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Transformational Leadership in Post-merger Organizations: A Qualitative Study of Indonesian State-owned Company

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Abstract

Purpose – To explore employees' perceptions of transformational leadership in a post-merger context and to understand the strategies they use to cope with merger-related challenges.

Methodology – This study employs a qualitative research design, conducted through semi-structured interviews with ten employees from various hierarchical levels at a company formed from the merger of two major Indonesian state-owned enterprises (BUMN). The qualitative approach is used to capture employees' subjective interpretations of transformational leadership and their strategies in responding to post-merger challenges.

Findings – The study identifies nine key themes across three areas. Employees perceive transformational leadership post-merger as the leader's ability to orchestrate organizational change, act as a role model, and provide guidance and emotional support during adaptation. They face major challenges including unclear structures and work systems, cultural differences between the merged entities, and a gap between management expectations and operational realities. To navigate these challenges, employees adopt three main strategies: developing acceptance toward organizational changes, demonstrating agility in adjusting roles and decision-making, and strengthening cross-unit and cross-entity collaboration.

Originality – This study contributes to the literature on the role of transformational leadership in post-merger organizations and offers practical implications for organizational change management, particularly in the Indonesian context. This study makes an important contribution to the existing literature by presenting a more contextual and in-depth narrative of employees' experiences in the public sector. In the context of state-owned enterprises, mergers introduce unique complexities because they involve bureaucracy, gaps in work culture, and imbalances in power structures and information.

Introduction

Organizational change is inevitable in modern organizations. In the face of dynamic global competition, rapid technological advances, and changing market demands, organizations need to continuously adapt in order to remain relevant. According to Porras and Robertson (1992), organizational change is a response to external changes or internal needs, which can take the form of structural adjustments, improvements in work processes, technological developments,

or cultural changes. However, change often gives rise to psychological and structural challenges, such as role uncertainty and organizational confusion (Nadler, Thies, & Nadler, 2001; Schein, 1992).

One significant form of organizational change is merger, which is defined as the union of two or more organizations into a new entity to strengthen strategic position and operational efficiency (Appelbaum et al., 2000). Zhang et al. (2015) emphasize that a merger is not merely a combination of assets and structures, but rather a complex integrative process, including the unification of values, systems, and human resources. Buono and Bowditch (2003) and Canterino et al. (2024) view mergers as social and cultural processes that require collective identity adjustments. In this process, challenges such as structural uncertainty, role disruption, and value differences between entities often cause significant psychological stress (Nemanich & Keller, 2007). The post-merger phase is a crucial period fraught with uncertainty, during which the structure, culture, and psychology of the organization undergo transition (Zhang et al., 2014; Canterino et al., 2024). Tensions often arise due to differences in work systems, organizational culture, and leadership styles between entities (Berkow, 2017). Employee disengagement in the integration process risks creating feelings of alienation and resistance (Buono & Bowditch, 2003). Unclear work structures and loss of status or role also have the potential to reduce loyalty and productivity (Cartwright & Cooper, 1996; Krug & Shill, 2008).

In this context, leadership becomes a crucial factor that bridges the gap between change strategies and implementation in the field. Leaders play a role in unifying different visions and work practices (Savović, 2017), establishing open communication, and creating a sense of psychological security for employees (Canterino et al., 2024). Two leadership approaches that are often discussed in the context of mergers are authentic and transformational leadership. Authentic leadership focuses on self-honesty and transparency (Walumbwa et al., 2008), while transformational leadership is oriented towards creating a shared vision, collective motivation, and strengthening commitment to change (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformational leadership is considered most relevant in the context of post-merger uncertainty. Its characteristics include four main dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Transformational leaders not only provide direction for change but also build employees' confidence and psychological readiness to adapt (Burns, 1978; Savović, 2017). Research by Canterino et al. (2024) shows that this approach can strengthen employee commitment through empathy and open communication. Busari et al. (2020) add that this leadership style encourages participation and loyalty during organizational transitions.

However, studies on transformational leadership in the context of mergers are still dominated by quantitative approaches and conducted in developed countries (Savović, 2017). Canterino et al. (2024) criticize the lack of studies that explore real experiences in highly complex organizations. Berkow (2017) also highlights the dominance of secondary data, which does not adequately represent the direct experiences of change actors. Therefore, a qualitative approach is needed to explore the subjective meanings and adaptive strategies of employees in dealing with merger dynamics, especially in the context of public organizations in Indonesia.

Given this background, this study aims to understand how employees interpret the role of transformational leadership in a post-merger situation. This study also explores the organizational challenges they face and the adaptation strategies used in the integration process. To achieve these objectives, a qualitative approach with an interpretivism paradigm was used

to capture the subjective meaning of employee experiences. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten employees from various units and job levels. This research was conducted at Company XY, a state-owned enterprise formed from the merger of two large state-owned enterprises that previously managed public services separately. Announced at the end of 2023 and implemented by the end of 2024 as part of a national state-owned enterprise transformation, the merger required integrating organizations with distinct operational characteristics: Company X focused on eastern Indonesia with a regional approach, while Company Y served western Indonesia with complex urban.

