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Human-Centered Leadership Under Sustained Institutional Pressure: A Developmental Framework for Policing and Higher Education

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Abstract

Policing and higher education are institutionally distinct but publicly consequential settings in which leaders must sustain judgment, learning, and legitimacy under prolonged organizational pressure. Existing leadership theories explain important elements of this problem, including emotional regulation, ethical conduct, relational processes, adaptation, and organizational culture. They do not, however, resolve a narrower question that motivates this paper: under what conditions do human capacities become sufficiently enacted, learned, and reinforced to persist as institutional capability beyond particular leaders? This conceptual paper develops Human-Centered Leadership (HCL) as a multilevel developmental framework organized around three levels—developing the person, developing relationships, and developing the institution—and six interdependent components: reflective awareness, emotional regulation, ethical leadership, relational intelligence, adaptive learning capacity, and institutional reinforcement. Four mechanisms—reflective regulation, relational enactment, adaptive learning, and institutional reinforcement—specify the translations across levels. Human development occurs across the framework, while organizational culture functions recursively as both an outcome of repeated practice and a condition shaping subsequent leadership. Nine propositions identify expected relationships, mediators, moderators, and boundary conditions. Comparative analysis of policing and higher education shows how common mechanisms take different forms under hierarchical command and distributed governance. HCL is advanced as an evidence-informed and empirically contestable framework; its contribution depends on whether the proposed developmental-institutionalization pathway explains institutional outcomes beyond established leadership models.

Keywords: Human-centered Leadership; Human Development; Institutional Capability; Policing; Higher Education; Adaptive Learning; Institutional Reinforcement; Legitimacy

Introduction

Public institutions operate amid sustained organizational pressure, technological acceleration, constrained resources, expanding accountability demands, and intensified scrutiny. These conditions elevate concerns about burnout, emotional exhaustion, recruitment and retention, organizational fragmentation, and declining trust. Although performance measures remain necessary, institutional effectiveness also depends on the quality of judgment, relationships, learning, and culture through which results are produced [1, 2].

Policing and higher education provide a useful comparative setting for examining this problem. They are not organizational equivalents. Police organizations exercise legal authority through comparatively formal chains of command and confront operational danger, trauma exposure, rapid decision-making, and direct responsibility for public safety. Universities distribute authority among governing boards, executives, faculty bodies, departments, and professional units while navigating academic freedom, shared governance, student success, knowledge production, resource pressures, and public accountability. Nevertheless, both are mission-driven and public-facing. Their effectiveness depends on professional judgment, employee commitment, institutional learning, and legitimacy among both organizational members and the communities they serve.

Research in the two sectors has generally developed in separate conversations. Police-leadership scholarship emphasizes operational competence, organizational justice, officer wellness, ethical conduct, community trust, and legitimacy. Higher-education scholarship emphasizes shared governance, academic leadership, organizational change, faculty and staff development, student success, and institutional trust. Across both literatures, however, a related problem is evident: chronic institutional pressure is not only an individual wellness concern. It can affect emotional regulation, communication, procedural fairness, employee voice, adaptive learning, organizational culture, and the credibility of public institutions [3-5].

Established leadership theories illuminate important parts of this problem. Adaptive leadership explains how organizations confront challenges requiring learning and changes in values or practice. Emotional-intelligence scholarship addresses awareness and regulation of emotion. Authentic, ethical, and servant leadership emphasize values, integrity, service, and follower development. Transformational leadership explains vision, motivation, and change, while relational leadership conceptualizes leadership as a process of interaction and shared meaning. Trauma-informed and psychological-safety perspectives clarify how stress, fear, and interpersonal risk affect organizational participation. Yet no single perspective fully explains how intrapersonal capacities are translated into relational experience, how relational experience supports adaptive learning, and how repeated practices become embedded in culture while culture simultaneously shapes leadership.

This paper addresses a more specific problem than the general observation that leadership operates across levels. Contemporary adaptive and complexity-oriented perspectives already treat leadership as relational, processual, and embedded in organizational systems. Recent integrative work on adaptive leadership, for example, emphasizes collective learning and the co-constitutive relationship between leadership practices and processes [6]. HCL therefore does not claim novelty from multilevel organization itself. Its proposed contribution is developmental institutionalization: an account of how reflective and regulatory capacities become relationally enacted, incorporated into adaptive learning, and reinforced through organizational systems so that they may persist as institutional capability beyond particular leaders.

The paper makes four contributions. First, it specifies developmental institutionalization as the theoretical problem HCL is intended to explain. Second, it differentiates six developmental components by function rather than treating them as a collection of desirable attributes. Third, it derives four mechanisms and identifies boundary conditions that make the proposed relationships conditional and empirically testable. Fourth, it compares the framework across policing and higher education and translates the architecture into a bounded implementation and research agenda.

The argument is deliberately limited. HCL does not replace adaptive, ethical, servant, relational, transformational, emotional-intelligence, complexity, or earlier human-centered approaches. Nor does it assume that leadership can overcome resource scarcity, legal constraints, political intervention, or structural inequality. The framework asks instead whether human capacities have more durable institutional consequences when they are enacted through credible relationships, converted into organizational learning, and reinforced through systems that survive leadership transitions.

Conceptual Approach and Theory Development

This paper uses an integrative conceptual approach for theory development rather than theory testing. Conceptual articles require an explicit logic of knowledge creation and a clear account of how existing theories are selected and used [7]. The analysis proceeds by problematizing the translation from individual leadership capacity to institutional capability, examining established and integrative leadership traditions for processes relevant to that problem, differentiating the proposed components by function, and deriving mechanisms and propositions that can subsequently be tested.

The literature is used purposively rather than as an exhaustive systematic review. Recent peer-reviewed reviews, meta-analyses, and empirical studies are prioritized when they bear directly on a proposed relationship; seminal sources are retained where they define foundational constructs. Evidence for individual relationships is not treated as evidence that HCL is already a validated higher-order construct. The integrated architecture remains a theoretical proposition requiring discriminant, incremental, multilevel, and longitudinal testing.

Theoretical Foundations and Distinctive Contribution

HCL is situated within established leadership scholarship. Emotional-intelligence research contributes self-awareness, regulation, empathy, and relationship management; ethical and servant leadership contribute fairness, moral responsibility, service, and development of others; relational leadership emphasizes interaction and shared meaning; adaptive and complexity-oriented approaches explain collective learning and adaptation in complex systems [6, 8, 9, 10]. Psychological-safety and organizational-culture scholarship further clarifies how voice, learning, and institutional norms shape behavior [2, 11]. The term Human-Centered Leadership is also not new. Leclerc et al. [12] developed a health-care model emphasizing self-awareness, caring, professional expertise, and cultures of trust, while Anders [13] advanced a communication-based approach to human-centered leadership development. The present framework therefore does not claim novelty from the label or from its individual components.

Its proposed contribution is developmental institutionalization: an account of how human capacities become relationally enacted, incorporated into adaptive learning, and reinforced through organizational systems so that they may persist as institutional capability beyond particular leaders. Recent adaptive-leadership scholarship already conceptualizes leadership as processual, relational, recursive, and multilevel [6]. HCL must therefore demonstrate added explanatory value through the particular relationships it specifies and through discriminant and incremental-validity testing.

