

# Leadership in a Private Higher Education Institution in Mexico: A Case Study of Tecnológico de Monterrey (Sonora Norte Campus)

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**Abstract:** Leadership for the new digital era and the 4.0 industry comes with some challenges for organizations across the board; and, in the education field, for institutions and educators alike. Understanding the need to transform and innovate processes is necessary to offer high-quality programs to students and competitive opportunities to educators. In Higher Education (HE) institutions, it is of great urgency to assign and distribute such leadership skills and tasks to educators and students, to provide and ease specific tasks at hand, and to encourage collaborators in the development of leadership skills for the classroom and to promote lifelong leadership skills for students too. In Mexico, the HE system looks to include new ways to innovate, collaborate and even compete with other national and foreign institutions for the most qualified human capital. *Tecnológico de Monterrey*, a private institution, is not only one of the top-ranking universities in Mexico, but it also has a strong emphasis on leadership development for its students and collaborators. The case of Sonora Norte Campus is a successful one, its empowerment approach toward building, nurturing, and developing quality leaders. A qualitative study was conducted to identify the practices of the institution and the leadership practices in the institution's different schools. We conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders and collaborators which resulted in understanding the leadership dynamics on the campus, the different styles of leadership among its collaborators as well as some of the challenges they face. This study provides a look into the leadership in a private HE institution, and some of its successful practices. This study proves to be relevant for other heads of HE institutions in the world (and in other *Tecnológico de Monterrey* campuses nationwide) interested in adding and researching effective leadership practices to their agendas.

**Keywords:** High school, Higher education, Educational innovation, Tec 21 Educative Model, Leadership

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## 1. Introduction

Currently, institutions looking to transform their organizations, to adhere to the 4.0 and 5.0 industries. At the head of these establishments, there is an administrative approach to operating the institution. As suggested by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), effective leadership in the educational sector is essential to achieve several target goals, such as Goal 4: Quality Education, of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) proposed by the United Nations (UN), proper organization of the institution, and adherence to international and national standards, among other outcomes.

Leadership in such institutions should be met to act by organizational and ethical principles. Within Higher Education (HE) establishments, there are different types of leadership and practices at hand, that can deliver the results in a timely and effective manner. However, these practices can become issues if proper leadership is not addressed; most importantly, when a change or an innovation is required, "change leaders are (...) responsible to make their followers put extra effort toward the implementation of change. What is more, they are expected to develop a sense of satisfaction and are perceived as effective in their leadership by their followers" (Mamo Gebretsadik et al., 2022, p. 10).

Leadership practices in HE institutions provide an outlook for effective organizational performance, from the leaders of each school or department to the educators and collaborators in their teams, to the expected outcome of the students. Leadership practices that welcome change, provide distributed leadership within their teams, and promote collaborative work can further an establishment's growth and quality, of their education and of their performance.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

As before mentioned, the current education scenario demands efficient leadership that can face challenges and transformations. Organizations such as UNESCO have suggested the need for Higher Education (HE) institutions

to aspire for sustainable leadership in their organizations. Hargreaves & Fink (2004) have noted that this type of leadership:

*“Is a shared responsibility, that does not deplete human or financial resources, and that cares for and avoids exerting negative damage on the surrounding educational and community environment. Sustainable leadership has an activist engagement with the forces that affect it and builds an educational environment of organizational diversity that promotes cross-fertilization of good ideas and successful practices in communities of shared learning and development” (p.3).*

This HE leadership focuses on the multicultural unification of values to select and combine the elements that can provide more suitable results. The concept of a leader varies depending on each culture, and so, the encouragement that a leadership style will differ as well. Van Norren & Beehner (2021) have noted that UNESCO comprises several competencies for sustainable leadership, which are: systems thinking, anticipatory, normative, strategic action, (emphatic) collaboration, critical thinking, self-awareness, and integrated problem-solving.

Leaders in universities, across the different schools and departments, influence the outcome of their collaborators and their team members which, in return, can lead to quality research and pedagogical developments by their educators, as well as positive student performance and retention rates. These leaders understand the high stakes their position entails, thus they practice collaborative and effective leadership by providing motivation and having constant communication with their team and the other school leaders of the institution.

To Toker (2022), “leaders inside institutions and universities play an essential role in displaying influence to increase organizational performance, besides, the style of leadership is also a great factor for the success of the educational system” (p. 233). This is an exercise of power, or control, that promotes positive attitudes among team members to achieve a common goal. Also, universities must prepare for continuous change and adaptability to new trends in education, through effective leadership that promotes an organizational culture and positive leadership practices (Egitim, 2022).

