

Decoding Organizational Culture Dynamics in Bureaucratic Reform: A Phenomenological Study Among Indonesian Public Sector Employees

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ABSTRACT

Organizational culture in the public sector plays a critical role in driving bureaucratic reform and institutional transformation. In Indonesia, however, entrenched hierarchical norms, generational value gaps, and employment status disparities between civil servants and non-civil servants (contractual staff) pose significant challenges to inclusive and adaptive cultural change. This study explores how employees interpret and respond to these cultural shifts through a phenomenological lens. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, data were collected from 12 informants across central and local government agencies, representing diverse generations and employment statuses. The findings reveal five key themes: the transition from bureaucratic to adaptive cultures, internal employee challenges, the role of transformational leadership, polarization based on employment status, and aspirations for inclusivity. Non-civil servant employees often experience exclusion and limited recognition, while younger generations face structural resistance to innovation. Despite reforms, informal norms and unequal treatment persist, highlighting the gap between espoused values and actual practice. This study underscores the importance of leadership consistency, inclusive HR strategies, and culturally sensitive change management. By capturing employees' lived experiences, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of organizational culture in the public sector. It offers strategic insights for more equitable and context-responsive bureaucratic transformation in developing countries.

Keywords: Human Resources, Leadership, Organizational Culture, Phenomenological Approach, Public Organization

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ABSTRAK

Budaya organisasi di sektor reformasi publik memainkan peran penting dalam mendorong birokrasi dan transformasi kelembagaan. Namun, di Indonesia, norma hierarkis yang mengakar, kesenjangan nilai antar, dan disparitas status ketenagakerjaan antara Aparatur Sipil Negara (ASN) dan bukan Aparatur Sipil Negara (non-ASN) menimbulkan tantangan signifikan terhadap perubahan budaya yang inklusif dan adaptif. Studi ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana karyawan menafsirkan dan mencerminkan pergeseran budaya ini melalui lensa fenomenologis. Menggunakan Analisis Fenomenologi Interpretatif (IPA), data dikumpulkan dari 12 informan di seluruh lembaga pemerintah pusat dan daerah, yang mewakili berbagai generasi dan status ketenagakerjaan. Temuan tersebut mengungkap lima tema utama: transisi dari budaya birokrasi ke budaya adaptif, tantangan internal karyawan, peran kepemimpinan transformasional, polarisasi berdasarkan status ketenagakerjaan, dan aspirasi untuk inklusivitas. Karyawan non-ASN sering mengalami pengirim dan pengakuan terbatas, sementara generasi muda menahan resistensi struktural terhadap inovasi. Meskipun ada reformasi, norma informal dan perlakuan yang tidak setara tetap ada, yang mengecualikan pengecualian antara nilai-nilai yang dianut dan praktik aktual. Kajian ini menggarisbawahi pentingnya konsistensi kepemimpinan, strategi SDM yang inklusif, dan manajemen perubahan yang peka terhadap budaya. Dengan mengumpulkan pengalaman hidup karyawan, penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih mendalam tentang budaya organisasi di sektor publik dan menawarkan wawasan strategi untuk mewujudkan birokrasi yang lebih adil dan responsif terhadap konteks di negara-negara berkembang.

Kata kunci: Sumber Daya Manusia, Kepemimpinan, Budaya Organisasi, Pendekatan Fenomenologis, Organisasi Publik.

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalisation and bureaucratic reform, organizational culture has been recognised as a key driver of effectiveness, efficiency, and innovation in various types of organizations, both private and public sectors (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Organizations that promote collaborative values, open communication, and accountability tend to be able to improve performance and adapt to environmental changes (Supriyanto et al., 2025). In line with these findings, studies in the Indonesian public sector emphasise the importance of an adaptive organizational culture to improve public services. Cultural transformation from a procedural orientation to a results orientation has been shown to accelerate public reform (Nugroho & Rahayu, 2020). However, the adaptation process often faces resistance and limited resources (Syukri et al., 2025). Therefore, studies that identify inhibiting and enabling factors in cultural transformation are crucial.