Human-Centered Leadership Framework: Developmental Components, Mechanisms, and Propositions

The preceding theoretical analysis establishes Human-Centered Leadership as a multilevel developmental framework rather than a discrete leadership style or collection of desirable attributes. The framework explains how reflective and regulatory capacities are expressed through ethical and relational practices, how those practices support adaptive learning, and how repeated leadership practices become embedded in institutional culture. It further proposes that organizational culture influences the development and effectiveness of current and future leaders, producing a recursive relationship between leadership and institutional conditions.

Framework Architecture

HCL comprises six interdependent developmental components distributed across three levels. These components are conceptually related, but they perform different theoretical functions: recognition, regulation, normative direction, navigation of institutionally structured relationships, organizational learning, and persistence. The framework therefore proposes functional differentiation rather than conceptual isolation.

These dimensions are analytically distinct but theoretically interdependent. Reflective awareness without emotional regulation may allow leaders to recognize their reactions without managing them effectively. Emotional regulation without ethical orientation may become strategic emotional control rather than Human-Centered Leadership. Ethical commitments without relational intelligence may remain abstract or be communicated in ways that fail to generate trust. Relational intelligence without adaptive capacity may improve interpersonal interactions without changing ineffective organizational systems. Finally, adaptive initiatives without institutional reinforcement may disappear when individual leaders leave or institutional priorities change.

The framework proposes the following general pathway:

This pathway does not imply that institutional change always proceeds linearly. Leaders and institutions may enter the developmental process at different points, and change within one dimension may affect several others simultaneously. Nevertheless, the model identifies a theoretically ordered process through which intrapersonal capacities become relational experiences and, ultimately, institutional conditions.

1. Reflective Awareness

Reflective awareness refers to a leader's capacity to observe personal assumptions, emotional reactions, values, biases, and habitual patterns while considering the broader context in which decisions occur. It includes attentional regulation, self-awareness, perspective-taking, and willingness to examine how authority, identity, and experience influence interpretation and conduct.

Recent organizational scholarship conceptualizes self-awareness as an ongoing developmental process involving both intrapersonal reflection and interpersonal learning rather than as a fixed personal attribute [14]. This process includes seeking feedback, recognizing discrepancies between intentions and consequences, and revising personal interpretations through interaction with others.

Leaders in high-stress institutions frequently make decisions under conditions of urgency, uncertainty, conflict, incomplete information, and competing expectations. Sustained pressure can narrow attention, intensify defensive reactions, and encourage reliance on familiar responses even when changing conditions require new learning. Reflective awareness creates cognitive and emotional space between stimulus and response, enabling leaders to consider alternative interpretations and possible consequences before acting.

Recent reviews provide evidence for the relevance of reflective and mindfulness-related capacities to leadership. Doornich and Lynch [15], in a semi-systematic review of leadership research, identified attention, awareness, and authenticity as central qualities associated with mindful leadership. Tenschert et al. [16] reviewed 52 studies of self-leadership and mindfulness training and found associations with self-regulation, stress resilience, emotional regulation, job performance, and the ability to establish constructive relationships with employees. The authors also noted limitations in the robustness and consistency of the available intervention evidence.

These findings do not establish that mindfulness or reflective practice alone produces effective leadership. Rather, they support the more focused claim that reflective awareness can provide an intrapersonal foundation for deliberate, relationally attentive, and adaptive conduct. Reflection also has an ethical function. Leaders who examine their assumptions, biases, authority, and emotional responses may be better positioned to acknowledge uncertainty and consider how institutional decisions affect constituencies with different levels of power.

Proposition 1: Reflective awareness will be positively associated with emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility under sustained institutional pressure.

2. Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation refers to the capacity to recognize, interpret, and manage emotional responses without suppressing emotion or disengaging from demanding situations. Psychological resilience refers to the capacity to recover, learn, and maintain effective functioning during or following adversity. Within Human-Centered Leadership, resilience is not an expectation that individuals should accommodate unlimited institutional demands. It involves adaptive coping combined with recognition of organizational conditions that unnecessarily produce or intensify stress.

Emotional regulation connects awareness to observable leadership conduct. Leaders may recognize that they are becoming defensive, frustrated, fearful, or overwhelmed, but this recognition becomes institutionally meaningful only when it changes how they communicate, interpret events, and make decisions. Emotionally regulated leaders may be better able to listen during disagreement, tolerate uncertainty, provide credible explanations, and avoid transmitting anxiety or defensiveness throughout an organization.

Contemporary emotional-intelligence scholarship supports the relevance of these capacities. Coronado-Maldonado and Benítez-Márquez [9] reviewed 104 peer-reviewed publications and found that emotional intelligence has become increasingly connected to leadership, teamwork, communication, and organizational effectiveness. More recently, Gerhardt et al. [10] systematically reviewed 101 empirical studies and found that leader emotional intelligence was positively associated with relational leadership behaviors, leader well-being, and several performance-related outcomes, including leadership effectiveness.

These findings update the foundational emotional-intelligence literature while also identifying important limitations. Gerhardt et al. [10] note continuing disagreement regarding the definition and measurement of emotional intelligence and caution that much of the existing evidence is correlational. Emotional intelligence should therefore not be treated as a complete or uniformly validated explanation of leadership effectiveness.

Human-Centered Leadership incorporates emotional intelligence but extends beyond it. Emotional awareness and regulation are primarily intrapersonal and interpersonal capacities. By themselves, they do not explain how emotional competence becomes connected to ethical responsibility, internal procedural justice, organizational culture, institutional legitimacy, or sustainable systems of leadership development. Emotional competence can also be used instrumentally or manipulatively. It becomes human-centered when it is directed by ethical judgment, transparency, accountability, and genuine recognition of others.

Proposition 2: Emotional regulation will partially mediate the positive relationship between reflective awareness and ethical and relational leadership behavior; organizational norms concerning feedback and leader fallibility are expected to moderate this translation.

This proposition identifies emotional regulation as a translating mechanism. Reflective awareness makes recognition possible; emotional regulation helps convert recognition into stable, consistent, and relationally responsible behavior.

3. Ethical Leadership

Ethical and values-based leadership refers to the alignment of decision-making and conduct with defensible moral principles, institutional responsibilities, professional standards, and the public mission of the organization. It includes integrity, fairness, transparency, accountability, consistency, and willingness to consider the human consequences of institutional decisions.

This dimension moves beyond personal values or authenticity. Leaders may hold sincere personal convictions that conflict with professional responsibilities, relevant evidence, institutional mission, or the rights and needs of others. Human-Centered Leadership therefore requires ethical reasoning rather than personal authenticity alone. Ethical leadership involves examining competing responsibilities, explaining difficult decisions, acknowledging tradeoffs, and accepting accountability for institutional consequences.

In policing, ethical leadership includes maintaining consistency among commitments to public safety, constitutional authority, procedural justice, employee wellness, and community legitimacy. In higher education, it includes navigating tensions among student success, academic standards, faculty autonomy, access, institutional sustainability, intellectual inquiry, and public responsibility. In both

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sectors, ethical leadership requires more than affirming a mission. It requires fair and transparent processes for interpreting and applying that mission when legitimate values conflict.

Empirical research connects ethical leadership with employee trust, psychological safety, voice, and commitment. Hu et al. [17], for example, found that ethical leadership promoted employee voice through stronger relational exchange and psychological safety. Research by Cheng et al. [18] similarly found that ethical leadership encouraged employee voice by increasing employees' willingness to express concerns and suggestions.

