



Saying One Thing, Doing Another: Sensemaking and the Persistence of Leadership Decoupling in High-Risk Indigenous Firms

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Abstract: This study examines how organisational members make sense of, and adapt to, the persistent gap between espoused leadership ideals and enacted leadership practice in high-risk, hierarchically structured indigenous firms. Drawing on 33 participants across four focus group discussions and open-ended responses embedded within a survey of 350 employees across eight private oil and gas companies in Nigeria, the study applies the Gioia methodology to a qualitative dataset analysed independently of any quantitative measurement. The analysis surfaces four aggregate dimensions that together form a grounded process model of leadership decoupling: the espoused-enacted gap itself, the cultural mechanisms that legitimate and normalise the gap without triggering organisational crisis, the functional logic that makes the gap locally rational despite its costs, and the behavioural repair mechanism through which the gap narrows or widens depending on the consistency between what leaders say and what they visibly do. The findings show that decoupling in this context is neither individual hypocrisy nor simple leadership failure but a structurally sustained equilibrium, actively reproduced through hierarchy, risk-averse socialisation, and ceremonial communication infrastructure, and only provisionally corrected through visible behavioural consistency at the level of individual leaders. The study contributes to institutional theory and leadership studies by specifying the micro-level mechanisms that keep espoused-enacted gaps stable in high-risk operating environments, and by identifying behavioural role modelling as the primary, though fragile, recoupling lever available to organisations that cannot easily relax the structural conditions producing the gap in the first place.

Keywords: leadership decoupling, organisational hypocrisy, sensemaking, Gioia methodology, indigenous oil and gas, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Organisations routinely say more than they do. Leaders articulate commitments to participation, fairness, and empowerment that do not survive contact with daily practice, leaving employees to interpret, explain, and act within the resulting gap (Heim et al., 2026). This gap between talk and action has long been recognised in organisation theory, most influentially in Meyer and Rowan's (1977) account of decoupling, in which formal structures are adopted to secure legitimacy while day-to-day operations proceed on a separate, often contradictory, logic, and in Brunsson's (1989) treatment of organisational hypocrisy, in which the separation of talk from action functions as a coping strategy for organisations facing incompatible demands. Parallel work on inclusive leadership has shown that the same espoused-enacted gap shapes how employees experience organisational climate, with

policy-practice decoupling operating as the mechanism connecting what leaders say to what employees come to believe about organisational priorities (Mor Barak et al., 2022, 2025; Platania et al., 2025). What remains comparatively underexamined is how such gaps are experienced, explained, and occasionally narrowed by the people who live inside them, particularly in high-risk, hierarchically governed operating environments where the stakes of both excessive rigidity and excessive flexibility are unusually high.

Nigeria's indigenous oil and gas sector offers a demanding setting in which to examine this question. Following the Petroleum Industry Act 2021 and the wave of divestitures through which indigenous operators absorbed major multinational asset portfolios, including Seplat Energy's acquisition of ExxonMobil's onshore assets and Oando's takeover of the Nigerian Agip blocks, indigenous private firms have had to sustain operational continuity without the risk diversification available to multinational operators (Anyigba and Lartey, 2024). Regulatory implementation of the Act remains uneven (NUPRC, 2022; Musa and Nwokoro, 2025; Obi, 2025), and the sector continues to contribute close to half of government revenue and around ninety per cent of export earnings (OPEC, 2023; NNPC, 2024), a degree of resource dependency long associated with heightened institutional and economic volatility (Sachs and Warner, 2001), leaving little room to absorb either the paralysis of excessive centralisation or the exposure of unmanaged risk-taking. Leaders in this environment are structurally pulled toward control, discipline, and compliance, precisely the conditions under which espoused commitments to participation, empowerment, and open communication are hardest to enact and most likely to remain rhetorical.

This study asks a single organising question: how do organisational members make sense of, and adapt to, the persistent gap between espoused leadership ideals and enacted leadership practice in high-risk indigenous firms, and what sustains that gap over time? The question is answered using a qualitative dataset comprising open-ended survey responses and focus group discussions gathered from employees across eight indigenous oil and gas companies.

The study makes three contributions. First, it extends decoupling and organisational hypocrisy theory, developed principally in Western, public-sector, and increasingly diversity-and-inclusion settings (Mor Barak et al., 2022), into a high-risk, hierarchically governed private-sector context where the consequences of both symbolic conformity and substantive failure are materially severe. Second, it specifies the cultural, discursive, and communicative mechanisms through which an espoused-enacted gap is actively sustained, moving beyond the observation that gaps exist to an account of how they are reproduced. Third, it identifies behavioural role modelling as the primary lever through which the gap can narrow, while showing that this lever is fragile and easily reversed, offering a more conditional account of recoupling than existing theory typically provides.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the theoretical literature on decoupling, organisational hypocrisy, and leadership in high-risk African operating environments. The following section details the study's data sources and analytical procedure. The results section presents the grounded data structure and its four dimensions, followed by the emergent process model. The discussion interprets these findings against existing theory and considers their practical implications, before a brief conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decoupling and Organisational Hypocrisy

Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that organisations operating within institutionalised environments adopt formal structures, policies, and rhetoric to conform to prevailing myths about rational organising, thereby securing legitimacy, resources, and survival, independent of whether those structures actually govern daily activity, a view consistent with Scott's (2014) broader account of institutions as regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures that organisations must be seen to comply with, and with Oliver's (1991) observation that organisations respond to institutional pressure strategically, ranging from acquiescence to outright defiance. Where formal commitments and operational reality diverge, organisations manage the tension through decoupling, permitting ceremonial structures to persist alongside a separate operational logic. Subsequent scholarship distinguishes policy-practice decoupling, in which adopted policies are not implemented, from means-ends decoupling, in which practices are implemented but fail to produce the outcomes they were intended to achieve (Bromley and Powell, 2012), a distinction that proves useful in a context, examined below, where formal communication and feedback structures exist but do not function as intended. Applying a multilevel lens to a different climate facet, Mor et al. (2022) show that policy-practice decoupling operates both within organisational levels, when a single leader's espoused values diverge from that same leader's enacted behaviour, and between levels, when top-management policy is not carried through by supervisors, and that both forms of decoupling erode the strength as well as the level of shared climate perceptions. This within-level/between-level distinction offers a useful analytic vocabulary for a hierarchically governed setting in which both CEO-level rhetoric and supervisor-level practice are independently implicated in the gap. Notably, Mor Barak et al. (2025) also argue that leaders should be understood as architects as it is not the existence of a policy that shapes employee perception but the visible alignment, or misalignment, between what leaders profess and what they are observed to do on a daily basis, a claim that positions leader behaviour and not communication content, as the operative mechanism worth tracing empirically, echoing Nishii and Leroy's (2020) characterisation of leaders as architects.

Brunsson (1989) offered a complementary account, arguing that the separation of talk, decisions, and action is a functional response to organisations facing inconsistent external demands. Talk can satisfy one set of stakeholders while action satisfies another, allowing organisations to avoid the paralysis that would follow from attempting genuine consistency across incompatible pressures. Read together with Meyer and Rowan (1977), these accounts imply that espoused-enacted gaps are not aberrations to be corrected but structural features that organisations actively work to sustain because the gap itself performs organisational work.

At the individual level, Argyris and Schön (1978) captured a parallel dynamic in their distinction between espoused theory, the values and beliefs people articulate when asked how they would act, and theory-in-use, the assumptions that actually govern behaviour. People are often unaware of the gap between the two, and organisational learning depends on surfacing it instead of concealing it. This individual-level formulation bridges institutional accounts of organisational decoupling and the lived experience of employees who must interpret leaders' espoused commitments against leaders' observed conduct.

Where decoupling theory explains why gaps emerge and organisational hypocrisy theory explains why they persist, sensemaking theory addresses how organisational members construct plausible accounts of the gap that allow them to continue functioning within it (Weick, 1995). Employees confronted with a mismatch between what leaders say and what leaders do do not simply register the inconsistency; they actively interpret it, often attributing it to individual leader characteristics, departmental variation, or structural necessity, and these attributions shape whether the gap is experienced as tolerable friction or as a legitimacy-eroding breach. It is this sensemaking process, not the existence of the gap alone, that the present study examines.

Leadership, Culture, and Decoupling in High-Risk African Operating Environments

Much of the empirical literature on leadership in Nigerian and wider sub-Saharan African organisations documents a persistent gap between the participative, empowering leadership that employees say they want and the directive, centralised leadership they report experiencing. Studies in the Nigerian oil and gas industry specifically find that autocratic and transactional leadership dominate day-to-day practice, with measurable, if uneven, consequences for productivity and morale (Adegboyega and Awolusi, 2024; Olayisade and Awolusi, 2021; Obi-Anike and Ekwe, 2020). Awolusi and Atiku (2023) and Nwankwo *et al.* (2019) argue that leadership theory developed in Western contexts travels poorly into African organisations without accounting for the layered influence of hierarchy, communal obligation, and post-colonial institutional legacies, a concern echoed in Nkomo's (2011, 2021) critique of how leadership knowledge about Africa is produced and by whom, and in George *et al.*'s (2021) broader call for management research to engage African organisational contexts on their own institutional terms, not as a testing ground for theory developed elsewhere. Nwankwo and Richards (2020) similarly show that culture and leadership in sub-Saharan African firms are mutually constitutive and not separable variables, consistent with the cross-cultural variation in power distance and hierarchical acceptance documented by Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) and House's (2004) GLOBE findings on societal leadership expectations, while Shehada (2023) argues that indigenous relational philosophies, such as Ubuntu, offer an alternative normative standard against which enacted leadership can be judged, one closer to the participative ideals participants in the present study articulate than to the control-oriented practices they describe experiencing, a position developed further by Khomba and Kangaude-Ulaya (2013) in relation to the indigenisation of corporate strategy across African firms more broadly.

A second relevant strand concerns leadership under conditions of operational risk and crisis. Addai, *et al.* (2026) and Sabbah (2024) both find that transformational leadership supports business continuity during crisis, but only where crisis severity does not overwhelm the organisation's existing capacity, implying that centralised, directive leadership may become locally rational precisely when risk is highest. Adekoya *et al.* (2023), writing specifically on Nigeria's oil and gas sector, describe organisational continuity as depending on exactly the kind of rapid, centralised decision-making that participative leadership models discourage, a tension that the wider institutional environment does little to resolve: implementation of the Petroleum Industry Act remains inconsistent (Musa and Nwokoro, 2025; Obi, 2025), leaving indigenous operators to absorb regulatory uncertainty through internal control mechanisms instead of external institutional support, consistent with

Nartey, et al.'s (2018) broader account of how firms in emerging markets substitute internal capability for absent institutional voids.