The phenomenological approach was noted to be effective in capturing the subjective experiences of employees in the context of public organizations. The study found that inclusive culture, respect for individual contributions, and communication accuracy are criticalessential elements in shaping employee loyalty and engagement (Stewart, 2014). Phenomenological studies in public organizations in Indonesia also show that organizational culture change strategies need to be implemented simultaneously through improvements in structure, work systems, and HR management (Boufounou & Argyrou, 2022). However, there are still a few studies that map the meaning of State Civil Apparatus (*Aparatur Sipil Negara*/ASN) and non-State Civil Apparatus (*Bukan Aparatur Sipil Negara*/non-ASN) employees' experiences in dealing with these cultural changes. Therefore, an explorative and contextual approach is needed.

Despite widespread reforms, research on organizational culture in the Indonesian public sector remains dominated by quantitative approaches that emphasize structural and policy-level outcomes, while neglecting the subjective experiences of employees. Studies by Dwiyanto (2013) reveal that deeply rooted hierarchical and feudal values continue to hinder cultural transformation, despite the formal adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles. Furthermore, resistance to change persists due to limited capacity, lack of engagement, and unequal treatment among employees, particularly

between ASN and non-ASN personnel (Syafri et al., 2025). Existing studies often fail to explore how these individuals internalise or resist such cultural shifts in their daily routines. This gap necessitates a phenomenological approach that captures employees' lived experiences, allowing researchers to understand the nuanced interplay between formal reforms and informal workplace culture. Airyq and Pertiwi (2024) assert that understanding these internal cultural dynamics is crucial for building resilient and adaptive institutions in the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity (VUCA) era. Moreover, comparative analysis between employment categories may reveal structural inequities in policy implementation. Therefore, this study aims to fill a methodological and empirical void by applying phenomenology to explore how cultural change is interpreted and embodied by public sector employees in Indonesia.

Organizational culture in the public sector is often built through daily interactions, communication, and formal and informal symbols of power. Findings in a study of social workers at the East Java Social Service indicate that organizational support is formed not only through formal policies but also through personal relationships, open communication, and professional support (Moss, 2022). Such experiences are essential to explore in the context of ASN and non-ASN who have different statuses and roles in the organization. Employee narratives about inclusivity, hierarchy, and collective values will provide a holistic picture of the dynamics of culture.

This study focuses on public sector employees in Indonesia with the aim of uncovering the dynamics of organizational culture from the employees' perspective. A phenomenological approach is used to explore the meaning of experience periodically and in depth. The focus of the study is directed at the daily experiences of employees in responding to changes in organizational culture, both from the positive side and the obstacles. The purpose of this study is to uncover the subjective experiences of ASN and non-ASN employees in responding to changes in organizational culture in the Indonesian public sector through a phenomenological approach in order to produce contextual understanding and strategic recommendations for inclusive and adaptive bureaucratic transformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Public sector organizations often fail to adapt to the cultural changes required in the New Public Management (NPM) era, mainly because cultural transformation is often more rhetoric than practice. As explained by Salama and Chikudate (2023), although decentralisation and employee participation policies have been implemented, resistance to change and limited resources are still significant barriers to cultural transformation in public organizations (Saad & Abbas, 2018). This suggests that organizational culture change has not been fully realized at the practical level, but is more procedural in nature.

The problem is compounded by the lack of research exploring employees' subjective experiences in the context of public organizational culture change (Brynildsen & Nguyen, 2019). Previous quantitative studies have linked organizational culture to employee motivation and performance, but few have adopted a phenomenological approach to uncover subjective experiences. As such, a methodological void remains in the literature that overlooks the depth of meaning experienced by individual employees.

Furthermore, recent literature shows that cultural adaptability is a crucial issue in facing the Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity (VUCA) era, yet there is a lack of research that contextually assesses cultural dynamics and employee adaptation in the Indonesian public sector. Most studies only emphasise the relationship between culture and performance without analysing the dialectical processes and cultural resistance that occur in the field (Royal, 2020).

