

# First Embrace Cultural Nuances and Then Adapt Your Leadership Style: Qualitative Insights from Senior Bank Executives in Sierra Leone

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## Abstract

In the vibrant yet complex landscape of post-conflict Sierra Leone, this study investigates the influence of cultural dimensions on the leadership styles of senior executives in the banking sector. It focuses on transformational and transactional leadership approaches to understand how these styles are shaped by the socio-cultural fabric of the region. The study employs Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis to delve into the narratives of ten CEOs from diverse commercial banks. This qualitative approach revealed eight compelling themes that illustrate the impact of cultural dimensions on leadership practices. The findings reveal that effective leadership in Sierra Leone transcends conventional models. It requires a delicate balance between authority and empathy, tradition and innovation. The study highlights the necessity for culturally attuned leadership development programs that resonate with the local ethos, empowering leaders to navigate the complex relationship between expectations and realities in a post-conflict society. The research offers practical implications for organisational policies and training initiatives in Sierra Leone and across various sectors on the continent. It underscores the importance of developing leadership programs that are culturally sensitive and adaptive to the unique challenges faced in post-conflict environments. This research enriches the theoretical landscape of leadership studies by providing insights into the dynamic relationship between culture and leadership in developing economies. It advocates for longitudinal studies and cross-sectoral investigations to further explore this relationship, contributing to a narrative that champions cultural sensitivity and adaptive leadership.

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## Keywords

Cultural Dimensions, Transformational Leadership, Transactional Leadership, Sierra Leone

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## 1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of post-conflict Sierra Leone, the success of the banking sector is closely linked with the quality of its leadership. Yet, conventional leadership models often fall short in addressing the complex cultural, social, and historical dynamics that shape this unique context. To thrive, banking leaders must go beyond traditional frameworks and adapt to the unique cultural and historical context. Leadership, as a critical driver of organizational success, cannot be divorced from the broader cultural environment in which it operates (Yan & Hunt, 2005). While prominent scholars have extensively probed into the influence of national culture on leadership styles, limited research has specifically examined how senior executives in the banking sector navigate the interplay between transformational and transactional leadership styles within the unique cultural and historical context of the country (Hanges et al., 2016; Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004; Kuchinke, 1999).

Sierra Leone is a small West African nation which carries the weight of a complex past, including colonialism, civil war, and the recent challenges posed by the Ebola epidemic and COVID-19, and these experiences have immensely shaped the country's political and economic landscape, significantly influencing leadership practices across various sectors, including banking (Kebe et al., 2024). This banking sector plays a decisive role in Sierra Leone's economic recovery and development, demanding that leaders effectively navigate complex organisational change processes (Duramany-Lakkoh et al., 2022).

The cultural nuances affecting leadership approaches in Sierra Leone's banking industry, especially the adoption of transformational and transactional leadership styles, are predominantly unexamined. Transformational leadership, emphasising inspiration and motivation, is often considered crucial in modern organisations (Bass, 1990). Conversely, transactional leadership focuses on structure, routine, and rewards, proving effective in environments demanding stability and efficiency (Burns, 1978). Sierra Leone as a collectivist society, group harmony and respect for authority are paramount, and leadership styles that promote collaboration, mutual respect, and strong social ties may be more effective than those that solely emphasise individual achievement and autonomy (Kennedy, 2002). This study aims to explore how senior executives in Sierra Leone's banking sector perceive the influence of cultural factors on their leadership styles, especially from the standpoint of how transformational and transactional approaches are adapted and integrated in response to organisational needs and local cultural norms. Furthermore, this study seeks to address the limitations of previous research by exploring

alternative theoretical frameworks, such as Ubuntu philosophy and adaptive leadership theory, which are particularly relevant to the African context. By integrating these frameworks, the study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of leadership practices in Sierra Leone. The following important questions are the focus of this study:

- 1) How are transformational and transactional leadership styles expressed and adapted within Sierra Leone's cultural context?
- 2) How do senior leaders integrate these leadership styles to achieve organisational goals during periods of change?
- 3) How do cultural nuances influence employee performance during organisational change?
- 4) What strategies do leaders employ to adapt their leadership styles to align with local cultural expectations?

Sierra Leone was selected as the central focus of this investigation because it presents a unique and compelling context for examining leadership within the banking sector. The country's complex history, and contemporary events, combined with its position as a small but strategically important nation in West Africa, offer an invaluable opportunity to explore how leadership styles evolve and adapt in post-conflict settings (Kobayashi & M'cleod, 2021). Sierra Leone's strong sense of collectivism and respect for authority contrasts with dominant global leadership paradigms, making it an ideal setting to investigate how transformational and transactional leadership styles are reshaped to fit local norms and expectations. This study aims to fill this gap by providing insights into how these leadership styles are adapted to the country's specific cultural and historical context. The findings of this study will enhance our understanding of leadership in post-conflict nations and provide practical insights for leadership development programs, organisational change initiatives, and policy-making in Sierra Leone and other similar contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Transformational Leadership (TRF)

The theory of transformational leadership, first proposed by Burns, (1978), and later refined by Bass, (1985), has been the subject of much debate in the academic and professional communities. It is grounded in the premise that Leaders inspire and motivate followers to surpass their self-interest for the collective benefit of the company or society. These leaders nurture an environment that encourages innovation, growth, and the development of novel concepts, empowering followers to contribute more meaningfully to organisational success. Bass, (1985), outlined four key components of TRF; Idealized Influence, leaders act as role models, earning respect and loyalty by embodying values that others aspire to; Inspirational Motivation, leaders communicate a convincing vision that energizes followers and promotes collective enthusiasm for achieving organisational goals; Intellectual Stimulation, leaders encourage followers to think critically, innovate, and challenge the

status quo, which fosters continuous improvement; and Individualized Consideration, leaders offer personalized support, mentorship, and coaching to help individuals reach their personal and professional aspirations, promoting growth and development within the team. However, TRF is effective in complex, changing, or turbulent environments, where motivation and innovation are critical to success. While it has been linked to higher organisational performance, greater employee satisfaction, and increased organisational commitment, its effectiveness may depend on the cultural context in which it is applied (Velarde et al., 2022).

