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# The Role of Psychology in Higher Education Leadership

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**Abstract**—Higher education leadership is confronted with increasingly complex challenges arising from globalization, digital transformation, and growing demands for quality assurance. University leaders are expected to demonstrate not only strong managerial and academic competencies but also a sound understanding of the psychological dimensions of individuals and groups within academic organizations. This article aims to examine conceptually the role of psychology in higher education leadership and its implications for leadership effectiveness. A literature review approach was employed, drawing on relevant scholarly sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and previous empirical studies on psychology and higher education leadership. The review reveals that psychological competence is critical to effective decision-making, faculty motivation and performance, organizational communication, conflict management, and the practice of transformational leadership in higher education institutions. Accordingly, the integration of psychological competencies into leadership development programs is essential to enhance organizational performance and improve the quality of higher education.

**Keyword**—*leadership psychology; higher education leadership; educational leadership; higher education management*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are complex educational organizations involving academic staff, administrative personnel, students, and a wide range of internal and external stakeholders. This complexity requires higher education leaders to possess not only managerial and academic competencies but also a deep understanding of human psychological aspects [1]. Many leadership challenges in higher education—such as low faculty motivation, internal conflicts, resistance to change, and ineffective organizational communication—often stem from

insufficient attention to psychological dimensions. This condition highlights the need for psychological competence in higher education leadership to foster a conducive and productive academic environment.

Effective leadership in higher education is closely associated with the ability to understand behavior, motivation, emotions, and social dynamics at both individual and group levels [2]. Modern education systems are inherently complex, and increasing insights into human behavior, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, and learning processes have demonstrated that no single educational approach is universally effective for all individuals. Consequently, leadership approaches must be adaptive and responsive to diverse human needs.

Alongside paradigm shifts in higher education that emphasize quality, competitiveness, and accountability, higher education leadership is increasingly expected to be adaptive and human-centered. Leadership transformation in higher education institutions plays a crucial role in advancing human capital development [3]. Such transformation significantly influences the future landscape of educational paradigms, societal progress, and economic growth [4];[5]. Improving educational quality remains a central challenge in leadership transformation processes within higher education [6]. Leadership that focuses solely on structural and administrative aspects often fails to address these challenges effectively. As a result, growing attention to innovative leadership in education has become essential to meeting societal demands, particularly as preparing students for future challenges requires moving beyond conventional one-size-fits-all approaches [7].

Higher education leaders are expected not only to help their colleagues understand ongoing changes but also to guide them in navigating a rapidly evolving world in ways that enable the optimal use of skills and capabilities to achieve organizational goals [8]. Therefore, an understanding of psychology is critically important for higher education leaders

in interpreting behavior, motivation, emotions, and the social dynamics of academic communities.

Leadership psychology focuses on understanding how psychological factors influence leadership behavior and its impact on teams and organizations. It examines personality traits, cognitive processes, emotional intelligence, and social dynamics that characterize effective leaders. Leadership is no longer defined solely by authority, formal position, or strategic planning. Instead, highly effective leaders recognize that success depends on their ability to connect with others, build trust, and adapt their leadership styles to diverse personalities and work preferences (Australian Institute of Management, n.d.). By applying principles of leadership psychology, individuals can gain insight into their leadership styles and identify areas for development [9]. Understanding the psychological foundations of leadership enables leaders to recognize why certain leadership approaches are more effective than others.

Psychology and leadership are interconnected in multiple ways. Behavioral and leadership practitioners apply psychological principles to explain why effective leaders succeed, particularly in how they make decisions, engage emotionally, and adapt their leadership styles to meet team needs [10]. Psychology provides both theoretical and practical foundations for understanding how individuals think, feel, and behave within educational organizations. Leaders with strong psychological awareness are better able to align their leadership styles with the characteristics and needs of faculty and staff, fostering productive and harmonious working relationships [11].

