

Leadership and the Implementation of Reformatory Change in the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service



Moses Cyril Ngawaite Chihobvu 

CUT Graduate Business School, School of Entrepreneurship & Business Sciences, Chinhoyi, University of Technology, Chinhoyi, Zimbabwe

ABSTRACT

The transition from punitive correctional systems toward reformatory and rehabilitative models has become a defining feature of contemporary criminal justice reforms globally. In Zimbabwe, the transformation of the Zimbabwe Prison Service into the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS) under the 2013 Constitution signalled a significant institutional commitment to rehabilitation, reintegration, and human rights-oriented corrections. However, the successful implementation of reformatory change within correctional institutions depends heavily on effective leadership. This paper examines the extent to which leadership influences the implementation of reformatory change within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service. Drawing from change management theories, institutional theory, systems theory, and empirical literature on correctional reform, the paper argues that leadership is a central determinant of organisational transformation in highly structured public sector institutions. The discussion highlights how leadership shapes institutional culture, employee engagement, stakeholder collaboration, policy implementation, and resistance management during reform processes. The paper further explores the challenges confronting leadership within correctional environments, including bureaucratic rigidity, resource limitations, entrenched punitive cultures, and political pressures. The study concludes that transformational, participatory, and adaptive leadership approaches are essential for facilitating sustainable reformatory change within ZPCS.

Keywords: leadership, reformatory change, correctional services, Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service, change management, public sector reform.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global correctional landscape has undergone significant transformation over the past few decades as criminal justice systems increasingly shift from punitive models toward rehabilitative and reintegrative approaches. This transition reflects broader changes in criminological thought, human rights discourse, and evidence-based correctional practices that emphasize rehabilitation as a means of reducing recidivism and promoting social reintegration [1] [2]. Contemporary correctional systems are no longer viewed solely as institutions of punishment and containment but increasingly as institutions responsible for facilitating behavioral transformation and societal reintegration [3].

In Zimbabwe, this paradigm shift gained formal recognition through the 2013 Constitution, which transformed the Zimbabwe Prison Service into the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service (ZPCS) [4]. The constitutional reform represented a deliberate institutional move toward correctional rehabilitation, reintegration, and human rights-oriented service delivery. However, transforming deeply entrenched correctional institutions involves more than legislative or policy reform. It requires profound organisational transformation encompassing institutional culture, operational practices, leadership orientation, staff attitudes, and stakeholder engagement.

Leadership plays a central role in facilitating such transformation [5]. Organisational change literature consistently identifies leadership as one of the most important determinants of successful institutional reform [6] [7]. Within correctional institutions, leadership is particularly important because prisons are highly hierarchical, bureaucratic, and culturally rigid organisations that often resist change. Leaders are therefore expected to articulate reform visions, mobilize institutional support, manage resistance, allocate resources, and foster organisational commitment toward change.

The Zimbabwean correctional environment presents unique leadership challenges due to resource constraints, historical punitive traditions, overcrowding, and institutional rigidity. These conditions create tension between reform aspirations and operational realities. Consequently, understanding how leadership influences reformatory change within ZPCS is essential for evaluating the sustainability and effectiveness of ongoing correctional reforms.

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Corresponding Authors: **Moses Cyril Ngawaite Chihobvu**

Email: mcnchihobvu@gmail.com

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL ANCHORS

Leadership and organisational change are closely interconnected concepts within public administration and management scholarship. Numerous theoretical frameworks explain how leadership shapes organisational transformation processes. Among the most influential theories relevant to correctional reform are transformational leadership theory, systems theory, institutional theory, and Lewin's change management model.

Transformational leadership theory emphasizes the ability of leaders to inspire, motivate, and guide organisational members toward collective goals and institutional transformation [8]. Transformational leaders influence followers by articulating a compelling vision, promoting innovation, encouraging participation, and fostering commitment to change. Within correctional institutions, transformational leadership is particularly relevant because reformative change often requires shifts in organisational culture, values, and institutional identity [9]. Leaders must therefore challenge punitive traditions and cultivate rehabilitation-oriented institutional mindsets.

Systems theory conceptualizes organisations as interconnected systems composed of multiple interdependent components [10]. According to this perspective, leadership decisions within one organisational subsystem affect the broader institutional environment. In correctional institutions, leadership influences not only administrative operations but also staff behavior, inmate management, rehabilitation programming, stakeholder relationships, and institutional morale. Effective leaders must therefore adopt holistic approaches that recognize the interconnected nature of institutional change.

Institutional theory provides additional insight into leadership and correctional reform. The theory argues that organisations are shaped by deeply embedded norms, rules, traditions, and cultural expectations [11]. Correctional institutions are often characterized by entrenched punitive cultures and rigid bureaucratic structures that resist reform. Leadership becomes critical in navigating these institutional pressures and creating legitimacy for reformative practices. Leaders must therefore balance institutional stability with transformational change.

Change management model further emphasizes the importance of leadership during organisational transformation [12].

5. FINDINGS

Leadership and Reformative Change

Path / Relationship	Standardized Beta (β)	p-value	Statistical Significance	Hypothesis Status
Leadership → Reformative Change	0.085	0.232	Insignificant	Not Supported (Direct)

Statistical Result: Beta (β) = 0.085, p = 0.232 (Statistically Insignificant)

Application Narrative: Structural Equation Modelling indicates that leadership has a positive but statistically insignificant direct effect on reformative change. This demonstrates that leadership alone does not directly determine reform outcomes within ZPCS. While it serves a strategic and symbolic role in setting direction and articulating the reform vision, its practical effectiveness remains dependent on contextual enablers such as organizational culture, political backing, and resource availability.