## 2.2. Transactional Leadership (TRS)

Transactional leadership is based on the conviction that individuals are primarily motivated by self-interest and external rewards, such as salary, bonuses, and promotions (Bass, 1985). TRS involves three key components: Contingent Reward, where leaders offer rewards based on meeting specific performance goals, creating a direct exchange between outcomes and incentives like financial rewards, recognition, or promotions. Management by Exception (Active) sees leaders actively monitoring performance and stepping in to address deviations before they escalate, ensuring issues are handled proactively, and Management by Exception (Passive) is a more reactive approach, with leaders intervening only when performance drops below acceptable levels or problems arise, focusing primarily on maintaining order and minimising deviations. Though TRS is often seen as more immediate and pragmatic, it is vital in environments where routine tasks, compliance, and efficiency are paramount (Bass, 1985). Further, TRS is often employed in conjunction with TRF, with the latter providing the long-term vision and inspiration, while the former ensures short-term performance and compliance (Gavan O'Shea et al., 2009). Thus, highly regulated industries, such as banking, a balance of both leadership styles can be crucial in achieving stability and innovation.

## 2.3. Integrating Transformational and Transactional Leadership

Recent leadership research has moved toward an integrated approach, recognising that effective leadership in complex, dynamic environments requires both transformational and transactional components. Further, Abbas & Ali, (2023), propose that leaders who can blend both approaches are more likely to succeed in navigating the complexities of modern organizations. In Sierra Leone, leaders in the banking sector must adopt a hybrid model that merges the visionary and motivational elements of TRF with the goal-orientated and performance-driven elements of TRS (Dartey-Baah, 2015; Kebe et al., 2024). Leaders who can flexibly switch between both leadership styles, depending on the circumstance, are better positioned to foster organisational growth while maintaining employee morale and cultural sensitivity. Further, during periods of economic instability or regulatory change, a TRS approach might be needed to ensure efficiency and compliance. At the same time, during periods of change, TRF can provide the vision and inspiration necessary for growth and unity. The integration of both styles requires a deep

understanding of the cultural, economic, and emotional contexts in which leaders operate (Abbas & Ali, 2023; Puni et al., 2021). In addition to the hybrid model, this study considers the relevance of adaptive leadership theory, which emphasizes the ability of leaders to navigate uncertainty and foster resilience in dynamic environments. Adaptive leadership complements transformational and transactional approaches by focusing on diagnosing challenges, mobilizing collective action, and fostering innovation in response to changing circumstances (Heifetz et al., 2009). This framework is particularly pertinent in post-conflict settings like Sierra Leone, where leaders must balance immediate operational needs with long-term strategic goals.

## 2.4. Cultural Dimensions and Leadership

Effective leadership is not a standalone phenomenon, they are influenced by the broader cultural context in which they are situated. Understanding how culture shapes leadership is essential for leaders who operate in diverse environments. (Hofstede, 2001; Minkov & Hofstede, 2014), framework of cultural dimensions provides a lens through which the relationship between cultural values and leadership styles can be understood.

### 2.4.1. National Culture

National culture significantly impacts leadership, shaping perceptions, interactions, and decision-making across societies. Hofstede et al., (2010), define culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (p. 6). Culture influences leadership and corporate performance, necessitating adaptability in multicultural contexts (Owusu Ansah & Louw, 2019). Hofstede’s six cultural dimensions; (power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint), provide valuable insights into how cultural values shape behaviour globally. Power distance signifies to the extent to which less powerful members of society accept unequal power distribution (Hofstede, 1980, 2011). High power distance cultures value hierarchical structures, with authority figures making decisions independently, while low power distance cultures emphasise egalitarianism and involve subordinates in decision-making (House et al., 2004). In Sierra Leone, power distance significantly influences leadership. Lower-level employees often respect and avoid questioning authority figures, such as bank executives. Individualism versus collectivism reflects whether a culture prioritises individual or group goals (Hofstede, 2001). Individualistic cultures value autonomy and personal achievement, while collectivist cultures emphasise group welfare and harmony. In Sierra Leone’s collectivist culture, loyalty, family ties, and community take precedence over individual ambitions, with bank executives fostering close relationships with subordinates. Masculinity versus femininity reflects whether a culture emphasises competition and achievement (masculine) or cooperation and quality of life (feminine) (Hofstede, 2001). Masculine cultures value assertiveness and success, while feminine cultures prior-

itise support, equality, and collaboration. In Sierra Leone, leadership often reflects feminine values, with bank executives focusing on teamwork, employee well-being, and social responsibility, though some emphasis on achievement remains. Uncertainty avoidance measures how comfortable a culture is with ambiguity and unpredictability (Minkov & Hofstede, 2014). High uncertainty avoidance cultures favour stability, rules, and predictability, while low uncertainty avoidance cultures tolerate ambiguity and risk. Sierra Leone reflects high uncertainty avoidance, with banking sector employees preferring clear rules, structure, and stable leadership. Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation reflects whether a society focuses on future rewards through planning and perseverance or prioritises immediate results and traditions (Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov & Hofstede, 2014). Sierra Leone exhibits both orientations: a focus on long-term recovery through economic growth and infrastructure, alongside short-term efforts to address unemployment and stabilise the economy. Bank executives balance immediate financial needs with long-term national development goals. Indulgence vs. Restraint reflects how much a culture allows or regulates enjoyment and leisure (Hofstede, 1980, 2011). Indulgent cultures emphasise personal freedom and happiness, while restrained cultures impose strict norms on gratification. Sierra Leone leans toward restraint, shaped by traditional norms and economic limitations, though moments of indulgence, like community celebrations, still occur within societal expectations. Consequently, these dimensions significantly influence leadership styles in Sierra Leone and understanding them is crucial for leaders to adapt their approaches to the cultural context within the banking sector. While Hofstede's dimensions provide valuable insights, they risk oversimplifying the rich diversity within Sierra Leone. For instance, intra-cultural variations among ethnic groups, linguistic communities, and urban versus rural populations may significantly influence leadership practices. Future research should explore these nuances to develop a more granular understanding of how cultural factors shape leadership behaviors across different subgroups within Sierra Leone.