These findings support the argument that ethical leadership becomes consequential when employees experience it through observable decisions and relationships. Ethical intentions alone are insufficient if institutional members experience decision-making as inconsistent, disrespectful, opaque, or unresponsive.

4. Relational Intelligence

Relational intelligence refers to the capacity to understand and navigate the interpersonal, emotional, cultural, and power dynamics through which leadership occurs. It includes empathy, communication, active listening, perspective-taking, conflict navigation, trust-building, responsiveness, and the creation of meaningful opportunities for voice.

Relational intelligence does not require leaders to agree with every constituency or avoid difficult decisions. Instead, it concerns how authority and disagreement are managed. Employees may accept decisions they do not prefer when they believe that decision-making processes were fair, relevant perspectives were considered, explanations were credible, and those affected were treated with dignity.

Ethical leadership and relational intelligence are mutually reinforcing. Ethical commitments provide direction and limits for relational behavior, while relational intelligence makes ethical intentions visible through communication and treatment. A leader may intend to act fairly, but if relevant groups are excluded, decisions are communicated inconsistently, or concerns are dismissed, institutional members may not experience that leadership as fair or trustworthy.

Psychological safety and internal procedural justice connect ethical and relational practices to organizational outcomes. Psychological safety describes a shared belief that interpersonal risk-taking—such as raising concerns, acknowledging mistakes, or questioning established practices—will not result in humiliation or retaliation [11]. Internal procedural justice refers to employees' perceptions that organizational authorities make and communicate decisions through fair, transparent, respectful, and unbiased processes.

Research supports these relationships. Ethical leadership has been associated with psychological safety and employee voice, while procedurally fair supervisory treatment in policing has been linked to organizational trust, commitment, job satisfaction, and support for procedurally just public interactions [17, 19]. Research in higher education similarly emphasizes transparency, bidirectional information-sharing, meaningful participation, and trusting faculty–administrator relationships as foundations of effective shared governance [4].

> Proposition 3: Ethical and relational leadership practices—including procedural fairness, respectful treatment, credible explanation, transparency, responsiveness, and meaningful voice—will be positively associated with psychological safety, leadership trustworthiness, and internal legitimacy.
>
> Proposition 4: Psychological safety and leadership trustworthiness will mediate the positive relationship between ethical and relational leadership practices and employee voice, knowledge sharing, engagement, and organizational commitment.

These propositions clarify that trust is not assumed to result directly from a leader's self-awareness, emotional competence, or ethical intentions. Trust develops through repeated experiences that make those capacities visible and credible.

Human-Centered Leadership and Organizational Stress

Human-Centered Leadership also proposes that fairness, support, psychological safety, and trust function as organizational resources influencing employees' experiences of stress. High workloads and inherent occupational demands remain important, but organizational processes can either buffer or intensify their effects.

When decisions are opaque, inconsistent, or experienced as disrespectful, employees may devote additional emotional and cognitive resources to uncertainty, self-protection, interpersonal conflict, or attempts to interpret leadership intentions. When employees believe that raising concerns is unsafe or futile, organizational problems may remain hidden until they become more difficult to address. Conversely, fair procedures, trustworthy communication, and meaningful support can provide predictability, dignity, and a greater sense of organizational security.

Empirical research associates perceived organizational injustice with occupational stress and poorer psychological health. Magnavita et al. [20], for example, found that organizational justice predicted occupational stress and that stress mediated the relationship between justice and mental health among hospital workers. In policing, Piotrowski et al. [21] found that supervisory support and justice positively predicted work engagement.

Higher education research provides related evidence. Recent systematic and qualitative studies identify workload imbalance, administrative demands, unmet support needs, institutional change, and strained workplace relationships as important contributors to faculty exhaustion and burnout [5, 22]. Research on shared governance further suggests that transparency, authentic participation, and trusting relationships affect how faculty and administrators navigate complex institutional challenges [4].

These findings do not demonstrate that Human-Centered Leadership can eliminate stress. They support the narrower claim that leadership and organizational practices can reduce or intensify avoidable institutional strain.

> Proposition 5: Sustained exposure to organizational practices that support reflection, constructive feedback, ethical reasoning, relational engagement, meaningful voice, and experiential learning will be positively associated with reflective judgment, relational competence, professional agency, adaptive learning, and responsible contribution.

This proposition applies primarily to organizationally generated stress. It does not imply that leadership can eliminate operational trauma, excessive workload, financial limitations, political interference, or personal sources of stress.

5. Adaptive Learning Capacity

Adaptive learning capacity refers to the ability of leaders, teams, and institutions to learn from experience, question established assumptions, experiment responsibly, respond to changing conditions, and develop new capabilities. It extends beyond individual adaptability by emphasizing collective learning and organizational development.

Adaptive capacity depends partly on relational conditions. Organizational members are unlikely to disclose emerging problems, acknowledge mistakes, or challenge ineffective practices when they anticipate retaliation, dismissal, or reputational harm. Psychological safety, trust, and employee voice therefore provide mechanisms through which relational leadership supports organizational learning.

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Ethical-leadership and employee-voice research indicates that supportive and trustworthy leadership can encourage employees to contribute concerns, knowledge, and recommendations [17]. These findings provide empirical foundations for connecting relational conditions to institutional adaptation.

In policing, adaptive capacity may involve learning from critical incidents, community feedback, employee experiences, complaint patterns, new technologies, and evaluations of enforcement or prevention strategies. In higher education, it may include responding to changing student needs, emerging learning environments, technological disruption, enrollment pressures, financial constraints, and disagreements over curriculum, governance, and institutional priorities.

Adaptive learning does not mean accepting every proposed change. It requires institutions to evaluate evidence, understand context, identify unintended consequences, preserve legitimate institutional values, and revise practices when existing approaches no longer support the mission.

> Proposition 6: Psychological safety and organizational trust will be positively associated with employee voice and knowledge sharing, which will in turn be positively associated with collective learning and institutional adaptive learning capacity.

This proposition positions voice and collective learning as mechanisms rather than assuming that supportive relationships automatically create institutional change.

6. Institutional Reinforcement

Institutional reinforcement refers to the process through which leadership principles and practices become embedded in shared assumptions, expectations, routines, systems, and norms. Culture is expressed through what institutions reward, tolerate, measure, communicate, fund, promote, and reproduce—not merely through formal mission statements.

Human-Centered Leadership becomes institutionally durable when its principles influence recruitment, onboarding, promotion, mentoring, leadership development, performance evaluation, workload systems, decision-making, accountability, resource allocation, and opportunities for employee and community participation. Without institutionalization, reflective, ethical, or relational leadership may remain dependent on individual personalities and disappear during leadership turnover.

Institutional culture occupies two positions within the framework. First, it is an outcome of repeated leadership and relational practices. Consistent experiences of fairness, voice, learning, and ethical accountability may gradually become shared organizational expectations. Second, culture is a moderating condition that affects whether individual leaders can enact Human-Centered Leadership effectively. A leader may value transparency and participation, but an organizational culture characterized by secrecy, retaliation, rigid hierarchy, or excessive competition may constrain those practices.

Research supports the general proposition that leadership and culture interact rather than operate independently. Schein and Schein [2] conceptualize leaders as important creators and transmitters of organizational culture while recognizing that established cultural assumptions also shape leadership conduct.

