

# **ANALYSING ROLE TRANSITIONING FROM FUNCTIONAL SPECIALIST TO LEADERSHIP: A CASE STUDY OF A MEDIA DEVELOPMENT AGENCY**

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The study explored the role transition experiences of media development agency employees transitioning from functional specialists to leadership roles. Role transitions can pose significant challenges, which can adversely affect individual performance and organisational effectiveness. Challenges included identity transformation, role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload. The study used a qualitative case study design, collecting data through semi-structured interviews from eight managers who transitioned from functional specialist roles to leadership roles. Thematic analysis was conducted to organise the data and identify thematic patterns and themes that emerged from their experiences. The results indicated that participants faced challenges associated with competing priorities; balancing the responsibilities of their former responsibilities and new role as a leader; ambiguous expectations in the new role; and ambiguity connected to a fast-paced and overwhelming workload. Organisational supports, such as mentorship programs, onboarding and continual development programs, the provision of mentors for professional development, and security provisions, were essential for managing transitions. Participants were able to create adaptive coping mechanisms, including self-directed learning and personal networks, to engage with peers in leadership roles.

The research provided theoretical and practical insight into role transitions, which were beneficial in generating new actionable recommendations for the public sector organisations looking to improve their leadership development initiatives. While the study is exploratory with limitations for generalisability, it has opened space for future research in role transitions, which could include a longitudinal study of leadership transitions into new roles, comparative studies of public sector institutions, and an exploration of female and male issues in role transition experiences.

**KEYWORDS:** Role Transition, Leadership Development, Public Sector, Organisational Support, Role Theory, Qualitative Case

## ***Declaration***

I declare that the Dissertation/Thesis entitled, examining role transitioning from functional specialist to leadership: a case study of a media development agency, which I hereby submit for the degree, Master of Business Administration at Rhodes University, is my own work. I also declare that this thesis/dissertation has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Sisanda Nompumza

Name Surname (*signed*)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'SN', written over a circular scribble.

## ***Acknowledgements***

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, **Mr. Kevin Rafferty**, for his invaluable guidance and support throughout the research process. His encouragement and belief in my capabilities empowered me to conduct and complete my study with confidence. I appreciate his insightful feedback and constructive criticism, which have significantly enriched my work. Thank you for being an inspiring mentor and for fostering an environment that encouraged intellectual curiosity and growth.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction and Project Overview**

#### **1.1. Introduction and Background**

This study focuses on a media development agency in South Africa that emphasises media diversity and fills its managerial roles internally. While promoting from within helps maintain continuity, it creates challenges around role identity, leadership readiness, and the expectations facing new leaders. These individuals must integrate their technical skills with broader organisational duties while reshaping how they are viewed by their teams and senior management. For reasons of confidentiality, the organisation cannot be named directly. The organisation is a statutory development agency with a responsibility to strengthen community and small commercial media. It operates with fewer than 50 employees and focuses on strategic objectives regarding media diversity, capacity building and digital adaptability.

#### **1.2. Problem statement**

Role transition from functional specialist to leadership roles is critical and challenging, particularly in organisations that prioritise internal promotions. Within a media development agency, although functional specialists are skilled in their respective areas, they frequently face difficulties when required to take on broader organisational and leadership responsibilities.

Roode (1993) indicates that such transitions often expose individuals to unfamiliar expectations, complicating their adjustment to new roles. Newly appointed leaders must navigate the complexities of managing former peers while shifting from a functional focus to a strategic organisational perspective. This process involves a significant transformation in role identity, as highlighted in Role Theory (Stryker & Serpe, 2018a). The necessity to align with organisational goals and effectively manage team dynamics can be frustrating and cause self-doubt, as noted by Ibarra (2015) and Kolzow (2014). Employees must reshape their identity, adjusting to new responsibilities and relationships. The pressure of aligning with organisational objectives and managing team relationships may confuse the transition, which may cause stress and hinder that employee's self-image (Ibarra, 2015; Kolzow, 2014).

Ibarra (2015) described how people adapt their behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs during role transition. This adaptation requires a change in identity from membership with peers to someone responsible for an entire team, or department, and it may create challenges of role conflict and identity confusion. Kolzow (2014) discusses the need for increased internal capacity for leadership under transitional circumstances, claiming that if not sufficiently trained and supported, the transitions can lead to role overload, more ineffective team management, and confounding professional identities. Kolzow asserts that leadership transitions introduce more responsibilities and complexities about group dynamics that hinder the decision-making process. Brown (2018)

emphasises that new leaders often experience role overload, which leads to stress and burnout. Research shows that ambiguity and confusion in leadership roles, due to unclear expectations, can adversely affect the individual and the organisation's overall performance (Tubre & Collins, 2000; Brown, 2018).

### **1.3. Research Questions**

Employing Roode's (1993) generic process-based research framework, this research undertook a systematic study of role transitions with a focus on the ontological, phenomenological, epistemological, and normative aspects of the issue. This research aimed to: (1) understand the essence of role transitions within public sector organisations (ontological); (2) examine individual experiences of these transitions at the media development agency (phenomenological); (3) investigate the challenges encountered during transitions and the impact of organisational factors (epistemological); and (4) provide actionable recommendations for enhancing organisational support mechanisms to facilitate successful adaptation (normative). Each of these questions is designed to contribute to theoretical understanding and practical improvements regarding the complexities of role transitions:

#### **1. What are the experiences and challenges faced by functional specialists transitioning into leadership roles within a media development agency?**

This question focuses on the "What is" aspect to examine the fundamental character and nature of the challenges encountered by new leaders. The research states that managing former coworkers, managing a new balance of technical and managerial responsibilities, and navigating evolving role identities are some of the challenges during transition (Kolzow, 2014; Smith, 2020). The intent was to explore these challenges and to consider their connectedness with role transition.

#### **2. How do functional specialists navigate the challenges associated with leadership transitions?**

This question is interested in the "How does" part by exploring the strategies used by individuals to deal with their new roles as leaders. The literature suggests that strategies such as mentoring, time management, and skill acquisition are vital to supporting one's transition (Williams, 2017a; Smith, 2020). This research will describe how these strategies are used and assess their effectiveness in supporting leaders transitioning into new roles.

#### **3. What organisational support mechanisms, such as mentorship and leadership development programs, influence the role transition process?**

This question aims to articulate the impact value of organisational interventions on the leadership transition experience. It examines how mentoring, leadership training, coaching and policies from the workplace impact employees who transition from of functional specialist to a leadership role. According to Eisenberger et al. (2020), Organisational Support Theory implicates that employees

who feel there is institutional support receive higher job satisfaction, lower levels of stress and ease of transition to a leadership role. Role Theory goes beyond perceived role behaviours and success controls, instead, it emphasises the role reinforcement and adaptation that occurs in a systematic way to internalise a new leader role identity (Stryker and Serpe, 2018b).

#### **4. What strategies do individuals employ to manage the challenges associated with role transitions, and how do these strategies affect their adaptation process?**

This question is concerned with the individual coping mechanisms and self-managed strategies that newly appointed leaders use to cope with the difficulties of transitional roles. Literature suggests that proactive learning, networking, mentoring, and developing resilience can support the adaptation of role and increase confidence (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Day & Dragoni, 2015). This question considers how individual strategies complement organisational-provided support to build a comprehensive support system to improve leadership transitions.

#### **1.4. Research contribution**

This research adds to the literature on organisational behaviour and understanding of role transitions to public sector organisations. By focusing on individuals transitioning from functional specialist roles to broader and more complex positions, this study addresses a relatively underexplored area in the literature. The contributions of this research can be categorised into three key areas: theoretical, methodological, and practical.

##### **Theoretical Contribution**

This study advances our comprehension of Role Theory, specifically regarding how individuals experience role identity transformation during transitions. While existing literature often emphasises leadership transitions, this research narrows its focus to the broader concept of role transitions, highlighting both internal and external factors that facilitate successful adaptation to new roles. This study contributes to theoretical conversations related to role identity transitions by exploring the research questions regarding challenges encountered, the role of organisational support, and strategies employed by individuals. These findings will provide new insights into role theory that can advance the use of role theory in public sector organisations and contribute to gaps relating to role conflict, ambiguity and overload during transitions.

##### **Methodological Contribution**

To analyse individuals in role transitions, the study uses semi-structured interviews as a qualitative research approach. This is appropriate for gaining insight into the subjective and dynamic role identity shifts. Utilising a constructivist research paradigm, the study understands that role transitions are multifaceted and that how individuals conceptualise their transition is influenced

by multiple factors, including the organisation. Qualitative methodologies provide an in-depth exploration of the potential dilemmas faced by individuals during transitions, the role and potential for effective organisational support mechanisms, and the coping strategies through the transition. The study uses an integrative conceptual model that draws on role theory and organisational behaviour to illustrate the various complexities of role transitions. The model not only informed the empirical study but will be a useful frame for further research in similar studies.

#### Practical Contribution

This research provides a practical contribution for a media development agency, where internal promotions might lack formal support during role transitions. All the data collected will link to organisation practices that relate to mentorship programs, leadership development programs for new leaders, and ongoing support beyond formal induction practices, to better equip employees with the re-contextualisation of the challenges presented by transitioning into new roles. By identifying a range of generic challenges, such as role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload, the research provides practical implications for organisations to enhance their support systems during role transitions. This research will serve the organisation with the capacity to improve retention and performance outcomes by setting individuals up well for their new roles. The research shows the importance of opportunities for self-directed learning, peer support, and mentorship as a trifecta of strategies helpful during role transitions. The research will guide the development of coaching and mentoring programs aligned with the needs of employees transitioning into leadership roles, providing better value for employees, increasing satisfaction, and reducing employee turnover.

#### Value of Answering the Research Questions

By addressing the research questions, this study aims to fill the gaps in understanding of how individuals experience role transitions within the public sector. The research will provide evidence-based insights into the challenges encountered, the effective support mechanisms, and the strategies individuals employ to thrive in their new roles. Answering these questions is essential for developing a deeper theoretical understanding of role transitions and for proposing practical solutions to enhance organisational practices.

#### Value of the Proposed Method and Research Paradigm

The qualitative, constructivist research paradigm adopted for this study is suitable for investigating the subjective dimension of role identity transformation, it allows for a contextualised and nuanced consideration of individual experiences and results in rich data on the complexities behind role transitions. The use of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to consider the impact of both psychological and organisational factors associated with role transitions. This

methodological approach is consistent with the research aims, providing room to explore how individuals experience their transitions, how organisations can support them more effectively. The constructivist paradigm, while being focused on individual experiences, highlights the deeply contextual and individual nature of role transitions, and the importance of understanding individual experiences in their unique organisational and social contexts (Jonassen & Land, 2021; Ertmer & Newby, 2020). The methods used in this study allow for exploration and understanding of these complexities.

## **1.5. Terms and Definitions**

### **1) Role Transition**

The processes by which a person transitions from one position in an organisation to another may involve shifts in duties, responsibilities, expectations, and identity.

This study will ascertain the role transitions from specialist functional roles to broader and more complicated types of roles in public sector organisations.

Location in Thesis: Primarily throughout the study, but pay close attention to Chapter 2 (Literature Review).

### **2) Role Identity**

The self-concept is based on the social roles an individual occupies in an organisation, determining their behavioural and perceptual inclinations related to their roles.

Role identity shifts are an integral part of role transitions, as they require the individual to recreate their self-concept to the expectations of the role.

Location in Thesis: Defined in Chapter 2 (Literature Review).

### **3) Role Conflict**

It is the conflict that occurs when an individual is faced with competing demands or expectations of their previous and new roles.

Role conflict is a common problem experienced during role transitions, specifically in instances when an individual must fulfil prior responsibilities simultaneously with new responsibilities.

Location in Thesis: Chapter 2 (Literature Review) and Chapter 5 (Discussion).

### **4) Role Ambiguity**

The uncertainty or lack of clarity regarding the expectations, responsibilities, and scope of a new role.

Role ambiguity can lead to confusion and stress during role transitions, impacting an individual's ability to adapt to their new role.

Location in Thesis: Discussed in Chapter 2 (Literature Review).

#### **5) Role Overload**

The stress of an exhausting role transition can lead to feelings of being overloaded with too many obligations/commitments, which creates unmanageable stress, and can ultimately lead to burnout. Role overload is a challenge in any type of role transition; however, it is particularly challenging when individuals get promoted without sufficient support from their organisation.

Location in Thesis: Discussed in Chapter 2 (Literature Review).

#### **6) Mentorship**

A developmental relationship whereby a more experienced person (the mentor) gives a less experienced person (the mentee) guidance, advice and support.

Mentorship has been identified as a key organisational support mechanism to assist individuals who are navigating role transitions.

Location in Thesis: Discussed in Chapter 2 (Literature Review).

#### **7) Self-Directed Learning**

The process by which employees take initiative and responsibility for their learning and acquire the knowledge and skills they need for their new role.