#### **2.4.2. The Ubuntu Philosophy**

The Ubuntu philosophy, rooted in African traditions, provides a framework for leadership in collectivist societies like Sierra Leone. Defined by the Nguni maxim "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" ("a person is a person through others"), Ubuntu centers on interconnectedness, communal ethics, and mutual accountability (Tutu, 1999). It aligns with African cultural values prioritizing group harmony, respect, and collective welfare over individualism. Ubuntu-oriented leadership emphasizes relational trust, ethical stewardship, and decisions that advance the common good through compassion and inclusivity (Metz, 2011).

In Sierra Leone's hierarchical, collectivist context, Ubuntu reinforces shared responsibility and collaboration. Leaders inspired by this philosophy promote participatory decision-making and foster belonging, strengthening team cohesion and organizational resilience (Okecha et al., 2024; Mbigi & Maree, 1997). For example, leaders fostering a familial workplace ethos may boost morale and com-

mitment. Ubuntu contrasts with Western individualistic models, advocating servant leadership over top-down authority (Louw, 2001). This approach prioritizes empowerment and unity, vital in post-conflict settings like Sierra Leone for rebuilding trust and sustainable growth. Applying Ubuntu principles enables Sierra Leonean leaders, including in banking, to align practices with local values while addressing modern challenges. Its emphasis on humanity and interdependence can cultivate ethical, adaptive organizations (Letseka, 2012).

## 2.5. Leadership in the Banking Sector

In the banking sector, a variety of leadership styles have emerged to drive performance and facilitate organisational change, especially in response to evolving economic landscapes, technological advancements, regulatory pressures, market competition, and cultural dynamics. Among the most prominent styles are TRF, which emphasises vision, inspiration, and motivating employees toward collective goals (Tuffour et al., 2022); TRS, which focuses on structure, routine, and rewards for performance (Alrowwad et al., 2020); and servant leadership, which prioritises the well-being and development of employees (Mujeeb et al., 2021). Collaborative leadership emphasises teamwork and shared decision-making (Ullah, 2017), while adaptive leadership helps organisations navigate change and uncertainty (Yozi & Mbokota, 2024). Ethical leadership, which fosters trust and integrity, is crucial for maintaining organisational credibility (Wu et al., 2021), as is authentic leadership, which highlights transparency and consistency (Yamak & Eyupoglu, 2021). Other styles, such as responsible leadership (Yasin, 2021), democratic leadership (Agarwal, 2024), and reputational leadership (James & Christopoulos, 2018), also play important roles in shaping organisational culture and performance. Additionally, with the rise of technology, digital leadership has emerged as a critical style for guiding organisations through digital transformation (Al Issa & Omar, 2024). While each of these leadership styles offers distinct advantages, transformational and transactional leadership styles have been the most sought after for driving employee outcomes, navigating change, and achieving organisational goals in the banking sector. Conversely, leadership in Sierra Leone's banking sector is shaped by the country's past, where recovery, economic challenges, and cultural factors intersect. Transformational leadership and transactional leadership remain vital for ensuring stability and efficiency in the country's evolving financial system (Duramany-Lakkoh et al., 2022). As the sector continues to grow, adaptive leadership helps navigate global economic changes and technological advancements, essential for growth and competitiveness in the banking industry. Ultimately, by combining these leadership styles, banking leaders can create a more resilient and inclusive financial ecosystem, supporting the country's broader socio-economic development.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a phenomenological qualitative approach, focusing on explor-

ing the lived experiences of senior executives, specifically CEOs of commercial banks in Sierra Leone. Phenomenology is suitable for this study as it seeks to uncover the essence of leadership practices and experiences, particularly in navigating organisational change within the cultural context. According to [Creswell & Poth, \(2016\)](#), it allows researchers to explore and describe how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences, providing rich insights into their realities. Additionally, [Moustakas, \(1994\)](#), highlights that phenomenological methods are effective in capturing the subjective experiences and meanings that emerge from participants' perspectives. This approach is relevant in Sierra Leone, where leadership strategies are deeply influenced by cultural nuances, as underscored by [\(Hofstede et al., 2010\)](#).

### 3.2. Participant Selection

A purposive sampling technique is utilised to select participants who possess the most relevant expertise in the study's context. The sample consists of 10 CEOs from 10 major commercial banks in Sierra Leone. This method ensures participants are directly involved in leadership decisions and organisational change processes [\(Palinkas et al., 2015\)](#). Participants had to have held their position for at least a year in order to meet the inclusion requirements. This ensures they had sufficient experience to provide in-depth insights into the dynamics of leadership and change. The choice of participants was based on their strategic leadership roles and knowledge of bank operations, employee performance, and challenges related to leading organisational change in Sierra Leone's unique socio-cultural context.

### 3.3. Data Collection

**Table 1.** Participants bio data.

Variable	Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	9	90%
	Female	1	10%
Age (in years)	36 - 45	4	40%
	46 - 55	3	30%
	56+	3	30%
Education	Masters	9	90%
	PhD	1	10%
Total Years of Experience in the Banking Sector	Below 15 Years	3	30%
	15+ Years	4	40%
	20+ Years	3	30%
Number of years in your current leadership role	1 - 3 years	5	50%
	4 - 6 years	2	20%
	>6 years	3	30%
	Total	10	100%

Source: Designed by author.