> Proposition 7: The positive relationship between adaptive learning and enduring institutional capability will be stronger when human-centered practices are reinforced through organizational systems, including selection, supervision, mentoring, promotion, evaluation, workload practices, resource allocation, recognition, and accountability.

> Proposition 8: Organizational cultures characterized by procedural fairness, psychological safety, developmental support, learning, and credible accountability will strengthen the relationships among individual HCL components, relational enactment, human development, and adaptive learning; cultures characterized by retaliation, opacity, chronic overload, or rigid status boundaries will weaken them.

These propositions capture the framework's recursive logic: leaders shape culture, and culture shapes the development and effectiveness of leaders.

Internal and External Legitimacy

The framework distinguishes internal from external legitimacy while proposing that the two are related. Internal legitimacy develops when employees perceive leadership processes and institutional authority as fair, competent, trustworthy, responsive, and ethically grounded. External legitimacy develops when communities, students, families, public officials, and other stakeholders regard the institution's authority and conduct as appropriate and worthy of confidence.

Evidence in policing supports an inside-out relationship. Officers who experience internal procedural justice are more likely to trust their organizations and support procedurally fair treatment of the public. Yesberg et al. [19] identify direct and indirect pathways connecting internal justice with external procedural justice, including stress, morale, self-legitimacy, organizational commitment, and trust in citizens.

The corresponding pathway in higher education requires further empirical investigation. Nevertheless, research on shared governance indicates that trust, transparency, relationships, and meaningful participation affect the quality and legitimacy of institutional decision-making [4]. It is theoretically reasonable to expect that internal organizational conditions influence how faculty, staff, and administrators interact with students, families, community partners, and other constituencies. This relationship should be presented as a testable proposition rather than as an established cross-sector conclusion.

> Proposition 9: Greater institutional capability and internal legitimacy will be positively associated with external legitimacy and sustainable mission performance, with the relationship operating partly through employee commitment, organizational learning, and fair, ethical, and responsive interactions with institutional publics.

The strength and mechanisms of this relationship may differ across sectors. Police authority involves state power and frequent direct encounters with members of the public. Higher education legitimacy is mediated through teaching, research, student services, governance, public scholarship, and community engagement. Comparative research should examine whether the same general pathway operates through different sector-specific practices.

Boundary Conditions

Human-Centered Leadership is not proposed as a context-free account of effective leadership. Its central relationships are expected to vary with institutional conditions that shape whether individual capacities can be enacted relationally, converted into learning, and reinforced organizationally. This qualification is consistent with evidence that leadership competencies are constrained by individual, team, organizational, and stakeholder conditions [23] and with meta-analytic evidence that leadership–performance relationships vary across national cultural contexts and sectors [24].

Authority structure is one such condition. Hierarchical command and distributed governance create different possibilities for voice, participation, and decision speed. HCL therefore does not equate human-centered leadership with reduced hierarchy. The theoretical

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issue is whether authority is appropriate to the institutional task and whether opportunities for explanation, feedback, and subsequent learning remain credible.

Crisis intensity also matters. Crisis-leadership research shows that crises differ in origin, urgency, and stakeholder demands, and that these differences alter the leadership challenges organizations face [25]. Acute crises may compress consultation and experimentation without making reflective regulation or ethical judgment less relevant. HCL therefore distinguishes temporarily compressed decision processes from abandonment of relational accountability and post-event learning.

Organizational culture and developmental maturity are expected to condition the credibility of HCL practices. In low-trust settings, employees may reasonably require repeated evidence before interpreting invitations to speak or collaborate as consequential. Supportive cultures may amplify reflective, relational, and learning practices, whereas retaliation, opacity, chronic overload, and symbolic participation may weaken or delay their effects.

Leadership tenure and institutional embeddedness create a related tension. Newly appointed leaders may bring comparative experience but lack knowledge of institutional history and informal norms; long-tenured leaders may possess contextual legitimacy while becoming more closely identified with established assumptions. HCL therefore emphasizes the joint importance of contextual understanding and reflective distance.

Resources, organizational size, legal authority, political context, and public or private governance further delimit what leadership can accomplish. Leaders may influence how institutions interpret and respond to these conditions without controlling them. HCL should therefore be evaluated as a conditional account of leadership contribution, not as a claim that relationally skilled leaders can overcome structural constraints through interpersonal competence alone.

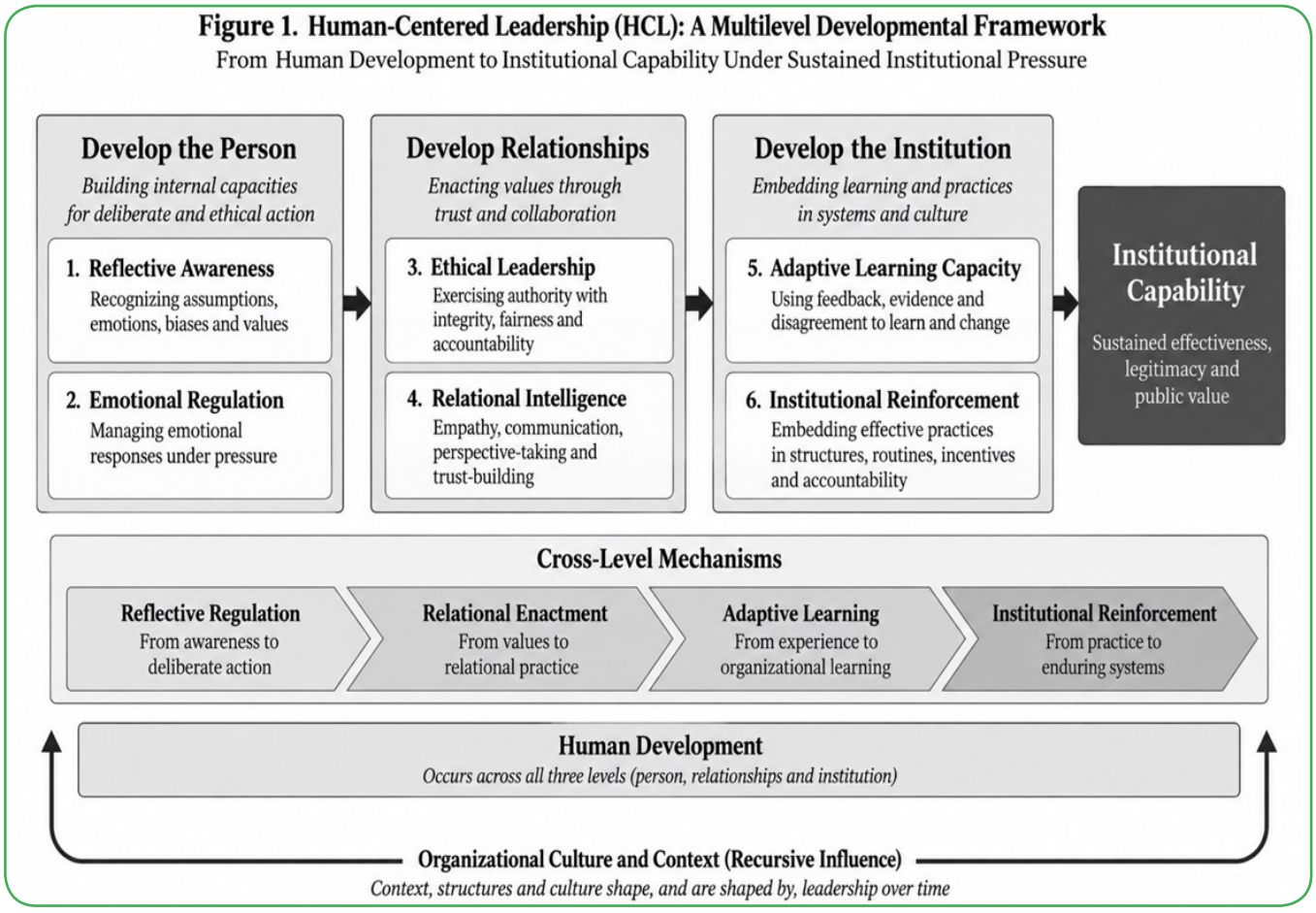
The described boundary conditions qualify the framework's scope. HCL predicts stronger translation from human capacity to institutional capability when organizational conditions permit reflective regulation, credible relational enactment, consequential learning, and institutional reinforcement. Where those conditions are absent, effects should be weaker, delayed, or expressed differently.