Literature Review

Merger and the challenges in post-merger organization

A merger is the process of combining two or more independent organizations into a new entity, with the aim of strengthening strategic position and improving operational efficiency (Appelbaum et al., 2000). Mergers not only unite structures and work systems, but also involve the complex process of merging organizational cultures and forming a new collective identity (Canterino et al., 2024). Because it touches on psychological and social dimensions, mergers can cause disruption to the roles, status, and expectations of employees, which ultimately creates uncertainty and tension in the work environment (Nemanich & Keller, 2007).

The post-merger phase is a challenging period because it involves integrating two entities with different systems, values, and identities. Organizational cultural differences often become a source of resistance if not managed carefully, especially when the integration approach is unilateral (Cartwright & Cooper, 1993; Nahavandi & Malekzadeh, 1988). Unclear integration planning and weak strategic communication can trigger role uncertainty and structural confusion, which can lead to decreased commitment and productivity (Zhang et al., 2014; Savović, 2017). In this context, open and participatory communication is necessary to rebuild the collective identity of the new organization (Canterino et al., 2024; Buono & Bowditch, 1990).

Emotional stress is a significant challenge in the integration process, especially when there are changes in roles, loss of status, and uncertainty about the future. This can trigger anxiety, social alienation, and disruption to collective work dynamics (Cartwright & Cooper, 1996; Degbey et al., 2021; van der Voet, 2015). In such conditions, employee voice becomes an important mechanism for navigating changing power structures. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) emphasize that voice is not merely a means of communication, but also an identity strategy that allows employees to renegotiate their position and the meaning of their roles amid organizational transformation.

Another risk that arises is the loss of key talent due to unclear career paths and a lack of recognition for individual contributions (Krug & Shill, 2008). This loss not only impacts operational continuity but also reduces the institutional knowledge base and weakens the established work culture (Zhang et al., 2014; Savović, 2017). To respond to this complexity, organizations need to implement adaptation strategies such as cross-cultural training, involving middle managers as agents of change, and psychological support through coaching and role mentoring (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Canterino et al., 2024). The success of post-merger integration depends heavily on the organization's ability to align communication, values, and strategic direction in an inclusive and sustainable manner (Buono & Bowditch, 2003). Hence, in this context, leaders play a critical role in guiding employees through uncertainty, clarifying

new roles and responsibilities, and modeling the desired organizational culture. Effective leadership fosters trust, mitigates resistance, and ensures that both structural and emotional aspects of the integration are addressed.

Transformational leadership and its role in post-merger organization

Leadership plays a central role in managing organizational change after a merger. Berkow (2017) states that many merger failures are not caused by poor strategy, but rather by weak leadership in maintaining morale, communication, and organizational identity. Similarly, Savović (2017) and Canterino et al. (2024) emphasize that successful integration depends heavily on the effectiveness of leaders in unifying vision, maintaining engagement, and creating psychological security for employees facing systemic disruption.

Among contemporary approaches, transformational leadership is considered most relevant to addressing post-merger organizational challenges, such as structural uncertainty, emotional pressure, and the need for cultural integration (Savović, 2017; Zhang et al., 2014). Unlike authentic leadership, which emphasizes personal values and self-honesty (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008), transformational leadership focuses on creating a shared vision, inspiration, and collective adaptation in crisis situations (Bass & Avolio, 1994). This approach strengthens employee loyalty and intrinsic motivation, as well as creating healthy organizational continuity amid the integration process (Berkow, 2017; Canterino et al., 2024).

Transformational leadership was first introduced by Burns (1978) as a process of mutual influence between leaders and followers that aims to increase motivation and morale to achieve meaningful change. Bass (1985) later developed this concept by adding that transformational leaders not only inspire enthusiasm, but also shape new values and aspirations in support of organizational goals. Bass & Avolio (1994) formulated four main dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Idealized influence describes leaders as ethical and trustworthy role models (Nemanich & Keller, 2007), while inspirational motivation reflects leaders' ability to build collective enthusiasm through a clear and inspiring vision (Siskin & Pablo, 2005). Intellectual stimulation encourages followers to think critically and innovatively in facing organizational challenges (Avolio et al., 1991; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Individualized consideration emphasizes the leader's attention to personal needs and support for employee development (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Marks & Mirvis, 1986).

In the context of a post-merger period full of uncertainty, the transformational approach is considered most relevant due to its ability to unify vision, build trust, and stabilize employee emotional dynamics (Savović, 2017; Canterino et al., 2024). This leadership helps bridge the gap between managerial logic and social needs during the integration process (Canterino et al., 2024), as well as maintaining organizational direction and engagement (Berkow, 2017). In addition, transformational leaders contribute to talent retention (Zhang et al., 2014), create an inclusive work environment (Khan et al., 2021), and encourage complex structural reforms, especially in the public sector (van der Voet, 2015).

