihood increases for an emergence of a new cohort of leaders. This underscores the critical relevance of the theme, as it highlights the conditions under which leadership qualities are cultivated and replicated within service-oriented environments.

Theme 2. Strategic self-improvement in communicative competence, social know-how, and relational intelligence.

Outstanding communicative competence and relational intelligence - not just sociability - were prominent areas that the participants emphasized as crucial to leadership development. Purposeful cultivation of communicative competence and social discernment are viewed as crucial to leadership development. As one participant puts it: "When I found my voice to share insights about the significance of the work I'm doing, people started listening. When I challenged the status quo and rethought how things could be done, those moments were turning points for me" (P4). Listening attentively, planning conversations carefully, and offering feedback thoughtfully emerged as part of exercising adaptive leadership in simple and complex situations.

While social intelligence might come off as something natural to those possessed of an extrovert personality, the basics of social know-how are regarded by nearly all participants as a basic foundational trait of a leader, regardless of personality type, a skill that must be developed by those being groomed for leadership responsibility. A participant expresses how this is possible when one becomes personally driven:

I am an introvert, so it is important for me to lead by word and example, and to learn how to delegate; otherwise, I end up doing things by myself…. I cannot always rely on the more outspoken ones to relay to others what I have in mind, so I learned to speak up. (P14)

Participants consistently emphasized that leadership could not be practiced in isolation. They viewed avoidance of difficult conversations such as giving performance appraisals, declining applications, engaging in

negotiations, intervening for conflict resolutions, as well as congratulating opponents or complimenting employees for a job well done as incompatible with effective leadership.

The participants' accounts resonate with contemporary research about the importance of communication, collaboration, empathy, negotiation, and relationship curation (Human Skills Matrix, 2024) in practically all areas of personal, social, and professional life. Effective communication skills have been identified as one crucial skill needed for leadership, and particularly by marginalized women who find difficulties in expressing their thoughts, feelings, and choices and become more transparent - if not savvy - in projecting themselves (Minani and Sikubwabo, 2022).

This finding is significant, adding depth and nuance to recent statistical studies that revealed a perceived inequity in professional development opportunities for women in service industries due to limited communicative competence and underdeveloped skills in self-expression (Darroca et al, 2024; Poquiz et al., 2023; Ismail, & Ab Halim, 2023; Asinas et al, 2019). Studies have shown repeatedly how communication-related skills increase productivity and promotional prospects (Paredes & Buenaventura, 2024, p. 405). As such, interpersonal skills and collaborative styles must be developed among women to support their efforts in dealing with diverse personalities and challenging circumstances within the workplace (Ismail & Ab Halim, 2023).

An interesting layer of experience shared by the participants was the usefulness of crafting a "communication plan" not only in times of critical or problematic situations, but as an ordinary strategy lived day after day - and not just with external clients, but within the organization. Developing effective communication skills help build confidence and assertiveness, empowering women to make informed decisions. Equipping them with these skills could enable them to overcome systemic barriers and pursue opportunities that might otherwise seem out of reach.

While literature about communication abounds within the context of leadership, there seems to be a gnawing absence of how communication is taught or mentored as part of leadership development programs, much less in the TVET settings where time is ordinarily spent on practical skill-building. Literature about the why, how, and effects of "communication plans" and dialogic strategies in leadership capacity building has yielded little from a search on academic literature, which suggests that this aspect is a promising topic for future study.

Theme 3. Active cultivation of selfhood through hobbies and interests outside of one's work, and having a mentor.

Considered a habit of self-care deemed important by the participants are developing hobbies or interests beyond one's area of professional expertise.

Table 3. Group Experiential Theme 3

Theme 3		Excerpts from experiential statements
Restorative and creative pursuits with family or community	P5	*Creativity is exciting for me because... it refreshes in a way.*
	P6	*It's all part of the plan for me to spend time with my family after a busy week*
	P11	*Interests aside from work are important and re-energize me.*
	P13	*My love for history has been a driving force for me... we don't work for 12 hours. We must give time for families.*
	P16	*I exercise - the best way to fight laziness and self-centeredness*
	P17	*Interest in something new motivates me a lot. I get fresh ideas when I go to malls and try expensive restaurants when I can afford it.*
	P18	*I have weekly commitments and monthly plans...including attention to ageing parents, to keep that balance.*

* P is the pseudonym for participants; the number after it refers to one of the twenty-four participants.

The table shows the second subtheme under habits of self-care: recreation or creative pursuits, preferably in solidarity with others; and intentional help-seeking from trusted mentors. This finding concurs with previous studies showing how women recognize the need to set limits to work and resist compromising family obligations to achieve work-life balance (Darroca et al, 2024; Poquiz et al., 2023; Kistner, 2020; Asinas, 2019). They

reframed pastimes and leisure outside of one's profession not merely as diversions, but as means for renewal of one's sense of belonging outside of work. Leisurely interests and hobbies developed outside of school became a way of safeguarding personal well-being. Viewed as a form of self-care, especially when undertaken in solidarity with one's family or community, it was a necessary break that reinvigorated for the workweek ahead. P4 reported her own experience: "The daring to do something else - something different apart from my daily work - feeds me." This partially affirms the findings of Minani and Sikubwabo (2022), who identified hands-on activities as empowering, evoking a sense of independence and self-sufficiency that are felt needed by women.