Human-Centered Leadership Across Policing and Higher Education: A Comparative Institutional Analysis

Policing and higher education provide a theoretically useful comparison because they are neither organizationally identical nor entirely unrelated. Both are mission-driven, publicly consequential institutions whose effectiveness depends on professional expertise, employee commitment, institutional trust, and external legitimacy. Both must also respond to political scrutiny, technological change, resource constraints, competing stakeholder expectations, and disagreements about how broadly defined public purposes should be translated into practice. Their authority structures, occupational cultures, leadership pathways, and operational environments, however, differ substantially. Comparing them therefore helps identify which elements of Human-Centered Leadership may be transferable across institutions and which require contextual adaptation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Human-Centered Leadership (HCL): A Multilevel Developmental Framework

From Human Development to Institutional Capability Under Sustained Institutional Pressure



This comparison does not assume that all police departments or universities operate alike. Governance arrangements, leadership appointments, labor relations, legal authority, and organizational cultures vary across jurisdictions, countries, and institutional types. The analysis instead uses the two sectors as contrasting institutional contexts through which to examine a common theoretical problem: how leaders connect individual capacities, relational practices, and organizational systems when chronic stress threatens employee well-being, institutional learning, internal trust, and public legitimacy.

The comparison is theoretically useful because authority, professional identity, decision speed, accountability, conflict, and

legitimacy are organized differently across the two sectors. Police agencies generally rely on formal command structures and may require immediate decisions under operational risk; universities distribute authority among boards, executives, faculty governance, departments, and professional units and more often rely on deliberative processes. HCL therefore does not prescribe identical participation or decision styles. Its stronger claim is that reflective regulation, ethical use of authority, credible relational enactment, learning, and reinforcement should take institutionally appropriate forms. Evidence from policing links internally experienced procedural justice with organizational trust and support for procedurally fair treatment of the public [19]; higher-education research similarly emphasizes authentic participation, bidirectional communication, and trust in shared governance [4].

Different Structures of Authority and Participation

The two sectors differ most visibly in how authority is organized. Police departments generally operate through relatively formal chains of command because operational coordination, legal accountability, emergency response, and officer safety require clear assignments of authority. This structure can support rapid decision-making and role clarity, but it can also inhibit upward communication when employees perceive that questioning decisions is unsafe or inconsistent with occupational expectations. Police leadership research consequently identifies communication, integrity, employee development, adaptability, and the ability to influence organizational culture as important leadership concerns [26].

Higher education distributes authority across governing boards, presidents, provosts, deans, department chairs, faculty bodies, professional administrators, and, in some settings, collective-bargaining structures. Faculty exercise particular expertise and authority in academic matters, while boards and senior administrators retain responsibility for institutional strategy, finance, compliance, and executive administration. Shared governance does not mean that every constituency has equal authority over every decision. It means that participation should correspond to areas of responsibility and expertise and that consequential decisions benefit from communication and appropriate consultation. Recent research involving faculty senate presidents emphasizes that effective shared governance depends not simply on formal representation but also on bidirectional information, authentic participation, and trusting relationships between faculty and administrators [4].

These differences influence how Human-Centered Leadership is enacted. In policing, voice must function within a hierarchy without weakening operational accountability. Leaders can create structured opportunities for officers and civilian personnel to identify risks, question routines, report mistakes, and contribute operational knowledge. In higher education, leaders must coordinate more distributed forms of authority while clarifying when consultation is advisory, when responsibility is shared, and who ultimately makes a decision. Ambiguity about these distinctions may produce either governance paralysis or the appearance of participation without meaningful influence.

Accordingly, participation should not be treated as an identical practice across both sectors. Its human-centered form depends on institutional design. What remains constant is the underlying mechanism: people are more likely to contribute knowledge, raise concerns, and support implementation when they experience the process as respectful, credible, and procedurally fair.

Comparative domain	Policing	Higher education	Human-Centered Leadership implication
Primary public mission	Public safety, law enforcement, prevention, order maintenance, emergency response, and community partnership	Student learning and success, knowledge creation, professional preparation, civic development, and public service	Leaders must translate broad missions into priorities while preserving legitimate disagreement
Authority structure	Relatively hierarchical, with clear operational command and legal accountability	Distributed among boards, executives, faculty bodies, administrative units, and professional groups	Voice and participation must be adapted to different distributions of authority
Leadership pathway	Internal advancement is common in supervisory ranks, although executive recruitment varies	Academic leadership combines internal progression with internal and external executive searches	Internal knowledge and external perspective are potential resources, not guarantees of effectiveness
Transition challenge	Moving from operational competence to strategic, political, cultural, and public leadership	Learning governance, institutional history, disciplinary cultures, and informal influence	Leadership development should integrate cultural knowledge, reflective distance, and strategic competence
Principal stressors	Trauma exposure, danger, uncertainty, shift work, staffing, supervision, administrative demands, and public scrutiny	Work intensification, multiple role's demands, resource constraints, governance conflict, technological change, and employment insecurity	Individual resilience must be combined with reduction of preventable organizational stress
Employee voice	Must coexist with command responsibility and operational coordination	Operates through shared governance, consultation, professional expertise, and formal or informal participation	Psychological safety and procedural clarity determine whether voice contributes to learning
Internal legitimacy	Influenced by fair supervision, organizational justice, support, communication, and accountability	Influenced by authentic consultation, transparent decisions, role clarity, recognition, and follow-through	Procedural care connects relational leadership to trust and participation
External legitimacy	Public confidence in fairness, effectiveness, restraint, responsiveness, and accountability	Confidence of students, families, governments, communities, accreditors, and professional partners	Internal practices and external conduct should express consistent institutional values
Cultural transformation	Requires alignment of training, supervision, promotion, discipline, peer norms, and executive behavior	Requires alignment of governance, workload, evaluation, resource allocation, communication, and academic values	Culture becomes durable when human-centered practices are institutionalized

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Several practices may transfer across the two institutions, but their implementation must remain context-sensitive. Structured listening can reveal operational knowledge and stakeholder concerns, but it must be followed by feedback explaining what was learned and what action is possible. Mentoring and coaching can help leaders interpret organizational culture, but they should include multiple perspectives to avoid reproducing narrow insider assumptions. After-action reviews, climate assessments, upward-feedback mechanisms, leadership-development programs, and transparent decision protocols can support institutional learning in both sectors. Their design, however, must reflect different legal duties, governance arrangements, and professional norms.