The primary data collection tool is semi-structured interviews, widely adopted in qualitative inquiry. This offers flexibility, allowing participants to share their views in an open-ended manner while providing structure to ensure consistency across interviews (Brinkmann, 2014; Kallio et al., 2016). In-person interviews were conducted in the participants' offices to create a comfortable and trusting environment, encouraging openness in discussing sensitive topics. All interviews were conducted from March to May 2024 and **Table 1** presents the participants' characteristics. Also, to ensure the interview guide's relevance and clarity, pre-tests were conducted with two Deputy CEOs of two banks. Based on their responses, the interview guide was refined, all interviews were done in English, which is the primary language of business and professional settings in the banking sector in Sierra Leone.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is utilised to examine the qualitative data, adhering to the framework established by (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following analytical steps were conducted. In Phase 1, the researchers begin by carefully reading through transcriptions to immerse in participants' insights. According to Braun & Clarke, (2006), qualitative research benefits from a deep engagement with data to capture deep meanings, which helps in understanding complex lived experiences. This initial process allows the identification of recurring patterns and sets the stage for detailed analysis. In Phase 2, data segments discussing key themes are coded. Saldaña, (2021), highlights that coding is a critical step in qualitative analysis, enabling the researchers to systematically organise data into categories for better interpretation. In Phase 3, codes are grouped into potential themes. This is supported by Guest et al., (2011), who emphasise that grouping codes into themes enables the organisation of data into thematic structures, making it easier to identify overarching concepts. During Phase 4, the researchers review and refine the themes to ensure consistency and logical coherence across the data. As indicated by Braun & Clarke, (2006), qualitative research often involves iterative processes of theme refinement to ensure accuracy and reliability. In Phase 5, the themes were defined in relation to the research questions. This ensures that the themes address the research objectives effectively. According to Creswell & Poth, (2016), defining themes is essential to grounding the findings in the research purpose and maintaining alignment with the research questions. Finally, in Phase 6, the final report is compiled, presenting themes with direct quotes and examples. In this step, incorporating direct participant quotes and rich data examples enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings. Also, NVivo 14 software is used for coding and organising the qualitative data. It helps researchers identify data patterns and trends, capturing and analysing critical findings.

### 3.5. Ethical Considerations

Throughout the study, ethical considerations are paramount. Participants are pro-

vided with detailed information about the research, and informed consent is obtained prior to conducting interviews. Confidentiality is upheld by anonymising participants' identities and ensuring secure data storage. Any potential conflicts of interest or biases are disclosed, and steps are taken to ensure that the researchers' own beliefs do not influence the research process.

**Table 1** outlines the demographics of participants. Gender is skewed, with 90% male and 10% female. Age is diverse, with the majority, (40%) aged 36 - 45. For education, the majority (90%) hold a master's degree, 40% have over 15 years in banking, while the rest have either less than 15 or more than 20 years. As for tenure in their current role, 50% have 1 - 3 years, 30% have over 6 years, and 20% have 4 - 6 years.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

The findings examine how senior executives in Sierra Leone's banking sector perceive the influence of cultural nuances on their leadership styles. Through in-depth analysis, eight key themes emerged (see **Table 2**), highlighting the ways in which cultural factors shape leadership practices in this context. The study also identifies the strategies employed by leaders to adapt their leadership styles in alignment with local cultural expectations.

**Table 2.** Research questions, codes, and themes.

Research Question	Codes	Themes	
RQ1: How are transformational and transactional leadership styles expressed and adapted within Sierra Leone's cultural context?	Adapting to competition	Strategic Leadership for Sustainable Innovation and Organizational Growth	
	Crucial for innovation		
	Instilling a purpose for change		
	Setting Vision		
	Employee engagement		
	Employee involvement		
	Employee Motivation		
	Mentoring employees		
	Long-term focus		
	Owning the process		
	Ensure compliance		
	Task completion		
	New product launch		
	Penetrating a new market		Operational Excellence and Market Growth
	Product acceptance		
	Achieve immediate performance targets		Operational Excellence and Market Growth
Organisational Exchange			
Meet performance expectations			

**Continued**

RQ2: How do senior leaders integrate these leadership styles to achieve organisational goals during periods of change?	Situational approach	
	Adaptive style	
	Dynamic response to needs	
	Dynamic competition response	Adaptive Approach for Achieving Effective Goal Attainment
	Proactive approach	
	Proactive problem-solving	
	Acting as role model	
	Taking ownership	
RQ3: How do cultural nuances influence employee performance during organisational change?	Team Alignment	
	Collectivist society	Collectivism and Tradition in Driving Collaboration
	Group over individual needs	
	Respect for traditional values	
	Building trust and influence	
	Hierarchical Influence	Hierarchical Leadership Influence
	Supportive atmosphere	
	RQ4: What strategies do leaders employ to adapt their leadership styles to align with local cultural expectations?	Building Strong Relationships
Inclusive Decision-Making		Prioritising Relational Leadership and Emphasizing Teamwork
Promoting Team-Oriented Goals		
Facilitating Resource Sharing		
Recognising Traditional Values		
High-Context Communication		Balancing Hierarchy, Communication, and Support for Well-Being
Cultural Intermediation		
Promoting a Family-Like Atmosphere		
Providing Emotional Support		
Transformational and Transactional Leadership blend		Aligning Leadership with Organizational Values and Cultural Norms
Embedding Core Values		
CSR Initiatives		

Source: Designed by author.

#### 4.1. Research Question One

Responding to research question one, participants highlight how each of the styles is expressed and adapted in driving change. Two themes emerged from this research question.