The significance of leadership psychology in professional development is substantial. Leadership is not merely about directing others but about maximizing positive outcomes for both leaders and followers. By understanding psychological constructs such as motivation, perception, and values, leaders can enhance trust-building, strengthen teamwork, and navigate the complexities of organizational change. Leadership psychology equips leaders with analytical tools to adapt their approaches to diverse situations and organizational contexts.

Leadership extends far beyond steering an organization; it involves recognizing that people are at the core of every institution, understanding what motivates them, and designing strategies that consider both organizational objectives and human needs [12]. Leadership entails interacting with and managing individuals—often within groups—and shaping their behaviors and attitudes to align with the leader's vision. The values, attitudes, and goals promoted by leaders define collective interests and transform individual actions into coordinated group efforts [13].

Effective leadership is not an individual endeavor but a collective process that requires teamwork. By leveraging psychological insights, leaders can better understand their teams, enhance talent retention and development, and create positive and productive work environments where individuals can thrive [14]. In this context, leadership becomes a determining factor in the effectiveness of higher education

governance. University leaders—such as rectors, deans, and heads of study programs—are required to manage academic, administrative, and human resource dimensions simultaneously. Educational leadership plays a critical role in institutional growth and development, as leaders must implement effective administrative practices to enhance human resource quality and achieve institutional excellence [15].

Outstanding leadership consistently emerges as a defining characteristic of high-performing educational institutions. There is little doubt that stakeholders committed to educational quality must ensure the presence of strong leadership and prioritize the development of future leaders. Effective leadership serves as the foundation for sustainable change in education. Leaders must embody a combination of personal attributes, skills, and behaviors capable of inspiring and guiding institutions toward long-term improvement. A clear and compelling vision of the future of education is essential, including the ability to anticipate trends, understand emerging technologies, and respond to evolving student and societal needs [16]. Leadership dynamism and adaptability have become increasingly critical in ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of higher education institutions in an era of rapid change and globalization [17].

At the core of effective leadership lies emotional intelligence, which encompasses a leader's ability to recognize, understand, and manage not only their own emotions but also those of others. Emotional intelligence plays a pivotal role in managing complex interpersonal relationships and mobilizing teams toward shared goals. With a comprehensive understanding of these essential leadership dimensions, leaders can build successful institutions while also creating authentic and psychologically safe workplaces where individuals feel valued, understood, and inspired to reach their full potential [12].

Self-awareness—the ability to recognize one's emotional states and their influence on behavior and decision-making—forms the foundation of authentic leadership. Additionally, self-regulation, or the ability to manage emotional responses, enables leaders to remain composed and objective, fostering trust among team members and minimizing the influence of personal bias in decision-making processes. Previous studies have examined leadership challenges in higher education from various perspectives. For example, Aisyah et al. [4] and Fitriani et al. [5] emphasized the importance of leadership transformation in higher education, while Muhammed et al. [17] investigated leadership adaptability in maintaining institutional relevance amid globalization. Baso and Alwy [6] explored challenges and opportunities faced by higher education leadership, and Febriantina et al. [18] examined the role of effective communication in educational leadership. International studies by Mpuangnan and Roboji [19] focused on leadership transformation through innovative administrative development, Kamara and Burhanuddin [16] analyzed the role of educational leadership in driving institutional transformation, and Murgatroyd [8] investigated leadership challenges in the era of disruption.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study argues that research on the importance of psychology in higher education leadership is both timely and necessary. A review of previous studies reveals a research gap concerning the explicit role of psychological dimensions in higher education leadership, which constitutes the novelty of this study. Accordingly, this research aims to examine the importance of psychology in higher education leadership from theoretical and conceptual perspectives.

## II. METHOD

This study was designed as qualitative research employing a library research method as proposed by George [20], in which articles related to psychology and higher education leadership were reviewed and explicated in the research findings. The articles were searched through Google Scholar and Springer. The keywords used in the search were psychology and educational leadership.