Self-directed learning is a key strategy for individuals transitioning between roles, especially when formal training programs do not exist.

Location in Thesis: Discussed in Chapter 2 (Literature Review) and Chapter 6 (Recommendations).

#### **8) Organisational Support Mechanisms**

Any formal and informal system and program provided by an organisation to support individuals in new position, for example mentorship, leadership development programs and ongoing support. Effective organisational support mechanisms are necessary to support transitional periods in roles and support greater adjustment to new roles.

Location in Thesis: Discussed in Chapter 2 (Literature Review).

#### **9) Peer Support**

The help and encouragement of colleagues who support emotional and practical transitions during times of role changes.

Peer support assists confidence and provides valuable resources for individuals transitioning to new roles.

Location in Thesis: Discussed in Chapter 2 (Literature Review) and Chapter 6 (Recommendations).

## **10) Public Sector Organisations**

Organisations controlled by the government or state that provide a public service and operate under public ownership and management.

This research is concerned with role transitions in public sector organisations such as a media development agency.

Location in Thesis: Introduced in Chapter 1 (Introduction) and referenced throughout the study.

### **1.6. Thesis structure**

The thesis is organised into five chapters as follows:

**Chapter 1:** Presented an introductory overview of the research study, background information, a problem statement and discussion of the methods adopted for the research.

**Chapter 2:** Literature Review: Reviewed a selection of literature that is relevant to role theory, transitions to new leadership roles, and organisational behaviour. Literature was reviewed in such a way as to examine public entities and individuals who were transitioned into new leadership roles.

**Chapter 3:** Research Methodology reviewed the research design, methods of data collection, and methods of analysis that were used in the study. This chapter also examined the ethical dilemmas that were considered in the practice of research and any limitations that existed in the study.

**Chapter 4:** Findings: Were based on the findings obtained from the interviews of the media development agency managers. The findings were indexed thematically that possible reflected the major themes, or 'takeaways' relevant to role transitions and leadership identity.

**Chapter 5:** Conclusion and Implications: summarises the main findings and contributions made by the study and provides recommendations for a media development agency and considerations for future studies.

## 1.7. Research Process Roadmap flow diagram

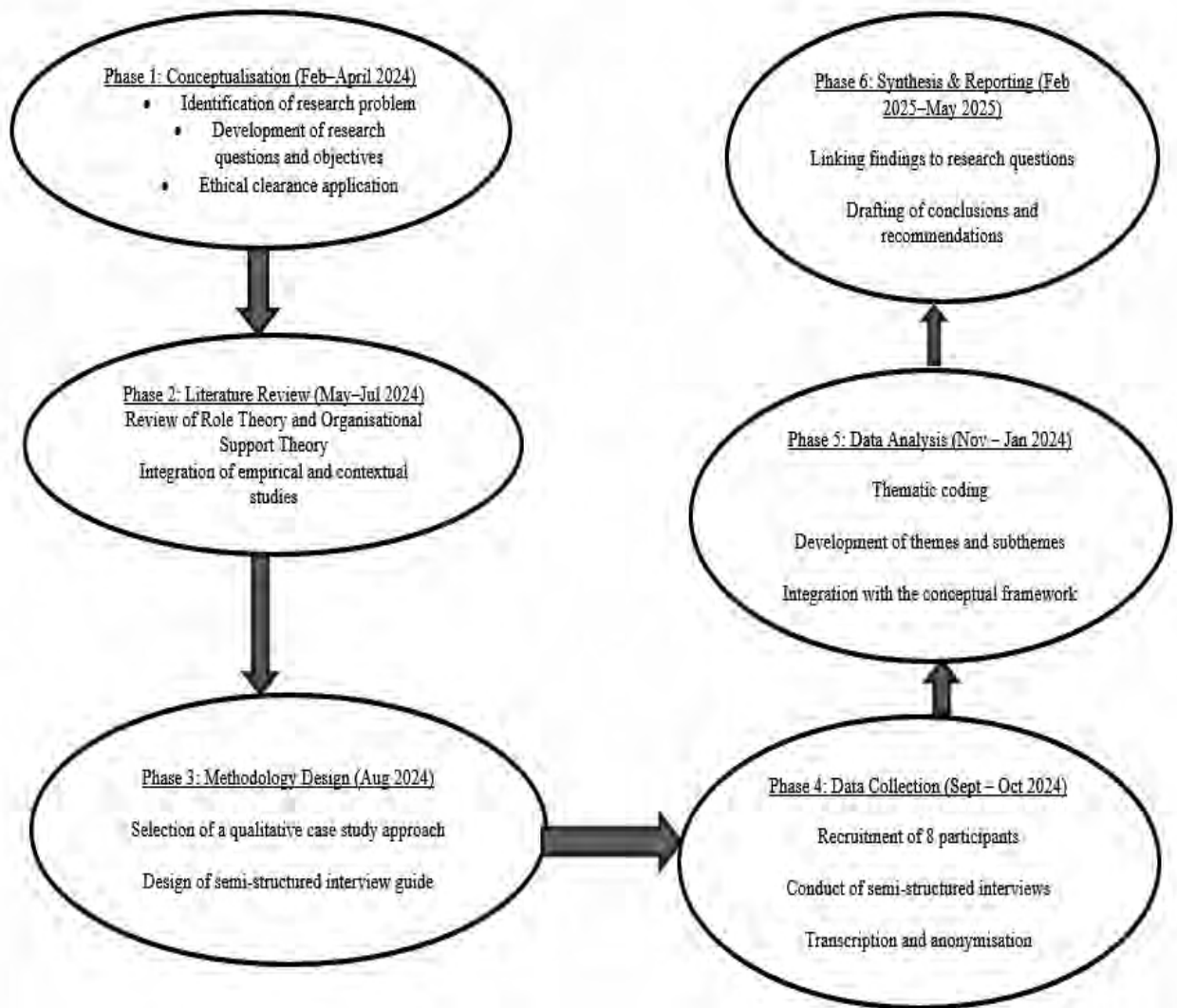


Figure 1-3: Research Process Road Flow diagram

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Literature

#### 2.1. Introduction

This chapter reviews the literature on role transitions, specifically looking at the experiences of employees moving from specialised functional roles into leadership roles, using a media development agency as an example. The chapter considers theoretical frameworks of interest, Role Theory and organisational supports are important aspects of leadership development and role transition. The chapter provides a review of the challenges experienced during these role transitions. It also considers the ways organisational supports can help to ease transition challenges and the transition process. The discussion will be structured to allow for a review of the theoretical models and empirical studies that advance understanding of leadership transitions at the categorical level of public organisations. Discussion will first consider some key theoretical frameworks and their relevance and role in adaptation to new roles, then it will outline the challenges to transitions that were commonly experienced, consider the role of the available supports, and finally assess various strategies such as self-directed learning, mentoring, and peer networking, to show how individuals can proactively manage their shift into leadership roles.

#### 2.2. Preliminary literature review

##### Introduction to the Literature Review

This section will address Role theory, organisational support mechanisms, and role transition to understand how a person adapts to their leadership role, redefines their professional identities, and engages with changing organisational expectations. The review also highlights common transition challenges, such as role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload, which can impede adaptation. Organisational support mechanisms, including mentorship, training opportunities, and leadership development opportunities, are also reviewed to understand organisational supports that can make the transition process smoother. The insights gained from this literature will be contextualised later in the case study of a media development agency to examine what this theory looks like in practice.

##### Key Themes and Search Terms

The literature review focused on key themes essential to understanding role transitions, guided by organisational behaviour, role theory, and role transition research:

- **Role Theory and Role Identity:** How individuals amend their identity when transitioning between roles in an organisation.

- **Role Transition:** The processes and challenges that individuals face when moving from a functional specialist role to a leader role, and ensuing responsibilities and identity are restructured.
- **Organisational support for Role Transition:** The impact of formal and informal support within organisations, such as mentorship, training, and leadership development strategies, on individuals' ability to flourish in a new role.
- **Challenges in role transition:** Some of the usual challenges to role transitions, especially role conflict, ambiguity, and overload, and individuals use specific mechanisms to alleviate and address challenges in their role.

To support the identification of literature and to develop insight into the existing literature, the following search terms were used:

- "Role transition in organisations"
- "Role identity during the transition"
- "Organisational support for role transition"
- "Challenges in role transition"
- "Functional specialist to leader role"
- "Role conflict and role ambiguity"
- "Strategies for successful role transition"

### **Key Databases Used**

The literature search was conducted using a range of databases containing peer-reviewed journals and relevant texts related to occupational behaviours, leadership studies, and role theory. The following databases were used:

- Google Scholar: a search engine developed for the academic community that indexes peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, texts, and books in a variety of disciplines.
- JSTOR: a digital library that provides access to scholarly journals, books and primary sources in many disciplines, including sociology, psychology, and occupational behaviour.
- ProQuest: a global resource that provides access to dissertations and theses, academic journals, books, and various types of academic resources to libraries.
- EBSCOhost: a research database that provides access to full text and indexed journals in disciplines such as management, occupational behaviours, and psychology.

The above databases were selected given the number of literature resources addressing role transition and organisational behaviours.

## **2.3. Body of the Literature**

The literature is grouped into four central themes: Role theory and identity transformation, Challenges in Role Transition, Organisational Support Mechanisms, and strategies for managing role transitions. The four themes provided contextual information about how people experience role transitions, challenges to manage those transitions, supports that mobilise their transition, and strategies to manage role transitions. role

### **2.3.1. Role Theory and Identity Transformation**

Role Theory is a critical framework for investigating how employees transition to a leadership role, specifically within the public sector. Stryker and Serpe (2018a) defined Role identity as an individual's self-concept within a specific role, which plays a crucial part in how individuals internalise, enact, and respond to workplace expectations. As functional specialists transition into leadership positions, they must renegotiate their professional identity, shifting their focus from task execution to strategic oversight. This transformation requires more than technical skills; it takes profound psychological and behavioural adjustments, particularly in public organisations where leadership responsibilities often involve extensive decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and policy implementation (Stryker and Serpe, 2018a). Burke and Stets (2009) argue that individuals undergoing role transitions frequently experience identity unease as they strive to merge their functional expertise with new leadership demands. This identity tension can create conflict between fulfilling the expectations of a previous technical role and adapting to the new strategic leadership role. McCarron (2023) states that individuals transitioning through roles not only construct their identities but also shape their leadership identities and develop leadership behaviours through experimentation and managing a pre-existing professional identity.

Organisational support can be critical to the role transition process. Ng and Feldman (2007) highlight that structured mentorship, leadership training, and clarity in role expectations significantly influence the adaptation of identity, thereby mitigating the stress associated with transitions. Additionally, Day et al. (2014) underscore that public sector leaders encounter increased challenges due to bureaucratic constraints, fluctuating political environments and resource limitations, which necessitate robust support systems to enable smoother transitions.

This study applies Role Theory and Organisational Support Theory to examine how identity shifts during role transitions are influenced by organisational support within a public sector context.

### 2.3.2. Challenges in Role Transitions

The literature highlights three key challenges in Role Transitions:

- **Role Conflict:** Emerges when individuals are caught between the demands of their old specialist responsibilities and their new leadership responsibilities (Katz & Kahn, 2018). Many new leaders struggle to separate themselves from their old roles while trying to attain their new roles (Floyd & Lane, 2000). This issue appears even more pronounced in public sector organisations where leaders may be expected to draw on their technical expertise while transitioning into a broader leadership role (Beehr & Glazer, 2005a).
- **Role Ambiguity:** A lack of clarity regarding responsibilities, decision-making authority, and performance expectations can lead to role ambiguity (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). When expectations are not clearly defined, newly transitioned leaders may struggle to assert their authority, which can result in decreased confidence and job performance (Beehr & Glazer, 2005a). Research indicates that well-defined roles and open communication can reduce ambiguity and support smoother transitions (Day et al., 2014).
- **Role Overload:** Employees transitioning into leadership roles face enormous challenges regarding role overload, especially at an organisation without strong leadership development programs (Boyatzis, 2008). The role overload is a challenge for public organisations with limited resources, which restricts the availability of tailored support mechanisms (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Role overload can result in burnout, less job satisfaction, and reduced effectiveness (Allen et al., 2004).

### 2.3.3. Organisational Support Mechanisms for Role Transition

#### Organisational Support Theory (OST)

This research incorporates Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 2020), which investigates how perceived organisational support influences employees perception, meaning making, motivation, adaptation, and wellbeing during transitions. OST suggests that when organisations have sufficient resourcing, mentor and focus on developing leaders with leadership programs, and structural support, they are more likely to create conditions for their employees to experience:

- Role clarity
- Reduced stress levels
- Increased job satisfaction (Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011).

In terms of leadership transitions, OST describes how the value of formal support mechanisms like tailored training programs, mentorships, and peer support mechanisms can mitigate prevalent challenges, including role conflict, ambiguity, and workload overload. Inadequate structured support mechanisms can worsen transitional difficulties, leading to heightened stress, self-doubt,

and suboptimal leadership practices (Schmidt et al., 2019). Therefore, an effective structured support mechanism is critical for facilitating smooth transitions into leadership roles.