**Theme 1:** Strategic leadership for sustainable innovation and organisational growth

From the TRF perspective, participants firstly emphasise that strategic leadership is critical for innovation and change, especially in the banking sector, known for its dynamism and unpredictability. Feedback from participants suggests that

the banking industry is extremely competitive, and top executives must establish a conducive atmosphere that motivates staff to embrace and adjust to the competitive nature of the business (Ng et al., 2024). Participants emphasise that this approach stimulates employees to think innovatively and generate novel solutions to tackle difficulties that arise during the transition (Kumar et al., 2024). Also, it helps in imbibing a strong sense of purpose, and these leaders often communicate the vision, encouraging employees to see their work not just as tasks but as part of a bigger mission that adds value to both the bank and society.

*“When introducing change, we make sure our workforce is carried along, and when they have a clear understanding of the reasons behind the change, how it affects them, and how it aligns with our bank’s overall mission, they stop worrying and start thinking of ways to make things work.” (P1)*

Furthermore, Participants claim that transformational leaders are accountable for fostering a favourable workplace climate that encourages employees to engage actively in the bank’s activities (Belias & Koustelios, 2014). They stressed that employee involvement leads to feelings of being respected, motivated, and connected to the bank. Also, active mentorship is seen as a potent strategy employed to develop employees (Akdere & Egan, 2020). Participants believe that TRF is very appropriate for promoting long-term initiatives within the bank by stating the bank’s long-term vision, setting long-term goals, and empowering employees to achieve these aspirations (Lewa et al., 2022). This foresightfulness propels the bank towards success and growth over the long term.

As P8 noted, *...trust me, when employees fully own their tasks, our performance improves. And when customers are satisfied with our services, as reflected in our consistent financial growth over the past five years, we see the results.*

## **Theme 2: Operational Excellence and Market Growth**

Commenting on the TRS standpoint, the primary objective is to make the bank’s operations more efficient and effective. A common view among participants was that the bank offers incentives such as bonuses, promotions, or recognition to employees who achieve goals, and employees who are unable to meet their targets will be subject to penalties like team-based penalties, which affect team bonuses or incentives, commission reduction, written warnings, etc. (Me-konnen & Bayissa, 2023).

*“When we align our rewards and consequences to employee performance, they ensure that they meet their performance targets and tasks are completed efficiently, thereby reinforcing overall effectiveness.” (P5)*

Additionally, the TRS approach is crucial for driving market expansion and successful product launch. This centres on creating awareness, generating interest, and establishing clear structures that facilitate market penetration, ultimately leading to product acceptance and sustained growth. Participants indicate that the key factor in this approach is the ability to provide new products and increase the bank’s market presence (Advani, 2015). It was argued that commercial banks adopt a transactional approach when introducing a new product or venturing into

a new market, as it guides in setting explicit objectives, provides incentives for their accomplishment, and penalties for failing to meet them.

In the words of P7... *“We always incentivise the process of launching new products or getting into a new market, this helps stimulate employees to be aggressive in marketing and reaching new customers.”*

An additional point emphasised by participants was that the TRS approach is key to setting realistic targets, and managing performance throughout is critical in the banking sector. Participants indicate that transactional leaders set clear performance targets (weekly, monthly, quarterly, half-yearly, and yearly) with key performance indicators (KPIs) to influence performance standards (Shah & Ab. Hamid, 2015), and this is key to achieving immediate objectives (Jaqua, 2021). Further, when performance goals are well-defined, it becomes easier for employees to understand expectations, leading to improved motivation and efficiency. A clear system of performance management fosters transparency within the organisation, which is particularly important in the banking sector where accuracy, trust, and customer satisfaction are critical.

## 4.2. Research Question Two

In addressing this research question, participants highlight how leaders integrate transformational and transactional leadership styles to achieve organisational goals during change initiatives, and one key theme emerged from the data.

### **Theme 3:** Adaptive Approach for Achieving Effective Goal Attainment

The study found that most participants, except for P6, observed that the banking sector does not strictly follow one leadership style. Instead, it combines components of both transactional and transformational leadership styles (Aarons, 2006). This is consistent with the notion of “transformational-transactional leadership” discussed earlier, which suggests that leaders can effectively integrate aspects of both types depending on the particular requirements of the circumstance and the objectives they aim to accomplish (Dartey-Baah, 2015). Participants argue that in the dynamic and complex banking sector, which offers both challenges and opportunities, adopting a leadership approach that blends elements can be highly effective.

To quote P3 directly, *“It can be challenging for me to stick to a single leadership style due to the dynamic and competitive nature of our industry. Depending on the situation, task, and objectives at hand, I may employ either a transactional or transformational approach, or even a combination of both. Ultimately, my primary focus is on achieving results, and I adapt my leadership style accordingly to best drive performance and meet our goals.”*

Beyond this, participants also reveal that a strategic blend of both transformational and transactional leadership styles is crucial for driving effective goal attainment. Participants state that this combination is crucial for banks to effectively attain both their short and long-term goals. Transactional leadership provides structure, clarity, and accountability to ensure that tasks are completed efficiently

(Ha & Moon, 2023), while transformational leadership inspires and motivates employees to reach higher levels of performance and innovation (Barkat et al., 2024). Therefore, by integrating these two approaches, banks can establish a harmonious approach that effectively tackles both the operational and motivational sides of goal attainment, resulting in enhanced success in achieving their objectives. For instance, participant 5 aptly puts it:

*“Even though I lean more towards transformational leadership, balancing both leadership styles enables us to address both operational effectiveness and employee motivation, which paves the way for greater success in achieving our objectives.”*

### 4.3. Research Question Three

Responding to this research question, participants highlight how cultural nuances influence employee performance during organisational change. Two key themes emerged from the data.