## **2.1 Higher Education Institutions in Mexico**

Effective leadership in HE institutions in Mexico is key for such establishments to thrive as competitive organizations in the country, as well as high-ranking establishments recognized around the world. In an organization, such as an educational one, the decision-making process should be shared, reviewed, and, if necessary, transformed to achieve the expected outcomes for its collaborators, professors, and, most, its students. In large-scale institutions, such as the *Tecnológico de Monterrey* and its twenty-six campuses throughout the country, these decisions should work with coordinators, directors, and immediate leaders on each campus.

Acosta Ochoa & Buendía Espinosa (2016) have pointed out that HE establishments in the country must be capable of identifying their ties to other organizations, and to the communities they belong to as well, to create the necessary structures and to provide the proper skills that industries need for today’s ever-changing global market. Nonetheless, limited turnarounds, improper leadership dynamics or practices, and lack of efficient communication between the stakeholders within the institution, among other aspects, can lead to poor performance from both leaders and their immediate team members.

Higher Education (HE) institutions in Mexico face statutes and norms that regulate their operations by the federal government, such as public policies placed by the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (SEP). But, private universities have more autonomy in their administration and management, but they still adhere to the achievement of the same outcomes: quality education and effective organizational performance (Acosta Ochoa & Buendía Espinosa, 2016).

Gatica et al. (2019) also note that Mexican universities see effective leadership as a source of success as an institution, as a top-ranking establishment recognized by other prestigious universities (national and international), as well as educators and students. Its success lies in the development of its employees’ leadership skills to manage the different schools and their collaborators alike. The author adds that universities in the country must have the adequate tools to transform their organization, include, or become, an international institution by improving its leadership practices, dynamics, and commitment to the expected outcomes.

In Mexico, the different schools within universities are led by professors who, with time, can get and develop leadership practices that suit their expected outcomes. If executed and by encouraging effective leadership

practices, these academic leaders can be able to manage knowledge and development, and at times innovate in their area of expertise.

## **2.2 The Concept of Practice in a Social Structure (HE Institution)**

Higher Education establishments share a set of statutes, goals, attitudes, and behaviors, among other aspects; thus, creating a sort of 'microcosmos', or rather a social space, that expects its employees to commit to the organization, or cultural, 'rules'. To belong to this space, the stakeholders at hand (the employees) must adopt, and adhere to, these rules. HE leaders that look out for their institutions' performance, and ranking, understand that their approach to their immediate staff (in this case, educators, and staff alike) must be welcoming, inclusive of change, but effective.

In this pursuit of effective leadership, the different leaders within the institution, oftentimes, may compete for power, control, or hierarchy. This competitiveness is part of the establishment or field of Higher Education, whether it is recognized by themselves or from the outside in; this power struggle can 'determine' the interests of the social space. Bourdieu (1976, 1977, 2001) describes in his practice theory, that such actions by the individual leaders can be understood by their intentions of "becoming or staying current [in the field]" (p.115).

This study incorporated Bourdieu's concepts of a social structure, the institution, to comprehend the field where the leaders stand (each school the institution holds), their practices (habitus) as heads, and, the set of strategies, networks, and personal trajectory within the institution (capital). These three components were able to provide an understanding of the leadership practices at a Higher Education institution.

## **3. Empirical Study Design**

Our qualitative study, with an exploratory approach, focused on understanding the practices of leaders at a Higher Education institution in the northwestern region of Mexico. This meant comprehending the structure of their 'field' (their school or department), their dynamics as leaders, and their knowledge, or capital, about their area of expertise (Bourdieu, 1976; 1977). We conducted the study in a private Higher Education institution (*Tecnologico de Monterrey*) in the northwestern region of Mexico, in Hermosillo City in the State of Sonora, during the 2023-1 semester.

To provide context for the institution, *Tecnologico de Monterrey* based on a national model, ranks as one of the top leading universities in the country. The university is governed by an Assembly of Associates. This assembly consists of several vital actors and stakeholders such as national entities, professors, and experts of the institution within. Also, to the assembly, various boards protect and aid private institutions. The following are some of them: board of directors, board of trustees, advocacy councils and committees, local boards of trustees, and extra boards and committees. All the entities mentioned aim to provide quality education in the organization.

In this study, we focused our attention on the Sonora Norte campus of the *Tecnologico de Monterrey*, which belongs to the Western Region of the institution. The campus has seven schools and one Academic Services Department. The schools are the following: Prepa Tec (High School); LIFE (leadership and student development); the School of Architecture, Art, and Design (EAAD); the School of Humanities (EHE); the School of Engineering and Sciences (EIC); the School of Business (EN) and the School of Economics, Law, International Relations and Government and Public Transformation (ECSSG).