In addition, the participants evoked a sense of gratitude for having had a coach or mentor to guide them through life's vicissitudes. Mentorship was seen by the participants as a wellspring for self-awareness and ethical reflection, where vulnerability - if properly made sense of in light of values or life principles - may contribute to the ongoing shaping of the self. Furthermore, the participants favored faculty who demonstrated hobbies or engagement beyond academic occupation and actively promoted the holistic development of their students. P18 for example, valued her experience of having received classes outside the usual culinary and technical subjects, such as art appreciation and values education, and justified their relevance by recognizing that these learnings, though often intangible, can be applied by the graduates when they begin managing their own homes. The participants expressed admiration for educators who exhibited more than just technical expertise, but were wellrounded individuals imbued with wisdom. Potential leaders catch the habits of educators who model leadership conduct. As expressed by P13, "If the trainees see and feel that they are cared for, they are likely to treat others in the same way..."

The finding that mentors are needed in the shaping of a leadership identity is significant. Previous studies have cited the lack of professional coaching and managerial support as an evident absence of opportunity towards growth and advancement (Asinas et al., 2019; Roces, 2019; Alvero, 2018). Mentors act more than just "sounding boards" of women's difficulties, helping women to create personal constructs borne out of guidance from trusted confidantes. This perspective echoes previous studies about the developmental nature of learning about leadership and life in general (Chuang, 2024; Wells, 2023). Mentoring also makes possible the growing acquisition of practical wisdom (Conley, 2024), characteristic of highly mature and experienced leaders, what literature calls "expert wisdom" (Swartwood, 2013, p. 511).

Theme 4. Habitual engagement in self-directed learning through the application of informal and formal means of learning: observation, systematic note-taking, documentation of best practices, skill upgrading.

Table 4. Group Experiential Theme 4

Theme 4		Excerpts from experiential statements
Habitual application of informal means of learning	P1	I would imagine [a skill] in my mind, then watch, observe,
	P2	I learned hands-on at the hotel.
	P3	I made manuals to systematize workflow, organizational charts… I write my goals - it gives direction
	P4	When I know someone with a special talent, I ask permission to observe
	P5	I have the habit of taking notes or recording things and reviewing them later.
	P6	I invested in an expensive cooking class…and spent hours practicing…
	P7	…lots of notes and…make sure to regularly review them.
	P8	I re-use and re-read my notebooks and notes taken from informal lectures - what I've seen, what I've heard. I also read book summaries…
	P9	I learn… by observing and reading instructions, reading online, and exercising my memory
	P10	I learn from the feedback of others
	P11	I add reading to my life…and look for books
	P12	I kept my own study files, organized them in neat and color-coded folders that I still use every now and then…
	P14	I enjoy reading, cooking, and exploring creative ventures like starting a YouTube channel
	P15	I make it a habit to read for 30 minutes a day—history, for general knowledge, and the latest developments
	P18	I learned through observation, involvement, and sharing what I know.
	P19	When something goes wrong, I normally take notes…When I am transferred to a new department, I take down notes from experience for the sake of the next comer.
	P20	I write down my thoughts… to make myself clear, I take notes and formulate schedules.
	P21	Reading and mind mapping, that made everything exciting.
	P24	Things get clearer…by taking notes

* P is the pseudonym for participants; the number after it refers to one of the twenty-four participants.

Table 4 reveals the participants' strong inclination towards self-initiated forms of learning, such as keen observation, note-taking, journaling, and manual-making. Although P14 noted that "one can always learn with Google" (P14), it is nevertheless the traditional forms of learning that most participants have identified as helpful for assimilating understandings associated with personal growth and leadership upgrading. Topping the list are careful observation of experts and role models (reinforcing the importance of "demonstration of expertise" combined with real time expository skills identified in Theme 1), paired with systematic note-taking. which often evolved into work manuals or customized documentation of best practices - these informal types of learning emerged as the mode of knowledge and skill acquisition seen as effective by several of the women participants:

I retain things when I write them down and then when I review them, there's like an imprint on my mind... It's important to go back to notes taken from classes and lectures - what I've seen, what I've heard. Then I gain more light and learn in the process. (P8)

A notch higher than simple note-taking is the production of personalized manuals, borne out of years of successful work experience. Making a praxis of best practices, because "standards should not only be communicated verbally or by example but documented in black and white for easy reference" (P3) is a mistakeprevention mechanism (P14). The digital means of learning, such as instructional videos, did not figure prominently in the narratives. These traditional and hands-on modes of self-development, often cultivated out of habit and necessity, might have been preferred by the participants due to their affordability and adaptability to real-life challenges, as in the case of one participant who lamented over the expensive tuition fees of the country's best-known culinary school (P22).