### **Organisational Support Mechanisms**

Kolzow (2014) believes that formal support systems, such as mentorship programs, leadership development programs, and other role-specific training programs, are important for supporting employees in their transition into leadership positions. These kinds of structured programs can lead to clarity, improvement in skill level, and increased confidence, which are important for individuals moving into a broader leadership role. Leadership development programs also prepare individuals to fully understand what is expected of them as leaders, the ability to think strategically, and the necessary decision-making abilities. Anderson (2019a) supports Kolzow by demonstrating that organisations that support the development of their employees in their roles, through structured programs and ongoing support systems, provide employees with a greater chance of transitioning into their new roles successfully. This is relevant when discussing public sector organisations, where there are often restrictions due to bureaucracy and available resources that are restrictive to personal and professional development training (Kolzow, 2014; Brown, 2018). As a result, informal support structures, through peer mentoring and self-directed learning, become important for adequately transitioning into the new role (Williams, 2017b). Peer mentoring plays an important role in leadership transitions because it is an emotionally and professionally supportive process that helps the individual to enter a new role. Anderson (2019b) states that peer networks give individuals an opportunity to feel belonging to a shared experience and reduce the stress and uncertainty of the transition of leadership. The process of peer mentoring promotes collaboration, knowledge exchange, and collective problem-solving, which contribute to confidence and performance outcomes, resulting in better transitions to leadership. Furthermore, self-directed learning has become a critical strategy to support employee role transitions. Williams (2017b) states that employees are more likely to better manage the new challenges of leadership roles if they are self-directed in their learning. For example, A peer involved in self-directed learning will recognise their gaps in knowledge and skills and can begin developing their leadership skills toward a new role, especially if there is no formal training.

The literature identifies three key mechanisms that contribute to successful adaptation:

1. **Mentorship and Coaching:** Studies have established that a formal mentorship program enhances leadership effectiveness with newly transitioned leaders by providing them with clarity, role modelling, support, and guidance (Lankau & Scandura, 2002). The utility of mentorship predominantly in public sector organisations has been shown where leaders face constraints from complex regulatory requirements that impact decision-making and performance (Allen et al., 2004).

**2. Leadership Training and Development Programs:** Training is needed to develop leaders and support them in transitioning into strategic responsibilities (Giber et al., 2009). Evidence shows that blended leadership programs have resulted in reduced transition stress and higher levels of long-term leadership effectiveness (Day et al., 2014). In addition, training increases leader self-efficacy by providing decision-making frameworks and conflict-resolution strategies (Wang et al., 2016).

**3. Organisational Culture and Peer Support:** Supportive organisational culture promotes leadership confidence, adaptability, and learning (Schein, 2010). Peer support networks provide a more natural vehicle for sharing knowledge and finding collaborative solutions to transition challenges (Higgins & Kram, 2001). If the organisation is engaged in supporting leader development, it will be in a better position to support transitions in a way that is connected to organisational values (London & Smither, 1999).

Situating Organisational Support Theory within leadership development highlights the importance of structured support measures, such as mentorship and training, during leader transitions. These measures can foster a supportive environment that aids leaders in adapting to new roles, reduces transition challenges, and enhances the development of capable and resilient leaders, ultimately benefiting organisational health and performance.

#### **2.3.4. Strategies for Managing Role Transitions**

Navigating role transitions involves a combination of organisational support systems and individual adaptation strategies. Researchers have indicated that organisations have a key role in reducing the burden of the transition, through structured support systems, whilst individuals equally have a responsibility to facilitate adaptation (Kolzow, 2014).

##### **The Interplay Between Organisational and Individual Strategies**

There are numerous valuable individual adaptation strategies, such as self-directed learning and peer mentoring networks, which may help to bridge the gap between organisational programmes and individual transition (Kolzow, 2014; Williams, 2017b). Access to formal and informal support systems adds overall leadership bandwidth, enabling transitioning employees to effectively tackle new challenges and responsibilities, ultimately enhancing organisational success.

This section argues the importance of linking organisational interventions to active individual strategies in transitioning to new leadership roles. The interaction of organisational support and individual behaviour is a key aspect of the efficacy of leadership development in the public sector, where pathways to leadership may not be obvious.

##### **Implications for Public Organisations**

Public sector organisations encounter unique challenges in facilitating role transitions, as identified in the existing literature. The most common challenges are resource constraints,

bureaucratic rigidity, and organisational cultures that resist change (Kolzow, 2014; Anderson, 2019c). Resource constraints impede the establishment of leadership development initiatives and formal mentoring programs, which serve a purpose for employees transitioning into new roles (Brown, 2018). Furthermore, public organisations tend to have more rigid hierarchical structures that slow the decision-making process, contributing to the initial confusion regarding role expectations (Williams, 2017b). Employees often struggle to adapt to role expectations with limited guidance and support. The role confusion leads to role stress, lower-level job satisfaction, and performance (Johnson, 2019a).

Studies have indicated that informal support practices, such as peer mentoring and self-directed learning are sources of support when formal organisational structures are limited, enabling employees with the ability to navigate transitions despite systemic challenges (Anderson, 2019a; Williams, 2017b).

Theory of Role provides a framework for this study; it directs attention to the interplay between identity changes, the organisation role dynamics during transitions, and the necessity for clear role expectations and legitimate support structures to resolve challenges associated with role conflict, ambiguity, or overload (Stryker & Serpe, 2018a; Burke & Stets, 2009).

This literature review identifies common challenges and potential solutions for public sector organisations. It lays a foundation for the empirical case study of this research focused on understanding the lived experience of employees of a public sector media development agency.

#### **2.4. Seminal Papers and Leading Authors**

The literature on role transition is grounded in several seminal works that support the contextual understanding of role identity, the experiences that individuals experience during transitions, and the supportive role of an organisation in facilitating transition experiences.

**Stryker and Serpe (2018a)** have contributed to Role Theory, particularly the understanding of how individuals create and re-create their identities based on the roles they occupy in a range of social and organisational contexts. Their studies seek to demonstrate the importance of role identity to behaviour and a way to understand the internal battles that individuals experience when engaging in a role transition.

**Burke and Stets (2009)** emphasised the psychological and sociological aspects of role identity and created a foundation for individuals to think about and navigate identity conflicts during a transition. They expect that a change in role identity will be necessary for successful adaptation, so their research is relevant to understanding the internal struggles and adjustments individuals must make when adapting to new roles.

**Kolzow (2014)** addressed leadership development and organisational support. He is important for understanding how organisations can build safe formal structures to support transitions with

strategies such as mentorship and training. Kolzow also considers cultural aspects of organisations and the impact of an individual on their experience, and which structures should be built proactively, considering employees being required to manage change in role identity.

**Brown (2018)** examines the external factors an individual might face when transitioning to new roles, and role overload and role ambiguity. Brown's findings relate most strongly to public sector organisations in which there is ambiguity in role clarity and role negotiation (entrance/exit), limited position resources and no support structures from the organisation, which leads to higher levels of stress and reduced performance.

**Williams (2017b)** considers the issues of mentorship and peer support and offers initial approaches for addressing the challenges of role transitions, as much of the previous research has excluded or only referenced mentorship and peer support without providing practical solutions or advice, particularly in environments where there are no formal organisational support systems.

These seminal articles provide the theoretical and empirical background for this study and the approach to thinking about the factors that relate to role, both internally and externally. The articles contribute to the understanding of the role of role identity and organisational support in frameworks for understanding adaptation to new roles.

## **2.5. Conceptual Model and Summary of Literature**

This section synthesises the literature examined by identifying the key variables related to effective role transitions to create a conceptual model. This model draws on theoretical literature and findings to propose a framework to explore the process of role transitions in an organisational setting, specifically in terms of public sector contexts.

## Conceptual Model Overview



**Figure 2-3: A Conceptual Model of Successful Role Transitions**

The conceptual model of successful role transitions is grounded in foundational theories and empirical studies, highlighting four critical components:

1. **Role Identity Change:** The process of changing one's self-concept to fulfil the new role.
2. **Challenges in Role Transition:** The barriers that individuals face during role transition including role conflict, ambiguity, and overload.
3. **Organisational Support Mechanisms:** The formal and informal systems that assist individuals' transitions.
4. **Role Transition Strategies:** Individual strategies to navigate transitions, including mentorship and self-directed learning.

The model draws on the foundational work of Stryker and Serpe (2018a) about role identity, and adds to the research of Kolzow (2014) and Brown (2018) about the individual and organisation challenges faced and adds the important roles of mentorship and peer support, taken from Williams (2017b).

Overall, the conceptual framework for successful role transitions in this study is a synthesis of these key studies, providing an illustration of the landscape involved in positive role transitions.

#### a) **Role Identity Transformation**

At its core, the process of role transition is the transformation of role identity. Stryker and Serpe (2018a) argue that self-concept is reflected in the roles an individual occupies and that, through role transition, comes a re-conceptualisation of identity. To enact a re-conceptualisation of identity, a person will have to adjust their behaviours, beliefs, and perceptions to accommodate the new role expectations, from role occupant to active role, and the role played to actively participating in their new role. For example, a transition from a functional specialist to a strategic leadership role requires a shift in perspective from task-based to an organisational perspective. The alteration of identity involves negotiating competing tensions; maintaining continuity with the previous role while considering the responsibilities of a new role (Burke & Stets, 2009). The successful alteration of identity is necessary for enabling role alignment with organisational strategies and enhancing personal satisfaction in the new role.

#### b) **Challenges in Role Transition**

Role transitions can have significant implications for adaptation and include:

- **Role Conflict:** Arises when an individual is faced with competing demands from the previous and new roles. Brown (2018) indicates that role conflict causes a tension that will take attention away from the new role and diminish its legitimacy.
- **Role Ambiguity:** Occurs when role expectations or responsibilities are unclear. Johnson (2019a) notes that role ambiguity may create frustration and negatively impact performance.

- **Role Overload:** Results from an overwhelming increase in responsibilities. Smith (2020) identifies role overload as particularly problematic in the public sector because it is common for public agencies to have far fewer resources to respond to transitions.

The challenges should be acknowledged and managed, or unattended tensions can develop into distress, diminish the effectiveness of role performance, and inhibit the transition.

### c) **Organisational Support Mechanisms**

Research emphasises the importance of organisational support in enhancing effective role transitions. Kolzow (2014) & Williams (2017b) indicate several approaches including:

- **Mentoring Programs:** which provide navigational, emotional, and institutionally relevant knowledge to individuals transitioning to a new role.
- **Leadership Development Programs:** which provide formalised programs to acquire the skills to assume broader responsibilities.
- **On-going Organisational Support:** which includes clear communications, easy access to resources, and role-related training to lessen role ambiguity and role overload.

Public sector organisations that prioritise these mechanisms can improve an individual's ability to adapt to a new role and facilitate improved overall group dynamics and organisational outcomes.

### d) **Role Transition Strategies**

Strategies that individuals may adopt to navigate transitions effectively include:

- **Mentorship:** This has been observed as significant to successful transitions: "Mentoring turned out to be a key factor in successful transitions, which provides practical guidance and an avenue for emotional support" (Williams, 2017a).

- **Peer Support:** Having peer support builds confidence, which helps individuals to create a community and reduce the feeling of isolation (Anderson, 2019b).

- **Self-Directed Learning:** Described as the act of seeking the knowledge and skills associated with a new role, this is important when individuals have limited formal training opportunities. It gives individuals ownership of their development and the ability to fill gaps in their learning.

The use of these strategies with organisational support mechanisms fosters a synergistic effect on role transitions, contributing to successful incorporation into the new role in the long term.

This conceptual model serves as a vehicle to understand transitions from one role successfully, combining theoretical and empirical understandings of the transition process with a focus on the individual. It emphasises the necessity of balancing personal adaptation with organisational support to navigate challenges of role ambiguity and role conflict while highlighting positive coping strategies for personal development. This model provides public sector organisations with an opportunity to introduce specific interventions to support employee transition. As a result, it

ultimately develops positive individual and organisational outcomes. The model of understanding transitions will be used as the research framework for the empirical work presented in the next chapters of the thesis, and the work is consistent with what is known from the theoretical and practical elements.

## **2.6. Summary of Theoretical Constraints/Boundaries**

Role transition studies in public sector organisations are limited (Kolzow, 2014; Brown, 2018; Smith, 2020). This research demonstrated some dominance of existing theoretical concepts on transitions in leadership roles that largely arose from the private sector. Role Theory (Stryker and Serpe, 2018b) and Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 2020) were useful perspectives into identity formation and adjustment, but their focus is limited in a context based on bureaucratic and hierarchical structures found in public organisations. Role transitions to leadership in public organisations are oftentimes made more complex due to internal positions filled by internal promotions, poorly structured leadership training, and inherent role ambiguity (Ng & Feldman, 2007; Johnson, 2019a). Beyond the factors, including organisational culture, resource limitations, and political factors, the public sector remains inadequately examined (Morgeson et al., 2010; Williams, 2017a). This demonstrates an opportunity for more effective use or growth of the existing theories to cohesively include the uncertain nature of role transitions in public sector organisations.

