

**Contextualizing a problem-solving and decision-making model in a state college
in Masbate, Philippines**

Arsenio D. Ocariza*

College of Education, Dr. Emilio B. Espinosa Sr. Memorial State College of Agriculture and Technology, Mandaon, Masbate, Philippines

Bernard M. Barruga

School for Graduate Studies and Research, Dr. Emilio B. Espinosa Sr. Memorial State College of Agriculture and Technology, Mandaon, Masbate, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Research on gender and educational leadership has produced mixed findings, and few studies have built leadership models from the conditions of resource-constrained Philippine higher education institutions. This study examined how gender roles shape the problem-solving approaches and decision-making styles of school leaders in a state college in Masbate, Philippines. It also identified the strategies these leaders use in managing conflict and developed a contextualized Problem-Solving and Decision-Making (PSDM) model from the findings. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed. Eight school leaders, four male and four female, served as deans, directors and department heads, and were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed individually using a validated guide. Transcripts and field notes were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that gender shapes emphasis and expression rather than capability. Male leaders described systematic, policy-anchored and results-oriented approaches centered on institutional performance, compliance and efficiency. Female leaders described democratic, empathetic and harmony-building approaches centered on stakeholder welfare, inclusion and relational continuity. Both groups converged on consultation and collaboration, which emerged as the dominant institutional practice regardless of gender. Participants also attributed more influence to professional experience and role expectations than to gender itself. The resulting model has five interacting components: contextual awareness; analytical and reflective assessment; collaborative consultation and communication; gender-responsive decision-making; and adaptive and accountable institutional action. The study concludes that gender shapes perspective and priority without determining competence. Leadership effectiveness in this setting appears to depend on integrating rational-structural and relational-empathetic orientations.

Keywords: Contextualized leadership model, decision-making styles, gender roles, problem-solving, school leaders, state colleges.

*Corresponding author / Email: arsenio.ocariza@debesmscat.edu.ph
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INTRODUCTION

School leaders shape institutional outcomes through the decisions they make about people, resources and policy. Grissom et al. (2021), reviewing 219 studies published since 2000, found that principal effects on school outcomes are second in size only to classroom instruction. Much of that influence is exercised through routine work: leaders define what the problem is, weigh the available options and commit the institution to a course of action.

Gender is one factor that has been studied extensively without producing agreement. Social role theory holds that differences in the behavior of men and women arise from socially constructed expectations rather than from fixed dispositions (Eagly, 1987). Men are commonly associated with agentic qualities such as assertiveness and task orientation, and women with communal qualities such as empathy and collaboration. Meta-analytic evidence supports this only in part. Eagly and Johnson (1990) found no difference between female and male leaders in interpersonally oriented or task-oriented style in organizational settings, though women in that review did lead more democratically and less autocratically than men. The same pattern appeared among school principals, where the democratic-autocratic dimension produced the largest difference (Eagly et al., 1992). Later work found female leaders to be more transformational and more likely to use contingent reward, although the differences were small (Eagly et al., 2003). Gil-Espinosa et al. (2026) report a similar result among Andalusian principals, where women scored higher on collaborative leadership and men on task orientation, with both differences modest.

Two considerations complicate the reading of these differences. First, organizations are themselves gendered structures that direct men and women toward different leadership domains and evaluate the same behavior differently depending on who performs it (Acker, 1990; Ridgeway, 2001). Role congruity theory explains the resulting disadvantage as a perceived mismatch between the female gender role and the leader role (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Second, leadership behavior is contingent, and Fiedler (1967) argued that no single style is effective in all situations. Hallinger and Heck (2010) likewise found that the effects of collaborative leadership on school improvement depend on organizational conditions. Gender therefore operates alongside context, role and experience. Yazıcı (2024) found that gender moderated the relationship between principals' learning agility and decision style for only one of five styles, which suggests a narrower effect than stereotype would predict.

The Philippine setting introduces a further consideration. Filipino organizational life is strongly relational. The values of *pakikipagkapwa*, or shared inner selfhood with others, and *bayanihan*, or communal cooperation, shape how authority is exercised and how disagreement is managed (Enriquez, 1992). Tugonon and Adlawan (2025) surveyed 48 academic administrators in state universities and colleges in Region VIII. They found near-equal gender representation alongside a persistent division of function, with men concentrated in administrative and research-extension roles and women in academic affairs. Representation has therefore advanced faster than the distribution of strategic authority.

Statement of the problem

Fewer studies have built a leadership model from the conditions under which many Philippine state colleges operate. Masbate is an island province in the Bicol Region with substantial areas classified as geographically isolated and disadvantaged. Its state college leaders work with constrained budgets and uneven infrastructure, while remaining accountable to national quality assurance, audit and gender and development mandates. Jemsy et al. (2026) report that principals in comparably remote Philippine settings rely on localized curriculum work, mentoring, community collaboration and flexible leadership to sustain operations under chronic scarcity. Established decision-making frameworks such as the normative model of Vroom and Yetton (1973), and its later elaboration (Vroom & Jago, 1988), were developed in settings that assume resource conditions these leaders do not have. No localized framework currently describes how leadership decisions are made in this context or how gender figures in them.