The study was conducted through several stages. The first stage involved identifying the research topic. Relevant research articles were identified, particularly those related to the role of psychology in leadership. In the next stage, research questions were formulated to address the roles of psychology in higher education leadership.

In the third stage, a research plan was developed with the aim of obtaining information related to the proposed research questions. This was carried out by searching for relevant articles in scholarly journals as well as books discussing the psychology of leadership. Subsequently, in the fourth stage, the collected articles were used as the sources of the study to support the explanation of the psychology of leadership. These articles were utilized to provide information related to the roles and principles of psychology in leadership.

In the subsequent stage, the obtained articles were read critically to derive meaning from each article. The roles and principles of psychology in leadership were then interpreted. From this process, the information was used to answer the research questions formulated in this study. In the final stage, the information was elaborated in depth as arguments concerning the roles of psychology in higher education leadership. The obtained information was then systematically organized for the present study. Suggestions from colleagues and further readings were employed to revise and refine the information presented in this study.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### ***3.1 Leadership Psychology***

Leadership psychology is the study of leadership phenomena, encompassing topics such as organizational identity, motivation, coordination, performance management, as well as organizational development and change through various psychological models and research approaches. These approaches examine multiple variables, including individual and group identity, perception, and behavior [21].

Leadership psychology represents a specialized branch of psychology that focuses on understanding how psychological

factors influence leadership behavior and how such behavior affects teams and organizations. At its core, this field examines personality traits, cognitive processes, emotional intelligence, and social dynamics that characterize effective leaders. By applying leadership psychology principles, individuals can gain insight into their own leadership styles and identify areas for improvement [9].

Moreover, leadership psychology reveals the mental and emotional dynamics that contribute to leadership effectiveness. It explores how innate personality traits, emotional intelligence, and motivational drivers influence a leader's ability to guide and inspire others. This perspective offers valuable insights into what distinguishes successful leaders and enhances their capacity to build strong and supportive relationships within teams. By examining these psychological elements, leadership psychology deepens the understanding of effective leadership and its impact on organizational success [22].

### ***3.2 Foundations of Leadership Psychology***

For leaders, understanding the psychological factors that influence motivation and performance is essential. Psychology, as the scientific study of the human mind and behavior, plays a significant role in effective leadership. The core of effective leadership lies in the ability to connect with others at a deeper level, a process mediated by emotional intelligence—the capacity to recognize, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others [23].

According to Stuarttan [23], the foundations of leadership psychology include four key elements. First, understanding human behavior: psychology provides insights into motivation, personality traits, and cognitive processes. Leaders who possess such understanding are better able to adapt their leadership approaches to align with the unique needs and characteristics of each team member. Second, motivation and goal setting: by establishing clear goals and aligning them with team members' intrinsic motivation, leaders can foster a sense of ownership and commitment. Third, emotional intelligence: leaders with high emotional intelligence are able to empathize with the experiences and perspectives of their team members. Fourth, building trust and collaboration: trust is the foundation of any successful team or organization. Leaders who prioritize trust-building create environments that support open communication, collaboration, and innovation. Psychology provides valuable insights into the factors that contribute to trust, including integrity, transparency, competence, and consistency.

### ***3.3 Principles of Leadership Psychology***

To develop high-impact leaders, organizations must integrate core psychological principles into their leadership development programs. Ryan C. Warner [24], as reviewed by Monica, identifies four fundamental principles that drive effective leadership, workplace well-being, and long-term success: serving as a cultural role model, leveraging emotional intelligence, recognizing and managing cognitive biases, and adapting leadership approaches to individual needs.

Leaders do not merely manage teams; they function as architects of organizational culture, with their behavior shaping norms, values, and levels of engagement. According to Ryan [24], employees tend to emulate their leaders' behavior, making cultural role modeling a critical element of leadership development. Consequently, organizations should emphasize exemplary leadership conduct and the reinforcement of values that promote long-term collective success.