Therefore, transformational leadership plays a strategic role in post-merger organizations due to its ability to manage uncertainty and complexity during the transition period (Nemanich & Keller, 2007). Transformational leaders act as agents of change who unite the organization's direction through an inspiring vision, encouragement of innovative thinking, and attention to individual needs (Vera & Crossan, 2004). In the integration process, this approach can increase

acceptance of the merger, strengthen performance, and create a work climate that supports innovation and clarity of purpose (Barling, Loughlin & Kelloway, 2002; Bass et al., 2003).

Research shows that transformational leadership behavior has a direct impact on improving performance and employee acceptance of structural change (Nemanich & Keller, 2007). Dimensions such as idealized influence and inspirational motivation have been shown to foster employee trust in the direction of the organization and encourage collective commitment (Bass, 1998). In addition, transformational leadership also creates a psychological climate that supports role clarity and new identities, while facilitating cultural negotiation between merged organizational entities (Anderson & West, 1998; Rafferty & Griffin, 2004; Hope, 2002).

In the context of cultural integration, transformational leaders help build a safe space to unite previously different values (Keup et al., 2001). Personal support and collective inspiration are important factors in building commitment to the new organization (Savović, 2017). Such leaders not only direct strategy but also serve as symbols of trust that bridge the ongoing structural and psychological transformation process (Schweizer & Patelli, 2012; Canterino et al., 2024). Thus, transformational leadership is crucial in ensuring merger success through an approach that touches on the human dimension of organizational change.

Given this previous literature, our study identifies three research questions:

1. How do employees interpret the role of transformational leadership in the post-merger organization?
2. What are the challenges faced by employees in the post-merger organization?
3. What strategies do employees use to deal with the challenges they face after the merger?

Research Methods

This study uses an interpretive paradigm that emphasizes understanding subjective meanings formed by individuals through their experiences in specific social contexts (Creswell, 2014). This paradigm views reality as plural and socially constructed, so that researchers are not neutral but actively involved in the process of interpreting meaning (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the context of this study, the interpretive paradigm is relevant for exploring in depth how employees interpret post-merger organizational dynamics, leadership roles, and the personal and social adaptation processes they experience (King & Brooks, 2017; Cunliffe, 2011).

This study uses a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of employees' experiences and perspectives on organizational change after a merger. This approach was chosen because it focuses not on measuring variables, but on exploring subjective meanings in complex social contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In this paradigm, reality is viewed as a social construct shaped through individual interactions and experiences (Silverman, 2021), so the purpose of the research is not to produce statistical generalizations, but to understand how meaning is formed and interpreted by participants (King & Brooks, 2017). The researcher acts as the primary instrument in data collection and interpretation, with reflective awareness of their position (Berger, 2015). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to explore emotional experiences, personal interpretations, and social dynamics during the post-merger adaptation process (Tracy, 2010; Kallio et al., 2016). Therefore, a qualitative approach is considered most appropriate for answering research questions oriented toward

meaning, subjective experience, and social processes in the context of organizational structural and cultural change (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020).

Participants

This study was conducted on 10 participants who were asked for their consent in advance through the researcher's closest relations. The participants were then selected based on recommendations from participants who had already undergone the interview process. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: 1. Participants were permanent employees of Company Company XY; 2. Participants had worked for the company for minimum 5; 3. Participants came from several job levels (BOD-1, BOD-2, BOD-3, and Officer); 4. Participants are the combination of former employees of Company X and Company Y; and 5. Participants came from several directorates within Company XY. Table 1 shows the participant details.

Table 1 List of Participants

No	Name (anynomous)	Gender	Age	Tenure	Position	Former Company
1	Nayla	Female	36	14	Specialist	Company Y
2	Sidoel	Male	43	16	Division Head	Company Y
3	Astra	Male	41	13	Division Head	Company Y
4	Wewen	Male	36	11	Specialist	Company X
5	Yasmin	Female	36	12	Officer	Company Y
6	Endu	Male	40	14	Group Head	Company Y
7	Suzu	Female	43	20	Group Head	Company Y
8	Queen	Female	39	13	Specialist	Company X
9	Andromeda	Female	33	7	Officer	Company X
10	Naru	Male	32	10	Officer	Company X

Data collection

The study was conducted in Company XY for five months between February and June 2025 The data collection method used in this study was semi-structured in-depth interviews, which allowed for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations related to post-merger organizational dynamics (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This approach is in line with the constructivist and interpretive paradigms that view reality as a social construct, whereby meaning is constructed through reflective dialogue between the researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The interviews were conducted using flexible thematic guides covering issues of structural change, work culture, and leadership, (see Table 2) and were supplemented with probing techniques to explore deeper meanings (Bernard, 2013; Robinson & Smith, 2023). The interviews lasted 45–90 minutes, were conducted face-to-face and online, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Primary data was obtained from employees across all levels, while organizational documents such as minutes and internal reports were used as secondary data for triangulation purposes (Fusch, Fusch, & Ness, 2018). Participants were selected purposively, and interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, i.e., when no new information emerged (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