Although these forms of learning were more associated with the acquisition of a practical skill, most participants were quick to point out that leadership in the service industry presupposes not only theoretical knowledge but, very importantly, expertise in at least one practical skill associated with the industry.

The findings align with Andreev's study that not all learning comes from within the confines of the classroom: "We have a natural curiosity and we are natural learners. We develop and grow thanks to our ability to learn," adding that it is all "part of being human" (2022). As already quoted in the literature review section of this study, learning is authentically "self-motivated or self-initiated, doesn't always require a cost, often informal, selftaught or instruction that is sought, [and] motivation is out of personal interest or personal development". Understood from this experience, it seems no wonder that observation, writing, and note-taking turned up as the participants' favored modes of learning - practices that are not only intuitive and cost-effective, but also deeply grounded in everyday habit and personal agency. It reinforces Kolbe's concept of real-life, experiential learning as a potential ground for realizing women's leadership development: learning happens out of an intrinsic desire to grow and become transcendent (Cloke, 2024; Ryan, 2013).

Because the study purposefully focused on individuals with established leadership experience, it appears that participants were more thoroughly familiar with traditional learning methods. Their responses lend depth and authenticity by citing systematic observation, note-taking, and documentation of manuals as effective learning practices that have withstood the test of time. The enduring relevance of reading, note-taking, synthesizing, and other forms of self-initiated learning may call not only for the cultivation of these habits —then as now—but also for research with regard to their effective implementation in classroom settings threatened with the looming rise of artificial intelligence. Further explorations on human-centered strategies may be taken to revive these time-tested methods of learning in today's ever-increasing technological society, with the ubiquitous artificial intelligence threatening to displace time-tested and personalized learning habits.

Theme 5. Benchmarking with local and international standards.

The fifth theme was seen by a score of participants as a personally transformative and desirable step in elevating leadership skills to the next level. Table 9 presents the participants' insights on how cross-border experiences and international benchmarks help extend horizons, deepen aspirations, and value gender equity. Based on the participants' responses, exposure to global and local standards came in the form of international competitions, cross-cultural immersion programs, or apprenticeships with foreign industry partners. Either way, these seemed

to have brought about an acceleration and broadening of professional identity, self-esteem, and leadership perspectives.

Table 5. Group Experiential Theme 5

Theme 5		Excerpts from experiential statements
Exposure to local and international standards	P2	*I learned a lot from working with foreigners in ___; workers are treated equally and skilled women are highly respected.*
	P7	*Working with German standards has allowed me to engage with professionals from various industries, improving my practice.*
	P9	*You could sense that… the work of women was regarded with dignity… coming from the Philippines, you feel important*
	P13	*Being in the US, where professionalism is highly emphasized—though similar here in the Philippines— pushed me to demand more from myself.*
	P17	*I earned qualifications from Australia, so they treat me well in ___.*
	P19	*We joined competitions in Taiwan and Hong Kong; it's advantageous to belong to an association, and we exchange ideas.*

* P is the pseudonym for participants; the number after it refers to one of the twenty-four participants.

Moving out of one's comfort zone into other workplace cultures was perceived as a desirable step in the ladder of leadership development. As P7 noted, "working with international standards… improved my practice," suggesting that external norms served as a challenge for her self-improvement.

For other participants, immersion in cultures other than one's own, especially in places where women's work was regarded with dignity, fostered a renewed sense of self-worth and self-respect. Talking about her experience, P7 narrated, "I wanted to become more immersed in the industry and eventually bring in outside influence, drawing on experiences from [what I had seen in] London." A fitting conclusion to this theme is expressed by P7, who showed that benchmarking has the potential to strengthen one's convictions and propel vocational advocacy: "I advocate for TVET more strongly now, because I've seen it work in other countries. Germany's educational system is outstanding, and incorporating their best practices into the local context could make us more globally competitive."

This finding is significant because it underscores the need for equitable access to leadership development opportunities. It also highlights a policy gap in TVET training, as international scholarships are more available in higher education. While international apprenticeships or even short-term employment abroad can boost one's leadership trajectory in the service industry, it is an undeniable fact that not all individuals have the financial means, institutional support, or personal inclination to pursue such a path. This reality calls for a model that advocates regional visits, localized immersions, or community-based exchanges that are more inclusive and scalable. More studies are needed for accessible pathways within TVET and service-sector leadership programs.

In a rapidly evolving service economy, the question of how to empower young women for leadership is urgent yet underexplored. This study reveals a set of strategies - both explicitly and implicitly articulated by the participants - that serves as enabling factors in cultivating the leadership potentials and capabilities of these women.