Comparative Implications for the Framework

The comparison clarifies three features of Human-Centered Leadership. First, leadership effectiveness depends on alignment across levels. Reflective and emotional capacities influence how leaders use authority, but their effects are mediated through relational practices and institutional systems. Second, organizational culture is recursive: it shapes what leaders can do while being reproduced or transformed through repeated leadership decisions. Third, legitimacy has both internal and external dimensions. Institutions cannot assume that public mission alone guarantees employee commitment or public confidence.

Accordingly, Human-Centered Leadership does not prescribe a single leadership style for policing and higher education. It offers a multilevel framework for examining whether leadership capacities are translated into fair relationships, adaptive practices, sustainable work systems, and cultures capable of maintaining trust under pressure. The comparison demonstrates why context matters while also identifying a common principle: institutions are more likely to sustain performance and legitimacy when the dignity, knowledge, capacity, and voice of the people who carry out the mission are treated as organizational resources and ethical responsibilities rather than peripheral concerns.

Implementing Human-Centered Leadership: An Institutional Roadmap, Development Cycle, and Evaluation Framework

HCL cannot be implemented through leadership training alone. Reflection, mentoring, feedback, procedural-justice practices, and organizational learning are not unique to HCL. The framework's practical contribution is developmental alignment: individual development should become visible in relational practice; relational conditions should make relevant knowledge available for learning; and effective practices should be reinforced through organizational systems. An initiative addressing only one component may be valuable, but it should not be described as a comprehensive HCL intervention.

The implementation framework presented here is not a separate leadership theory or a universally prescribed organizational-change model. Rather, it translates the six developmental components of HCL into a practical and testable sequence. Its logic is consistent with implementation research demonstrating that organizational interventions are influenced by the characteristics of the intervention, the people involved, the internal setting, the external environment, and the implementation process [27]. It also reflects evidence that leadership-development outcomes depend on needs assessment, experiential learning, feedback, workplace support, and opportunities to apply new practices—not simply participation in training [28, 29].

The feasibility of HCL also rests on its compatibility with practices already used in policing and higher education, including supervisory development, mentoring, climate assessment, procedural-justice initiatives, shared-governance consultation, after-action review, and employee-wellness programs. Existing research supports many of these constituent practices and the mechanisms connecting fairness, support, trust, learning, well-being, and organizational effectiveness. However, the complete six-component HCL framework has not been evaluated as an integrated intervention. It should therefore be understood as an evidence-informed model appropriate for bounded pilot implementation and empirical testing rather than as an already validated institutional solution.

Principles Guiding Implementation

First, implementation should be context-responsive. Institutions should not assume that the same leadership challenges exist across every rank, department, campus, or employee group. Police supervisors, command executives, university department chairs, deans, provosts, and presidents exercise different forms of authority and operate under different constraints. Implementation should begin by identifying a clearly defined institutional need rather than introducing a standardized training package.

Second, implementation should be participatory but accountable. Employee voice can improve problem identification, decision quality, and institutional learning, but participation does not require consensus on every decision. Leaders should clarify the purpose of consultation, the scope of participants' influence, who holds decision authority, and how stakeholder input will inform the outcome.

Third, implementation should be developmental rather than punitive. Assessment should identify strengths, developmental needs, and organizational barriers rather than merely classify leaders as human-centered or non-human-centered. Leaders require opportunities to examine difficult decisions, unintended consequences, and failures without every acknowledgment of uncertainty being treated as incompetence.

Fourth, implementation should be systemic. Institutions should not ask leaders to demonstrate empathy, adaptability, or resilience while preserving policies and incentives that reward contrary behavior. Leadership expectations must be aligned with organizational resources, workloads, communication practices, evaluation systems, and accountability structures.

Fifth, implementation should be evidence-informed and adaptive. Because the HCL implementation framework has not yet been empirically validated as an integrated model, institutions should introduce it incrementally, evaluate its effects, and revise it according to evidence and stakeholder experience (Figure 2).

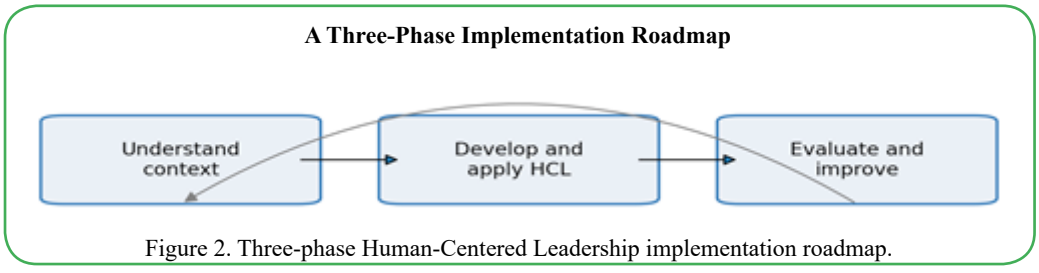


Figure 2. Three-phase Human-Centered Leadership implementation roadmap.

To preserve feasibility, the implementation process is organized into three recurring phases: understand the context, develop and apply HCL, and evaluate and improve. These phases encompass the more detailed activities of diagnosis, leadership development, institutional embedding, and evaluation without requiring an extensive organizational audit before action can begin.

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Phase 1: Understand the Institutional Context

Implementation begins with a focused assessment of the problem the institution seeks to address. This assessment need not measure every HCL component or collect large quantities of new data. Its purpose is to identify a priority problem, understand how it is experienced, and determine which individual, relational, and institutional factors may be contributing to it.

Five questions can guide the initial assessment:	
1.	What leadership or organizational problem is the institution seeking to address?
2.	Who experiences the problem, and what evidence demonstrates its existence?
3.	Which HCL developmental components are most relevant to the problem?
4.	Which organizational practices, conditions, or incentives may reinforce it?
5.	What evidence would indicate meaningful improvement?

Institutions can initially use information they already possess, including climate surveys, employee interviews, complaints, grievances, exit information, workload data, performance reviews, community feedback, student surveys, and organizational records. Additional data collection should occur when existing evidence is insufficient or excludes important constituencies. Where appropriate, results should be examined across organizational levels, employee categories, career stages, units, and demographic groups because aggregate findings may conceal meaningful differences in institutional experience.

In policing, a focused assessment might examine organizational stress, confidence in supervisors, perceived fairness of promotion or discipline, psychological safety following critical incidents, communication across ranks, staffing concerns, or relationships with communities. Police stress research demonstrates that well-being is affected not only by operational danger and trauma but also by organizational conditions such as supervision, internal communication, administrative processes, and perceived support [3, 30].

In higher education, an assessment might examine shared-governance relationships, workload distribution, leadership transitions, communication between academic and administrative units, psychological safety, burnout, mentoring, or participation in institutional change. Research on shared governance indicates that trust depends not merely on formal opportunities to participate but also on bidirectional communication and whether participation is experienced as authentic and consequential [4].

The output of this phase should be a concise institutional profile identifying the priority problem, affected constituencies, relevant HCL developmental components, existing strengths, organizational barriers, and a manageable set of expected outcomes. The purpose is not to rank individuals publicly or diagnose the entire institution. It is to ensure that implementation responds to an identifiable need.