Emotional intelligence (EI or EQ)—the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions as well as those of others—plays a crucial role in leadership development. Research indicates that EQ is twice as predictive of leadership success as IQ and accounts for up to 90% of the competencies that differentiate high-performing leaders. Leaders with high emotional intelligence are better equipped to foster collaboration, strengthen team cohesion, and address workplace challenges effectively.

Emotional intelligence comprises four core components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Self-awareness enables leaders to recognize emotions and understand their impact on behavior, while self-management allows leaders to regulate emotional responses, particularly in high-pressure situations. Social awareness enhances empathy and sensitivity to others' needs, and relationship management strengthens communication and conflict-resolution skills.

Warner [24] concludes that organizations led by emotionally intelligent leaders experience lower turnover rates, higher employee engagement, and stronger team performance. In contrast, leaders with low emotional intelligence often struggle with conflict resolution, effective communication, and sustaining employee engagement.

Like all individuals, leaders are influenced by cognitive biases—mental shortcuts that shape decision-making. When left unexamined, these biases can negatively affect judgment, problem-solving, and team dynamics. Common leadership biases include confirmation bias, the tendency to seek information that confirms existing beliefs, and status quo bias, the reluctance to change despite the availability of better alternatives.

Research compiled by Warner [24] indicates that leaders who actively challenge their biases by seeking diverse perspectives tend to make more balanced and higher-quality decisions. Encouraging structured decision-making processes and incorporating diverse inputs can help minimize bias and enhance leadership effectiveness.

Uniform, one-size-fits-all leadership training is no longer effective in the increasingly complex higher education environment. Leadership development must be tailored to individuals' unique strengths and challenges to ensure that leaders receive appropriate support to maximize their potential.

Personalized leadership development enhances skill mastery, engagement, and long-term success. Drawing on expert perspectives, Warner [24] notes that faculty members and administrative staff who feel supported in their professional development demonstrate higher job satisfaction and stronger

organizational commitment. Without personalized training, organizations risk disengagement, skill stagnation, and low leadership retention. Targeted and individualized leadership development fosters resilience, adaptability, and sustained high performance in dynamic organizational contexts.

### **3.4 The Role of Psychology in Higher Education Leadership**

Leadership psychology explores the mental and emotional dynamics that contribute to a leader's effectiveness. This field encompasses an understanding of how innate personality traits, emotional intelligence, and motivational factors influence a leader's capacity to guide and inspire others. Such a perspective provides valuable insights into what distinguishes successful leaders and enhances their ability to build strong, supportive relationships within teams. By examining these psychological elements, scholars and practitioners can better understand the essence of effective leadership and its impact on organizational success [22].

Psychology provides a theoretical foundation for higher education leaders to understand individual and group behavior within academic organizations. Faculty members and educational staff possess diverse characteristics, needs, and motivational drivers, requiring differentiated leadership approaches. Leaders who possess psychological awareness are better equipped to adapt their leadership styles to the psychological conditions of their subordinates, thereby fostering harmonious and productive working relationships.

Furthermore, psychological understanding supports leaders in cultivating a positive organizational climate characterized by trust, openness, and commitment to institutional goals. A psychologically healthy organizational climate has been shown to contribute significantly to improved performance and job satisfaction among academic communities.

Sahni [22] further identifies several key roles of psychology in leadership, including: its role in leadership decision-making, its influence on faculty motivation and performance, contribution to communication and conflict management, and its relevance to transformational leadership.

One of the defining features of effective leadership lies in the ability to make sound, evidence-based decisions. The cognitive aspects of decision-making involve processing information, evaluating alternatives, and recognizing cognitive biases that may influence judgment. Emotional intelligence also plays a critical role by providing intuitive insight which, when balanced with rational analysis, can lead to more thoughtful and prudent decisions [9]. Leaders must navigate the interaction between cognitive processes and emotional influences, ensuring that neither dominates excessively, so that decisions can produce optimal outcomes for both teams and organizations.