Finally, a body of climate research offers a structurally analogous account of how decoupling is sustained instead of corrected. Zohar (2002) and Zohar and Luria (2004, 2005, 2010) show that gaps between declared safety policy and enacted safety practice are read by employees as cues to the organisation's true priorities, that such gaps reduce not only the level but also the strength, or shared agreement, of climate perceptions, and that these relationships hold across organisational and group levels of analysis simultaneously. Mor Barak et al. (2022, 2025) extend this logic to inclusion climate, proposing that leaders function as architects of climate whose behavioural consistency, more than their stated commitments, determines whether policy and practice converge. The present study draws on this parallel to ask whether the same behavioural mechanism operates in a substantively different, high-risk operational domain, where the underlying control orientation is not genuinely implicated in safety and regulatory survival.

METHODOLOGY

Design and Data Sources

This study adopts an inductive qualitative design, analysing two data sources collected within a single research programme: open-ended responses embedded within a structured questionnaire administered to 350 employees across eight private oil and gas companies in Nigeria, and transcripts from four focus group discussions involving 33 purposively selected participants drawn from the same organisations. The two sources are treated as a single combined qualitative corpus.

Focus group participants were purposively sampled to achieve heterogeneity across hierarchical level, employment cadre, and department, consistent with Krueger and Casey's (2014) guidance that three to four groups of six to eight participants typically achieve thematic saturation, and with Guest, Bunce and Johnson's (2006) finding that data saturation for core themes is generally reached within a comparable range of interactions. The four groups comprised nine, eight, eight, and eight participants respectively, for a total of 33, distributed across interns (3), contract staff (6), junior staff (8), senior staff (9), and middle management personnel (7), spanning technical, administrative, operations, logistics, and support functions. This stratification was deliberate: because the study's central concern is how organisational members at different levels of the hierarchy experience and explain the same leadership behaviour, hierarchical heterogeneity within the sample is analytically necessary, not incidental.

The open-ended questionnaire responses addressed four questions distributed across different sections of the survey instrument, inviting participants to describe, in their own words, the qualities of effective leadership, their direct experiences of leadership within their organisations, and the perceived influence of leadership on organisational culture and outcomes. The focus group discussions extended this material through semi-structured, open discussion organised around five question areas, covering prevalent managerial style, the relationship between leadership and organisational survival, organisational culture and its response to external pressures, the culture-leadership relationship, and participants' overall assessment of what sustains organisational survival, allowing participants to

elaborate, contest, and qualify one another's accounts in ways the questionnaire format did not permit.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), selected for its capacity to build inductive, informant-centred concepts into a defensible theoretical structure while remaining traceable back to first-order data. Analysis proceeded through three stages. First, first-order concepts were generated by coding participants' own language as closely as possible to their original terms, without imposing a predetermined theoretical vocabulary. Second, first-order concepts exhibiting conceptual similarity were grouped into second-order themes, at which point existing theoretical constructs, decoupling, legitimization, and behavioural modelling, were used to interpret and label emerging patterns. Third, second-order themes were distilled into aggregate theoretical dimensions capable of supporting a grounded process model. Movement between stages was iterative, not strictly linear, consistent with Gioia et al.'s (2013) description of continual comparison between emerging structure and raw data.

Analytic rigour was supported through several practices. Coding proceeded independently across both data sources before comparison, allowing convergence and divergence between open-ended responses and focus group accounts to be assessed directly instead of assumed. A parallel thematic frequency analysis, tabulating the proportion of participants in each focus group who raised a given theme, was conducted to triangulate the prevalence of patterns identified through Gioia coding against a second, independently derived count. Negative and disconfirming cases, including participants who described more transformational or participative leadership experiences, were retained and coded instead of treated as noise, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2019) emphasis on reflexive engagement with the full range of the data, and with Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach to combining inductive theme development with deductive triangulation against a second, independently derived data source. Participant quotations are attributed using role and group identifiers already established in the source dataset (for example JS for junior staff, MM for middle management, SS for senior staff, CT for contract staff, followed by the relevant focus group number) or marked as drawn from open-ended survey responses where no group identifier applies.

FINDINGS: A GROUNDED MODEL OF LEADERSHIP DECOUPLING

The analysis produced four aggregate theoretical dimensions, each built from multiple second-order themes and first-order concepts, that together describe not a static gap but a self-reproducing cycle: the gap emerges (Dimension 1), is actively legitimated by culture (Dimension 2), persists because it is locally functional despite its costs (Dimension 3), and is provisionally narrowed or further widened depending on leaders' behavioural consistency (Dimension 4), which in turn feeds back into how the gap is understood going forward