#### **Theme 4:** Collectivism and Tradition in Driving Collaboration

Cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping employees' behaviour and attitudes, significantly impacting performance outcomes in commercial banks. Participants noted that Sierra Leone's collectivist culture, where collaboration and group harmony are deeply valued, fosters a strong sense of unity and mutual support among employees. In this context, rooted in respect for traditional values, individuals are more likely to work cohesively, strengthening teamwork and enhancing overall performance (Ghosh, 2011). Echoing this, P6 emphasized that by cultivating a culture of collaboration and resource-sharing, banks can foster a strong sense of unity and cooperation, where the needs of the group are prioritized over individual needs, leading to enhanced performance and smoother transitions during change (Choi & Yoon, 2018). However, it is important to note that Sierra Leone's collectivist culture is not monolithic. Intra-cultural variations, such as differences between urban and rural communities or among ethnic groups, may influence how collectivism manifests in leadership practices. For instance, urban employees might prioritize individual achievement more than their rural counterparts due to greater exposure to global influences. Exploring these variations could enrich our understanding of how cultural nuances shape leadership dynamics.

Participant 2 commented that *“Sierra Leone is a collectivist society where collaboration and group harmony are deeply valued. In our bank, we encourage employees to work together and support one another, especially during times of change, because we see ourselves as one united family.”*

#### **Theme 5:** Hierarchical Leadership Influence

Building trust and creating influence is crucial for effective leadership within a hierarchical structure. Participants note that Sierra Leone's culture is highly hierarchical, emphasizing respect for authority and seniority, and this cultural norm significantly influences trust and employee outcomes within the banking sector

(Jiang & Luo, 2018). This hierarchical nature of leadership emphasizes the importance of respecting authority figures, which can impact the level of trust between leaders and employees. When employees respect authority, they are more likely to trust their leaders and follow their guidance and this in turn affects their performance. Also, P1 noted a transactional aspect to this relationship, where employees are aware that failure to meet objectives or expectations set by their leaders may result in consequences.

*“The hierarchical nature of my leadership style is shaped by our national cultural practices, which emphasizes the importance of respecting authority figures, and this has played a key role in developing trust, collaboration and respect within the workplace.” (P3)*

“In this bank, we believe respect for authority is that foundation to forming a good relationship with employees which they can also replicate to our customers”. (P6)

#### 4.4. Research Question Four

In answer to this research question, participants discuss the strategies they employ to adapt their leadership styles to align with local cultural expectations. Three key themes emerged from the data.

##### **Theme 6:** Prioritising Relational Leadership and Emphasising Teamwork

Relational leadership and teamwork appear to be pivotal in promoting collaboration and enhancing performance within the banking industry. Feedback from participants highlights that prioritising relational leadership strengthens trust, loyalty, and mutual respect, which are values deeply rooted in the country’s collectivist culture (Hernandez et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2021).

As P7 noted; *“Within this bank, we consider ourselves one united family, working together towards a shared objective.”*

Participants emphasized that inclusive decision-making and team-oriented goals are crucial for fostering employee engagement and ownership. When employees take active part in decision-making and can clearly see how their contributions align with collective objectives, it strengthens their commitment, accountability, and ultimately drives organizational success (Baran & Sypniewska, 2020). Participants also emphasized that resource sharing plays a pivotal role in enhancing team cohesion, as it encourages collaboration, trust, and mutual support. By facilitating the exchange of knowledge, and expertise, it promotes a more innovative environment, where creative solutions can thrive and contribute to the success of the bank. For instance, participant 4 puts it this way:

*“When I took over as CEO, I streamlined the organisational structure by flattening it, which I believe is crucial for facilitating resource sharing.”*

##### **Theme 7:** Balancing Hierarchy, Communication, and Support for Well-Being

Embracing traditional values, using appropriate communication strategies, and cultivating a supportive environment have emerged as key strategies leaders use to adapt their leadership styles to align with local cultural expectations. Drawing

on insights from the participants, it is evident that a leadership approach that blends respect for hierarchy, culturally sensitive communication, and emotional support is pivotal in fostering employee engagement and well-being (Willett et al., 2023). In Sierra Leone, recognition and respect for hierarchy is an essential tool for cultivating an environment of mutual respect and stability, ultimately contributing to smoother interactions and enhanced employee satisfaction.

Further, Participant P3 emphasised the importance of high-context communication, noting that, effective communication relies not just on words but on non-verbal cues and relational context, with leaders needing to be sensitive to these details to ensure employees feel heard, understood, and valued, thereby enhancing trust and collaboration (Nakamura & Milner, 2023). Furthermore, participants echoed that cultural intermediation plays a key role in bridging organisational policies with local norms, by interpreting global policies in ways that the workforce can relate to, leaders can minimise resistance and encourage smoother transitions during organisational changes.

In the words of participant P8, *“As the first Sierra Leonean CEO of the bank, I took on the role of a mediator, bridging the bank’s global corporate policies with Sierra Leone’s local cultural practices and adapting our organisational strategies to align with cultural norms”*.

Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of cultivating a family-like atmosphere within the bank, coupled with providing emotional support (Karatepe et al., 2019). By promoting a sense of unity and collaboration, leaders motivate employees to work together toward common goals. At the same time, offering emotional support helps employees feel valued, reduces stress, and nurtures a positive work environment, ultimately boosting productivity and morale. As participant P9 aptly put it, *“Employees spend most of their time here, so we want to make sure they feel at home while they are away from home”*.