This study therefore addressed four questions:

1. How do gender roles influence the problem-solving approaches of school leaders in a state college in Masbate, Philippines?
2. How does gender affect their decision-making styles in handling administrative and institutional challenges?
3. What strategies do male and female school leaders employ when addressing conflicts or complex issues?
4. What contextualized problem-solving and decision-making model can be developed from these findings?

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. This approach was chosen because the research questions concern how leaders experience and make sense of institutional problems, not how often particular behaviors occur.

The participants were eight school leaders from a state college in Masbate, Philippines. They comprised two deans, four directors and two department heads, divided evenly between four men and four women. Purposive sampling was used against three criteria: current service as a dean, director or department head; active involvement in administrative and institutional decision-making; and willingness to discuss their problem-solving and decision-making practice. Balanced representation of men and women was deliberate, since the research questions turn on comparison. Participants are identified throughout by codes combining gender, position and sequence. MDn1 denotes the first male dean, FDir2 the second female director and MDH1 the first male department head.

Data were gathered through one-on-one in-depth interviews using a validated interview guide anchored to the research questions. The guide maintained consistency across interviews while permitting probing and follow-up. Sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent, and field notes recorded tone, hesitation and other non-verbal cues relevant to interpretation.

Transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). The first author read the transcripts repeatedly to achieve familiarity and generated initial codes from significant statements. These codes were collated into candidate themes, which were then reviewed against the coded extracts and the full data set before being defined and named. Trustworthiness was supported through verbatim transcription and consistent

application of the coding frame. Participants' own wording was retained in the theme definitions, and field notes were used to check interpretations against the interview context.

The study observed established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Written permission to conduct the study was secured from the college administration before data collection began. Participants received a full explanation of the study's purpose and procedures and gave informed consent, including consent to audio recording. They were advised of their right to decline or withdraw at any point without consequence. Recordings, transcripts and field notes were stored securely and accessed only by the first author. Personal identifiers were removed from all research records, so that participants are distinguishable only by role-based codes. The study was not submitted to a formal institutional review board, as the college had no standing ethics review committee for social science research at the time of data collection. The authors declare no conflict of interest and received no external funding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved eight school leaders from a state college in Masbate, comprising four male and four female participants occupying dean, director, and department head positions, and the findings presented below are grounded in data gathered through in-depth interviews and interpreted using thematic analysis in direct relation to the study's objectives concerning gender roles, decision-making styles, and conflict management strategies among school administrators.

The analysis produced four themes describing how gender roles enter problem-solving practice: strategic and results-driven problem-solving, diplomatic and flexible problem-solving, democratic and consultative problem-solving, and empathetic and people-centered problem-solving, alongside a fifth theme concerned with gender-fair and contextually responsive problem-solving. Male participants framed problems as questions of structure, cause, and sustainability. One dean, an engineer by training, described problem-solving as analyzing the root cause, looking at the data, and ensuring that the solution is strong and sustainable (MDn1). This orientation reflects the agentic, task-focused disposition that Eagly and Johnson (1990) associated with masculine role expectations, and it corroborates Acker's (1990) argument that administrative roles are themselves defined in analytical and control-oriented terms. Female participants also reasoned systematically, though they applied that reasoning to gathering and weighing stakeholder perspectives rather than to diagnosing structural causes, indicating that analytical reasoning was not exclusive to male leaders and that what differed instead was the kind of evidence to which such reasoning was applied.

Collaboration emerged as the strongest point of convergence between the two groups. Female leaders articulated collaboration as a guiding principle, with one leader stating that leadership is not just about one person deciding, it is shared (FDn1), while male leaders arrived at the same practice from a different premise, treating consultation as a means of balancing perspectives and ensuring fairness before a decision is finalized. This convergence is consistent with the pattern documented by Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt (2001) and with the collaborative advantage reported among women principals by Gil-Espinoza et al. (2026), and it further reflects a cultural setting in which *pakikipagkapwa* renders unilateral action socially costly for leaders regardless of gender (Enriquez, 1992).

Empathy and relational sensitivity produced the clearest divergence between male and female leaders. Female leaders placed the human dimension of institutional problems at the center of their reasoning, with one director explaining that her experiences taught her that issues within an institution are not just administrative, that they involve people, feelings, and relationships, and that she therefore prioritizes understanding the human side of every problem

(FDir1). Male participants demonstrated relational awareness as well, but treated it as a consideration to be weighed within an otherwise structured process rather than as the organizing principle guiding their decisions. This finding suggests that the difference between the two groups lies in where empathy enters the decision sequence rather than in whether empathy is present at all, a pattern that corresponds to the tendency of organizations to direct women toward people-centered leadership work (Acker, 1990; Simpson, 2004).