In response to research questions two and three, the following set of themes have emerged.

Theme 6. Human-centered educator traits and training approaches.

This finding foregrounds the vital role of human-centered approaches in shaping future leaders. A powerful thread woven through the participants' lived experiences is the enduring influence of educator traits that convey trust and affirm the dignity of the trainees. The table presents Group Experiential Theme 6, along with selected quotes from the twenty-four participants that are most relevant to the theme.

Table 6. Group Experiential Theme 6

Theme 6		Excerpts from experiential statements
Fostering human-centered educator traits and approaches	P1	*I appreciated being given clear instructions on what to do.*
	P2	*You couldn't help but admire competent professors who embodied the values they imparted.*
	P3	*I wish teachers were more tactful and respectful, especially to less advantaged students or the poorer ones.*
	P4	*What I've personally concluded is that central to excellence in the service industry is person-centeredness.*
	P8	*More empathy… Teachers can project that they can be approached anytime, that students need not be afraid of deductions…*
	P11	*When they make mistakes, I try to be patient and understanding… better to limit the commanding style and let trainees take ownership… Students like feeling trusted; constant reminders only make them nervous.*
	P14	*Know your students well and help them to become more self-aware…*
	P17	*We need to be people-centered… Not to create tense moments. Students learn and assimilate better when there is no fear felt towards the trainer. Don't give off fear - even teachers make mistakes*
	P19	*Humility. The trainer in the course of teaching can also cite personal examples of her struggles while learning.*
	P23	*Students learn and assimilate better when there is no fear of the trainer or supervisor.*

* P is the pseudonym for participant; the number after it refers to one of the twenty-four participants.

The table presents several excerpts that illustrate educator dispositions perceived by participants as having a lasting positive impression or impact upon their leadership formation: empathy, humility, clarity.

Across the narratives, transformative teachers and trainers were consistently described as those who embodied human qualities: they were respectful, non-discriminatory, emotionally attuned, and genuinely invested in the growth of their trainees. P4 further articulated the link between human-centered qualities as imperative in today's digital-driven society:

In an AI-driven world, what will remain useful are skills related to human emotions. What I've realized is that central to excellence is person-centeredness. You cannot get that from a robot. The human touch must always be there, and must be central to curriculum implementation. The appreciation of our humanness is the edge of our industry. (P4)

While the participants generally expressed admiration for technical expertise, they placed even greater value on educators who demonstrated balance between high expectations and helpfulness, an approach that empowers rather than controls, facilitating correct practice. P1 reflected on the unintended effects of assessment practices that induced unhealthy anxiety among young trainees: "I think it could have been easier if the assessors were less scary. I don't know why they put up that front. I don't understand why they threaten students during assessment periods." This observation underlines how excessive formality or intimidation during assessment periods can undermine learning agency particularly among novice trainees.

As P11 transitioned from rank-and-file worker to supervisor, she came to recognize how young people preferred autonomy. P4 suggested teaching critical thinking through case studies to instill both autonomy and accountability. In a similar vein, P8 expressed appreciation for teachers who were approachable and supportive, observing that students learned best when they felt supported and encouraged. P10 observed that "empathy improves when a teacher has had life experiences."

Authentic TVET and work-based learning should develop women not only on a technical level but on human, personal level as well (Khalid et al., 2021; Ekanayake, 2021). Human-centered approaches to training may be linked to the principle of "dignity through work for a stable and productive life." This was publicly stated by Senator Loren Legarda on filing the TESDA Modernization Act, thirty years after the passage of Republic Act No. 7796, also known as the TESDA Act of 1994 (Escosio, 2025). In this light, modernizing TESDA must include holistic development encompassing highly valued human skills not replaceable by artificial intelligence. To date, however, very limited offerings on human skills are to be found in TESDA's Online Program platform. Embedding these dimensions into TESDA's modernization agenda would help fulfill its mandate to uphold the dignity of women through work.

Theme 7. Promoting trust and confidence through positive, polite, and strategic communication.

A recurring insight across participants' narratives is the powerful influence of positive - even polite - communication in shaping women's leadership mindsets and dispositions.

Table 7. Group Experiential Theme 7

Theme 7		Excerpts from experiential statements
Instilling trust and confidence through positive communication	P1	*We should know how to praise and how to point out good things.*
	P2	*Instead of announcing mistakes, explain what went wrong, ask for students' opinions, listen, and work through it together.*
	P4	*Trainees learn a lot when they are given honest feedback that shows where they stand. Objectives need to be very clear to everyone, and transparent communication is key.*
	P5	*If someone has a suggestion, make sure it's heard and addressed, whether the feedback is positive or negative.*
	P6	*Clear communication ensures everyone is informed and aligned… helps keep everything on track.*
	P10	*Communication is important. Skills improve when a teacher is exposed to more experiences, and the same applies to students.*
	P11	*I encourage them to entertain questions and clarify doubts.*
	P13	*It's good to have classes on communication skills and to foster openness with one another within the workplace*
	P14	*They'll only open up if they feel that the listeners are genuinely willing to hear them out and engage.*
	P15	*Some struggle with listening… showing genuine interest in the person, building a connection…*
	P18	*What I developed is active listening…to inspire trust by constantly communicating.*
	P19	*Listening is a must…to make myself clear, I take notes and formulate schedules. It's a habit that takes practice.*

* P is the pseudonym for participants; the number after it refers to one of the twenty-four participants.