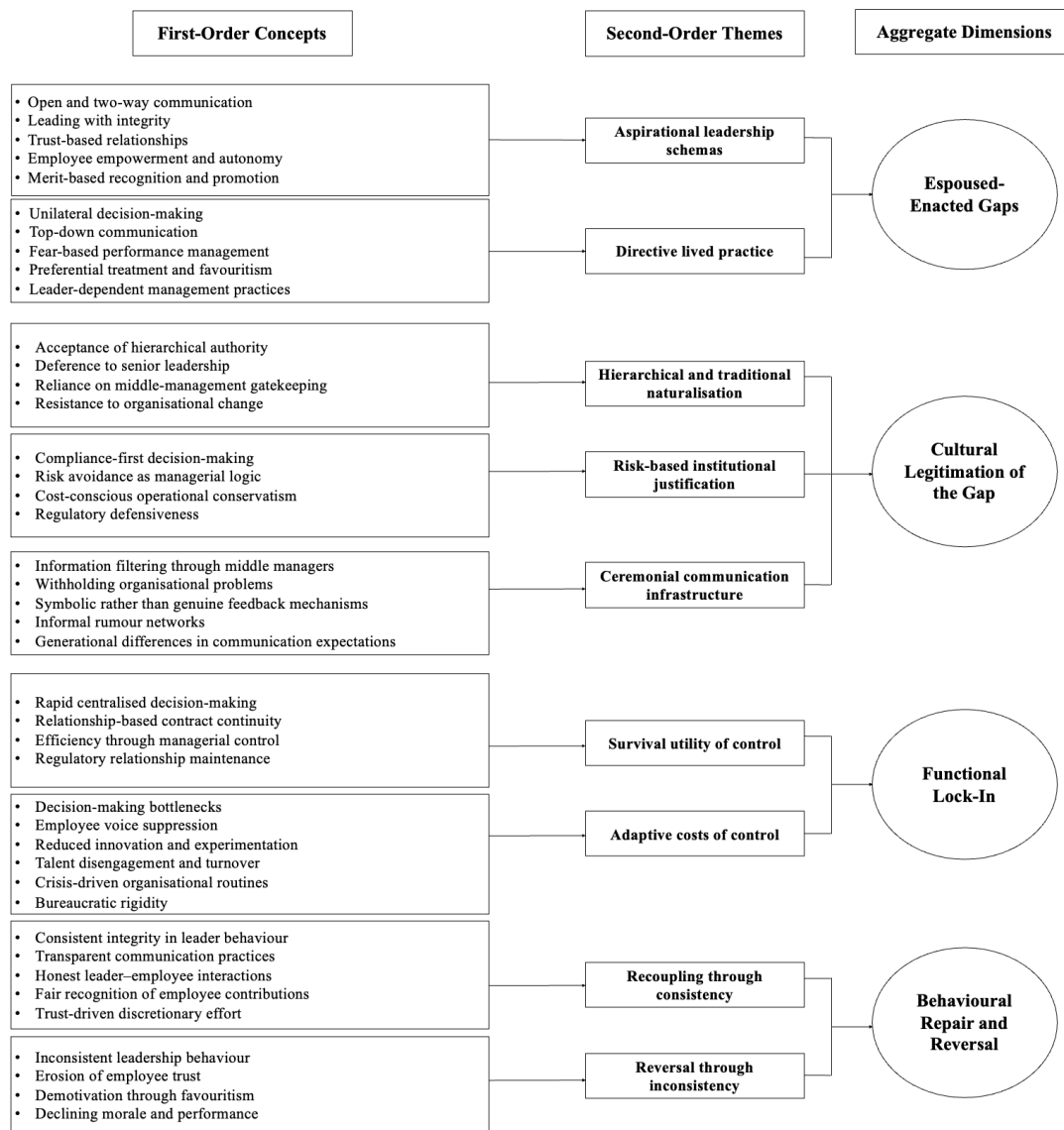


Figure 1: Data Structure

Figure 1 presents the full Gioia data structure underpinning this model, and Table 1 presents the corresponding thematic map, cross-referencing each subtheme against illustrative codes drawn directly from the data. Where relevant, findings from the Gioia coding are triangulated against a parallel thematic frequency analysis conducted across all four focus groups, which independently counted the proportion of participants raising each theme; this second count is reported in the text as corroborating evidence, not as a quantitative test.

Dimension 1: The Espoused-Enacted Gap

The most consistent pattern across both data sources was a sharply articulated distance between how participants described ideal leadership and how they described their organisations' actual leadership.

Aspirational Schemas

When asked directly what effective leadership required, participants converged on a coherent, developmentally oriented vocabulary: genuine two-way communication, integrity, adaptability, accountability, empowerment, and emotional intelligence. One participant wrote that “a good leader listens before acting and ensures everyone’s voice counts” (Open-ended response), while another held that “integrity builds the foundation of trust; without it, leadership crumbles” (Open-ended response). These formulations were normative and relational indicating that participants possessed sophisticated, internally consistent models of what leadership should look like, independent of what they experienced.

Directive Lived Practice

When describing actual experience, particularly in the more elaborated focus group setting, participants described a markedly different reality. Decision-making was concentrated and unilateral: “most of our top managers have an autocratic style, decisions come from the top, and we just execute” (JS3, G1). Communication, despite topping the list of aspirational qualities, was experienced as one-directional and procedural: “most leaders communicate through official memos or reports, which feels cold and distant” (JS2, G1). Motivation relied on sanction, not inspiration: “motivation comes from fear of sanctions, not from genuine engagement” (CT2, G1). Advancement, despite widespread endorsement of merit and fairness as ideals, was described as favouritism-driven: “since the company prizes loyalty, leaders tend to promote familiarity over competence” (SS2, G2). The independent thematic frequency count corroborates the weight of this pattern: autocratic or directive leadership was the single most frequently cited style in Group One, and a profit-driven, reactive orientation, in which cost and short-term outcomes dominated decisions over people development, was cited by a majority of Group Four participants.