There are not many studies that explicitly compare the cultural experiences of ASN and non-ASN employees in the context of organizational culture change, especially with a phenomenological approach (Bahsuan et al., 2024). Understanding the differences in these experiences is very important because non-ASN employees, such as contract or local workers, often face inequalities in terms of access to information, involvement in decision-

making, and performance appraisal systems (Kurniawan et al., 2024; Saputra & Suherman, 2024). This inequality creates feelings of exclusivity and marginalization that impact work motivation and the integration of organizational culture as a whole (Anhar et al., 2025). Research that explores the subjective experiences of these two groups can provide in-depth insights into how power structures and social relations are formed and perceived in everyday practice. Thus, this study is relevant to designing more inclusive and equitable cultural change policies in the public sector work environment.

Thus, this research is here to answer the critical question of how employees from various employment statuses, ASN and non-ASN, senior and millennial, experience and interpret the dynamics of organizational culture in the Indonesian public sector through a phenomenological approach (Dartey-Baah & Addo, 2019). This approach is expected to fill the empirical and methodological gap in the Scopus-indexed human resource management and public management literature.

The importance of this research lies in the urgency to understand the dynamics of organizational culture in depth and contextually, especially in the public sector environment that is facing the demands of bureaucratic reform and governance modernisation (Hidayat, 2023). Organizational culture can no longer be viewed as a static element, but rather as a phenomenon that continues to evolve along with changes in policy, technology, and the characteristics of generations of employees (Lebkhachi & Chraibi, 2025). In the Indonesian context, most previous research tends to use a quantitative approach that only captures the relationship between variables without revealing the meaning of work experience in depth. In fact, the root problems that occur in the bureaucratic environment, such as resistance to change, inequality of treatment between ASN and non-ASN, and the continuation of feudal cultural practices, require a narrative and reflective understanding. Therefore, the findings of this research are important because they are able to solve the problem at its root, namely, how organizational culture is perceived, experienced, and interpreted by employees of various statuses and generations as direct actors in the organization (Mol et al., 2020).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to uncover the deep meaning of public sector employees' experiences of organizational culture dynamics. This approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the research objectives, which focus on exploring the subjective and interpretive experiences of informants in the context of public organizations. The analysis technique used is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), proposed by Smith & Fieldsend (2021). This technique allows researchers to understand how informants personally interpret their experiences in daily work interactions, especially those related to the dynamics of values, norms, and changes in organizational culture. The informants in this study numbered 12 people, consisting of employees of central and regional government agencies. The selection of informants was carried out purposively by considering variations in employee status ASN/non-ASN, generation (senior/millennial), and level of involvement in the process of changing organizational culture.

These criteria were set in order to obtain rich and diverse perspectives in accordance with the phenomenological context being studied. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations. Interviews were the main instrument and were structured based on indicators of organizational culture that refer to the theory of Vindrola-Padros and Johnson (2020) and other qualitative literature. The three main focuses in the interview were perceptions of organizational values and norms, responses to changes in work culture, and personal experiences in interacting in the work environment. The interview process was conducted directly with a duration of 45 to 60 minutes per informant, and was conducted for two weeks. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the informant and transcribed verbatim. In addition, field observations were conducted to capture the social and cultural context of work more comprehensively, while internal organizational documents were used as supporting data. To maintain the

validity of the data, triangulation techniques of methods and sources were used as suggested by Patton (2002). Data analysis was carried out thematically with an IPA approach, starting from identifying essential meanings to formulating main themes that describe the dynamics of organizational culture as experienced by informants. The results of the analysis are presented in the form of key findings that are reinforced by direct quotes from interview transcripts as empirical evidence.