### **2.6.1. Empirical Investigation of Organisational Factors**

The data collection approaches included semi-structured interviews to explore how organisational culture, leadership and structural support mechanisms affect role transitions. Questions about mentorship, training programs, and leadership support highlighted the influences that go beyond individual adaptation.

#### **Analytical Integration of Organisational Concepts**

Although Role Theory is the primary framework from which data was collected, the findings were analysed through an organisational lens, out of awareness of the constructs in Organisational Support Theory. This assures that the experiences of individuals in the organisation and the centrality of the organisational structures can be highlighted in the interpretation of findings.

#### **Future Research and Practical Recommendations**

This study identifies important challenges involved in the role transitions of public sector organisations and provides possibilities for future study. Future studies could consider the influences of organisational support on adaptation to new roles, especially in public sector organisations with restrictive resource environments. Future studies could examine the longer-term effects of leadership development programs on successful role transitions, and comparative

research across various public institutions to seek out better practices surrounding the support organisations provide.

## **2.7. Conclusions and Research Questions Revisited**

The preliminary literature review has established a framework and provided a theoretical basis for role transition and the key factors influencing successful adaptation to new roles. It has identified some gaps in the literature, especially to how individuals are transitioning from functional specialist roles to broader leadership roles in the public sector, such as a media development agency. These gaps are the rationale for conducting further empirical research.

The conceptual model that emerged from the literature will assist with the research methods; it will be used to frame the research of the investigation into individuals' experiences of role transitions. The model emphasises role identity and how it changes, the role of organisational support for transition, and the potential practical strategies to balance the challenges of the transition from functional specialist to new roles.

The findings from the literature review confirm the value of research questions centred on the following:

- **What are the key challenges individuals face during role transitions in public sector organisations?**
- **How do individuals manage shifts in role identity during role transitions?**
- **How do organisational support mechanisms contribute to effective role transitions?**

These research questions will guide the study of role transitions at a media development agency, identifying how internal and external factors impact successful role transitions. The following chapter will explain the research methodology, discussing the approach that will be taken to gather and analyse data about the research questions.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

The research methodology for this study explores the experiences of individuals as they transition between roles within public sector organisations, with a focus on a media development agency. The research is aimed at examining challenges individuals encounter, what strategies they employ to deal with these challenges, and the role of organisational support mechanisms during role transition. This study emphasises individuals' perceptions of their adjustment over time and the factors that influence their ability to meet new role expectations.

The study used a qualitative research framework methodology. This aligned with the study's constructivist paradigm. Paradigm acknowledged that individual experiences of role transitions are complex and subjective, influenced by personal perceptions and the organisational context. A qualitative approach enabled an in-depth exploration of these experiences, yielding rich data that captured the intricacies of role identity transformation, role conflict, and the support systems that contributed to successful transitions.

This chapter outlines the research design and the research rationale for the methodology used. It describes the semi-structured interviews as the sole data collection method, the sampling, and the criteria for selection of participants. It describes the data analysis experiences and methods used, the relevant ethical considerations, and closes with a reflection on the limitations of the qualitative approach employed, including potential researcher bias, small sample size, and implications for generalisability.

#### **3.2. Research Aim**

Using a media development agency as a case study, this research aimed to explore the experiences and challenges of transitioning from functional specialist roles to leadership roles in a public sector organisation. This research examined how individuals navigated the changes in responsibilities, newly defined role identities, and challenges experienced during the transition process. The aim was to consider these experiences to make informed recommendations about improving organisational support mechanisms and to make transitions smoother.

#### **3.3. Research Objectives**

To achieve the aim of this study, the following objectives were set:

1. To examine the experiences of public sector employees moving from functional specialist positions to leadership roles.
2. To examine the main challenges experienced during role transition, including role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload.
3. To examine strategies used by individuals in their role transitions.

4. To examine the role of organisational support mechanisms in facilitating transitions, such as mentoring, leadership training, peer support.
5. To establish what strategies participants regarded to be effective in enhancing leadership transitions in public sector employment.

### **3.4. Research design**

The research design for the study consisted of a qualitative case study approach examining the experiences of functional specialists transitioning in a media development agency. This methodology was aligned with the study's objectives to unpack and explore the tensions and complexities of transition from a functional specialist role into leadership roles. A case study approach was selected as it enables the researcher to examine role transitions and navigate the situated context of the organisation (Yin, 2018) and thus delve deeply into understanding the experiences of individuals, the organisational context, and the forces that aided or impeded their transition. Undertaking a qualitative approach to the research was appropriate as it focused on understanding lived experience and not on counting variables, providing rich, descriptive accounts of identity shift, leadership adaptation, and organisational support mechanisms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Role transitions in public sector organisations are largely unexplored dimensions (Hirst et al., 2017); therefore, the design was exploratory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach encouraged participants to share insights in an open-ended insight. This aligned with the study's aims to identify specific themes that will be used to guide the interviews, while exploring participants' experiences during role transitions.

#### **3.4.1. Research Paradigm: Post-Positivism**

The research was grounded in a post-positivist paradigm, which recognises that reality can be known but only from the foundations of individual perception and experience. Whereas positivists assume there is an objective reality, and only one, post-positivists recognise how context plays a role in social phenomena and how knowledge is iterative rather than static (Phillips & Burbules, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Post-positivism was suitable for this research, as qualitative data led to meaningful knowledge of the role transition process while considering relevant theoretical frameworks like Role Theory (Stryker & Serpe, 2018a). It also supported this study in exploring role identity changes, organisational support structures, and role conflict, ambiguity, and overload challenges with a focus on living experience and transition processes.

### **3.4.2. Methodological Approach: Case Study Research**

The case study methodology was selected to specifically provide a deep examination of the role transition experiences of employees working at a media development agency. Case studies are one of the most effective approaches to investigating a complex phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when the boundary between the phenomenon and the context is not clear (Yin, 2018). In this study, the media development agency was the bounded system, studying those who transitioned from functional specialist roles to leaders. The case study approach enabled the use of rich contextual data that ultimately captured the essence of role transitions within the public sector and provided instruction that has implications for theoretical understanding and practical intervention.

### **3.4.3. Data to Be Collected**

Data focused on the personal experience of participants in making the transition in their role, noting the challenges they experienced, their perceptions of organisational support, and the strategies they used to navigate the experience. The study used the following themes:

- **Role Identity Transition:** Participants' thoughts about how their role identity changed from more specialist roles to broader roles within the organisation.
- **Challenges:** Specific challenges that were encountered during the role transition process, such as role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload, as discussed in Chapter 2 with the literature review on role transitions.
- **Forms of Support - Organisational support mechanisms** the participants found helpful, such as a mentoring program, leadership development initiatives, and ongoing support as a manager.
- **Transition Strategies:** The strategies used by participants to help them transition into their role, such as making connections with a mentor, obtaining peer support, and engaging in self-directed learning.

### **3.4.4. Sources of Data and Participants**

The participants in this study were employees at a media development agency who transitioned to a leadership role from a functional specialist role. These participants had personal stories and practical experiences associated with the process of role transition, the focus of the study. At the time of the research, eight managers had made this transition at the media development agency. Eight managers were invited, and all participated.

### **3.4.5. Data Collection Method**

Semi-structured interviews were used as a data collection method. The method was suitable for qualitative case studies because it allows for the latitude in exploring the participants' experiences while still covering key topics around role transitions. The interview questions were informed by

the conceptual framework in Chapter 2 and aligned with participants' experiences of role identity transformation, obstacles, and organisational support mechanisms.

#### **3.4.6. Field Procedures**

Participants were informed of the study's intended purpose, and a consent process provided participants with the ability to grant research permission. Interviews were arranged at each participant's convenience virtually. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis.

#### **3.4.7. Data Collection Instrument**

The semi-structured interview guide served as the primary instrument for data collection. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses regarding participants' experiences during their role transitions. Example questions included:

- "Can you describe your transition experience from a functional specialist to your current role?"
- "What challenges did you face during the transition, and how did you address them?"
- "What organisational support was available to you, and how effective was it in helping you adapt to your new role?"
- "What strategies did you use to manage your new responsibilities and expectations?"

#### **3.4.8. Data Treatment and Analysis**

The data collected from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. This method was particularly suitable for qualitative research, as it allowed the researcher to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis aligned with the post-positivist paradigm, which acknowledged that while patterns existed, they were interpreted through the perspectives of the researcher and the participants. To maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants involved in the study, each individual was assigned a unique pseudonym in the form of coded identifiers. Participants were labelled as P1, P2, P3, up to P8. This coding system allows for straightforward reference to each participant's contributions without disclosing their identities.

The analysis focused on identifying key themes related to:

- **Role Identity Transformation:** The process by which participants adjusted their professional identity as they took on new responsibilities, transitioning from a specialist to a broader organisational role. This transition required them to align their skills, behaviours, and decision-making approaches to conform to varying expectations of leadership (Stryker & Serpe, 2018c).

- **Challenges in Role Transition:** The patterns of challenges, such as role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload, influenced how participants were able to integrate into their new roles (Brown, 2018; Johnson, 2019b).
- **Organisation Support Mechanisms:** Participants' experiences and perceptions of how effective the organisation's support was during transition, including mentorship, training, and leadership development programs (Kolzow, 2014; Anderson, 2019a).
- **Role Transition Strategies:** Participants reported common strategies they used to help them navigate their new role, which included seeking mentorship, peer support, and self-directed learning (Williams, 2017c).

### 3.4.9. Research Bias and Limitations

Like any qualitative research, this study had potential biases and limitations. Researcher bias could play a role in the process of data collection and analysis, especially because the researcher was an insider within the organisation. To address this, the researcher was reflexive and critically self-aware throughout the research process (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity allowed for the acknowledgement of any potential biases and maintained a commitment to accurately represent the positions of participants of the study. The study also had limitations in being small in scale. Although the focus on a specific public sector organisation produced rich, contextual data, the findings are not generalisable to wider contexts. However, qualitative case studies favour depth over breadth, and this study intended to collect rich data from a small and well-defined sample instead of generalising findings (Yin, 2018). A small sample will facilitate case study research, as it can focus on an in-depth and detailed investigation of the lived experiences of participants and generate meaningful thematic observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Regardless of its limitations, the study offered valuable insights into experiences of role transition and offers complexity and specificity into how individuals navigate their professional identity shift, supportive organisational mechanisms, and transition strategies. The findings can contribute to the theory and practice of role-transition experiences, including within the public sector and other publicly structured organisational settings.

### 3.5. Ethical clearance procedures

The research for this study adhered to the ethical standards established by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC). The research protocol involved submitting the necessary documentation and following the ethical clearance process outlined by the Department of Information Systems. Ethical approval for this research was granted on 27 June 2024, under approval number 2024-7706-8799, and was valid for one year (see **Appendix A**).

#### 3.5.1. Ethical Clearance Application

To make sure the research was carried out ethically, the following steps were taken as per university procedure:

**Completion of Ethical Clearance Forms:** The ethical clearance forms were completed and submitted through the ethical clearance portal at Rhodes University, Faculty of Commerce.

**Submission of Research Instruments:** The research instruments (immersion semi-structured interview purposive sampling guide, see **Appendix B**), clearly conceptualised given the study's objectives and being respectful of the dignity and confidentiality of participants, were submitted to the ethical standards committee with the entire application.

**Informed Consent Form:** The detailed informed consent form was submitted with the application, which outlined of the nature of the study, the participant's role in the study, as well as the guarantees of confidentiality in allowing participants to take part voluntarily (see **Appendix C**). There was also the reassurance that participants could withdraw free of any penalty.

**Participant Information:** All possible participants were sent a written invitation to participate in the study, outlining the engagement purpose, what participation entails, as well as the guarantee that their data would be used for academic purposes only (see **Appendix D**).

**Institutional Permissions:** Institutional permission was granted from a media development agency, which is the agency within which the research is being undertaken. The permission granted access to employees and sets an ethical standard, which further guarantees ethical integrity.

### **3.5.2. Ethical Considerations in Data Collection**

The following ethical considerations were addressed during the data collection.

**Confidentiality:** Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to ensure anonymity. Data collected was stored securely to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

**Informed Consent:** Participants were informed of the study, the purpose of the study, and their role in the study, and consent was obtained before the commencement of data collection.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in the study was completely voluntary. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

There were no significant modifications to the research design, methods, or individuals involved in the research project, so there was no need to notify or seek approval from an ethics standards committee to make changes. The study adhered to all ethical implications of the university.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

This chapter describes the research methodology used to study role transition experiences in a media development agency. This research study was approached from a qualitative case study method within a post-positivist epistemological approach. The purpose of this study was to unpack and gain insights about how employees experience the inherent complexities of transitioning out of their specialist functional roles into broader organisation-based roles. This quantitative strategy was used to satisfy the research aims and questions while allowing for an exploration of participants' role identity, the organisation's support mechanisms, and change management strategies during these transitions.