The qualitative findings provide deeper insight into how leadership is experienced within the institution. Participants consistently acknowledged visible leadership commitment toward reform.

The model conceptualizes change as a three-stage process involving unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. During the unfreezing stage, leaders create awareness of the need for change and destabilize existing institutional practices. During the changing stage, leaders guide the implementation of new practices and behaviors. During refreezing, leaders institutionalize new norms and reinforce sustainable transformation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a mixed-methods research approach consistent with the broader dissertation from which these findings are drawn. The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design that integrated quantitative survey data and qualitative interview findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of leadership and reformative change within ZPCS. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to correctional officers, administrative staff, and institutional managers across selected ZPCS facilities. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was employed to examine the direct and indirect effects of leadership on reformative change outcomes. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants, including senior officers, middle managers, and frontline staff. Thematic analysis was applied to interpret qualitative findings, and triangulation was used to validate and integrate both data strands.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative analysis utilised Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to assess the relationship between leadership and reformative change implementation. The model tested direct effects, indirect pathways, and mediating variables influencing institutional transformation within ZPCS. The SEM results provided standardised path coefficients and p-values, enabling systematic assessment of leadership's statistical contribution to reform outcomes. Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on interview transcripts, systematically coding emerging themes related to leadership visibility, institutional culture, reform communication, resistance management, and leadership challenges. Triangulation integrated findings from both data sources to develop a more robust and contextually grounded interpretation of the relationship between leadership and reformative change.

Respondents highlighted examples such as ministerial visits and high-level engagement as evidence that leadership supports the transition toward reformative correctional practices. One participant noted that "Minister visits show leadership commitment," while another observed that "when HQ leadership visit unannounced issues are addressed." These findings suggest that leadership visibility enhances institutional legitimacy and signals commitment to reform.

However, the findings also reveal a significant symbolic-operational gap. While leadership is perceived as visibly committed to reform at policy and rhetorical levels, participants indicated that reform initiatives are inconsistently implemented across operational levels.

One participant observed that leadership commitment is "mixed... some practices still punitive." This reflects the persistence of traditional punitive institutional cultures despite official reform agendas.

The triangulated findings further demonstrate that leadership within ZPCS is more effective at communicating reform direction than embedding reformative practices into institutional culture. This distinction is important because sustainable institutional transformation requires more than strategic vision; it requires consistent operationalization of reform values at all institutional levels.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings reveal a nuanced relationship between leadership and reformative change within ZPCS. The statistically insignificant direct effect of leadership on reformative change suggests that leadership functions within a complex institutional ecosystem where political support, resource availability, and organisational culture significantly mediate its effectiveness. These findings align with institutional theory, which emphasizes that organisational transformation is shaped not only by leadership actions but also by broader institutional norms, traditions, and structural constraints.

The symbolic-operational gap identified in the qualitative findings is particularly significant. While transformational leadership theory predicts that visionary leadership catalyzes institutional transformation, the ZPCS context demonstrates that institutional rigidity, entrenched punitive cultures, and resource limitations may constrain even committed leadership's ability to embed reformative practices operationally. This finding underscores the importance of adaptive and participatory leadership approaches that engage institutional members at all levels.

Leadership visibility and consistency of communication emerge as critical factors in institutional reform credibility. Correctional officers are more likely to internalize reform values when they observe sustained leadership commitment demonstrated through consistent actions rather than symbolic gestures. The persistence of mixed institutional cultures within ZPCS highlights the need for deliberate cultural leadership strategies capable of systematically challenging punitive traditions.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

First, ZPCS leadership should develop structured leadership development programmes specifically designed for correctional environments. Such programmes should incorporate transformational, participatory, and adaptive leadership competencies aligned with rehabilitation-oriented correctional management.

Second, institutional leaders should establish clear and consistent communication systems capable of translating reform vision into operational practice. Communication strategies should engage all institutional levels, from senior administrators to frontline officers, ensuring that reform values are understood and operationally embedded.

Third, leadership accountability systems should be strengthened to monitor the translation of reform commitments into institutional practice. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks should assess the alignment between leadership rhetoric and operational reform outcomes.

Fourth, government and institutional leadership should ensure adequate resource allocation for reform implementation.

Leadership effectiveness is significantly constrained where institutional resources are insufficient to support operational transformation.

Fifth, participatory leadership models should be adopted to increase institutional ownership of reform processes. Involving correctional officers and staff in reform design and implementation reduces resistance and strengthens organisational commitment.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the extent to which leadership influences the implementation of reformative change within the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service. The findings demonstrate that leadership is an important but contextually constrained determinant of reformative change within ZPCS. While leadership contributes to institutional direction-setting, visibility, and reform communication, its ability to embed reformative practices into institutional culture and daily operations remains limited by resource constraints, entrenched punitive cultures, bureaucratic rigidity, and the complexity of correctional institutional environments.

The study concludes that transformational, participatory, and adaptive leadership approaches are essential for facilitating sustainable correctional reform. However, leadership effectiveness must be understood within its broader institutional ecosystem. Sustainable reformative change within ZPCS requires not only visionary leadership but also aligned organisational systems, institutional accountability, continuous employee development, adequate resource support, and political commitment capable of sustaining long-term correctional transformation.

DISCLAIMER: The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Zimbabwe Prisons and Correctional Service or any government institution. This paper is intended for academic and policy discourse purposes only.

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