Leader-dependent Inconsistency

A distinctive feature of this dimension, most visible in the frequency data, is that the gap was not experienced as uniform across the organisation but as dependent on which individual leader an employee happened to report to. Group Four’s discussion was dominated by the observation that leadership style varied with individual personality instead of a unified organisational philosophy, a pattern echoed in Group Two’s description of a “mixed leadership environment where different departments operate under varying managerial philosophies.” Participants themselves offered competing explanations for this unevenness, and these explanations mattered analytically because they indicated where responsibility for the gap was located.

A minority attributed the divergence to individual leaders, describing uneven practice across departments: “our leadership is a mix, some departments are democratic, others are completely top-down” (JS4, G2). A further minority identified genuine pockets of more participative practice: “I’d say our leaders are more transformational, they encourage innovation and reward initiative” (SS1, G1), consistent with the small but consistent minority in the frequency data who reported delegative, trust-based leadership confined to particular departments. The dominant explanation, however, located the gap

not in individual leaders but in the surrounding organisational system, a system-level attribution that motivates the second dimension. It is worth noting that the frequency data also recorded a modest but recurring counter-signal, a gradual shift toward participation in which some leaders had begun engaging staff before major decisions, suggesting that the gap identified here is a stable pattern, neither fixed nor worsening.

Dimension 2: Cultural Legitimation of the Gap

The second dimension captures how the gap identified above is actively sustained, made to feel natural and unremarkable instead of simply persisting by default.

Naturalisation Through Hierarchy and Tradition

Participants described hierarchy not as an imposed constraint but as a taken-for-granted social order: “there’s a strong hierarchy here, you rarely question leadership decisions even when you have a better idea” (JS2, G1). Distance between senior leadership and frontline staff was reproduced through everyday interaction patterns and not deliberate policy: “many of the senior executives lead from a distance, we only interact with their directives through middle managers” (MM1, G3). A parallel orientation toward tradition and continuity discouraged experimentation: “the culture here is conservative, we follow rules strictly but are slow to embrace change” (MM1, G1). The frequency data reinforces this pattern directly: a persistent “boss-subordinate” mentality emphasising authority over mentorship was among the most frequently cited themes in Group Four, and a comparable orientation toward centralised, top-down decision-making recurred across every group’s discussion of managerial style. Distance from senior leadership was itself named as a distinct theme in Group Three’s synthesis, in which executives were reported to lead indirectly through middle managers with minimal direct interaction, while Group Two’s account of organisational culture independently identified a broadly reactive posture, in which the organisation’s response to external pressure typically followed the pressure itself instead of anticipating it.

Institutional Justification through Risk and Compliance

Critically, participants did not describe this control orientation as arbitrary; they linked it explicitly to the operational stakes of the sector. “We have a very disciplined and compliance-driven culture, which helps us stay on the right side of regulations” (SS1, G1). This same logic was described as double-edged even by those who endorsed it: “there’s a culture of caution, which helps us avoid costly mistakes but also stifles innovation” (MM2, G2). Group Two’s discussion of organisational culture independently surfaced the same trade-off, describing a culture in which professionalism and safety compliance built external credibility with regulators and clients while simultaneously discouraging creativity. This is a distinctive feature of decoupling in this setting: unlike legitimacy-seeking decoupling in lower-stakes environments, the control orientation here carries genuine functional justification, which makes it considerably harder for organisational members to characterise as illegitimate, even when its costs are directly experienced.

Ceremonial Communication Infrastructure

A further mechanism concerned the gap between the existence of formal communication and feedback structures and their actual use. Middle managers described themselves as gatekeepers: “filters, deciding what information gets passed up or down” (MM3, G3). Problems were withheld instead of escalated: “people hide problems instead of reporting them” (JS3, G4). One participant summarised the pattern precisely as decoupling in miniature: “feedback channels exist but aren’t genuinely used” (JS2, G1). The frequency analysis identifies the same mechanism from a different angle, describing employees as routinely learning about new policy through informal channels or rumour ahead of official announcements, and noting that fear of being labelled a complainer discourages honest dialogue even where formal open-door policies exist, what one group’s synthesis termed limited psychological safety despite the appearance of accessible leadership. This is a clear instance of means-ends decoupling (Bromley and Powell, 2012): the structure is present, implemented, and even actively maintained, but it does not produce the outcome, authentic upward communication, that it was ostensibly built to achieve. A further variant emerged in the frequency data as a generational transparency gap, in which younger leaders were reported to favour openness while senior executives preferred confidentiality, suggesting that the ceremonial character of communication infrastructure is not uniform but concentrated at senior hierarchical levels.

Cultural Benefits that Reinforce the Same Logic

Notably, participants also identified genuine positive functions of the same cultural configuration, which further explains why the gap was not experienced as unambiguously dysfunctional. Loyalty-based culture produced solidarity: “we operate like a family, that unity keeps morale high during tough market periods” (CT1, G1). Compliance orientation built external credibility: “we pride ourselves on professionalism and safety, that’s our strongest shield against external pressures” (SS2, G2). Because the same cultural features that sustained the gap also delivered valued outcomes, cultural legitimization of decoupling was reinforced from multiple directions and did not rest on coercion alone.

Dimension 3: Functional Lock-In

The third dimension addresses why, despite widespread awareness of its costs, the gap was not simply abandoned. Participants’ accounts revealed a paradox in which the same control mechanisms that sustained the espoused-enacted gap also delivered outcomes the organisation genuinely needed.