In recent years, the campus has seen a growth in student enrollment (both in undergraduate programs and its High School program). This has helped the expansion of the facility of the campus: an Innovation Center will begin construction in the upcoming months, high-end sports facilities were recently completed and the proposal for an added building for the High School is in the works.

For our study, we invited the leaders of each school and of the Academic Services Department, from the Sonora Norte campus, to take part in a semi-structured interview. This invitation was requested by way of their institutional email, where they were informed of the duration of the interview (approximately thirty minutes) and the study's goal; they were made aware that their participation was voluntary, and that their identities would remain anonymous, following the ethical guidelines of the institution. Of the eight participants invited, only five volunteered. The participants that agreed were from different schools and departments at the time of the study; their school is not disclosed to protect their identities.

One of the authors conducted the interviews with all the participants and recorded the video and the audio of each conversation that was held via Zoom digital platform (this was due to time constraints the participants had). We collected more than three hours of recordings, which allowed us to conduct this exploratory study.

Our initial purpose was to have all the leaders from the schools at the campus take part, but, three leaders from different schools were unable to take part now in the study, due to conflicting schedules; nonetheless, they agreed to be interviewed at a later moment during the 2023-2 semester. The interviews were guided by concepts from Bourdieu's practice theory (1976, 1977), which encompasses the concepts of field, *habitus*, and capital. With this in mind, we created and validated a script for the interviews, based on dimensions, categories, and subcategories created by Bourdieu, with experts in the field of Social Sciences (see Table 1). We included another dimension to the script, based on Tejada's (1998) innovation theory, to explore their conception of innovation and to identify if they perceived their leadership as innovative.

**Table 1: Dimension and categories of the semi-structured interview guide for participants about their practices as leaders in their school at the Tecnológico de Monterrey, based on Bourdieu's practice theory (field, habitus, capital)**

Dimension	Category	Subcategory	Questions
<b>Field</b>	Structure of the field of their school	Rules of the discipline	How is work done in your discipline? (Is it coordinated, do people perform their tasks individually?)
		Tensions	Does this way of performing one's work generate tensions among other people in the discipline?
		Knowledge monopoly, prestige, and position in the organization	Do you enjoy prestige in your discipline, school, and the local community?  How, or by way of whom, did you first begin your career in the institution?
		Interests, shared values (history)	What is the linkage between your school, or discipline, with the local community?
<b>Habitus</b>	Perception of the discipline and socialization of procedures	Forms of leadership practices according to the school and ways of appropriation of leadership practices	How are your normal workdays?  What do you do or what strategies do you implement to perform your leadership role?  What is the most complicated part of your role as a leader in your school?  What is the most rewarding and the least rewarding part of working in this institution?
<b>Capital</b>	Economic Capital	Projects, funding, networks or groups, trajectory, experience acquisition, knowledge, and leadership strategies.	What strategies do you use to gain funding in your discipline or school?  What conditions your leadership in your discipline or school?

Dimension	Category	Subcategory	Questions
	Social Capital	Networks, academic bodies, and research groups.	Do you belong to national or international networks or groups?
	Cultural Capital	Incorporated: formative trajectories. Learning the rules, acquisition	How and when did you begin your leadership role in the institution?
		Objective: academic production: books, articles, cv, etcetera. Material support: financed projects, and initiatives	Literature research and institutional reports and statutes.
		Institutionalized: diplomas, titles, recognition (cv), etcetera	How important is the Higher Education institution where one studies?
<b>Innovation</b>	Innovation	Processes of continuous improvement to identify useful changes for the discipline (Tejada, et al., 2019).	What is innovation? and how important is it for you? How do you consider that you are innovating in your leadership role in your discipline?

Once we conducted the interviews, we organized the information recovered from the conversations with the aid of one of the authors, we coded the information, provided an identifier to each participant (1, 2, 3, 4, and 5), and proceeded to review the coded interviews. While organizing the information from the interviews, we gathered more data from the participants through the institutional platform Mitec (see Table 2), such as years in the institution, years in their current leadership position, and the size of their team (we must note that in some cases, their team was a national team made up of members from different campuses but had also collaborators in their campus that they were in charge of).

**Table 2: Participants Profile**

Participant	Gender	Seniority in the organization	Seniority organizational Leadership	Collaborators in charge of the Sonora Norte campus	Size of team
1	Male	2013	2021	7	66
2	Male	2013	2021	14	14
3	Male	2014	2017	18	18
4	Female	2014	2020	77	77
5	Female	2002	2017	6	109

The duration of the interviews ranged from twenty-seven to forty-four minutes. There were two female participants and three males; despite this, all the leadership roles in the institutions' seven schools and one Academic Services Department are distributed in gender (four are led by women and the other four by men).