Table 2 Interview guidelines

Topic	Interview Questions
Participant Background	Can you share your career journey in this company, including when you joined and whether you were involved in the merger process and what your experience was like during that process?
Merger and Organizational Change	What is your opinion of the merger process? Do you feel it went smoothly?
	What are the significant changes you've felt in the work environment after the merger?
	Do you feel this merger aligns with the company's expected goals?
Impact of the Merger on the Organization	Have you felt any benefits from this merger? If so, can you explain?
	How has the change in organizational structure affected your job?
	After the merger, has the way you work, communicate, or coordinate with your team changed? How did you adapt?
	Has the merger affected your team's productivity and work effectiveness?
Organizational Challenges Post-Merger	What is the biggest challenge you have felt after the merger?
	Do you feel there is a difference in work culture before and after the merger? How do you cope with it?
	After the merger, do you feel there is uncertainty in the way of working or the organizational structure? How do you manage it?
	How has this merger affected your motivation at work? What do you do to stay motivated?
	Has the company provided programs or support to help employees adapt after the merger?
Leadership in Merger and Organizational Change	How do you define the role of leadership in the organization after the merger?
	What qualities or characteristics do you consider important for a leader in a merger situation?
	How important is the role of leadership in dealing with organizational change after the merger?
	How do you assess the leadership applied during this merger process? Does it meet the expectations of the employees?

Data analysis

This study uses a thematic analysis approach to analyze qualitative data, due to its ability to identify and interpret explicit and implicit patterns of meaning in participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The analysis was conducted reflectively by understanding themes as units of meaning that explain post-merger dynamics and leadership roles (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The process followed the six thematic stages of Braun and Clarke, from familiarization to reporting, which were carried out iteratively and integrated with the data collection process (Nowell et al., 2017). For the coding stage, a three-stage approach from Strauss and Corbin (1990) was used, namely open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, which allowed researchers to systematically organize data from basic concepts to the integration of main themes (Tie et al., 2019). Coding was done manually through repeated reading, separation of units of meaning, and analytical labeling of narrative segments (Bengtsson, 2016; Saldaña, 2021), so that the data could be interpreted in depth and linked to a broader theoretical framework. The final result of this manual coding process produced a total of nine themes, with each research question having three themes visualized in Table 3, 4 and 5.

The researchers then developed explanations for each theme, both those that emerged as new findings and those that reinforced existing concepts.

Table 3 Coding process of the role of transformational leader

Theme / RQ	No	Selective Coding	Axial Coding	Open Coding
(1) How employees interpret the role of transformational leadership after the merger	1	Leader as orchestrator of organizational change	Determiner of Strategic Direction Strengthener of Internal Synergy	Leader as a direction setter Leadership in transition and reorientation Leadership in decision-making Leader as integrator and guide Leader as an aligner Leadership that is resilient and adaptive
	2	Leader as a Role Model for Organizational Change	Model of Adaptive Behavior Shaper of a Positive Culture	Leader as a role model Leader as a direction setter Adaptive and transformative leadership Transparent and open leadership Inclusive leadership
	3	Leader as Companion in the Adaptation Process (Mediator)	Connector of Employee Aspirations Supporter of the Adaptation Process	Collaborative and aspirational leadership Empathetic leadership Leader as a companion during change Responsive leadership Leadership in communication

Table 4 Coding process of the challenges in post-merger organization

Theme / RQ	No	Selective coding	Axial coding	Open coding
(2) What Challenges Do Employees Face Post-Merger?	4	Uncertainty of Structure and Work System	Unclear Regulations and Employee Roles Suboptimal Restructuring Information and Communication Barriers	Unclear organizational roles and structures Regulatory gaps and operational obstacles Overlapping responsibilities Limited HR capacity and strategic roles Impact on coordination and workflow Unclear and inconsistent information System and communication flow barriers Limited hierarchical interaction
	5	Cultural Differences as Internal Adjustment Challenges	Differences in Culture and Communication Patterns Old Culture Hindering New Culture Formation	Differences in organizational culture Cross-cultural communication issues Integration of organizational identity Dominance of old culture Dynamics of cultural adaptation
	6	Mismatch Between Management Expectations	Strategy–Implementation Gaps Employee	Management gaps Structural uncertainty Compensation disparity Unclear career paths Barriers to aligning expectations

Theme / RQ	No.	Strategy Category	Sub-strategy Group 1	Sub-strategy Group 2
and Field Realities			Experience Imbalance	

Table 5. Coding process of the strategies in navigating the challenges in post-merger organization 1

Theme / RQ	No.	Strategy Category	Sub-strategy Group 1	Sub-strategy Group 2
(3) What strategies do employees use to deal with the challenges they face after the merger?	7	Acceptance of Change	Acceptance of New Culture and Values Acceptance of Organizational Decisions	Individual Acceptance Reflection on Cultural Adaptation Optimistic Attitude Individual Initiative
	8	Adaptive Agility	Roles and Responsibilities Decision Making	Self-Adjustment Self-Development Decision Making under Uncertainty Agility in Facing Change
	9	Cross-Unit/Entity Collaboration	Inter-Unit Initiatives Work Pattern Harmonization	Collaboration Initiatives Organizational Communication Strengthening Organizational Systems Work Environment Adaptation Strengthening Work Systems Work Efficiency