Survival Utility

Senior staff with longer tenure in particular credited centralised control with organisational survival through crisis: “our leaders’ quick decision-making helped us stay ahead during the last oil price crash” (SS1, G1). Established relational networks similarly buffered volatility: “because of their strong networks, we’ve maintained key contracts even during tough times” (SS3, G3). Performance discipline was credited with building reputation: “their focus on efficiency and quality has built a strong reputation for us in the sector” (MM2, G2). The

frequency data corroborates each of these strands independently: decisive leadership during crises, including proactive cost-control measures introduced ahead of currency depreciation, was cited across two of the four groups as directly preserving jobs and operational continuity, while an efficiency and quality orientation was independently identified as sustaining sector reputation. Regulatory relationship management, in which leaders deliberately cultivated ties with regulators to avoid operational disruption, and a degree of job security that persisted despite acknowledged rigidity, were both cited as additional, if secondary, survival functions of the same centralised structure, reinforcing that participants did not experience control and continuity as separable.

Adaptive Cost

Junior staff and contract workers, who bore the operational consequences of the same control mechanisms most directly, described their adaptive costs in detail. Centralisation produced delay: “autocratic leadership slows problem-solving because everyone waits for approval from the top” (CT4, G2). Sanction-based control suppressed the information flow needed for organisational learning: “our top managers lead with fear rather than strategy, so people hide problems instead of reporting them” (JS3, G4). Risk intolerance actively discouraged innovation and drove out the employees most likely to generate it: “innovation is not encouraged here, so we lag behind more dynamic competitors” (JS5, G2); “those who crave innovation often leave for more flexible environments” (CT3, G4). Decision-making operated reactively, not anticipatorily: “leadership decisions are often made in crisis mode rather than through foresight” (MM3, G4). This adaptive cost was the single most consistently cited weakness in the frequency data: reactive, not anticipatory, leadership, low innovation culture, and bureaucratic inertia each recurred across at least three of the four groups, most often in the same breath as the survival benefits described above, underscoring that participants experienced these as two faces of a single leadership orientation and not as separable strengths and weaknesses.

This dimension is the analytic core of why the gap persists. The gap is not maintained despite being costly; it is maintained because the same structure that produces its costs also produces outcomes, crisis survival, regulatory standing, operational reputation, that the organisation cannot easily forgo. A small number of participants nonetheless detected tentative movement: “the culture supposedly supports learning, so leaders are encouraged to experiment with new management approaches” (JS5, G4), suggesting the lock-in described here is strong but not absolute.

Dimension 4: Behavioural Repair and Reversal

The fourth dimension identifies the one mechanism through which participants described the gap narrowing, and the conditions under which it widened further instead.

Behaviour as the Primary Signal

Across both data sources, participants converged on the view that leadership influence operated through observed conduct, not stated commitment: “employees emulate what leaders do, not what they say” (Open-ended response); “leaders must walk the talk, actions

“speak louder than words” (Open-ended response). This positions behavioural consistency, not communication of values, as the operative mechanism through which the espoused-enacted gap is either bridged or entrenched, a pattern consistent with the frequency data’s identification of transparent leadership and loyalty, rooted specifically in openness and honesty from top management instead of in policy statements, as a recurring driver of employee commitment.

Recoupling through Consistency

When leaders’ visible conduct aligned with stated values, participants described a direct, if often qualified, positive effect. “Because integrity is a core value here, leaders act with transparency and fairness” (SS4, G3); when leaders acted with honesty and fairness, “staff give their best without fear or favour” (Open-ended response). Recognition-based behaviour produced measurable, if short-lived, motivational gains: “when leadership recognises effort, performance improves briefly” (SS4, G3).

Reversal through Inconsistency

Where behaviour diverged from stated commitment, the effect was not neutral but actively corrosive, and participants described this corrosion as more consequential than the original gap itself. “Inconsistency kills momentum” (SS4, G3). Favouritism, in particular, was described as directly undermining stated commitments to fairness: “when leadership favours a few and ignores others, morale and performance drop drastically” (Open-ended response). This suggests an asymmetry worth noting: behavioural consistency narrows the gap only modestly and temporarily, while behavioural inconsistency widens it sharply and, on participants’ accounts, more durably. The frequency data lends further texture to this asymmetry: cultural resilience, participants’ own persistence and adaptability under uncertainty, was frequently cited as compensating for leadership inconsistency instead of being produced by it, implying that where the gap narrows in practice, the credit is not always attributable to leadership behaviour alone but partly to employees’ independent coping capacity, a distinction the data cannot fully resolve but which qualifies how much weight should be placed on behavioural consistency as a standalone lever.

The four dimensions were not evenly distributed across the sample. Senior staff and middle management, whose accounts anchor much of Dimension 3, were considerably more likely to explain the gap through its survival function, while junior staff and contract workers, who anchor much of Dimension 1’s directive-practice accounts and Dimension 3’s adaptive-cost accounts, more often explained the same gap through its constraining effects on voice, innovation, and advancement. This divergence by hierarchical position recurs across every dimension and is addressed directly in the discussion below, since it bears on whose account of the gap, and whose account of what would close it, is treated as authoritative within the organisation.