The data collection method was semi-structured interviews, where participants shared rich accounts of their transition journeys. The data analysis was a thematic analysis of the participants' responses that had patterns regarding the challenges of role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload and how the organisations' support structures assisted with these transitions. This

analysis was participant-focused and resonates with the study's final contributions towards theoretical and practical dialogues on role transitions in public sector organisations.

The study adhered to ethical conduct through the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC) guidelines for ethical clearance and continued to take reasonable measures to ensure participant anonymity and confidentiality, informed consent, and the integrity of the research. Pseudonyms were given to the participants to ensure anonymity while still presenting the findings clearly in the subsequent chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### Data analysis and results

#### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews of employees of a media development agency transitioning from functional specialist roles to leadership roles. The findings are organised by the four themes: Role Identity Transformation, Challenges in Role Transition, Organisational Support Mechanisms, and Role Transition Strategies, that emerged from the data analysis and were designed to align with the research questions and objectives of the study. The chapter also interprets the findings to existing literature, highlighting similarities, consistencies, comparable patterns, and differences from prior research.

#### 4.2. Thematic Analysis Coding Tree diagram

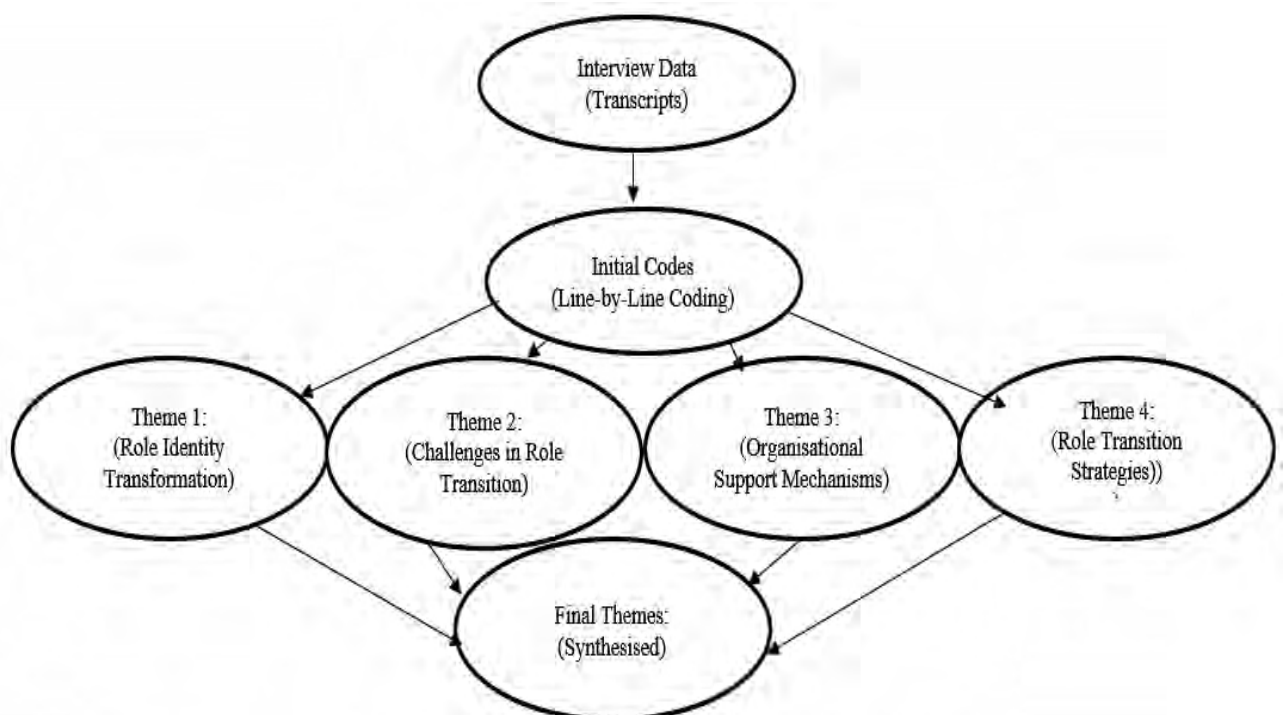


Figure 3-3: Thematic Analysis Coding Tree

### 4.3. Summary of Findings for Research Questions

**Table 1-2: Summary of Findings Across Research Questions**

Research Question	Key Findings	Practical Implications
RQ1: Challenges in transition	Identity conflict, role overload, and lack of mentoring	Leaders need structured support for identity development and workload management
RQ2: Organisational support	Weak induction, inconsistent mentoring, lack of leadership pathways	Formalise mentoring and induction processes
RQ3: Strategies for improvement	Structured mentoring, tailored training, and clear performance metrics	Implement structured programmes and align metrics with organisational goals

### 4.4. Presentation of Findings

The thematic analysis resulted in four main themes that capture the participants' experiences:

1. **Role Identity Transformation:** The adjustment of professional identity is the change in professional identity during the transition.
2. **Challenges in Role Transition:** The challenges experienced such as role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload.
3. **Organisational Support Mechanisms:** The impact of informal and formal mentorship, leadership development opportunities, and any other support structures.
4. **Role Transition Strategies:** The intentional and proactive strategies participants used as part of the adjustment to their transition.

Each theme is presented in detail, as well as participant quotes that demonstrate their lived experiences.

#### 4.4.1. Role Identity Transformation

Role identity transformation was one of the key themes in participants' experiences as they transitioned from functional specialist roles to leadership roles within the media development agency. The findings indicated that participants needed to rethink their professional identity by changing from task doers to strategic decision-makers. They also had to develop new leadership behaviours to fit these new roles.

## Data Presentation

Several participants reflected on the internal changes they needed to transition into leadership. For many people, stepping from a technologist to a leadership position required coming to terms with a different professional identity.

P1 noted, *"I was great at being the one person in my profession that everyone asked for answers, but when I was asked to lead a team, I found I was moving away from being a safe technical expert and looked to lead others to do the technical stuff."* P3 reflected similarly: *"I noticed that during the beginning, I found I was still doing specialist tasks because that felt secure. I came to realise that if I was to be successful in a leadership position, I needed to think beyond my capabilities and recognise the whole team's success."* P5 recognised the challenge of stepping away from being a technical contributor, saying, *"It required me to change how I represented myself from an executor to a person that was a strategic executor, which was difficult, because I believed I was no longer being who I was."* This challenge of identity also invited emotional and psychological challenges. Some participants described the doubt they felt in their abilities or their assertion of the leaders' role. P6 described, *"I spent an inordinate amount of time wondering whether I was the right person for the job. I was highly respected as a specialist, but as a leader, I doubted I had the skills to do the work"*. P8 noted, *"I felt I had to prove myself all over again, even after years of experience in the organisation."* P2 highlighted the challenge to shift from a colleague to a leader with authority. P2 stated, *"It was strange to start to delegate work to people that I considered equals, and I had a hard time not sounding bossy and establishing authority."* For others, leadership was about evolving a new sense of confidence in managing people and making higher-level decisions. P4 noted, *"At some point, I had to tell myself that I was chosen to have this role for a reason. I started to entertain the idea that being the boss/managing people was not about knowing everything; it was about leading the team appropriately."* P7 supported this comment, stating, *"I learned it was less about control and more about influence. Once I realised that my job was to give people the power to do their work, I began to see the light."* The change of role identity was also about managing what it meant to exercise technical skills versus the strategic aspects needed in the role. P5 noted, *"It was difficult to let go of being hands on, I had to remind myself that my job was not to execute the work, but to have foresight."* P6 noted, *"The technical skills I had relied upon were no longer my greatest asset in the organization. It is my role to manage people, to create confidence, and to ensure outcomes."*

## Analysis and Theoretical Link

The findings support Role Theory, which states that individuals change their self-concept as they enter new roles (Stryker & Serpe, 2018a). Participants spoke to the discord between their identity

as specialists and their new identity as leaders, and, in this vein, Burke and Stets (2009) view identity transformation as renegotiating the self-concept. Katz and Kahn (2018) argue that those entering leadership roles must also redefine their relationships within the organisation, including moving from a peer or participant relationship to an authority-based leadership role. This was evident in how participants described tension when transitioning from functional technical roles and their responsibilities as managers. Participants also spoke about emotional disagreements, like self-doubt and experiencing imposter syndrome, all of which add complexity to the psychology of the identity transformation process. This aligns with Ibarra's (2021) findings that professionals often experience a liminal stage when caught between their old and new identities as they transition and adapt to their role as a leader.

The opportunities to shift from functional specialist roles to leadership roles involved not only a shift in roles and responsibilities but also a transcendent change in professional identity. The findings clearly illustrated that participants showed clear signs of initial resistance, self-doubt, and obstacles to meeting the expectations of a leader. However, participants who were willing to transition and face the challenges of the change did so with self-reflection, mentoring support, or leadership development programming and experienced higher self-efficacy and greater clarity about their role as a leader.

#### **4.4.2. Challenges in Role Transition**

The participants reported various challenges to moving successfully from functional specialist roles to leadership. Four key challenges emerged from the analysis:

- **Role Conflict:** The challenge of transitioning from the previous technical roles to a new leadership role.
- **Role Ambiguity:** The uncertainty of what to expect with the new leadership role.
- **Role Overload:** The heightened workload resulting from the absence of structural adjustments to accommodate leadership responsibilities.
- **Safety Concerns:** An unforeseen concern regarding personal safety was expressed by one participant. The potential exposure to security risks inherent in leadership positions.

Each of these themes will be further described in the following sections, along with the participants' quotes.

##### **Data Presentation**

##### **Role Conflict:** Balancing technical and leadership responsibilities

Role conflict was an important issue described by participants, which occurred when they moved from a functional specialist role in their field to a leadership role in their field. The role conflict occurred largely because of the difficulty of integrating their previous technical responsibilities

with new responsibilities associated with leadership, and it created challenges and inconsistency in their roles.

### **Common Experiences of Role Conflict**

Five of the eight participants mentioned feeling conflicting role expectations where they felt a tension between wanting to exercise their leadership roles, and feeling obligated to their previous roles. As an example, P1 stated: "*I was the one who was in control of any detail. Now I have to guide my team without controlling, which is a challenge.*" P1's comment demonstrates the struggle of participants to go from a detail-oriented approach as specialist staff to a broader leadership role that requires strategic thinking and delegation to others. P3 echoed this feeling: "*I was more hands-on work, as a specialist. To stop being a hands-on person as a manager, it was a significant shift.*" P3 identified something most participants struggled with - relinquishing control, a process that was amplified with numerous new responsibilities. Further, P6 described a similar conflict when he said: "*The difference between submitting my own work and reviewing the work of others was a huge change. One of the first things I had to learn was how to trust my team.*" P7 also commented on a common theme of trust and delegation in his experience: "*When I first became a leader, I kept wanting to jump in and do it myself. I felt like I was good at it, and it was about maintaining control. I had to remind myself that I was leading the lead. Me doing the job is not my job as a leader.*" Finally, P5 discussed, "*I was torn between trying to fix problems myself, and empowering my team members to fix problems. For me, there was a real conflict.*"

These participant experiences highlight a common struggle within the cohort, in identifying their habitual roles of task-oriented specialist and the expectation at leadership level to be more hands-off.

### **Contrasting Experiences of Role Conflict**

On the other hand, P2 expressed a different perspective: "*I took my new role, and instead of worrying about it, I did what a leader was supposed to do to empower/inspire my team, and I embraced my shortcomings as a former member of the team - I previously worked with them, and viewed this as an advantage rather than a disadvantage.*" P2's pro-active approach shows that, while role conflict was a common issue, some participants were able to survive role confusion by using their previous experiences as a launching point for their leadership practice.

### **The impact of prior technical responsibilities**

Participants frequently acknowledged their past technical roles as a source of conflict. P5 spoke to the difficulty of moving from a "doer" role to a "leader" role: "*As a specialist, I was in the weeds. Now, I have to step away and help my team. It's hard to let go of that hands-on role.*" This statement reflected the challenge that many participants were facing when viewing their technical

expertise as a barrier to effective leadership. The challenges of continuing to maintain high standards while enabling others to grow often created stress and uncertainty for the participants. The records from the participants demonstrated how five of the eight participants were faced with significant role conflict during their transition to leadership, but the manner in which they responded differed significantly. Some participants employed proactive strategies addressing their role conflict, whereas others were more reliant on the tension created by their ongoing technical role and their new responsibilities. The range of experiences emphasised the complexity of the transition to a leader and the need for contextualised support for those facing these challenges.

### **Role Ambiguity:** Lack of clear expectations

Role ambiguity was a major hurdle for participants during their transition into leadership roles from functional specialist positions. The ambiguities surrounding the expectations of their new roles caused confusion and hesitancy, which compromised their abilities to lead. Of the eight participants, five expressed comments regarding role ambiguity, in which they reflected on their difficulty in comprehending their role and the expectations of their new roles.