Decision-making is a crucial aspect of leadership in higher education. The decisions made by institutional leaders affect not only the achievement of organizational goals but also the psychological well-being of individuals involved. Psychology enables leaders to understand how emotions, perceptions, and cognitive biases shape decision-making processes. Rapid developments in science and technology demand continuous innovation, which in turn requires the

courage to make decisions involving calculated risks. Psychological theories explain when individuals feel comfortable engaging in risk-taking and how leaders can inspire others to embrace meaningful and goal-oriented risks [25].

Leaders with strong psychological awareness tend to be more reflective, emotionally regulated, and open to multiple perspectives before making decisions. This capacity is essential for producing policies that are fair, rational, and widely accepted by the academic community. Leveraging psychological foundations allows leaders to manage role complexity, inspire teams, and guide institutions toward greater organizational effectiveness [9].

An understanding of motivational theories is also essential for inspiring and engaging academic staff. Intrinsic motivation—driven by a sense of purpose, autonomy, and mastery—is considerably more powerful than extrinsic motivation such as rewards or punishment. Leaders can foster intrinsic motivation by establishing meaningful goals and providing opportunities for professional growth and self-development [23].

Faculty motivation is a key determinant of success in higher education delivery. Leaders who understand motivational theories can design leadership strategies that enhance faculty enthusiasm and performance. Recognition, appreciation of achievements, and opportunities for professional development represent effective psychological approaches to strengthening intrinsic motivation. Integrating psychological principles, particularly from social psychology, also helps leaders recognize biases such as confirmation bias and in-group/out-group dynamics that may influence judgment. Awareness of these biases enables leaders to make more objective decisions and foster inclusive work environments [23].

Conversely, leadership practices that neglect psychological considerations may lead to occupational stress, burnout, and declining faculty performance. Therefore, integrating psychological principles into leadership practices is essential for creating work environments that support academic productivity.

Empathy represents another critical psychological principle in effective leadership. Leaders who demonstrate empathy show genuine concern for employee well-being and are able to understand others' perspectives. By placing themselves in the position of their staff, empathetic leaders create supportive environments in which individuals feel valued and motivated to perform at their best.

Conflict is an inherent aspect of human interaction, occurring in personal relationships, workplace environments, and broader social contexts. The manner in which individuals confront and manage conflict significantly influences the outcomes achieved as well as the overall dynamics of relationships. Psychological approaches to conflict management provide valuable insights into the emotional and cognitive dimensions of disputes and offer strategies to reduce tension and promote positive resolution. Understanding the psychological factors underlying conflict enables individuals and groups to respond more effectively, thereby creating

opportunities for growth, cooperation, and long-term peace [26].

Effectively managing team conflict requires a deep understanding of its root causes and the application of strategies that promote constructive solutions. By practicing active listening and demonstrating empathy, managers are able to understand diverse perspectives within a team, which helps mitigate potential tension. The use of collaborative problem-solving techniques encourages team members to approach conflict with a focus on shared goals rather than personal grievances. In addition, a leader's emotional intelligence allows conflicts to be managed in a calm and controlled manner, transforming them into opportunities for growth and mutual understanding. When conflict is handled constructively, it can strengthen trust within relationships. Respectful, direct, and open discussions of differing perspectives, along with collaborative conflict resolution, foster a sense of unity, shared purpose, and mutual respect [27].

According to Grace and Honey [26], one effective approach to conflict management is active listening. This process involves full engagement with both the words and emotions of the interlocutor, demonstrating respect and validating their perspective. Reflective communication, such as paraphrasing, ensures that all parties feel understood and helps clarify potential misunderstandings. These strategies reduce tension by fostering empathy and creating space for open dialogue. Grace and Honey [26] further outline the key steps of active listening as follows: (1) giving full attention to the speaker by minimizing distractions, (2) acknowledging the speaker's emotions through verbal and nonverbal cues, and (3) paraphrasing or summarizing the message to ensure accurate understanding.