PROCESS MODEL

The four dimensions describe a cycle, not a static condition, illustrated in Figure 2. An espoused-enacted gap emerges between what leaders say and what participants experience

(Dimension 1), visible in the contrast between the aspirational, relational vocabulary participants use to describe ideal leadership and the directive, unilateral practice they report living within, and further complicated by the finding that this gap tracks individual leaders as much as organisational policy.

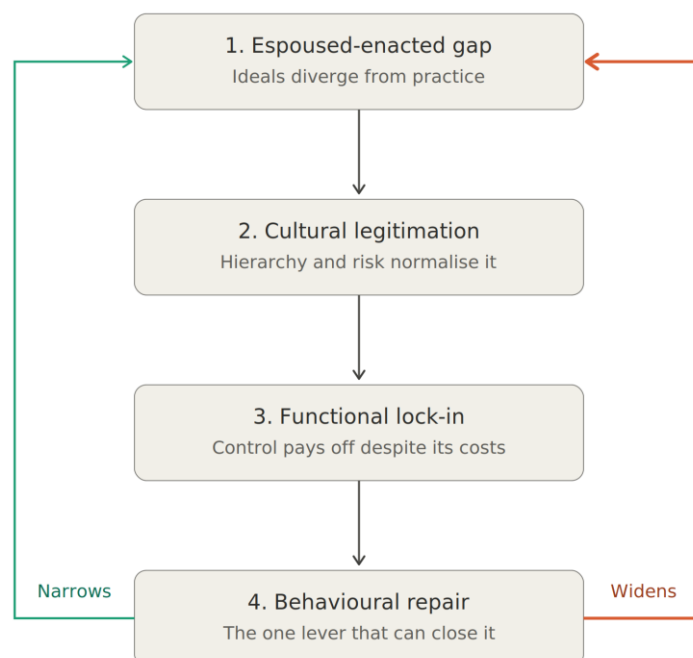


Figure 2: Process Model of Leadership Decoupling

This gap is actively legitimated through hierarchy, risk-based justification, and ceremonial communication structures that make the gap feel natural, necessary, or at least unremarkable instead of illegitimate (Dimension 2). Legitimation operates through naturalisation, in which hierarchy is treated as an unquestioned social order; through institutional justification, in which control is tied to genuine regulatory and safety stakes; and through communication infrastructure that exists, functions, and is even actively maintained, yet systematically fails to carry information upward, a textbook instance of means-ends decoupling, not simple non-implementation decoupling.

The gap persists because the same mechanisms producing it also deliver functional outcomes the organisation depends on, creating lock-in that outlasts individual leaders' intentions (Dimension 3). Crisis survival, regulatory standing, and reputational capital are all credited to the control orientation that simultaneously produces delay, information suppression, and talent attrition; because these are two faces of a single structure and not separable costs and benefits, the structure cannot be selectively dismantled without risking the outcomes it protects.

The one lever available to narrow the gap operates not through communication but through consistent leader behaviour, and this lever is fragile: it produces modest, temporary recoupling when present, but produces sharp, more durable widening of the gap when absent (Dimension 4). This behavioural lever feeds back into Dimension 1, either narrowing

the espoused-enacted gap for the employees who observe it or confirming and deepening it, which in turn is re-absorbed into the cultural legitimation processes of Dimension 2 and the functional calculus of Dimension 3, closing the cycle.

Two structural features of this cycle are consequential for how it should be interpreted. First, because behavioural inconsistency is common in exactly the high-control conditions that Dimensions 2 and 3 sustain, the model implies a structural bias toward gap persistence over gap closure, one that individual leaders' behavioural consistency can only partially offset. Second, because sensemaking about the cycle diverges systematically by hierarchical position, senior staff anchoring their account in Dimension 3's survival logic and junior staff and contract workers anchoring theirs in Dimension 1 and 3's constraining effects, the cycle is not experienced identically throughout the organisation even where the same leadership behaviour is its common cause.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

The central finding is that leadership decoupling in this setting is not a failure state awaiting correction but a structurally reproduced equilibrium, actively sustained by cultural legitimation and functional necessity, and only provisionally responsive to individual leader behaviour. This finding qualifies existing decoupling theory in several respects and carries direct implications for practice.

Theoretically, Meyer and Rowan's (1977) original account emphasises legitimacy-seeking as the driver of decoupling in institutionalised environments where formal structures are largely symbolic. The present findings show a materially different logic operating alongside legitimacy-seeking in high-risk operating environments: the control orientation participants described was genuinely implicated in survival, regulatory standing, and reputation, as Dimension 3 makes clear. Decoupling in high-risk, capital-intensive contexts should therefore be understood as partially functional and not purely symbolic, a distinction with consequences for how readily such gaps can be expected to close: where legitimacy-driven decoupling might erode as external monitoring intensifies (Bromley and Powell, 2012), functionally locked-in decoupling of the kind observed here is less likely to respond to external scrutiny because the underlying practices continue to deliver value the organisation needs regardless of how they are perceived. The findings also extend Brunsson's (1989) account of organisational hypocrisy by specifying the communication-level mechanism, ceremonial infrastructure that exists, is maintained, and is even actively used for downward information flow while systematically failing to carry information upward, through which talk and action remain separated without triggering organisational crisis, and they speak directly to the espoused theory-theory-in-use distinction (Argyris and Schön, 1978) at the collective level and not the individual level: the gap here was not hidden from organisational members but was widely recognised and differently explained depending on hierarchical position, a sensemaking divergence (Weick, 1995) with its own implications for intervention. Finally, the identification of behavioural role modelling as the primary recoupling lever, and its striking asymmetry, modest and temporary when present, sharp and durable when absent, echoes Mor Barak, Luria and Brimhall's (2022) argument that leaders function as architects of climate and not mere communicators of it, while extending

that claim into a setting where the underlying control orientation is not symbolic but functionally load-bearing.