A richer finding from their narratives is the perceived relation of positive communication to building trust and confidence: when one is listened to, one feels trusted, and confidence increases. The connection between trust and listening is a very interesting finding from this theme. The participants emphasized the importance of attentive listening, noting that it was not only an area for growth among the trainers and supervisors they had encountered but a "doorway" to trust which, for P18, is the best form of motivation: "When you feel trusted, you innovate and become creative". P14 observed that students "open up only if they feel that the listeners are genuinely willing to hear them out".

There has been a resurgence of studies emphasizing the need for trust and listening, particularly as contemporary societies become increasingly inundated with internal and external noise brought about by ubiquitous technological accessibility. A recent study has found that "listening is associated with and a likely cause of desired organizational outcomes in job performance, leadership, quality of relationships and well-being" (Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022, p. 40). In an age where attention and listening spans are increasingly limited by constant stimulation from both real and virtual environments, strengthening this skill may be key to resolving conflicts and fostering trust in individuals who may have experienced psychologically unsafe spaces. P11 illustrated an experience showing the effect of being trusted and listened to:

Trainees like feeling trusted; constant reminders only make them nervous… trusting helps them grow and perform better. When assessors show genuine concern —not appearing suspicious or threatening, but truly caring—we can grow. It's through this support that I've learned to exceed myself… Staff could show confidence in their students and highlight the beauty of their work.

Corollary to trust was the importance of communicating specifically in English, to understand the clientele and build a respectable workplace culture (P20). P5 gave an example:

I began teaching our staff to analyze the root cause of our problems, instead of relying on generalizations, hearsay, or false assumptions, to which we are so prone… Over time, they adopted a new discourse— they learned to ask specific questions and take corrective actions. I even took classes to deepen my understanding of listening exercises, which was hard at first.

Communicating in English was understood by the participants as going beyond the dynamics of human courtesy but learning a specific discourse inherent to one's job, capacity, or function within the organization. Terms and phrases used in problem-solving, corrective feedback, and decision-making needed to be explicitly taught and practiced in an attempt to ensure that everyone is included in the communication.

The aforementioned narratives resonate with Suhaili et al. 's (2025) study on English workplace discourse and constructive feedback as enablers not only of employability, but of leadership readiness. Indeed, participants considered excellent communication skills in English as a cornerstone for nurturing leadership potential, and that trainees should be hearing and having positive communicative encounters more often.

Of the four basic communication literacies (speaking, listening, writing, reading), listening has been taken much for granted and is not actively taught either as a concept or as a skill. This is a sorely missed opportunity, given that listening may hold the key to many other soft skills, such as negotiation, conflict resolution, and -as pointed out by the participants - creating a culture of trust and confidence. A richer and more nuanced approach to communication—one that includes relational intelligence and explicitly connects listening with its positive outcomes in human relationships —merits deeper attention and intentional cultivation. This is particularly important given that the lack of training in positive attitudes and communication skills have surfaced in Asinas et al.'s study as a barrier to professional growth and development (2019), alongside lack of equity and poorly developed communication competencies.

In summary, positive communication as shared by the participants included attentive listening - considered as the doorway to building trust and instilling confidence - clarity, and courtesy in giving instructions, expressing appreciation, giving constructive feedback, collaboration within a network of support, and familiarity with

workplace discourse in the English language. In an era saturated with digital noise and shrinking attention spans, these findings position relational communication as an indispensable cornerstone to human-centered leadership.

Theme 8. Institutionalizing life coaching and mentorship for personalized attention and individual growth.

Mentoring emerged as a preferred formative strategy in the leadership narrative journeys of the participants. "When lessons are individualized, that's when I learn best", says P17. This theme reinforces relational intelligence as a hallmark of women's leadership. Mentoring is framed as satisfying the need for human connections, aligning well with this IPA's in-depth approach on how women make meaning of their lived experiences.