Phase 2: Develop and Apply Human-Centered Leadership

The second phase combines leadership development with application to the selected institutional problem. Development should connect the six HCL developmental components rather than present them as unrelated competencies. Relevant methods may include case-based learning, reflective decision reviews, ethical reasoning, scenario exercises, emotional-regulation practice, conflict simulations, mentoring, coaching, multisource feedback, and supervised application to current organizational challenges.

Leadership-training research suggests that development is more likely to influence practice when it is informed by needs assessment and incorporates practice, feedback, spaced learning, and opportunities for transfer to the workplace [28]. Evidence-informed leadership-development models similarly emphasize alignment among program design, participant readiness, organizational support, practical application, and desired outcomes [29].

For example, a leader reviewing a difficult institutional decision could be asked to examine:	
1.	The assumptions and emotions influencing their interpretation.
2.	The individuals and constituencies affected by the decision.
3.	The ethical obligations and competing values involved.
4.	Whether affected employees have meaningful opportunities for voice.
5.	The effects of the decision on trust, well-being, and institutional culture.
6.	Alternative actions and their likely consequences.
7.	What evidence and feedback would support later reassessment.

In policing, development might use cases involving critical incidents, internal discipline, officer wellness, community conflict, implementation of new technology, organizational reform, or interagency coordination. After-action reviews could assess not only operational results but also communication, ethical reasoning, employee voice, organizational learning, and effects on public legitimacy.

In higher education, development might address shared governance, resource allocation, workload, program restructuring, personnel conflict, student concerns, academic freedom, executive transition, or AI-enabled change. Mentoring and coaching may be especially valuable for department chairs, deans, and senior executives transitioning into roles that require unfamiliar strategic and relational capabilities. Mentors should represent sufficiently diverse perspectives so that mentoring does not simply reproduce existing assumptions or narrow networks of influence. Application must also address organizational power. Employees may hesitate to challenge decisions, disclose limitations, identify errors, or raise workload concerns when they anticipate reputational or career consequences. A formal invitation to speak does not necessarily create meaningful voice. Leaders must demonstrate through repeated actions that constructive disagreement and problem reporting will receive respectful consideration.

Embedding HCL in Institutional Systems

Development becomes institutionally consequential when organizational systems support rather than contradict the practices being cultivated. Depending on the problem, reinforcement may involve leadership selection and promotion, onboarding and mentoring, performance evaluation, workload and resource decisions, upward feedback, supervisory expectations, or accountability. The relevant question is whether systems make desired conduct feasible and durable.

This requirement guards against individualization. Institutions should not ask leaders or employees to become more reflective, relational, or resilient while leaving preventable organizational sources of strain unexamined. In policing, HCL could be incorporated into supervisor development, after-action learning, internal procedural justice, and wellness-related organizational practices. In higher education, it could inform chair and dean development, leadership transitions, shared-governance communication, workload review, and implementation of institutional change.

1.	**Incorporating HCL capacities into leadership selection and promotion.**
2.	Assessing behavioral evidence rather than relying only on candidates' statements of values.
3.	Providing structured onboarding, mentoring, and feedback during leadership transitions.
4.	Including ethical, relational, and developmental practices in leader evaluation.
5.	Reviewing whether workloads, staffing, and resources make expected leadership practices feasible.
6.	Establishing recurring opportunities for upward and multisource feedback.
7.	Integrating procedural fairness and psychological safety into supervisory expectations.
8.	Connecting wellness initiatives with efforts to reduce organizational sources of stress.
9.	Reviewing consequential decisions for their ethical, relational, and cultural effects.
10.	Aligning recognition and reward systems with employee development, collaboration, and institutional learning.

Phase 3: Evaluate, Learn, and Improve

The third phase evaluates implementation and uses the findings to improve practice. Evaluation should distinguish among three questions:

1.	**Was the intervention implemented as intended?**
2.	Did leadership behavior and relational practices change?
3.	Did those changes contribute to organizational and mission-related outcomes?

These questions should not be collapsed. High participation in a leadership program does not demonstrate behavioral change. Improved leader behavior may not immediately alter organizational culture. A favorable performance indicator may also change for reasons unrelated to HCL. Evaluation should therefore consider implementation processes, intermediate mechanisms, and longer-term outcomes separately.

Institutions should establish a baseline and assess changes at intervals appropriate to the implementation scope. Early feedback might be collected after six months, with more comprehensive assessment after 12 or 24 months. Cultural change is unlikely to be captured adequately by immediate post-training satisfaction surveys.

Evaluation findings should be communicated to participating leaders and employees. Institutions should explain what was learned, which actions will follow, which concerns cannot presently be addressed, and why. This feedback closes the implementation cycle, reduces informational uncertainty, and demonstrates that participation can influence organizational learning.

Where results do not improve, the institution should examine several possibilities: the selected intervention may be inappropriate; implementation may be inconsistent; leaders may lack resources or senior-level support; institutional incentives may contradict HCL expectations; or more time may be required for effects to emerge. Unfavorable results should lead to reassessment rather than symbolic continuation of an ineffective program.

1.	**Implementation: reach, participation, completion, consistency, and access across organizational levels.**
2.	Behavioral: observable listening, feedback, ethical reasoning, emotional regulation, and developmental supervision.
3.	Relational: psychological safety, organizational justice, supervisor support, trust, and employee voice.
4.	Organizational: burnout, engagement, retention intentions, absenteeism, grievances, collaboration, and learning.
5.	Mission-related: service quality, community confidence, student experience, educational quality, public safety, and stakeholder trust.

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Feasible Adoption Through Bounded Pilots

Initial implementation should occur through a bounded pilot rather than an immediate organization-wide transformation. This approach makes HCL feasible for institutions with limited resources and allows its assumptions to be tested before broader adoption.

A police department could pilot HCL through first-line supervisor development. It might assess supervisory justice and trust, provide scenario-based development and coaching, modify selected evaluation criteria, and examine subsequent changes in psychological safety, engagement, complaints, wellness, and turnover intentions.

A university could pilot HCL through department-chair or dean development. It might identify a priority involving communication, conflict, workload, shared governance, or organizational change; provide case-based development and mentoring; introduce structured feedback practices; and evaluate trust, role clarity, psychological safety, participation, and burnout.

These pilots rely on familiar institutional practices rather than requiring an entirely new administrative structure. HCL's practical contribution is to connect those practices through a multilevel logic linking individual capacities, relational mechanisms, institutional conditions, and organizational outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research Agenda

The Human-Centered Leadership (HCL) framework offers an integrative explanation of how intrapersonal capacities, relational practices, and institutional conditions may interact in high-stress public institutions. However, several limitations define the boundaries of its present contribution. These limitations arise from the framework's conceptual status, its relationship to established leadership theories, the selection of policing and higher education as comparative contexts, the complexity of measuring multilevel relationships, and the absence of direct evidence concerning implementation. Acknowledging these limitations is particularly important because evidence supporting the framework's individual components does not establish the validity or effectiveness of HCL as an integrated model.

Conceptual Status and Absence of Empirical Validation

The principal limitation is that HCL remains a conceptual and evidence-informed framework. The present study does not report original quantitative or qualitative data, test the theoretical propositions, or evaluate the proposed implementation process. Evidence reviewed throughout the manuscript supports relationships among such constructs as reflective awareness, emotional regulation, ethical leadership, psychological safety, organizational justice, trust, employee voice, adaptive capacity, and well-being. Nevertheless, empirical support for these component relationships does not demonstrate that the six HCL developmental components constitute a distinct higher-order construct or that their integration produces the proposed organizational outcomes.