RESULTS

Employees' Lived Experiences in Responding to Organizational Culture Change

The results of this study reveal that organizational culture in the Indonesian public sector is experiencing complex dynamics, especially in facing the demands of bureaucratic change. Informants stated that in the last five years, there has been a tendency for a shift in work patterns from a highly bureaucratic system to a more open and adaptive pattern. However, traditional values such as hierarchy and loyalty to superiors are still the dominant norms in work interactions.

Further findings indicate challenges in internalizing organizational values to new employees. Differences in educational background, age, and work orientation lead to diversity in the acceptance of organizational values such as integrity, accountability, and public service. Informants responsible for staff development mentioned that the challenge is building collective awareness of integrity, service, and discipline. Many of them are fast learners, but sometimes informal culture is more dominant than formal values. This shows that organizational culture is not only formed formally by the system, but also by daily practices and social relationships in the workplace.

On the other hand, the role of structural leadership determines the direction and success of organizational culture change. Informants stated that the success of cultural transformation is highly dependent on commitment and exemplary leadership. Inconsistency of leaders in implementing organizational values causes stagnation and even resistance to change. A field leader said that if leaders change direction and do not set an example, cultural change will stagnate. This finding strengthens the view that transformational leadership is a key factor in strengthening a progressive and collaborative work culture in the public sector.

This study also identified a gap in experience between senior and younger employees in dealing with the dynamics of organizational culture. Senior employees generally feel a shift in values from a rigid and hierarchical work system to a more flexible structure, although old cultural practices, such as as long as you are happy (ABS), still exist. As conveyed by one senior informant: The ABS culture still exists. I want an objective assessment, not based on closeness to my superiors. Meanwhile, millennial employees face challenges in voicing new ideas due to the culture of seniority and the unpreparedness of the structure to accept change. Younger informants mentioned that sometimes new ideas are not well-received. There is still a culture of seniority. This indicates a cultural dissonance between generations that needs to be accommodated in public sector HR management.

Inclusivity is also an important aspect of public sector organizational culture. Non-civil servants or contract employees express their experiences as groups that are often marginalized in decision-making and organizational recognition. Although they make significant contributions to organizational operations, they are not always culturally or structurally equal. It's just that the rewards are often unequal. Abrianto and Srimulyani (2021) said that an organizational culture that discriminates against employee status can hinder work cohesion and reduce the motivation of non-structural employees.

Table 1. Analysis of the Phenomenologic

Main Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quotes
Organizational Culture Transition	Change from bureaucratic to adaptive culture; Influence of merit system	The highly bureaucratic work culture became more open and adaptive. (Informant R)
Internal Employee Challenges	Difficulty in digital adaptation; Generational and mindset differences	Some of my friends have difficulties because the changes are too fast. (Informant T)
Leadership role	Leadership example: Consistency of change direction	If leaders do not set an example, cultural change will be stagnant. (Informant S)
Polarization of Employee Status	The gap between ASN and non-ASN: Inequality of access to information	We are often considered outsiders, and awards are often unequal. (Informant M)
Aspiration for New Culture	Desire for a collaborative culture; Expectations of inclusiveness and fairness	If you feel valued and involved, your morale is high. (Informant A)

Table 1 summarizes five key themes that emerged from the phenomenological analysis of public sector employees' experiences of organizational culture dynamics. The first theme, Organizational Culture Transition, shows the shift from a bureaucratic work system to a more adaptive and open work pattern. The second theme, Internal Employee Challenges, describes the difficulties of digital adaptation, generational differences, and shifting work values. The third theme, The Role of Leadership, shows the importance of exemplary leadership and consistency in driving cultural change. The fourth theme, Employee Status Polarization, highlights the inequality between ASN and non-ASN in access to information and decision-making. The fifth theme, Aspirations for a New Culture, shows the hope for a collaborative, equitable, and inclusive organizational culture.

Conceptual Insights and Strategies for Inclusive Bureaucratic Transformation

The relationship between transformational leadership and organizational culture transition in shaping an inclusive and adaptive organizational culture. This model highlights how internal employee challenges and employee status polarization become factors that mediate the effectiveness of cultural change towards sustainable and collaborative bureaucratic transformation.