The participants were able to share during the interviews their leadership journeys, their development, and growth within the HE institutions as well as reflect on the positive outcomes they have experienced in their current roles, which were positive. All the audio recordings were reviewed and ensured that the answers provided during the interviews remain anonymous (some characteristics of the leaders were left out, as well as the names of the participating schools in the study). The driving question of the study: what are the practices of the leaders in a private Higher Education (HE) institution? Provided us with a guide to further analyze their dynamics as leaders in their schools, and to identify their perception of innovation in their leadership.

Some limits of the study, as expected, were about the depth of the answers from the participants. We understood that having an administrative position as the one they had at the time of the study, could limit their answers. The interviewer who conducted all the semi-structured interviews had more familiarity with the participants and was able to establish a proper rapport; nonetheless, most of them kept answers short without delving into specifics, which can result in biases due to their institutional position at the time of the study.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

Our exploratory approach provided us with an understanding of the practices of leadership in the different schools and departments of the Sonora Norte campus at *Tecnologico de Monterrey*, in the northwestern region of Mexico. There is a shared understanding among the participants that their leadership practices are aligned with the national and regional areas of the institution, and that their practices promote collaboration and communication, which they attribute as keys to their success as leaders in their schools. When referring to innovation, all the participants, except one, believed that they were innovating in their leadership in their discipline or school.

All the participants shared that the work in their school, or department, was coordinated through constant communication among the collaborators on campus. They made emphasis on the fact that they understood the common goals that the national coordination shared, but they were flexible in reaching them by providing freedom on how to achieve them. They viewed their work as a collaborative effort between their leadership, and their team, and all the participants acknowledge the amount of freedom their team must achieve tasks at hand, without micromanaging them. The consensus among the participants reflects a sense of understanding their teams and trusting them with reaching the goals needed in their schools.

About tensions due to their leadership in their discipline or school, they mentioned that the tension, or conflict, comes from the stress generated by the amount of work they have, but not by the work environment. Other comments from two participants had to do with the size of their school on the campus and the limited budgets they had to work with. In their case, their in-campus team was small, which meant that they had to have two or three administrative roles at the same time, also to their teaching activities. These participants also noted that they had to be strategic when referring to their school's budget; since they did not have the same amount of budget to execute their school's activities and events. One participant mentioned the following:

*"No, there aren't tensions between the collaborators in [my school or department], but what does stand out is the stress due to the [fast-paced] rhythms and the high amount of work there need to be executed in short periods".*

The participants recognized that their contributions as leaders in the institution had been acknowledged by their peers, which can be translated as them performing effective leadership practices. This can confirm that some leadership practices can be obtained by experience or by reproduction (Bourdieu, 1977); this experience can be attributed, in the case of the participants, to their institutional antiquity and their understanding of the goals that their school and institution need. We must note that the antiquity of the participants in their current leadership role was less than six years old, but their antiquity in the institution ranged from nine to twenty-one years. Also, some of them mentioned that they had previous leadership roles in the campus, that led them to the position they have today.

Participants shared that their workload meant that, in some instances, they stay overtime, or they continue working in their homes. Yet all mentioned that some periods during the year, or semester, are more hectic than others. They mentioned that by having a clear understanding of what they need to achieve, meeting up (weekly)

with their teams, and having constant communication among them and with other schools on the campus, they can reach those expected outcomes.

Participants commented that they believed they were innovating in their leadership by implementing new initiatives in and outside of the institution, with their communities and regions. Only one participant mentioned that his school or department did not have a direct linkage with a social initiative. As mentioned previously, all the participants agreed that their leadership was innovative except one participant; this participant acknowledged that their school or department has events, actions, and processes that motivate and that are different from others, not new, but that due to the fast-paced environment was not able to innovate through their leadership as the participant would like to. They mention that innovation has a reflection process that, in their case, was not possible to do now of the study.

## 5. Conclusions

In this paper, we aimed to explore the leadership practices in a Higher Education (HE) institution, *Tecnologico de Monterrey*, Sonora Norte campus. In education, leadership practices determine institutional success; this can be determined by the amount of student retention, performance, and graduation rate. Throughout our interviews, the interviewees mentioned how their experience improved when prioritizing different tasks, adapting to changing surroundings, and identifying areas for growth.

The results state that an influential leader embraces change, and guides others toward professional growth. By persuading others to work towards a shared goal as a team, leadership promotes a space for sharing ideas and opinions and encourages a culture where individuals feel valued and motivated to cultivate themselves. It is crucial to study leadership to nurture future leaders and develop skills that foster them. It is imperative to expand this study to other campus leaders and the public HE sectors as well. Thus, a broader understanding of leadership practices can be acquired.

### *Declaration of interest*

This is to acknowledge that the authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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