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness in this qualitative study, the researchers referred to four main criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). The strategies used included data triangulation (combining interviews, observations, and organizational documents), method triangulation, and theory triangulation using the organizational change framework, transformational leadership, and post-merger cultural dynamics (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Participant selection considered the diversity of units and job levels to capture the complexity of perspectives, while data were analyzed reflectively through audit trails and member checking (Birt et al., 2016). The researcher also applied a reflexive approach to manage potential bias as an insider who have worked for Company XY for 11 years of service and have been involved in the integration workstream prior to the merger. This position provided the advantage of access and contextual understanding, but was balanced with strategies such as bracketing and reflective memos to maintain objectivity (Berger, 2015; Unluer, 2012). As insiders, the researchers gained the trust of participants and access to more authentic narratives, while maintaining the integrity of the analysis through critical awareness of their position and experience (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Mercer, 2007).

Findings

The analysis resulted in nine main themes grouped based on three research questions. First, regarding the Meaning of Transformational Leadership Roles Post-Merger, three themes were identified: (1) Leaders as Orchestrators of Organizational Change, (2) Leaders as Role Models for Organizational Change, and (3) Leaders as Facilitators of the Adaptation Process (Mediators). Second, regarding Challenges Faced Post-Merger, three main themes emerged: (1) Uncertainty of Structure and Work Systems, (2) Cultural Differences as Internal Adjustment Challenges, and (3) Differences between Management Expectations and Field Practices. Third, regarding the question of Strategies for Facing Post-Merger Challenges, three additional themes were identified: (1) Acceptance of Change, (2) Agility, and (3) Cross-Unit/Entity Collaboration. These nine themes will be discussed in depth in the following subsections using an interpretive approach that describes the meaning and dynamics of the participants' experiences in context.

The role of transformational leaders in post-merger organization

In the context of structural changes resulting from mergers, leadership is seen as a key element in bridging the transition process and ensuring organizational synergy. Based on in-depth interviews with ten employees from various levels, it was found that the meaning of post-merger leadership is not only related to formal authority, but also includes the leader's ability to direct, set an example, and accompany the team in facing new dynamics. Three main themes emerged: leaders as orchestrators of organizational change, role models for change, and facilitators of the adaptation process (mediators). As orchestrators, leaders act as strategic direction setters who provide clarity amid structural uncertainty and post-merger work vision. This function includes the enormous responsibility of redefining organizational identity, setting strategic priorities, and clearly communicating the direction of change so that it can be internalized by all employees.

> ""In my opinion, one of the strategic keys to successful post-merger transformation lies in management's ability to select leaders who are aligned with the company's goals."
> (Suzu, P, 43 years old, Group Head)

However, successful organizational integration requires more than just setting a direction; it also requires leaders who are capable of strengthening internal synergy. In this role, leaders act as orchestrators who harmonize cultural, structural, and perspective differences to create effective collaboration.

> "Good leadership can orchestrate all elements in the work environment, whether it be resources or materials. [...] So, it is how can this be orchestrated into a cohesive whole after the merger?" (Yasmin, P, 36 years old, Officer)
> "It is how does he harmonize them so that they can work towards the same goal [...] and achieve the unit's KPIs together. This harmony is important so that we can work together and there are no conflicts within the unit." (Wewen, L, 36 years old, Specialist)

Thus, leaders in the context of mergers have a crucial role, not only in determining strategic direction but also in maintaining internal harmony as a prerequisite for achieving a stable, productive, and adaptive organization. As role models, leaders are not only required to be able to provide direction, but also to set an example in responding to change through their attitudes and actions. The exemplary nature of leaders is clearly reflected in their adaptive behavior, which demonstrates flexibility, assertiveness, and consistency in dealing with various pressures resulting from mergers. Employees use the attitude of leaders as a reference in dealing with

uncertainty, especially when leaders are able to remain calm, empathetic, and solution-oriented in complex situations.

> "If the leader is indecisive and afraid to take risks, subordinates will be confused about who to look up to as a role model. Leaders are supposed to be role models who set an example and guide the direction the company will take." (Sidoel, L, 43 years old, Division Head)

In addition to being a role model for adaptive behavior, leaders also play an important role in shaping a positive post-merger culture. In conditions where there is social tension and resistance to change, the actions of leaders become the main reference for the formation of new collective norms. Leaders who are able to show enthusiasm, concern, and transparency in their daily activities will create a supportive, open, and collective learning-oriented work atmosphere.