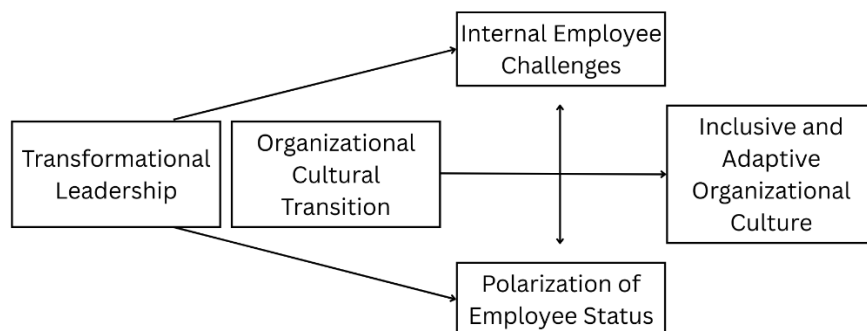


Figure 1. Elements of the Dynamics of the Public Sector

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the main elements in the dynamics of public sector organizational culture based on the findings of this study. Transformational leadership is positioned as the initial element that triggers the transition of organizational culture. This change has an impact on two main issues, namely internal employee challenges and polarization of employment status. These two factors interact

simultaneously and become the main determinants in the formation of an inclusive and adaptive organizational culture.

This framework is consistent with the theory of Tortorella et al. (2021) of organizational culture, which states that changes in values and norms in organizations are determined by leadership as well as collective meaning systems that develop from everyday experiences. This finding is also supported by Tran (2021), who emphasise that transformational leadership has a central role in the formation of a healthy and progressive work culture. In the Indonesian context, this research reinforces the results of the study by Wijethilake et al. (2023), which shows that the success of bureaucratic reform is strongly influenced by exemplary leaders and the clarity of the value structure in the organization.

This conceptual framework not only shows a linear process of cultural change but also emphasises the complex interactions between leadership, the social structure of the organization, and the subjective experiences of employees (Gorzelay et al., 2021). This framework can be used as a conceptual basis for developing change management strategies in the public sector that are more responsive and humane.

The chart above illustrates the relationship between the main elements in the dynamics of public sector organizational culture based on the findings of this study. Transformational leadership was placed as the initial element that triggered the organizational culture transition (Manu, 2022). This change impacts two major issues, namely internal employee challenges and polarisation of employment status. These two factors interact simultaneously and become the main determinants in the formation of an inclusive and adaptive organizational culture (Asbari et al., 2020).

This framework is consistent with Paais and Pattiruhu (2020) theory of organizational culture, which states that changes in values and norms in organizations are determined by leadership as well as collective meaning systems that develop from everyday experiences. This finding is also supported by Andika and Darmanto (2020), who emphasise that transformational leadership has a central role in the formation of a healthy and progressive work culture. In the Indonesian context, this research reinforces the results of the study by Kim et al (2023), which shows that the success of bureaucratic reform is strongly influenced by exemplary leaders and the clarity of the value structure in the organization.

Overall, the results of this study confirm that the dynamics of organizational culture in the public sector are not only influenced by formal structures, but also by the perceptions, interactions, and individual experiences of employees. The process of adapting to a new work culture is not linear, but full of value negotiations, resistance, and efforts to find a balance point between organizational demands and social realities. A collaborative, inclusive, and value-based work culture is a shared aspiration, but its realization requires structural support, leadership consistency, and openness to the diverse experiences of employees.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study confirm that the dynamics of organizational culture in the Indonesian public sector are still in transition between traditional bureaucratic patterns and modern managerial orientations (Lamsihar & Huseini, 2019; Utami, 2023). This finding is in line with Wijethilake et al. (2023) theory of organizational culture, which explains that organizational culture consists of three levels: artefacts, espoused values, and basic assumptions. In the context of the public sector, artefacts such as hierarchical structures and manual work systems still dominate, despite efforts to internalise new values such as collaboration, transparency, and results orientation. This is reflected in informants' experiences, which show the existence of old values such as respect for superiors and a culture of seniority, alongside new values brought by the younger generation.