Table 8. Group Experiential Theme 8

Theme 8		Excerpts from experiential statements
Seeking mentorship and coaching	P3	*Sincerity is important....Now I mentor or coach just as I was coached, but in a personalized way*
	P4	*I'm fortunate to have had supervisors keen on mentoring me.... I'm grateful for that mentorship and the emphasis on caring for the people on your team.*
	P7	*I've gained both big and small ideas from mentoring sessions*
	P9	*Mentoring isn't just about sharing knowledge but also showing vulnerability, revealing personal experiences, and discussing how you overcame failures.*
	P11	*Mentoring helps because it's individualized, allowing students to feel more confident asking questions than in a classroom.*
	P18	*Mentoring helps; mentors should know their situation*
	P19	*When I have questions and cannot find solutions, I ask mentors for suggestions and opinions.*
	P24	*When there are problems and even moral dilemmas, there has to be somebody, a companion in life's journey.*

* P is the pseudonym for participants; the number after it refers to one of the twenty-four participants.

Mentoring is perceived as a deeply relational practice that involves not just the transfer of knowledge but the sharing of vulnerability, seeking lessons from previous generations, and the influential power of storytelling. By sharing failures and ways of overcoming obstacles, trainers cum mentors forge a relational bond that transcends technical training and mere advice. The resulting mental and emotional resonance fosters a climate where leadership is formed not through perfectionism or "martyr complex," but through struggle for balance and personal growth.

Mentoring is favored by many as a type of relationship that is a notch higher than teaching or instruction. P9's experience illustrates the evolving role of mentoring from the conventional direct instruction toward experiential, personalized learning - an approach that has proven more attractive by younger generations who now prefer immersive and authentic forms of instruction that embrace the realities of life:

Young people prefer experiential learning. When they see examples from older generations, they don't always accept them. That's why one-on-one coaching and mentoring are valuable. When you coach, you're sharing not just what you know but also showing your vulnerability, personal mistakes, and how you overcame those. (P9)

The desire for mentorship likely stemmed from the complex challenges that women experienced at home and in the workplace—challenges that intensified and demanded balance when they stepped into leadership roles. Oneon-one interactions remain crucial, an extension of one's job as a teacher or trainer, allowing students to feel more confident asking questions than in a classroom setting. These insights suggest that the kind of mentoring the participants are advocating goes beyond technical instruction and rather, addresses the whole person, helping women leaders uphold integrity even when it comes at a cost.

Theme 8 confirms Asinas, et al. 's study which underscored mentoring support as the top-ranking need of women for career advancement, satisfying women's aspiration for "someone to look up to and guide them…without which they lose confidence and feel inferior" (2019, p.36). P12's disclosure, "I hope the approach would be more personalized so we become individually responsible" is a qualitative proof of the need for individualized guidance vis-à-vis large group settings typical in academic projects.

Coaching and mentoring have consistently been identified as crucial for women training as can be gleaned in a review of 20 articles conducted by Ismail, & Ab Halim in 2023. The quality of technical vocational education improves significantly with mentoring and coaching (Shah, 2021).

Despite the well-documented effectiveness of coaching and mentorship, these strategies remain informalized - if not altogether missing - in many TVET settings. Most programs focus on technical competencies and quick employment, with limited scaffolding for relational leadership development. Participants acknowledged the limitations in manpower and resources that hinder the provision of one-on-one training sought by many students. As P9 lamented, "With the number of students and teachers' heavy workloads, including administrative tasks, student follow-up can be challenging."

Although mentoring relationships have emerged organically—either driven by necessity or pure teacher initiative—they are not yet institutionalized or formally supported as structured strategies for leadership development. Addressing this concern is worth it, given that the absence of mentoring support has been identified as one of the "primary factors that hinder career advancement of women" (Asinas et al., 2019, p. 26). Reviewing, evaluating, and fine tuning the implementation of the dual-training systems is needed. This finding would therefore recommend training mentors who are adept not only in technical matters but also in relational and ethical leadership. This can be implemented by embedding structured mentoring in TVET or by pairing each trainee with a trained mentor who commits to regular conversations about holistic life goals.

Theme 9. Cultivating the right attitude through ethics, reflection, and service orientation drives women's leadership growth in the service industry.

Participants identified the cultivation of "right attitude" as fundamental for lifelong leadership learning. Attitude is interpreted as the capacity to exercise one's agency and free will in the pursuit of learning and personal agency in the manner of working, a dynamic and deeply formative force that ensures continuous growth and development. Alongside technical skills, the formation in the right attitude is a compelling strategy to foster leadership not only through skill mastery but through internal dispositions such as diligence and helpfulness at work. P1 suggested that technical expertise in areas like the culinary arts may open doors for financial opportunities, but what makes a big difference are the dispositions of service and emotional regulation in the field, as these help to ensure success at work and pave the path for leadership:

With the basics in culinary and baking, if you have the foundational skills, you can build on them over time. Videos and other resources can help you learn as well. A good attitude should start with something like an external activity, something that can be done regularly, not just once in a while. So many things depend on the brain—health, attitude, and the ability to control emotions. But these are all influenced by external factors like exercise, interacting with people, and having quiet time. The issue is with attitude. Success comes with attitude. (P1)

This insight situates "attitude" as a practice that can intentionally be nurtured in TVET, one that is characterized by emotional regulation and service orientation. One participant elaborated this view:

I think the impact lies in helping young people develop the right attitude—not just to get a job or support their family, but to have the proper mindset when working with others. For me, programs addressing attitudes and values related to service are essential. Yes, that's what I think. (P17)

The women expressed various ways for the cultivation of work attitude: classes on ethics and values, optimal use of time, and reflection embedded within the rigorous training. What follows is a short discussion of each.