> "Leaders also serve as role models [...] figures whose attitudes and actions serve as a reference for the team. When leaders show enthusiasm and concern for change, this will be reflected in the team's spirit. Conversely, if leaders are apathetic or show no concern, the team tends to become passive, lose direction, and even feel adrift." (Suzu, P, 43 years old, Group Head)

Meanwhile, as an adaptation companion, the role of leaders does not only stop at providing direction or setting an example, but also includes actively assisting employees in adapting. As companions, leaders serve as connectors of aspirations who open up space for two-way dialogue and bridge voices from the bottom up, creating active involvement in the change process.

> "A leader who prioritizes open, two-way communication. [...] He or she can make decisions not only from one perspective, but from a variety of perspectives." (Yasmin, P, 36 years old, Officer)

In addition to being a liaison, leaders also play a role in supporting the adaptation process by providing practical assistance and emotional support. The post-merger adaptation process is not only a technical challenge, but also a mental and cultural one, so leaders must be able to provide empathy, constructive feedback, and sustained morale.

> "In my opinion, empathy is a very important part of leadership. Sometimes we can be so focused on targets that we forget to read the team's situation. [...] The point is to be open and give the team space to speak up. Don't let things go unsaid from the start, only for them to end up grumbling behind your back." (Astra, L, 41 years old, Division Head)

Playing roles as an orchestrator, role model, and mediator, leaders are present in the team's daily activities, helping to overcome obstacles in concrete ways and accelerating the adaptation of individuals and teams to new structures, cultures, and expectations, making the post-merger transition process a clear, fully supported, and emotionally connected collective journey.

Challenges in post-merger organizations

The first major challenge faced by employees was uncertainty regarding the structure and work system. The merger process, which was intended to bring clarity, actually resulted in the opposite situation, where employees faced uncertainty regarding regulations, job roles, and operational standards that were not yet ready for implementation.

> "In general, the documents are already in place. But because there are certain standards that apply, the role cannot be clearly explained. [...] The language becomes too general, which tends to be open to multiple interpretations." (Nayla, P, 36 years old, Specialist)

This situation is exacerbated by suboptimal restructuring, which has led to overlapping functions, gaps in responsibility, and weak coordination between units.

> "Currently, the regional office is still very dependent on the head office [...] waiting for policies to be issued, then forwarding them to branch offices. In fact, the role of the regional office is crucial." (Wewen, L, 36 years old, Specialist)

These challenges show that premature restructuring creates a domino effect that impacts daily work quality, hinders adaptation, and complicates collaboration between organizational levels and units.

In addition to structural issues, information and communication barriers also exacerbate post-merger adaptation challenges. Employees often receive information that is too general and does not meet technical needs, causing confusion in understanding the direction of organizational change.

> "When the merger was announced, there was minimal information, especially from the CEO or board of directors. [...] The lack of information at the beginning can make employees afraid of the merger process." (Wewen, L, 36 years old, Specialist)

The lack of communication regarding the reasons and urgency for change exacerbates this situation, making employees reluctant to take initiative for fear of misunderstanding policies. Therefore, clarifying operational regulations, refining organizational restructuring, and establishing transparent and participatory communication are urgent priorities for facilitating an effective, stable, and adaptive organizational integration process.

Cultural differences pose a significant challenge that goes beyond mere structural changes. This study shows that differences in values, norms, and work habits between entities are a source of real friction in the daily lives of employees. One of the main obstacles is the difference in communication patterns and work culture, which is reflected in seemingly simple but highly impactful aspects, such as interpersonal communication styles or career development patterns.

> "It was a struggle at first, yes. Because we had different backgrounds and different ways of communicating. Even small things like how we addressed each other were different. At my former company, Y, it was common to address superiors as Mas or Mbak. But with colleagues from Company X, that kind of address felt less common." (Yasmin, P, 36 years old, Officer)

In addition, the old cultures of each entity, which are still strongly held by employees, have also proven to hinder the formation of a new culture after the merger. Many employees tend to maintain their old habits, creating a dualism of culture within the organization.

> "In the end, it comes back to tradition. Last year, this was the way it was done, so we just followed it. [...] The culture has become one of 'following'. Following what? Following superiors, following the previous culture, following old ways of working." (Sidoel, M, 43 years old, Division Head)

> "From my own experience, there was no adaptation program. [...] It's like the left side is company Y, and the right side is company X. Yes, we are still operating separately, not yet fully integrated." (Wewen, M, 36 years old, Specialist)

Another challenge is the mismatch between management expectations and conditions in the field. Although the organization's strategy and vision have been formally formulated, their implementation at the operational level often does not run smoothly. This creates a gap between

strategy and implementation, where a new structure has been established, but the substance of the work still refers to the old ways.

> "The structure has changed, yes. But after that, it's business as usual [...] there are no clear directions. Many of my friends are confused about what to do and are afraid to take the initiative." (Queen, P, 39 years old, Specialist)

In addition to implementation gaps, disparities in employee experience are also a source of tension in the integration process. Differences in the backgrounds of the two merging organizations have given rise to conflicting expectations regarding compensation, career opportunities, and leadership styles.