### **Common Experiences of Role Ambiguity**

P1 expressed this confusion well when they said, "*I didn't know what they even wanted of me at the time I became a leader. It was like a foggy room. I couldn't see it.*" P1's experiences convey a particularly salient and common point of discomfort for many subjects. Many constructed leadership roles and goals without any actionable means to clarify them. P3 alluded to the confusion when they said, "*There were times I felt lost. There were many times I did not know what I was supposed to do as a leader. Each CEO had different priorities, and it was hard to keep those straight.*" P3's reference to changing priorities due to changing leadership illustrates how the lack of clarity from upper management, in their words, put them in ambiguity with their leadership role. P6 also affirmed this idea when they said, "*I had no clue what the expectations even were when I became a leader. I had to figure it all out on my own, which often made me question what I was doing.*" P6's reference to figuring out what they referred to as undefined expectations maps to their difficulties transitioning into their new reality of leadership.

### **Contrasting Experiences of Role Ambiguity**

In contrast, P7 approached role ambiguity differently: "*I took the initiative to clarify my responsibilities with my supervisor early on. It helped me understand what was expected of me and reduced some of the uncertainty.*" P7 viewed ambiguity as something they could tackle and take control of. They also articulated more broadly that while role ambiguity was an issue for some participants, a handful managed this through good communication and engagement with their supervisor.

It was widely recognised by participants that role ambiguity was an obstacle to their transition into leadership, with five of the eight participants expressing they were unsure of their role or obligations. P2 reflected on their feelings of being lost when they didn't have clear guidance on where to go, which resulted in frustration and disconnection from the goals of an organisation. Conversely, P1 expressed that being able to engage in proactive dialogue through communication helped clarify expectations. This illustrates that proactive and open discussions can alleviate signs and feelings of ambiguity and help align teams.

**Role Overload:** Increased responsibilities without support

Role overload emerged as an important issue for participants transitioning from functional specialists to leaders at work. Their workload increased significantly because there were no structural changes to help address their expanded role, which contributed to stress and challenges related to role management. Five of the eight participants expressed statements on role overload as they tried to manage increasing demands without possible support and resources.

### **Common Experiences of Role Overload**

P1 indicated the impact of new responsibilities when they said, "*When I transitioned into a leadership position, there was a lot on my plate... So, continuing with all of my old responsibilities as well as being the leader of the whole group was quite a bit to juggle. There were points at which I felt like I was drowning.*" This quote illustrates the workload and magnitude of new expectations due to the new responsibilities for P1 and how they experienced the feeling of being stressed and stretched. P6 went on to share similar experiences: "*As I transitioned into a leadership role, I still had to perform all of my old jobs while also becoming the overseer of the work of my team. I felt like I was being pulled in all directions.*" The experience of feeling overextended with responsibilities was also shown in P6's struggle to balance his old roles alongside the new leadership responsibilities. P4 reiterated feelings of frustration at not having any congruency: "*We did not have a structure to assist in our transition from role to role. I often ended up working late to catch up on the expectations of myself, based on my old roles.*" These quotes illustrated that, as well as support from organisations and structural elements, the amount of work and demands placed on the leader contributed to their sense of overwhelm.

### **Contrasting Experiences of Role Overload**

In contrast, P2 recounted strategies they used to cope with increased workload: "*I had to change how I managed and prioritised tasks and sought better strategies for delegation. It was hard to start with, but I grew to trust my team, and that helped take off the pressure.*" P2's active steps toward delegation demonstrate that while role overload and time become a challenge, everyone faced with using more effective management strategies was able to mitigate its impact as a challenge for some participants. The results from participants demonstrate that role overload was

a significant challenge they experienced in their leadership transitions. Five out of eight participants had serious increases in their workload from the absence of structural changes and support, while the responses of participants differed based on their means of managing the new demands.

### **Safety Concerns: An Unexpected Challenge**

Safety concerns emerged as an unexpected challenge for participants experiencing transitions into leadership roles, especially as the focus was upon personal safety and the insecurity associated with the position's leadership responsibilities. This issue was described most clearly by P1 when they described the special vulnerabilities that could occur with any type of organisational leadership role. P1 described a sense of vulnerability when they stated, "*When I took on the leadership role, I became aware of the security risks that previous leaders faced. The former CEO had a bodyguard, but that level of protection wasn't extended to others in leadership positions, including me.*" This statement illustrates the insecurity P1 felt as they underwent a transition to a new position with a higher profile and responsibilities. The inability for leaders to maintain their status without added vulnerabilities and subsequent concern towards security risk heightened awareness, a situation that did not factor into their considerations in other specialist positions before. While P1 was the only participant to state that they were concerned for their safety, their situation does present an important aspect of leadership that may not have been previously considered during transition planning. Security risks were not only a threat towards participants' confidence and decision-making ability but also involved a balance of responsibility and thought for their safety.

### **Theoretical Implications**

#### **Role Conflict and Role Theory**

Role Theory posits that individuals form their self-concept around the various roles they occupy and that changes in these roles can produce conflict in one's identity (Stryker & Serpe, 2018b). The participants articulated challenges integrating their technical expertise with new leadership responsibilities, illustrating the tension in fulfilling operational activities while also being able to engage in strategising. The apparent conflict between their technical capabilities and evolving attention to leadership responsibilities aligns with Katz and Kahn's (2018) Role Conflict Theory, which asserts that individuals can feel psychological distress when confronted with competing role demands. The struggle participants encountered in giving up control to team members can be connected to Burke and Stets' (2009) Identity Theory, which indicates the difficulties a person can experience regarding disengaging from established role identities. From the findings, the role conflict was prolonged by the absence of mechanisms by which participants could delegate or a

lack of structural guides for role transitions. This suggests that leadership training programs should focus on role readjustment and identity change (Day et al., 2014).

The varied experiences of participants indicated that individual manoeuvres to role conflict were affected by past leadership experience, leadership networks, and the ability to reframe previous experience into leadership capabilities (Ibarra, 2015).

### **Role Ambiguity and Leadership Adaptation**

Role ambiguity is characterised by a role where there are vague expectations, responsibilities, and performance standards (Cengiz et al, 2021). Participants in our study displayed uncertainty regarding what they were expected to do in their new leadership roles, which resulted in confusion and indecision in their adjustments to their new roles. The already present role ambiguity was exacerbated by a lack of a well-defined onboarding experience for leadership roles within the organisation. Morgeson et al. (2010) note how important clarity is in the role for successful adaptation in a leadership role because clarity reduces uncertainty and increases confidence in making decisions in a new role. In line with this, Johnson (2019a) indicates how ambiguity regarding leadership expectations has been frustrating sometimes, where decision-making has suffered, and performance outcomes have degraded.

This data indicates that newly appointed leaders would benefit from clearer role expectations and structured orientations. The structure of clear performance expectations and ongoing feedback are two key suggestions in addressing role ambiguity as it relates to the transition to leadership.

### **Role Overload and Organisational Support Theory**

Role overload arises when a person is expected to fulfil duties beyond their capacity (Beehr & Glazer, 2005b). The participants' experiences of balancing their former technical responsibilities and their leadership role support Schmidt et al.'s (2018) and Beehr and Glazer's (2005b) assertion that when role demands extend too far beyond an individual's capacity, it can result in stress, burnout, and, ultimately, less effective performance. The studies identify commonalities associated with individuals engaging in new leadership role complexities that require former role expectations to be accommodated. The findings from these studies are also supportive of Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 2020), which contends that when an employee believes there is little structure to adjust to the transition in expectations, the employees are inhibited from adjusting appropriately. The lack of adjustment towards reallocating resources and role expectations to adjust workload can highlight what it means for an organisation to provide appropriate support for leadership. On the other hand, participants using delegation and prioritising also supported Kolzow's (2014) argument that effective leadership requires the

management of time, responsibilities, and resources to mitigate role overload under, contradictory circumstances of the public sector.

### **Safety Concerns and Leadership Risk Management**

While there was only one participant who mentioned safety considerations, this data indicates another seldom-examined aspect of leadership transitions: the perceived risk in relation to safety when working in high-visibility situations. The participant's remarks about the security measures for other leaders signal a need to include risk assessments in the planning for leadership transition. This should be noted to adequately prepare new leaders for the issues associated with a leadership position and its possibilities for issues to occur.

#### **4.4.3. Organisational Support Mechanisms**

This section looks at the support mechanisms used by the media development agency to aid employees' movement from functional specialist positions to leadership roles. It considers how participants described the efficacy of these support systems and how they contribute to the successful transition of people within the organisation.

#### **Data Presentation**

The reflections participants offered emphasised the importance that organisational support mechanisms such as mentorship and leadership development programs play in facilitating transitions to roles in leadership. Of the eight participants, five referred to aspects related to the necessity or disruption of an organisational support mechanism, such as mentorship or leadership development, during their leadership transitions. P1 said, "*It was hard to manage the expectations of my new role without mentorship. Sometimes it felt like I was floating there without direction.*" P3 noted, "*I would have had a much less difficult transition if I had had a mentor. I had to learn everything on my own, which was hard.*" P6, who had some informal mentorship, had a different experience, sharing, "*In conversations with my colleagues, I was able to transition a lot quicker in my new job; I was able to have their support, which was a significant element to my confidence.*" In addition to mentorship, participants noted the importance of leadership development programs. P7 mentioned, "*Programs aimed at developing leadership skills would have helped prepare me to meet the obstacles ahead of me.*" Overall, the data indicate that structured organisational support mechanisms, mentorship and leadership development training are critical to smoothing transitions to leadership and increasing effectiveness overall.

## **Theoretical Implications**

The findings are consistent with Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 2020), which posits that perceived organisational support augments employee motivation and employee well-being. The absence of structured mentorship and leadership development programs reflects a shortfall in organisational support, creating stress for new leaders and role ambiguity. Mentorship can provide or enable critical guidance that can allow newcomers and new leaders to take their cues and model behaviours after more seasoned colleagues, which, in terms of transitions, can make such transitions smoother.

Participant insights provide essential perspectives on the need for proactive leadership development strategies tailored to meet the contextualised needs of individuals transitioning into leadership positions.

### **4.4.4. Role Transition Strategies**

This section examines the strategies used by participants in the process of successfully managing and transitioning from their functional specialist roles to leadership roles in the media development agency. An understanding of the strategies is important to understand how people engage with new roles and responsibilities, to allow for a successful adaptation and incorporation into leadership.

#### **Data Presentation**

The participants gave a wide array of proactive strategies that they used to aid them in the transition from being a technical expert to a leader. The strategies covered proactive communication, paths to acquiring mentors, task prioritisation, and continuous learning. The emphasis on the proactive communication aspect was shown well in P1, "*I tried to check in all the time with my team and supervisors to clarify what we were expected to do. This helped prevent any confusion and shaped our working together.*" P1's proactive communication strategy is demonstrating, through its use with her team members, the importance of setting expectations related to the role and responsibilities they transitioned to. P3 gave a similar example when he shared, "*I sought feedback from my colleagues and mentors to help me understand the role and expectations I had.*" P3 demonstrates that he was looking for input from colleagues and mentors, which describes the input that is available within mentoring relationships compared to peers. Other participants engaged in different ways to sort out sudden fluctuations in workloads. P6 explained how he has addressed tasks to sort through an involuntarily increased workload: "*I certainly started to think about the more important accountabilities and what I could delegate, which was helpful during my transition and to stay from being too overwhelmed.*" P6's way of prioritising and delegating relates to having a practical means of distributing the workload of the new leader role with the actual and potential expectations of previous accountabilities or responsibilities. P7

also reflected in his stating the need to take care of himself and for continuous learning, "*I did formal leadership training that included tools I learned to develop my professional development. I needed to put the time in and train myself about the importance of that commitment to my career.*" P7's willingness to be responsible for his continued professional development supports the need for continued education to support the transition journey of a beginning leader.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The results related to proactive role transition strategies align with multiple domains of established organisational and leadership theories, supporting the importance of communication, mentoring, prioritisation, development, and continuous learning in leadership adjustment. These strategies situate themselves within larger theoretical domains related to role transition, leadership development, and organisational support.

### **Role Theory and Identity Negotiation**

The experiences described by participants fit well with Role Theory (Stryker & Serpe, 2018c), which argues that individuals are engaged in identity negotiation as they adopt new roles. In the case of P1, for example, communication is paramount, and it is believed that role clarity develops through working with supervisors and team members. Burke and Stets (2009) note that defined role expectations reduce disorientation associated with transitions. Similarly, P3's choice to seek mentorship and feedback affirms Burke and Stets' (2009) assertion that role identity is affirmed through social interactions and feedback. Accordingly, participants' positive communication was consistent with Role Theory, which also implies that leaders who focus on dialogue and feedback are more likely to successfully transition into leadership roles.