The phenomenon of resistance to change found in this study is also in line with the findings of Moss (2022), who emphasises that public sector organizational cultures often

have high resistance to innovation due to rigid bureaucratic structures and the dominance of formal rules. As stated by the head of the field informant, the success of work culture transformation is largely determined by the leadership's example and consistency. This view reinforces the idea in transformational leadership theory proposed by Manu (2022), that leaders must become agents of cultural change by instilling a vision, shaping shared values, and providing exemplary behaviour.

The intergenerational gaps identified in this study point to the importance of multigenerational management in public organizations. Millennials, who grew up in the digital age, tend to be more open to innovation and collaboration. This finding is consistent with previous research by Syukri et al. (2025), which highlighted the differences in work values between generations and the need for adaptive cultural approaches to foster harmony among employees.

The issue of exclusivity in the treatment of non-civil servants raised in the informant interviews also confirms that the culture of public organizations is still laden with status hierarchies and internal discrimination. This contradicts the principle of organizational justice as developed by Manu (2022), which emphasises the importance of fair distribution of treatment as a prerequisite for employee commitment and engagement.

Furthermore, these results enrich the discourse on public organizational culture in the context of developing countries, where bureaucratic modernisation is gradual and often faces socio-cultural challenges (Prasetyanti & Kusuma, 2020; Sugiarto & Iskandar, 2022). The finding that informal culture is sometimes more dominant than formal values suggests that value systems in public organizations are not solely determined by official documents or organizational structures, but also by social interactions, symbols of power, and daily practices. This is in line with the interpretive approach in organizational studies, which views culture as a product of meanings constructed collectively by its members (Tambunan & Anwar, 2019).

As such, this research makes an important contribution to understanding how public sector employees interpret and respond to organizational culture dynamics, and how these experiences influence their attitudes, behaviours, and performance (Suprayitno & Abbas, 2024). The practical implications of the findings emphasise the need for more adaptive HR management policies, the involvement of employees across generations and statuses in the change process, and the strengthening of organizational values through a participatory and dialogic approach, rather than a top-down one (Suprayitno & Abbas, 2024).

The findings are consistent with Wijethilake et al. (2023) theory that emphasises the importance of values and basic assumptions in organizational culture. The unequal treatment of non-ASN employees indicates that organizational justice has not been realised (Mol et al., 2020). Informal cultures such as ABS are still dominant, although new values are beginning to grow. Intergenerational dissonance reinforces the importance of HR management strategies that are sensitive to values across age generations. The role of transformational leadership, Manu (2022), is key in bridging these differences.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the dynamics of organizational culture in the public sector are complex and cannot be separated from the interaction between old hierarchical values and new adaptive and collaborative values. The cultural transition process is influenced by the leadership structure, differences in employment status between ASN and non-ASN, and generational differences that bring different value backgrounds and work preferences. This study confirms that the subjective experience of employees is an important component in understanding resistance and support for cultural change within the organization. Therefore, organizational culture renewal strategies need to consider the perspectives of all internal elements, including contract employees and younger generations, as an integral part of the organizational system. A participatory approach to cultural transformation is considered more effective than a purely structural approach.

Theoretically, these findings make an important contribution to the enrichment of the literature on organizational phenomenology, particularly in the context of human resource management in the public sector of developing countries. The findings strengthen the understanding that the formation of organizational culture is not only determined by formal policies, but also shaped through narratives, work experiences, and internal organizational social structures. Practically, this research provides conceptual solutions in the development of inclusive HR policies through strengthening collective values, transformational leadership, and valuing contributions across status and generations. However, the limitations of this study lie in the limited scope of locations and number of informants, so generalization of findings needs to be done carefully. For this reason, future research is recommended to conduct comparative explorations across agencies and regions to broaden the understanding of organizational culture dynamics more thoroughly.

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