> "The difference in income between employees from the two original companies who have the same position, workload, and risks has the potential to create social disparities. […] Although the adjustment process cannot be completed instantly, there still needs to be clear steps" (Sidoel, M, 43 years old, Division Head)

> "As a middle manager, sometimes I have to interpret my superiors' intentions to the team. [...] My superiors themselves sometimes don't provide a complete explanation. So it becomes ambiguous." (Astra, M, 41 years old, Division Head)

This imbalance not only creates feelings of unfairness, but also erodes motivation and loyalty to the new organization. Therefore, bridging the expectations between management and employees, particularly through strengthening the role of middle management, is a crucial step to ensure that post-merger transformation is not just a formal change, but is truly internalized in daily work practices.

Strategis in navigating the challenges in post-merger organizations

Acceptance of change is both a psychological foundation and a crucial initial strategy for employees in dealing with uncertainty and transition. Acceptance is not merely a sign of compliance with new policies, but a reflection of an individual's ability to respond actively and consciously to new realities. Cultural acceptance is reflected in the readiness to adjust one's perspective and behavior to the new system brought in by another entity, supported by an understanding of the organization's direction.

> "What needs to be adjusted is the attitude in accepting change [...] it can start with understanding the reasons: why we have to merge, then what the expectations are." (Nayla, P, 36 years old, Specialist)

However, in reality, cultural adaptation is often done independently, without formal training.

> "Regarding differences in work culture between organizations, we automatically have to adapt. Even though we never get training, we still have to be willing to learn on our own [...] by studying, focusing, and trying to do our jobs well." (Wewen, F, 36 years old, Specialist)

On the other hand, acceptance of organizational decisions requires individuals to be prepared to adjust to changes that do not always match their personal expectations, such as job transfers or new workloads. In this case, moral responsibility to the team becomes the main motivator.

> "If I'm not sincere, I'm worried it will affect my team. […] If I set a bad example, […] they might think, 'Wow, if he's stressed, then I'll just be stressed too, […] I don't want that to happen." (Sidoel, L, 43 years old, Division Head)

This entire process shows that acceptance is not a linear process, but rather is formed from the interaction between organizational dynamics and individual reflection. It becomes the

foundation for fostering the resilience, flexibility, and readiness for collaboration that are necessary in the long-term integration process.

Adaptability becomes a key adaptive strategy that goes beyond mere speed of response. Agility encompasses quick thinking, flexibility of attitude, and the ability to make contextual decisions. Agility in performing roles is reflected in employees' proactive efforts to understand the new organizational structure and independently reconstruct their work focus.

> "[...] I overcame this by first learning to understand what this is and what it is related to. The most obvious thing I learned first was about the organizational structure. Because all companies are ultimately defined by people, the human aspect that plays a role." (Nayla, P, 36 years old, Specialist)

Meanwhile, at the managerial level, agility also concerns sensitivity to the diversity of individual capacities.

> "People are different, they cannot be generalized [...] if someone is placed according to their passion, they will be happy, work faster, and perform well." (Sidoel, M, 43 years old, Division Head)

This agility is also evident in the ability to maintain team stability through a communicative and responsive approach.

> "Some ripples still appear [...] but these conditions are still within limits that can be managed well through a communicative and adaptive approach." (Suzu, P, 43 years old, Group Head)

On the other hand, agility in decision-making is very important in organizational situations that do not yet have a stable system. Employees are required to quickly assess risks and develop contextual mitigation strategies.

> "[…] First, we apply mapping. If we take path A, the risks are these, so the mitigation is this; if we take path B, then it's this. The hope is that, whatever the conditions, we can be better prepared […]." (Nayla, P, 36 years old, Specialist)

Thus, agility is not merely a rapid response, but an intelligent and purposeful response that enables employees to remain relevant and productive even when organizational systems are not yet fully stable. This strategy bridges the process of accepting change toward active collaboration and more comprehensive integration.

Cross-unit and cross-entity collaboration emerges as a crucial strategy to maintain operational continuity and ensure the success of transformation. A merger does not only unify organizational structures, but also ways of working, cultures, and expectations between units that previously operated independently. Cross-unit initiatives are reflected in proactive actions by individuals to establish cross-functional communication amid structural uncertainty.

> "First, I study the organizational structure, the roles and responsibilities, and the role map. After that [...] I coordinate or seek clarification from the relevant unit." (Nayla, F, 36, Specialist)

These initiatives are also facilitated by leaders who gradually encourage horizontal coordination.

> "At first, I open the door myself as an initiator [...] then I delegate. So I entrust it to them [...] It can be between Officers, as long as they know where it starts." (Astra, M, 41, Division Head)

Beyond individual initiative, harmonizing work patterns becomes an important aspect of building post-merger synergy. This process requires individuals to be open to differences and ready to adapt to the dynamics of new relationships.