### **Self-Directed Learning**

The results correspond with Role Theory (Stryker & Serpe, 2018c) that asserts individuals develop and redefine their professional identities through adaptive learning and role negotiation. The results indicated that self-directed learning facilitated identity reconstruction through the effort to align their behaviours and skills with the evolving expectations of their roles. Participants who worked in independent learning, networking, and mentorship exhibited how active and flexible adjustments to roles are instrumental to transitions. The results also aligned with the idea of proactive learning for leadership development (Day et al., 2014). Day et al. (2014) argued that leaders who are focused on self-improvement can navigate the complexities of transitions more successfully. Williams (2017b) highlighted the value of peer-supported learning, whereby individuals activate their networks to grow their leadership skills. These results suggest that self-directed learning is necessary for managing role ambiguity and gaining confidence through transitions into new leadership roles. From an organisational perspective, formalised forms of

support, such as learning resources, professional development opportunities, and mentorship, can improve self-directed learning endeavours.

### **Organisational Support Theory and Mentorship in Leadership Transitions**

The value of mentorship and peer support noted by the participants, P3 and P6, aligns with Organisational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 2020) before knowing more about this theory. Mentorship is a form of organisational support and can provide guidance, role clarity, and emotional support to leaders who are transitioning to a new role. This is indicative of the results of Lankau and Scandura (2002); they found formal mentorship programs could improve leadership effectiveness through support in the transition into new leadership roles, and to address uncertainties at the start of the leaders' roles. Furthermore, mentorship is especially valuable in public sector organisations where leaders encounter increasing levels of regulation and use of bureaucratic systems (Allen et al., 2004).

Lankau and Scandura (2002) assert that leaders who participate in formal mentorship roles encounter a less bumpy transition when practitioners receive guidance about the role they will be expected to play, the emotional support they will require, as well as role clarity that will be needed when transiting to a new leadership role. These educators support participants, P3 and P6, who, as new leaders, relied on mentorship in their initiation to leadership. The findings support that mentorship and structured support from experienced, engaged leaders can help new leaders build clarity, confidence, and sustain the complex activities required for transitioning into a new role. The findings indicate that leaders who seek mentorship, continual learning, communication, and delegation skills are better suited to deal with role transition, consistent with Role Theory, Transformational Leadership Theory, and Organisational Support Theory.

### **4.5. Conclusion**

This chapter presented the findings of a thematic analysis of the interviews with employees who transitioned from functional specialist roles to leadership roles at a media development agency. The analysis revealed four themes: Role Identity Transformation, Challenges in Role Transition, Organisational Support Mechanisms, and Role Transition Strategies. Participants described a significant degree of professional identity transformation, and self-doubt and adjustment to new roles were prominent issues of concern. The participants experienced many challenges, including role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload, and it was clear that providing mechanisms for clarifying expectations and support was an important need. Participants expressed valued mentoring and peer support that were vital resources to support transition success in building confidence and clarity as new leaders. The analysis also revealed some proactive responses to role

challenges, such as communicating effectively and seeking opportunities to enhance their learning, which were key to developing capabilities essential for their leadership-related competencies. Overall, the findings suggest that the organisation must establish tailored support mechanisms to improve their leaders transition to effective leadership and subsequently professional effectiveness in the organisation.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Conclusions and contributions**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

The final chapter consolidates the key findings of the study, structured to demonstrate how the study fulfilled the stipulated objectives, and it summarises the key findings from the analysis. This chapter describes the theoretical and practical implications of the above conclusions and specific recommendations to assist the media development agency in developing the transition process for future leaders. The findings illustrated the need to understand the phenomena of role identity transformation, role ambiguity, role overload, and perceptions relating to safety, and one of the key messages was that organisations are expected to develop tailored support mechanisms in transition periods. Limitations of the study were also acknowledged, with possible restrictions in sample size and contextual specificity that could influence the findings' generalisability. Recommendations for future research that addressed this study's limitations were also made to expand knowledge around role transitions, including longitudinal studies to better understand long-term effects of leadership transitions, comparative studies in other public sector organisations, and studies of organisational culture in support of or interference with transition experiences. This chapter has attempted to identify the study's contributions and create a prospectus for further study of the application of challenges related to role transitions in public sector organisations.

#### **5.2. Summary of the Thesis**

To investigate the experiences of employees transitioning from functional roles to leadership roles at a media development agency, a qualitative case study design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with eight managers. Thematic analysis was performed to extract themes within their experiences, and four themes were identified:

- **Role Identity Transformation:** All participants indicated a substantial change to their professional identity, imposed by taking on leadership roles and requiring considerable adjustments to their decision-making processes, strategic-thinking capability and personal relations. Their experiences suggested that role identity may be dynamic, especially when positioned within an organisational context, and could affect the effectiveness of the leader.
- **Role Transition Challenges:** Participants' experiences included role conflict, confusion, and overload. Other specific challenges of an emerging leader included the potential for personal safety and the pressure of taking on dual roles. The findings highlight the challenges of individual role transitions and additionally the different ways challenges may evolve during a role transition

as an employee, demonstrating the responsibility of the organisation to actively recognise and alleviate challenges arising from a role transition.

- **Organisational Support Mechanism:** Several overarching support mechanisms were revealed that enhanced participants' successful transition, including formal and informal mentoring, leadership training, and financial support in the form of scholarships/bursaries. Not only did the organisation support practical activities that enhanced participants' knowledge or confidence, but the support provided belonging and confidence from the emerging leaders in the study, which highlighted how support from organisational support mechanisms could effectively shape the way a transitioning leader experiences the transition process.
- **Role Transition Strategies:** Participants employed several strategies to manage their transitions effectively. Strategies included mentoring, peer support and self-directed learning. Proactive strategies like these highlight the possibility for the agency to create an environment that supports employees through role transitions, preparing leaders to understand and address any complexities of a role transition.

The findings from this study offer insightful ideas to help public sector organisations improve their leadership transition methods. A more resilient and effective leadership pipeline can be achieved by addressing role identity transformation, transition challenges, and enhancing organisational support mechanisms.

### **5.3. Addressing the Research Questions**

This research aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What are the key challenges associated with role transitions in a media development agency?

Participants faced many significant challenges during the transition, including role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload. Participants highlighted a lack of human resource support and concerns for their safety as significant challenges. Thus, these challenges reflect that role transitions into leadership within media development agencies introduce multiple challenges.

2. How do individuals navigate changes to role identity throughout the transition process?

Participants described the complicated and dynamic mental and professional repositioning process they navigated as they took on new leadership roles. This reorientation process involved changes to identity in forming legitimacy with their team as new leaders and becoming comfortable with their new levels of decision-making responsibility. Moving forward on this new identity, they grappled with directing the organisation's change, as well as clarifying their positions. This shift was significant not only to their self-perceptions but also to how those shifts impacted the relationships with others in their new role. They were demonstrating their authority but also understanding how to collaborate on the new roles with their teams.

3. What organisational support mechanisms contributed to an effective role transition?

Participants resorted to their strategies to support their role transitions. They sought out mentors who were experienced leaders, engaged in self-guided learning to fill in the gaps, and used networking with peers to fill in additional gaps based on experience. These proactive strategies allowed participants to learn individually while also supporting a sense of community where participants and mentors could share knowledge that strengthens their understanding and capacity to work through new challenges.

Overall, this study outlines the environment of a media development agency, the challenges of transitioning roles, the processes of identity management that participants went through, the significance of successful organisational support systems, and the strategies that development leaders use to support themselves in the transition process. This is important information to be used for developing best practices in leadership development and supporting effectiveness in a media development agency.

#### **5.4. Theoretical Contributions**

The study substantially contributes to the literature on Role Theory by clarifying the processes of identity transitions within public sector organisations. Previous literature has primarily concentrated on transitions and transformations in corporate settings; the implications for public organisations are yet to be considered. This study highlights that public organisations work under extreme pressure from resource constraints and expectations from the public, which can create additional challenges during role transitions. It is important to demonstrate the sensitivities of role identity transformation in this context, as it has the potential to add depth to the understanding of how individuals manage their transitioning roles despite the distractions provided to people in the public sector. Furthermore, this study could be interpreted as extending specific capabilities associated with Organisational Support Theory, as it identified actual mechanisms that supported transitioning people. The study may have been limited to public sector organisations, but it explained how security support (emotional and structural) helped provide an individual with the confidence to help them transition into their new role. Additionally, dual-role balancing was often stressed as a cognitive process that also incorporates overlapping roles. Intentionally designed organisational support mechanisms for employees transitioning into leadership roles are important and can contribute to the ongoing discourse of how organisations can support the resilience and adaptability of their leaders. Role Theory and Organisational Support Theory integrate useful insights into this study, filling the gap in the literature regarding role transitions in public organisations and providing useful outcomes for enriching leadership development processes. The identification of specific support mechanisms and the exploration of identity transformation within

a unique organisational context enrich the theoretical frameworks and provide a foundation for future research in this area.

## **5.5. Practical Recommendations for the Media Development Agency**

The findings of this research lead to the following recommendations for improving leadership transitions in the organisation:

### **5.5.1. Strengthening Role Clarity and Onboarding Processes:**

Structured onboarding programs should be designed to develop effective leadership transitions. In addition to outlining leadership expectations for new leaders, these programmes should also be able to provide specific transition guidelines that outline expectations for leadership roles, decision-making boundaries, and an understanding of the existing organisational culture. Overall, having an internal liaison or transition coach is a valuable resource for a new leader when delving into the organisation's leadership practices. This benefits the new leaders by helping them settle more quickly and understand the organisational dynamics and expectations faster.

### **5.5.2. Enhancing Mentorship and Peer Support Structures:**

A formalised mentoring program will improve the experience of new leaders. This formalised mentoring program will make sure each new leader is matched with an experienced mentor with the capacity to give them some guidance, assurance, and insights through their transition. Peer learning circles will also allow newly appointed leaders to engage in open discussions about all their challenges, provide an opportunity to share best practices, and work towards solutions. Furthermore, leadership roundtables and informal discussions led by current leaders will increase an interactive style of learning and exchange among newly appointed employees. It will also foster a sense of community for the transitioning employees.

### **5.5.3. Reducing Role Overload and Administrative Burden:**

To address concerns raised about role overload experienced by some leaders involved in this research and address some of the challenges of new leaders, it is recommended that an administrative staff be provided to deal with administrative-related tasks to allow managers to focus on their roles as strategic leaders. A workload assessment will allow to ensure that leadership roles will not be burdened by non-managerial duties that can undermine quality leadership. A phased transition approach where employees have an opportunity to transition previous duties in stages will also leverage the transition, assist with onboarding in the new roles, and reduce the role anxieties associated with taking on new roles.

### **5.5.4. Addressing Safety and Security Concerns:**

Given the importance of addressing safety concerns, security risk assessments of leadership roles, especially when leadership roles could include safety risk, are critical to the better functioning of any organisation. Providing the opportunity to access security awareness training will give

employees in leadership roles the knowledge, skills, and competence employees distilled from the risks of threats. Having a crisis management system will enable the organisation to respond seamlessly to any leadership security risk, which will assist leaders in resolving any threats to their safety.

#### **5.5.5. Expanding Leadership Training and Development:**

Increasing access to leadership training programs that focus on the critical leadership competencies, decision-making, conflict resolution, and organisational strategy will assist in onboarding leaders on their journey to better develop leadership effectiveness. Providing access to funding for leadership development opportunities, like a postgraduate study or executive development course, will enable people to build on good academic standing and career development. Designing individual career development plans that align with the goals of the job role will leverage the development and results for the organisation.

#### **5.5.6. Improving Organisational Communication:**

In enhancing the effectiveness of leadership transition, it is essential to create transparent communication channels that facilitate the timely and constructive feedback leaders require regarding their roles and responsibilities. Regularly scheduled quarterly program review meetings would provide more structure for newly appointed managers to assess their progress, discuss challenges, and receive guidance from senior leadership. These meetings can serve as a platform for constructive dialogue, allowing leaders to articulate their experiences and seek insights that can foster professional growth. Embedding intentional opportunities for discourse with executives engaged with experienced leaders who demonstrate leadership potential while reflecting on their experiences, with follow-ups, is also a transparent encounter to aggregate expectations with feedback to clarify accountabilities and to enhance organisational cooperative or collaboration. These discussions can be supported through informal check-ins, mentoring, casual connections and facilitated workshops to share knowledge and support relationship building and collaboration capability in and amongst formal hierarchical levels of the organisation.

#### **5.5.7. Implementing Succession Planning:**

Having a succession planning framework is important for the sustainment of leadership talent requisite in the organisation and future generations of leadership. A succession planning framework would resume with recruitment, with a focus on identifying high potential employees with valuable skill sets required for leadership roles. A clearly defined career pathway for individuals will help them evolve from a specialist into succession leadership, which will increase employee engagement and retention. Conducting and using tools for leadership readiness will be an important part of the assessment before employees commence the leadership role. The

assessments will be with consideration of technical capability and soft skills, or emotional intelligence, to measure their effectiveness in the newly assigned leadership roles. These approaches will enhance the success of a transitioning leader; candidates who agree to agree in the succession and are best poised in their performances to lead the organisation in a growing and complex environment.