#### **Theme 8: Aligning Leadership with Organisational Values and Cultural Norms**

By aligning leadership styles with core values and social responsibility, leaders can foster a cohesive environment that drives performance and success while respecting cultural expectations. Based on participants’ insights, it is evident that aligning leadership styles with cultural norms and organizational values is crucial for achieving sustained success (Latta, 2020). Successfully balancing transformational and transactional leadership is crucial for guiding employees while honouring local cultural expectations. This approach highlights the importance of using transformational leadership to inspire and energize employees, while transactional leadership provides the structure, clarity, and accountability needed to ensure alignment. The synergy between these two styles enables leaders to cultivate innovation and motivation, all while maintaining the processes and frameworks necessary for organizational success (Dartey-Baah, 2015). Participants emphasized that embedding core values into the organizational culture is vital for aligning leadership practices with cultural norms. This alignment encourages deeper employee commitment whilst enhancing overall performance by creating a cohe-

sive and purpose-driven environment. Moreover, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives were mentioned as a key strategy in aligning the bank's leadership approach with local cultural expectations. Participants remarked, leaders who engage in CSR activities show a commitment to the community, demonstrating social responsibility and enhancing the bank's reputation (Javed et al., 2020). These initiatives not only correspond with cultural values but also inspire employees by providing them with a sense of pride in being part of an organisation that prioritises its social impact.

The following insights was shared:

*“Our bank consistently invests in community programs, as they reflect our core values and strengthen our connection with both employees and the broader society.” P4*

*“Since becoming CEO, I have made CSR initiatives a top priority, particularly green initiatives, as they not only align with our values but also contribute to the long-term sustainability of our community and environment.” P8*

## 5. Discussion

This article delves into how senior executives in Sierra Leone's banking sector navigate the relationship between cultural nuances and their leadership styles, with an emphasis on transactional and transformational approaches.

Participants highlighted that Transformational Leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering innovation, enhancing employee engagement, and driving long-term organisational ownership, while Transactional Leadership focuses on operational efficiency, market expansion, and short-term performance management (Aarons, 2006; Abbas & Ali, 2023). These findings align with research questions one and two, illustrating how senior leaders express and adapt both leadership styles. Additionally, participants demonstrate how these leadership styles are integrated to achieve organisational goals during periods of change. Together, they provide a balanced approach to navigating the dynamic banking industry, empowering employees, motivating them to meet performance targets, expanding market share, and aligning the bank with strategic change initiatives (Dartey-Baah, 2015; Kebe et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the findings indicate that cultural factors play a significant role in shaping employee performance. The collectivist nature of Sierra Leone emphasises group harmony, mutual support, and prioritisation of group needs over individual achievements (Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov & Hofstede, 2014). This approach fosters an environment where teamwork and shared responsibility thrive, enabling employees to adapt effectively to change. Such collaboration enhances problem-solving, knowledge sharing, and a stronger community spirit, which collectively drive performance (Choi & Yoon, 2018). Additionally, Sierra Leone's hierarchical culture, which values respect for authority and seniority, significantly influences trust and accountability within the workplace. Employees' respect for leadership promotes trust and a willingness to follow guidance, creating a bal-

anced environment that enhances performance and facilitates successful navigation of change (Yasir et al., 2016). However, these findings directly align with research question three, highlighting how cultural nuances impact employee performance during organisational change.

Finally, a range of strategies to adapt leadership styles to align with local cultural expectations was put forward. First, prioritising relational leadership and emphasising teamwork is one of the strategies suggested. Leaders in the sector recognise the importance of building trust, loyalty, and mutual respect, which are core values of the country's culture. By promoting a sense of unity, they encourage collaboration and resource sharing, creating a cohesive work environment. Participants highlighted that involving employees in decision-making and aligning their efforts with team-orientated goals boosts engagement and accountability. This relational approach strengthens teamwork while also driving innovation and problem-solving, which positions the bank for sustained success (Johnson et al., 2021).

Another key strategy for leaders is centred around balancing hierarchy, communication, and supporting employee well-being. In Sierra Leone, leaders maintain a clear hierarchical framework, which promotes mutual respect and stability. This approach helps smooth interactions and enhances employee satisfaction. Leaders also recognise the importance of culturally sensitive communication as a key component in helping them adjust their approaches to align with local cultural expectations (Hofstede, 1980; Kuchinke, 1999). Furthermore, the crucial role of cultural intermediaries is key to adapting global policies to align with local norms. This approach minimises resistance to change, ensuring that organisational transitions are more acceptable to the workforce. However, cultivating a supportive, family-like atmosphere, where emotional support is emphasised, helps lessen stress and encourage a favourable work environment, ultimately boosting productivity and morale.

Nonetheless, the final strategy suggested was anchored on harmonising leadership styles with both organisational values and cultural norms. The study underscored that blending transformational and transactional leadership helps guide employees' behaviour while respecting local cultural expectations. Transformational leadership inspires and motivates, while transactional leadership provides structure and accountability, ensuring organisational success (Aarons, 2006; Gavan O'Shea et al., 2009). However, embedding core values such as collaboration, integrity, and respect into the organisational culture strengthens employee commitment and enhances performance. Leaders who align their practices with these values foster a cohesive environment that drives success (Hanges et al., 2016). CSR initiatives were also highlighted as essential in aligning leadership with local cultural values, offering employees a sense of pride, and strengthening the bank's community ties (Chen et al., 2020). This integration of values, leadership, and CSR fosters both internal motivation and external reputation. Thus, these strategies directly align with research question four, showcasing how leaders adapt their styles to align with local cultural expectations.

## 5.1. Implications of the Study

### 5.1.1. Theoretical Implications

This study augments the current leadership theories by underscoring the essential influence of cultural nuances on effective leadership practices. Traditional leadership theories, often rooted in Western contexts, have tended to overlook the significant influence of cultural values on leadership styles and their effectiveness. By examining the interaction of transformational and transactional leadership with national culture, this research challenges the universal applicability of existing leadership frameworks. The findings demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is not merely a function of individual personality or leadership style but is deeply intertwined with the prevailing socio-cultural values and norms of a specific context. This study provides valuable insights into leadership in post-conflict societies, where historical and socio-political factors have profoundly shaped organisational dynamics and cultural values. By highlighting the interaction between leadership and cultural factors in this unique context, the study advances a deeper and situation-specific comprehension of leadership theory. Moreover, this study highlights the importance of considering alternative theoretical frameworks, such as Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes interconnectedness, community, and shared responsibility. These frameworks resonate deeply with Sierra Leone's cultural values and could provide additional insights into effective leadership practices. Future research should explore how indigenous leadership theories intersect with global paradigms to inform leadership development programs in post-conflict settings.