> "Coordination also needs to be more open [...] Sometimes people give feedback because they care, but their approach is too fiery, so it's not received well. [...] Therefore, the ability to accept feedback well and openly is also important." (Nayla, F, 36, Specialist)

Cross-unit collaboration not only reflects technical coordination but also a social process that demands clarity of roles, responsive communication, and recognition of diversity. When collaboration arises from grassroots initiatives and is supported by adaptive systems, organizational integration becomes not only more effective but also has the potential to create a strong and sustainable unity.

Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on transformational leadership in post-merger organizations and provides practical implications for organizational change management, particularly within the Indonesian context. By offering a contextualized and in-depth narrative of employees' experiences in the public sector, the study enriches existing scholarship that often overlooks the complexities of mergers involving state-owned enterprises. In organizations such as PT XY, post-merger integration is shaped by bureaucratic constraints, disparities in work cultures, and imbalances in power and information flows. The findings also extend the literature on HRM in public-sector integration by identifying how HRM systems can better support workforce alignment, capability development, and cultural integration during large-scale organizational restructuring.

This paper specifically offers a three-role model of transformational leadership in post-merger contexts, identifying leaders' functions as change orchestrators, role models, and adaptation facilitators. The model advances understanding of how transformational leaders navigate and integrate organizational systems during post-merger transitions, offering a nuanced framework for explaining leadership behaviors that enable successful merger outcomes. Leaders who are able to articulate strategic direction, unify cultural differences, and provide spaces for discussion and emotional support effectively help employees navigate role uncertainty and implicit resistance. All dimensions of transformational leadership—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—manifest simultaneously, reinforcing internal engagement and synergy. These findings extend the studies of Nemanich & Keller (2007) and Savović (2017), confirming the relevance of transformational leadership in the context of public sector mergers, particularly in bridging employees' psychological needs and fostering a participatory change narrative (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Canterino et al., 2024; Chipunza & Gwarinda, 2010).

In the post-merger integration process at Company XY, three interrelated challenges were identified: structural and work system uncertainty, internal cultural differences, and gaps between management expectations and field practices, reflecting the complexity of structural, cultural, and operational changes. Ambiguous regulations, multiple interpretations of job profiles, and the absence of standardized SOPs reinforced previous findings on role ambiguity and weak organizational design (van der Voet, 2015; Marks & Mirvis, 1998; Zhang et al., 2015). One-way communication barriers and limited dialogue spaces resulted in the loss of meaning in organizational change (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Buono & Bowditch, 1990).

Moreover, cultural and communication style differences across units complicated interactions, creating identity dualism due to weak internalization of new values and the lack of symbolic and empathetic leadership (Schein, 1992; Cartwright & Cooper, 1993; Canterino et al., 2024). The dissonance between highly conceptual management strategies and the field's need for technical guidance weakened the role of middle managers (Berkow, 2017; Savović, 2017). Inequities in compensation, career paths, and leadership styles further triggered perceptions of injustice and employee anxiety (Cartwright & Cooper, 1996; Degbey et al., 2021). In the context of state-owned enterprises, these challenges are not merely technical but are deeply embedded with social and emotional dimensions, necessitating a comprehensive and participatory change management approach.

Another contribution offered by this study is a typology of employee adaptation strategies in post-merger contexts: acceptance of change, adaptive agility, and cross-unit collaboration. This typology advances understanding of how employees navigate complex integration processes and offer a structured framework for analyzing variation in adaptation behaviors during organizational transitions. Acceptance manifests through employees' independent reinterpretation of roles and organizational values despite minimal structural support, reflecting proactive coping and the importance of individualized attention from leaders (Schein, 1992; van der Voet, 2015; Bass & Avolio, 1994). Adaptive agility is demonstrated by employees' ability to reorganize work roles and make decisions amidst uncertainty, accompanied by the courage to voice critiques as a form of active participation and identity negotiation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Zhang et al., 2015). Labor unions also play a key role as formal channels for employee voice. Meanwhile, cross-unit collaboration emerges organically through employees' initiatives to bridge structural and cultural gaps, highlighting the importance of relational strength and horizontal coordination (Buono & Bowditch, 2003; Canterino et al., 2024). Harmonization of work patterns further requires empathetic communication and cultural sensitivity to prevent conflict and alienation (Nahavandi & Malekzadeh, 1988). Collectively, these strategies demonstrate that successful adaptation in post-merger public organizations depends heavily on reflection, flexibility, and initiative at the operational level rather than solely on top-down structural interventions.

Conclusion

This study shows that employees at Company XY view transformational leadership not as merely structural or bureaucratic, but as a relational and symbolic force that anchors them amid post-merger complexity, with leaders acting as orchestrators of organizational change, role models, and guides in the adaptation process; the post-merger period is marked by structural uncertainty, cultural differences, and gaps between managerial expectations and on-the-ground realities, all of which create psychological pressure and weaken employees' sense of belonging; yet employees respond proactively through acceptance, adaptive agility, and cross-unit collaboration to bridge system and cultural differences; overall, merger success depends on leaders who are empathetic, communicative, and able to simplify complexity, as well as on employees' capacity to form reflective and collective adaptive strategies, underscoring the importance of balancing structure and meaning in organizational integration.

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