### 5.5.8. Recommendations Categorised by Priority

**Table 2-2: Recommendations Categorised by Priority**

Priority	Recommendation	Short-term Action	Long-term Action
High	Implement structured mentoring programmes	Identify mentors and assign mentees within 1–2 months	Establish ongoing evaluation and feedback system
High	Develop tailored leadership training	Conduct needs assessment and initiate pilot training	Institutionalise annual leadership development programme
Medium	Formalise induction processes	Create an induction checklist for new leaders	Continuously update the induction programme based on feedback
Medium	Introduce clear performance metrics	Align immediate objectives with role expectations	Integrate leadership metrics into organisational performance system
Low	Address workload management	Review task allocation and redistribute urgent tasks	Develop long-term workload optimisation strategies

### 5.6. Limitations of the Study

While this research provides useful information regarding leadership transitions in a media development agency, some limitations warrant acknowledgement.

### **5.6.1. Sample Size:**

The number of participants involved in this research was limited to eight. This sample size may not capture the entirety of the leadership transition experience across the broader public sector; however, it produced rich qualitative data and developed deep insights. Qualitative research highlights depth and not breadth, as well as data saturation, or the process of learning that no new information can be obtained. It is common practice in qualitative research that saturation can occur from using smaller sample sizes, and particularly, these smaller numbers allow for data saturation when there are shared experiences among research participants. The adequacy of this sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, the point at which the data no longer generated new themes or notes (Guest et al., 2020). According to Fusch and Ness (2015), satisfaction can emerge with as few as eight interviews; however, this needs to be contextualised using rich, detailed information. This suggests that a higher sample size supports the generalisability of the findings obtained; however, the knowledge generated from this research is useful and credible in gaining an understanding of the role transition dynamics in this specific context. Saturation occurred in this study once about the sixth interview was complete, with subsequent participants providing validation of themes that were beginning to form. This is consistent with the literature which indicates that six to twelve interviews are generally sufficient to reach saturation in homogenous groups when the research focus is narrow and clear (Hennink, Kaiser, and Marconi, 2017; Saunders and Townsend, 2022). Thus, the sample size of eight is considered appropriate from a methodological standpoint, allowing depth of analysis while remaining feasible for a case study.

### **5.6.2. Context-Specific Findings:**

The findings of this study relate to a single media development organisation, and as such, the potential for generalisability to other organisations with different structures, cultures, and resource allocations is limited; thus, there is a potential for unique traits of this organisation to influence how the findings could apply to other public sector entities, indicating caution should be exercised in making generalisations beyond the examined organisation.

### **5.6.3. Time Constraints:**

This study was limited by time; thus, longitudinal data could not be collected related to the long-term transition experiences. As a result, this study has created a snapshot of the participants' immediate experiences and perceptions to explain the many ways various leadership identities and roles can evolve after transition. Longitudinal studies could further initiate a deep understanding that could explain how leadership identities and roles develop after transition.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study outlines a strong narrative for understanding leadership transition in public sector organisations and provides useful critical insights that could inform theory and practice.

## **5.7. Areas for Future Research**

Future research could consider several directions that would further the understanding of leadership transitions:

### **5.7.1. Longitudinal Studies:**

Longitudinal studies would allow future research to look at leadership transitions over time to assess leaders' long-term changing behaviours. Longitudinal studies would look at the fluid aspect of transforming role identity, newly developed capabilities to lead, and the influence of organisational structures on leaders' future. Longitudinal researchers would be able to track a cohort of leaders' experiences and emphasise their processes of adaptation and resilience that produce effective leadership in the face of danger.

### **5.7.2. Comparative Studies:**

Another path for future research could involve comparative studies on how role transitions differ between different public sector organisations. This aspect of research would reveal how context impacts the way leadership through role transitions is experienced by contrasting transitions from organisations that are structured and culturally dissimilar and have differing amounts of resources. For instance, researchers may examine how the roles to transition are different, what the different challenges and opportunities are, and the contextual factors that informed that transition. Comparisons may also be possible and have the potential to add value to what is known about best practices and new practices in leadership development in the public sector.

### **5.7.3. Security Issues for Leadership:**

Based on the implications of concerns around safety, more research will need to examine the overall effectiveness of leaders and employee well-being in high-risk environments. It would be beneficial to examine how leaders' concerns around security affected their decision-making, confidence, and performance. How and from what form of decision-making they determined may inform new understandings of leaders' psychological experiences of leading in precarious contexts. Additionally, how leaders' security concerns impact the well-being and engagement of employees would also add to our understanding, from a well-being perspective, in devising strategies that support both leaders' and employees' well-being in precarious contexts.

These areas of future research would further contribute to and broaden understanding of leadership transitions, which would enhance leadership development and organisations developing capacities in public sector contexts.

## **5.8. Conclusion**

This study has explored role transitions in a media development agency, revealing important obstacles, organisational supports and successful strategies for transition. Understanding how to put together Role Theory and Organisational Support Theory has offered important theoretical contributions as well as practical suggestions designed to support the needs of the organisation. These findings suggest the need for formalised support measures, explicit definition of role expectations, and training initiatives viewed as a responsibility of the organisation for leadership transitions to be successful. The implications of study findings should be of great interest to both policy and practice within the media development agency and similar public sector agencies by providing employees transitioning to leadership roles within an agency the knowledge they need to navigate the complexities of their roles. This knowledge can help improve the transition and enable the agency to offer an improved degree of agency support and help to make the leadership transition progress smoother.

This research may provide a starting point for future research to address the findings to improve organisational processes with transition or training-based leadership development frameworks within the public sector. Future research may address the longer-term impact of a structured support system on leadership effectiveness or review the impact of security on this leadership function. As a collective, research will inform our understanding of leadership transition, ultimately helping organisations build capable and resilient leaders in the public sector.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethics Approval Letter

 <p><b>RHODES UNIVERSITY</b> <i>Where leaders learn</i></p>	<p><b>Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee</b> PO Box 94, Makhanda, 6140, South Africa t: +27 (0) 46 603 7727 f: +27 (0) 46 603 8822 e: ethics-committee@ru.ac.za NHREC Registration number: RC-241114-045 <a href="https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/">https://www.ru.ac.za/researchgateway/ethics/</a></p>
<p>27 June 2024</p>	
<p>sisanda nompunza</p>	
<p>Email: g23n3390@campus.ru.ac.za g23n3390@campus.ru.ac.za</p>	
<p>Review Reference: 2024-7706-8799</p>	
<p>Dear sisanda nompunza</p>	
<p><b>Title:</b> Examining Role Transitioning from Functional Specialist to Leadership: A Case Study of a media development agency</p>	
<p><b>Researcher:</b> sisanda nompunza</p>	
<p><b>Supervisor(s):</b> Mr Kevin Rafferty</p>	
<p>This letter confirms that the above research proposal has been reviewed and <b>APPROVED</b> by the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (RU-HREC). Your Approval number is: 2024-7706-8799</p>	
<p>Approval has been granted for 1 year. An annual progress report will be required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the annual report is due.</p>	
<p>Please ensure that the ethical standards committee is notified should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators. Please also ensure that a brief report is submitted to the ethics committee on the completion of the research. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully, if any aspects could not be completed, or if any problems arose that the ethical standards committee should be aware of. If a thesis or dissertation arising from this research is submitted to the library's electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) repository, please notify the committee of the date of submission and/or any reference or cataloguing number allocated.</p>	
<p>Sincerely,</p>	
	
<p><b>Dr Janet Hayward</b></p>	
<p><b>Chair: Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee, RU-HREC</b></p>	
<p>cc: Ethics Coordinator</p>	
<p>Page 1 of 1</p>	

## Appendix B: Interview guide

### Interview Schedule

#### Background Information

- Can you please describe your current role and responsibilities at the MDDA?
- Answer:
- How long have you been working with the MDDA, and what was your previous role before transitioning to a leadership position?
- Answer:

#### Transition Experience

- Can you describe your experience transitioning from a functional specialist to a leadership role?
- Answer:
- What were the most significant challenges you faced during this transition?
- Can you provide specific examples of difficulties you encountered during this period?
- Answer:
- What kind of support did you receive from the organisation during your transition?
- Answer:

#### Strategies Employed

- What strategies did you use to navigate the transition to your new leadership role?
- Answer:
- How did you adapt to the new responsibilities and expectations that came with your leadership position?
- Answer:
- Did you participate in any training or development programs to help with your transition? If so, how did they help?
- Answer:

#### Identity as a Leader

- How has your identity as a leader evolved since your transition?
- Answer:
- In what ways have your behaviours, attitudes, and beliefs changed since taking on a leadership role?
- Answer:
- How has this transition impacted your leadership style?
- Answer:

#### Impact on Operations

- How has your transition to a leadership role affected day-to-day operations within your team or department?
- Answer:
- What challenges have you faced in decision-making or managing team dynamics since your transition?
- Answer:
- What has been the overall impact of your transition on the organization?
- Answer:

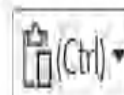
#### Recommendations

- What suggestions do you have for improving the transition process for future leaders at the MDDA?
- Answer:
- Are there any specific ways you believe the MDDA can enhance its leadership development programs?
- Answer:
- What strategies would you recommend to support future transitions more effectively?
- Answer:

#### Closing

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience that we haven't covered?
- Answer:
- Do you have any questions for me or additional insights you would like to provide?
- Answer:

Thank you for your time and participation.





## Appendix D: Participant Invitation Letter

 <h3 style="text-align: center;">PARTICIPANT INVITATION LETTER</h3> <p><b>Project Title:</b> Examining Role Transitioning from Functional Specialist to Leadership: A Case Study of a media development agency.</p> <p><b>Summary</b></p> <p>Mr. Sisanda Nompumza from the Rhodes Business School, Rhodes University, has received ethical clearance 28 June 2024 to conduct a study on Examining Role Transitioning from Functional Specialist to Leadership: A Case Study of a media development agency. This study focuses on investigating the experiences and challenges of individuals transitioning from functional specialist roles to leadership positions at a media development agency in South Africa. By exploring the dynamics of role transitions within this unique organisational context, the research aims to provide insights into the strategies individuals employ, the impact on their identity as leaders, and recommendations for the organisation to support employees undergoing role transitions effectively. The study utilises a qualitative case study design and emphasizes the importance of understanding the complexities of transitioning to leadership roles within the organization. The organisational name will not be used in any reporting or writing up of the thesis to ensure the organisation's anonymity throughout the research process.</p> <p><b>Benefit to participants</b></p> <p>Through this study, the participants will contribute to the Media Development and Diversity Agency in formulating effective strategies to assist employees during role transitions. Moreover, participants will benefit by being given a platform and an opportunity to express their challenges or concerns as employees who have transitioned from a functional specialist role to a leadership role at the MODA.</p> <p><b>Your participation</b></p> <p>Participation is voluntary, and all responses will be kept strictly confidential. You may withdraw from the research study at any stage. Participants will be required to partake in a semi-structured and in-depth interview, which will be recorded using an online communication tool like Otter.ai or Microsoft Teams as a recording tool and estimated to take 45-60 minutes to conduct, whereby the researcher will ask questions as indicated in the interview schedule.</p> <p><b>How do you become a participant?</b></p> <p>To become a participant in this study, you must be an employee of the MODA who has transitioned from functional specialist roles to leadership roles at the MODA.</p> <p>If you wish to be part of the study please respond to this invitation so I can set up an online meeting with you to conduct the interview.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethical Review Ethics Coordinator: <a href="mailto:ethicscommittee@ru.ac.za">ethicscommittee@ru.ac.za</a> t: +27 (0) 48 803 7314 Room 204, Main Admin Building, Quarry Road, Grahamstown, 6131</p>	 <p>You will be required to sign a consent form prior to the interview. I will go through the consent form with you before we proceed so that you can acknowledge your understanding of the process.</p> <p>If you require further information, please contact Mr. Sisanda Nompumza or should you have any ethics concerns, feel free to contact the Rhodes University Human Research Ethics Committee (details below).</p> <p>Mr. Sisanda Nompumza Email: <a href="mailto:g23n3390@campus.ru.ac.za">g23n3390@campus.ru.ac.za</a> Cell: +27(0) 73 256 9101</p> <p>Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethical Review Ethics Coordinator: <a href="mailto:ethicscommittee@ru.ac.za">ethicscommittee@ru.ac.za</a> t: +27 (0) 48 803 7314</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rhodes University, Research Office, Ethical Review Ethics Coordinator: <a href="mailto:ethicscommittee@ru.ac.za">ethicscommittee@ru.ac.za</a> t: +27 (0) 48 803 7314 Room 204, Main Admin Building, Quarry Road, Grahamstown, 6131</p>
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