First, the cultivation of the right attitude may be contextualized within the planned and deliberate delivery of classes on values and ethics. Participants consistently championed these classes as spaces where attitudes are honed and character is strengthened. P3 reflected, "When I was in school, it helped a lot that we were taught virtues and values. We need more of those." On-the-job training environments were not always conducive to positive development and the participants stressed the importance of emphasizing integrity at work.

Beyond theoretical discourse on ethics, participants named practical topics such as time management, monthly homeroom meetings, virtue assemblies, orderliness, etiquette, personality development, and customer service. Other topics worth tackling are justice, fair treatment, clear salaries, and social security and medical insurance—practices that ultimately empower women to become ethical leaders themselves. It was generally opined that when trainees received formal classes on just wages and fair treatment, it was more likely that these critical factors will be sought for when they become leaders themselves.

Second, the right attitude may be cultivated through sufficient time dedicated to reflective thinking on the day's or week's lessons. "As a student, I felt we needed more time to mature and develop" (P23). A necessary pause from the rush—often experienced in practical classes—helps foster an open disposition. In contrast, compressed timetables, such as reducing a six-week culinary course to three weeks, may strip away opportunities for critical engagement and mastery. The importance of a six-month probation period as a realistic timeframe to assess actual skills and workplace contribution, beyond initial claims made during interviews, as P2 observed: "In an interview, [the applicants may] claim they are capable, but it's only after a 6-month probation period that one can truly assess capabilities. That's why the 6-month probation period is very important."

Rigor was understood by the participants as anchoring lessons on scientific information. Learning this, such as the chemical reactions behind disinfectant products, often takes time – but it also enhances TVET with an approach comparable to those in higher education. P19's experience in a culinary competition highlighted the link between time and quality in training. She reflected, "I wanted to learn the science behind things—cleaning, housekeeping, even the chemical reactions of cleaning agents. We don't need to memorize components, but understanding them helps us apply a scientific approach. Training could be longer, more scientific, and individualized."

Third, reflection emerged as a foundational practice that transforms technical training into a mature work attitude. P4 insists that reflection exercises, when undertaken strategically and systematically, does more than simply recall events and occurrences but also fuels passion to learn new skills and develop new constructs. She explained:

What strategies do I think are lacking that we could introduce to enhance leadership? Top of mind is valuable reflection. I think if we incorporate that in a more strategic, evidencebased methodology, it can deepen convictions… As a baseline strategy, reflection is key… [we] cannot reflect on something without synthesizing… to synthesize and grasp the reality of things is the beginning of learning. Then you examine the different facets of that synthesis and take action. So yeah I mean it is complicated, but I would say that's the basic structure, and it can really inspire ideas. (P4)

Taken together - classes on ethics, time-sensitive training, and reflection embedded into the curricula - point to a systematic andragogy, where standards are explicit, time is well-spent, metrics are written, and individualized reflection and attention are accorded as far as possible within TVET.

To translate these insights into TVET, the institution might:

1. Dedicate time for weekly discussions of ethical principles and dilemmas encountered during internship or on-the-job training;
2. Integrate reflective prompts into technical assignments, prompting learners to connect "what worked," what challenged me," and "what I'll do next."
3. Offer workshops on synthesis skills, guiding students to distill complex experiences and information into practical insights useful for everyday life.

Through these steps, the "right attitude" emphasized by the participants as crucial for leadership development ceases to be an afterthought and becomes the engine of leadership readiness. Over time, these time-tested practices may enable women to grow from their accumulation of lived experiences.

Recent developments in Philippine educational policy reinforce the direction suggested by Theme 13. The Department of Education conducted a pilot study in selected schools where the number of immersion hours have significantly expanded from a superficial 80 to 420 to 640 hours to enable close to real-world work depth of experience (Romero, 2025). Yet, as Asinas et al. (2019) caution, gap persists between policy rhetoric and reallife TVET conditions, citing persistent time and resource deficits in vocational sectors beyond the typically shortterm technical training. As such, leadership development within TVET settings is often undervalued within higher-education certification-driven schemes as affirmed by Andreev (2022), and Billett (2017).

Theme 10. Interweaving leadership development activities within training apprenticeship.

The programmed inclusion of both theoretical and practical lessons on leadership into the curriculum emerged as a powerful strategy to tap women's potential, as revealed by the participants.