Practical Implications

Practically, these findings suggest that closing espoused-enacted gaps cannot be achieved primarily through communication or values statements, since these were shown to be precisely the elements least connected to how participants judged leadership credibility. Interventions are more likely to succeed if targeted at the behavioural level, particularly around consistency in the treatment of information, recognition, and advancement, where inconsistency was shown to produce disproportionate damage relative to consistency's modest benefit. Given that ceremonial communication infrastructure was identified as a specific mechanism sustaining the gap, organisations may benefit from auditing existing feedback channels not for their existence but for whether information demonstrably moves upward through them, since the presence of a channel was shown to carry little credibility on its own. Because sensemaking about the gap diverged sharply by hierarchical position, leadership development and culture change efforts premised solely on senior management's account of why control is necessary are unlikely to be persuasive to those experiencing its costs, and would benefit from incorporating the adaptive-cost perspective documented among junior staff and contract workers directly. Finally, because the same structure generating the gap also generates outcomes the organisation depends upon, practitioners should treat wholesale decentralisation as a poor prescription; the more tractable target is the consistency of individual leader behaviour within the existing structure, fragile as that lever is shown to be.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how organisational members make sense of, and adapt to, the gap between what leaders say and what leaders do in high-risk indigenous firms, and what sustains that gap over time. The answer emerging from this qualitative dataset is that the gap is actively reproduced through cultural legitimation and genuine functional necessity, and that it responds, if at all, primarily to sustained behavioural consistency, not to communication or stated commitment. This reframes leadership decoupling in high-risk operating environments not as a problem to be solved through better articulation of values, but as a structural condition that organisations must actively work against through demonstrated behaviour, with the clear risk that inconsistency, when it occurs, does more lasting damage than consistency does good.

The study contributes to institutional and leadership theory by extending decoupling and organisational hypocrisy theory into a high-risk, private-sector operating environment where the drivers of decoupling are partially functional and not purely legitimacy-seeking; by specifying the cultural, discursive, and communicative mechanisms through which espoused-enacted gaps are actively sustained and not passively tolerated; and by identifying behavioural consistency as a conditional and asymmetric recoupling lever, refining the largely static treatment of decoupling as either present or absent within much of the existing literature. The findings should be read with two caveats in mind: they draw on a single national and sectoral context in which control is tied to genuine regulatory and safety

stakes, and they capture participants' retrospective sensemaking of leader behaviour and not direct observation of it, both of which point toward comparative and longitudinal designs as natural next steps.

Organisations operating in comparable high-stakes, hierarchically governed environments should treat the closing of espoused-enacted gaps as an ongoing behavioural discipline, not a communications exercise, recognising that the structural conditions sustaining the gap will not relax on their own, and that the people best placed to judge whether the gap is closing are not always the people whose account of it is most often heard.

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Table 1: Thematic Map of Leadership Decoupling

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative Codes
Espoused-Enacted Gap	Aspirational leadership schemas	“A good leader listens before acting and ensures everyone’s voice counts” (Open-ended response); “Integrity builds the foundation of trust; without it, leadership crumbles” (Open-ended response)
Espoused-Enacted Gap	Directive lived practice	“Most of our top managers have an autocratic style, decisions come from the top, and we just execute” (JS3, G1); “Motivation comes from fear of sanctions, not from genuine engagement” (CT2, G1)
Cultural Legitimation of the Gap	Hierarchical and traditional naturalisation	“There’s a strong hierarchy here, you rarely question leadership decisions even when you have a better idea” (JS2, G1); “The culture here is conservative, we follow rules strictly but are slow to embrace change” (MM1, G1)
Cultural Legitimation of the Gap	Risk-based institutional justification	“We have a very disciplined and compliance-driven culture, which helps us stay on the right side of regulations” (SS1, G1); “There’s a culture of caution, which helps us avoid costly mistakes but also stifles innovation” (MM2, G2)
Cultural Legitimation of the Gap	Ceremonial communication infrastructure	“Filters, deciding what information gets passed up or down” (MM3, G3); “Feedback channels exist but aren’t genuinely used” (JS2, G1)
Functional Lock-In	Survival utility of control	“Our leaders’ quick decision-making helped us stay ahead during the last oil price crash” (SS1, G1); “Their focus on efficiency and quality has built a strong reputation for us in the sector” (MM2, G2)
Functional Lock-In	Adaptive costs of control	“Autocratic leadership slows problem-solving because everyone waits for approval from the top” (CT4, G2); “Innovation is not encouraged here, so we lag behind more dynamic competitors” (JS5, G2)
Behavioural Repair and Reversal	Recoupling through consistency	“Because integrity is a core value here, leaders act with transparency and fairness” (SS4, G3); “When leadership recognises effort, performance improves briefly” (SS4, G3)
Behavioural Repair and Reversal	Reversal through inconsistency	“Inconsistency kills momentum” (SS4, G3); “When leadership favours a few and ignores others, morale and performance drop drastically” (Open-ended response)