The propositions should therefore be understood as theoretically derived expectations rather than established causal relationships. For example, the framework predicts that ethical and relational leadership practices contribute to psychological safety and internal trust, and that these conditions support employee voice and adaptive learning. Cross-sectional associations among these variables, however, would not establish their causal sequence. Reverse and reciprocal relationships are possible: trusted leaders may strengthen psychological safety, but an already supportive culture may also enable leaders to behave more openly and relationally. Similarly, leadership practices may shape organizational culture while existing cultural norms affect which leadership practices are possible, rewarded, or resisted.

Theoretical Overlap and Construct Distinctiveness

A second limitation concerns HCL's relationship to established leadership theories. The framework incorporates concepts associated with adaptive, servant, authentic, relational, ethical, transformational, trauma-informed, and emotional-intelligence approaches. This overlap is intentional because HCL addresses a multilevel problem that no single contributing theory fully encompasses. Nevertheless, conceptual integration alone does not establish theoretical novelty.

Future research must determine whether HCL represents a distinct and useful construct or primarily reorganizes dimensions already captured by existing theories. This requires tests of discriminant and incremental validity. HCL measures should be compared with validated measures of ethical, servant, authentic, transformational, adaptive, and relational leadership, as well as leader emotional intelligence. Researchers should examine whether HCL explains meaningful additional variance in psychological safety, internal legitimacy, organizational trust, employee well-being, adaptive capacity, and external legitimacy after accounting for established leadership constructs.

Contextual Boundaries and Institutional Heterogeneity

The comparative focus on policing and higher education introduces both theoretical value and limitation. These institutions share public missions, complex stakeholder relationships, chronic organizational pressures, and dependence on internal and external legitimacy. They differ substantially, however, in legal authority, occupational risk, governance, professional autonomy, leadership pathways, and relationships with the public. The comparison helps distinguish transferable leadership mechanisms from context-specific practices, but it cannot represent the full diversity of either sector.

Police organizations vary by country, jurisdiction, level of government, agency size, organizational function, community characteristics, labor arrangements, accountability systems, and political environment. The experiences of a municipal police department cannot automatically be generalized to national police services, rural agencies, specialized units, or policing systems operating under different legal and political traditions.

Normative Assumptions, Power, and Competing Outcomes

HCL is grounded in the normative premise that organizational effectiveness and human well-being should not be treated as inherently competing objectives. The framework assumes that respect, fairness, employee voice, and sustainable working conditions can contribute to institutional effectiveness and legitimacy. Nevertheless, institutions face genuine conflicts among interests, values, and outcomes. A decision that supports one constituency may impose costs on another, and an inclusive process may not produce consensus or eliminate dissatisfaction.

Human-centered leadership should therefore not be interpreted as requiring leaders to avoid authority, conflict, performance expectations, or unfavorable decisions. Nor should empathy be treated as agreement with every request. The relevant questions concern how authority is exercised, how competing interests are evaluated, whether affected constituencies receive appropriate voice, and whether burdens are distributed and explained in ethically defensible ways.

Measurement and Methodological Limitations

The framework currently lacks a validated measurement instrument. Future measurement development should begin with precise definitions of the six developmental components and their proposed level of analysis. Some constructs may describe individual leader capacities, others may represent follower perceptions of leader behavior, and institutional culture concerns shared patterns at the unit or organizational level. These should not be combined without theoretical and statistical justification.

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Scale development should proceed through established stages of construct definition, item generation, content validation, pilot testing, factor analysis, reliability assessment, and tests of convergent, discriminant, criterion-related, and incremental validity [31, 32]. Item development should include leaders, employees, sector experts, and representatives of affected external constituencies. Cognitive interviewing can help determine whether proposed items have comparable meanings across policing and higher education.

1.	How does reflective awareness influence leaders' recognition of automation bias or excessive confidence in algorithmic recommendations?
2.	How do ethical and relational leadership affect transparency when automated systems inform decisions?
3.	Does employee participation in technology adoption strengthen trust and implementation quality?
4.	How should responsibility be allocated when leaders rely on algorithm-assisted decisions?
5.	Under what conditions does technology enhance rather than displace professional judgment?
6.	How do AI-enabled monitoring and evaluation affect employee privacy, autonomy, psychological safety, and perceptions of fairness?
7.	Can HCL protect public legitimacy when consequential institutional decisions become increasingly digitally mediated?

Future research should proceed cumulatively. Qualitative comparative studies can first assess whether the six components and four mechanisms reflect participants' experiences and identify sector-specific or missing processes. Measure development should test alternative structures rather than assume six independent factors, followed by discriminant and incremental-validity comparisons with established leadership constructs [31, 32]. Multilevel and longitudinal designs are necessary to test mediation, cultural feedback, persistence across leadership transitions, and the distinction between leader-level capacities and institutional conditions. Bounded implementation studies can subsequently examine feasibility, transfer, unintended consequences, and organizational outcomes. AI-enabled decision environments provide a relevant future context because they intensify questions of transparency, bias, accountability, and human judgment, but AI should be treated as a contextual condition rather than an additional HCL component.

Discussion and Conclusion

HCL addresses a problem of developmental institutionalization: effective individual leadership does not necessarily become an enduring organizational property. Its contribution lies in the relationships among reflective regulation, relational enactment, adaptive learning, and institutional reinforcement rather than in the novelty of reflection, emotional regulation, ethics, relational competence, adaptation, or culture. Human development occurs across these processes as organizational members strengthen judgment, responsibility, relational competence, agency, and learning through repeated participation in institutional life.

The comparison between policing and higher education clarifies why HCL should not be reduced to a universal list of behaviors. Hierarchy, operational urgency, professional autonomy, shared governance, occupational risk, and accountability alter how voice, participation, and authority can be enacted. The transferable claim is narrower: human capacities should have more durable institutional consequences when they are expressed through credible relationships, incorporated into organizational learning, and reinforced through systems appropriate to the institution's legitimate structure and public responsibilities.

The framework also resists an individualized account of institutional strain. Reflection, emotional regulation, mentoring, and resilience may be valuable, but they cannot substitute for examining supervision, workload, resources, communication, decision procedures, or accountability. HCL therefore links human development with institutional responsibility. Its practical value lies not in prescribing a standardized program but in identifying where translation breaks down—from capacity to conduct, from relationships to learning, or from learning to persistence.

The framework remains empirically contestable. Its strongest test is whether the proposed developmental-institutionalization pathway explains outcomes beyond established leadership models and whether reinforced practices persist across leadership transitions. Qualitative refinement, construct validation, multilevel and longitudinal testing, and bounded implementation studies are necessary before HCL can be treated as an empirically supported leadership model. Evidence that its components are redundant with established constructs, that the proposed mediating relationships do not hold, or that institutional reinforcement adds no explanatory value would require revision of the framework.

HCL consequently reframes the practical leadership question facing high-stress public institutions. The issue is not simply whether they can develop more capable leaders, but whether leadership contributes to organizational conditions that sustain judgment, ethical responsibility, relational trust, learning, and adaptation over time. For policing and higher education alike, the durability of those conditions—not the presence of a particular leader—provides the more demanding test of human-centered leadership.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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