Motivation also influences how individuals approach conflict and engage in its resolution. For instance, intrinsic motivation tends to encourage more collaborative behaviors, whereas extrinsic motivation may lead to more competitive approaches. Recognizing and aligning motivational factors can help create conflict resolution processes that satisfy all parties involved [26]. Moreover, conflict is an inevitable phenomenon in organizational life. Psychological understanding enables leaders to manage conflict constructively by identifying root causes, understanding the emotions of those involved, and seeking mutually beneficial solutions. Such an approach prevents conflict from escalating into more serious issues that could undermine the academic climate.

Within the framework of communication psychology, communication is not merely about speaking skills but also about delivering persuasive messages. In other words, effective communication considers not only what is conveyed by the communicator but also how messages are adapted to the needs of the audience [28]. Effective communication is a key determinant of leadership success in higher education. Communication psychology helps leaders understand how messages are transmitted, received, and interpreted by individuals from diverse backgrounds. The ability to communicate empathetically and assertively enables leaders to build healthy relationships with the academic community.

According to Febriantina et al. [18], effective communication lies at the core of leadership and serves as a primary differentiator between successful and unsuccessful leaders in achieving organizational goals.

Communication style in leadership plays a critical role in determining a leader's effectiveness in influencing and guiding groups toward shared objectives. These styles reflect the interpersonal behaviors employed by leaders in specific situations to elicit desired responses. Febriantina et al. [18] identify six primary communication styles: (1) the controlling style, which is authoritarian in nature; (2) the equalitarian style, which emphasizes equality and two-way communication; (3) the structuring style, which focuses on delivering information in a systematic manner; (4) the dynamic style, which is action-oriented and assertive; (5) the relinquishing style, which welcomes ideas from others; and (6) the withdrawal style, characterized by avoidance of communication.

The selection of an appropriate communication style depends largely on context, objectives, and leader characteristics. An effective communication style not only facilitates the clear transmission of messages but also strengthens leader-follower relationships, thereby fostering a collaborative and productive work environment. Among these styles, the equalitarian style is often regarded as the most effective in academic leadership contexts [18].

Conflict and differences of opinion are unavoidable in organizational settings. It is important to recognize that the benefits of conflict resolution extend beyond merely settling disagreements, contributing significantly to personal growth, emotional well-being, and healthy relationships [27].

Transformational leaders inspire and motivate followers to transcend personal interests for the sake of organizational goals. This leadership style is rooted in a leader's ability to articulate and communicate a compelling vision, foster enthusiasm, and support the personal development of followers. Transformational leadership is characterized by a strong emphasis on innovation, change, and the achievement of long-term objectives [22].

Transformational leadership emphasizes a leader's capacity to inspire, motivate, and empower subordinates to achieve positive change. This leadership model is closely linked to psychology, particularly in building shared vision, trust, and organizational commitment. According to Ashveen [22], higher education leaders who apply transformational leadership grounded in psychological principles are better able to encourage active participation from the academic community in institutional development. This capability is increasingly critical in addressing the challenges of globalization, inter-university competition, and the growing demand for innovation in higher education

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Psychology plays a vital role in leadership within higher education institutions. An understanding of psychological roles and principle aspects enables leaders to manage human resources effectively, make rational and equitable decisions, enhance the motivation and performance of faculty members and administrative staff, and manage communication and conflict in

a constructive manner. Higher education leadership grounded in psychological principles also supports the development of transformational leadership that is capable of inspiring, empowering, and fostering positive change within academic organizations. Therefore, strengthening psychological competencies among higher education leaders should become an integral component of leadership development in higher education in order to improve institutional governance and the quality of graduates

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