Table 9. Group Experiential Theme 10

Theme 9		Excerpts from experiential statements
Embed leadership development activities within training and apprenticeship.	P1	*Seminars… provide insights into real-life experiences… where speakers share personal experiences and practical insights beyond what is written in books.*
	P2	*I think it's very important to establish programs for training, seminars, and opportunities to listen to insights from outsiders.*
	P3	*Growing up, we needed practice in organizing a teams*
	P4	*Classes would have to be engaging, experiential, with real-life applications, and developmental, taking into consideration the maturity of the students*
	P5	*We expose students to competitions so they don't think they're the best just because they've only won in class.*
	P9	*Project exposures, working with different people*
	P11	*Use videos and ensure students master the fundamental basics*
	P17	*Service-learning projects helped a lot*
	P19	*Every course deepens your know-why and know-how*

* P is the pseudonym for participants; the number after it refers to one of the twenty-four participants.

The participants observed how joining competitions became occasions for making healthy comparisons and student benchmarking, with the potential to gain new insights and perspectives that could help themselves improve. On the other hand, P16 urged seminars that provide insights into real-life experiences, noting that graduates often focus solely on applying theoretical knowledge and would benefit from speakers who share personal experiences and practical insights beyond what is written in books.

Often touted as an approach to teaching the sciences, some participants alluded to a Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach that may be adapted in TVET. Beyond executing instructions, students may be challenged to stretch their foundational skills to creative pursuits with a twist of service for the community, deepening both competence and conviction. Both theoretical and hands-on practice in teamwork were perceived as vital. Since most TVET skills are learned in small group settings, effective communication, collaboration, and conflict resolution skills must be taught just as deliberately as the technical skills being primarily targeted; otherwise, frictions ensue, and this could have a negative effect on learning. One participant reflected on the lack of early opportunities to practice team organization and leadership, while another emphasized that leadership training should be engaging, experiential, and grounded in real-life applications. Such approaches would allow students to rehearse essential leadership skills through discussion and collaborative activities, making the learning process both practical and developmental.

Finally, a well-planned work rotation is widely perceived as a doable form of skill training that gives high returns, as it helps to multiply one's competencies across roles. P15 described it as "a beautiful system where tasks rotated every two or three weeks." P22 added that "rotating staff and finding roles where they can excel is key… Sending people to different work areas allows them to experience new environments, adopt different work attitudes, and gain fresh perspectives." To strengthen the effectiveness of work rotations, participants recommended that trainees evaluate one another and then link the feedback and evaluations for improvement that are systematically acted upon. Diverse strategies such as project-based learning require the "participation of learners in understanding the reality of life from the concrete to the abstract" (Indrawan et al., 2020, p. 2824), reinforcing Theme 14's finding of a leadership-learning pathway where diverse simulation activities coalesce into an apprenticeship designed to develop the competence and confidence of young women who will carry the torch of leadership in the service industry.

Overall, the information gained from this study may benefit those working with women and/or developing future leaders by recommending actions, reflections, and strategies that were deemed important and effective by the participants. In doing so, the study aimed to bridge intergenerational communication, and contribute to the appeal of TVET as a desirable career path. Real-life stories served as portals to the process of leadership learning, particularly in specific episodes where such learning occurred. These experiences help enhance TVET programs. Enhancing vocational courses by integrating technical and human skills, responding to women's unique challenges, and adopting a more holistic, human-centered approach amid rapid technological advancements has highlighted the service industry as a viable path for both personal growth and professional leadership. By integrating technical expertise with human-centered skills, TVET can transform from a pathway of employability into a platform for leadership readiness—ensuring that women trainees emerge not only as skilled workers but as empowered leaders capable of shaping the future of the service industry.

CONCLUSION

This research provided actionable insights for improving technical and vocational programs with a strong leadership focus. It argues that, for TVET to produce women capable of leadership in the service industry, it must no longer be driven solely by market demands, rushed apprenticeships, and short-term employability. Instead, it should champion the expansion of human capabilities, especially for vulnerable young women navigating complex social and economic landscapes. Workplaces must be seen not just as sites for internship, but as arenas for growth, engagement, and leadership development.

This research calls for a deeper and more human-centered vision with far-reaching effects: TVET must not only serve market-driven objectives but empower women to lead and flourish in their communities, putting them at

the forefront of global agendas. In the Philippine context—where manual skills are globally recognized —there is a unique opportunity to elevate TVET into a platform for women's leadership and overall human flourishing, not just a pipeline for labor supply.

Ultimately, empowering women through TVET is a vital remedy against social exclusion, especially in an era of rapid digitalization and environmental strain, where women from marginal communities are often left behind. Technical and vocational education must be seen not merely as a tool for economic advancement, but as an intrinsically valuable phase of human resource development —a source of dignity, agency, and lifelong learning. The role of TVET in facilitating leadership and social integration for women is central to building a flourishing society. This study affirms that TVET, when grounded in reflective practice and human development, can transform not only careers but lives, families, and communities.

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