### 5.1.2. Practical Implications

This study has considerable practical implications for leadership development and organisational change projects. Recognising the profound influence of Sierra Leone's history and socio-political environment on leadership, a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership training would be detrimental. Instead, successful leadership development programs must be meticulously tailored to account for the local cultural context. Furthermore, leaders should adapt their leadership styles to cater to the specific needs of their employees. Promoting an environment where TRF flourishes in high-power distance contexts while concurrently recognising the effectiveness of TRS in settings that prioritise structure and predictability is crucial. By acknowledging and effectively addressing these cultural factors, organisations can enhance employee engagement, motivation, and performance, ultimately driving success.

Additionally, the broader West African region faces challenges due to its diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural composition. Across West Africa, shared histories of colonial rule, cultural amalgamation, and post-independence transitions require leaders to balance traditional norms with modern demands for innovation and inclusivity (Zimbalist, 2021). Successful leadership must account for factors such as respect for hierarchy, communication styles, and decision-making processes to effectively address the unique needs of employees. On a continental level,

Africa's colonial legacy continues to influence leadership. Post-colonial nations face the challenge of integrating indigenous traditions with global best practices to address socio-political and economic complexities (Gumede, 2017). Additionally, the history of centralised governance has led African leaders to redefine leadership towards more democratic and participatory models (Fourie et al., 2017). Thus, balancing tradition and modernity remains essential for effective leadership and performance.

On the policy front, the critical need for national and sector-specific leadership development policies to explicitly recognise to address cultural adaptation. Policymakers should advocate for leadership frameworks that blend both leadership approaches, acknowledging that the effectiveness of each style is contingent upon the specific cultural values and norms prevalent within different organisational and national contexts. This dual approach could be institutionalised through national leadership development programs that emphasise adaptability, cultural alignment, and the ability to navigate diverse cultural landscapes across various industries.

### **5.1.3. Broader Implications for Global Leadership**

Additionally, this study has significant implications for the global discourse, underscoring the critical need to move beyond universalised leadership models that often fail to account for the profound influence of cultural contexts. As globalisation intensifies, international organisations and leaders must cultivate a deeper appreciation for the cultural underpinnings that shape leadership practices across different regions. The findings suggest that effective global leadership development programs must transcend generic frameworks and incorporate culturally tailored strategies. This approach will empower leaders to navigate diverse cultural environments with greater sensitivity and effectiveness, promoting stronger international collaboration, mutual understanding, and ultimately more sustainable outcomes.

## **5.2. Limitations of the Study**

This study primarily employed qualitative interviews with 10 CEOs from 10 commercial banks, utilising purposive sampling to select participants. While the study facilitated a deep exploration of how cultural dimensions influence leadership styles, the relatively small sample size impedes the generalisability of the findings to a broader population of senior leaders, either within Sierra Leone or internationally (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample was limited to the banking sector, and participants' perceptions may not necessarily reflect the experiences or practices of leaders in other sectors. The purposive sampling method inherently introduces some bias, as it focuses on a specific group of leaders with specific experiences and perspectives. While this approach provided valuable insights, it may have overlooked the perspectives of leaders from other sectors. Further, the focus on Sierra Leone's socio-cultural and post-conflict challenges may not apply to other con-

texts with different cultural, economic, or political environments. The results of this qualitative study are predicated on the participants' subjective impressions and experiences, which may be influenced by personal biases or social desirability. Also, the study's cross-sectional approach makes it difficult to evaluate the long-term impacts of cultural factors on leadership.

### 5.3. Future Research Directions

This study serves as a foundation for future research exploring the multifaceted relationship between national culture and leadership. Future research could investigate generalisability by conducting studies across different sectors and expanding research to other West African and post-colonial countries. Also, incorporating participants from rural and urban regions within Sierra Leone would capture subnational cultural variations. Examining geographical variations within Sierra Leone is also crucial. Research should investigate employee perceptions and responses to different leadership styles within the cultural context. Longitudinal studies are needed to track the long-term effects of cultural influences on leadership practices and their evolution over time. Finally, incorporating insights from other disciplines like anthropology and sociology will contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between culture, leadership, and organisational behaviour. Future studies should also examine the role of gender in leadership practices, as the current sample predominantly comprises male participants. Investigating how female leaders navigate cultural expectations and organizational challenges could uncover unique strategies and perspectives that enhance leadership effectiveness. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking leadership practices over time could reveal how cultural and contextual factors evolve and influence leadership behaviors.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explores how senior executives in Sierra Leone's banking sector perceive and actively manage the influence of cultural nuances on their leadership styles, through transformational and transactional approaches. The findings offer valuable insights into the role of cultural factors in shaping leadership practices within this post-conflict, socio-culturally specific context. This research contributes significantly to a deeper theoretical understanding of leadership practices. Moreover, it provides practical guidance for the development of culturally sensitive leadership training programs and the formulation of organizational policies that effectively address the unique cultural dynamics in the banking sector and beyond. By addressing the limitations identified in this study—such as the small sample size, lack of triangulation, and limited exploration of alternative theoretical frameworks—future research can build on these findings to create a more robust and inclusive understanding of leadership in Sierra Leone. Emphasizing intra-cultural variations and integrating diverse methodologies will further enrich the discourse on leadership in post-conflict and culturally complex environments.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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