Both groups nonetheless demonstrated contextual adaptability. Male leaders who described themselves as firm and policy-oriented also recognized circumstances warranting adjustment, as illustrated by one department head who allowed an accommodation so that students could graduate on time (MDH1) and who described his own style as a balance of being firm when it comes to rules and policies, but also flexible and humane when considering the welfare of the people involved (MDH1). Female leaders showed the reciprocal movement, adhering to policy while remaining attentive to its human effects. This balance between firmness and flexibility, rather than a gender-determined style, appears to underlie problem-solving practice within the institution, a pattern consistent with the contingency argument advanced by Fiedler (1967) and confirmed in school settings by Hallinger and Heck (2010).

With respect to decision-making styles, gender proved significant but non-deterministic. Male participants emphasized task completion, efficiency, and measurable results, and one dean summarized the perceived division directly, stating that they analyze the data, look at the structure, and focus on what is efficient and sustainable, and that men are on the system and result while women focus on people and process (MDn1). A female director described the same division from the other side, observing that men tend to see the task while women tend to see the context and people (FDir1). The fact that participants of both genders described the same contrast suggests a shared institutional narrative about gender that may be distinct from any actual difference in behavior. These accounts appear to describe emphasis within an evaluative frame rather than differences in capability, an outcome predicted by role congruity theory, in which the same leadership act is interpreted through expectations attached to the actor's gender (Eagly & Karau, 2002), and reinforced by status beliefs that more readily associate competence and authority with men (Ridgeway, 2001). Participants' descriptions of one another may therefore reflect how leadership is perceived within the institution as much as how it is actually performed.

Consultation again emerged as common ground in decision-making. A male director stated that he considers both sides before implementing a decision (MDir1), while a female department head preferred to ask ideas or opinions of her superiors or those leaders ahead of her (FDH1). One director argued that combining male and female perspectives produces decisions that are not only strong and effective but also fair, humane, and gender-responsive (FDir1), and participants generally framed the two orientations as complementary rather than ranked, a pattern consistent with the small but positively valued differences reported by Eagly et al. (2003). Notably, participants themselves de-emphasized the role of gender in shaping their decisions. A female department head stated explicitly that she believes it is not her gender that influences her decision-making style but rather her experience and years of service as a leader (FDH1), while acknowledging emotional and maternal instincts and maintaining that policy should not be twisted or recreated (FDH1). Male participants likewise attributed their decisiveness to expectations attached to the position rather than to gender identity. On the participants' own account, experience and institutional role outweigh gender in shaping leadership behavior, a conclusion consistent with Park's (1996) finding that gender interacts with leadership context rather than determining behavior independently, with Yazıcı's (2024) evidence that gender moderates only one of five decision styles among school principals, and

with the related conclusion of Keser Ozmantar and Gök (2024) that although women reasoned more often from personal frames and men from institutional ones in ethical decision-making, neither pattern mapped onto decisiveness or decision quality.

Four strategies for managing conflict and complex issues recurred across the interviews. The first was diplomatic and consultative resolution built on verification. A male dean described handling a task-related dispute by calling the parties' attention and asking their individual views, then interviewing colleagues to verify the accounts before convening the parties for agreement, characterizing the approach as more diplomatic (MDn1). A female department head described a structurally similar sequence, explaining that when settling a conflict between two people, she talks to them one on one first, then meets them together to settle the issue (FDH1). Both leaders establish facts privately before bringing the parties together, a sequence that protects face and reduces the risk of public escalation, consistent with the relational orientation described by Enriquez (1992).

The second strategy was empathy and stakeholder-centered judgment. A dean explained that there are times when one must go beyond what the law states because of personal consideration, and that there are many things to weigh before deciding (FDn1), characterizing her own orientation as pro-student in student matters and pro-faculty in faculty matters. A male dean framed the same disposition instrumentally, noting that all human senses must be involved in handling difficult situations (MDn1). Empathy in these accounts functions as a practical resource for conflict management rather than a departure from professional judgment, a role similar to that identified by Mahfouz (2020) in her study of how principals absorb organizational stress.

The third strategy was collaborative communication and coordination. A director who faced overlapping institutional activities resolved the problem through early coordination and communication, conducting meetings and consultations, delegating responsibilities, and maintaining open communication (FDir2). This pattern of delegation and consultation describes leadership practice distributed across roles rather than concentrated in a single office, an arrangement theorized by Spillane (2006) and empirically linked to school improvement by Hallinger and Heck (2010).

The fourth strategy, and the one most specific to this institutional setting, was accountability under resource constraint. A director explained that due to budget restrictions, gender and development programs, activities, and projects are limited, which leads to low budget utilization and resulted in the issuance of a notice of audit observation from the Commission on Audit (FDir2). She further described her responsibility to ensure that the five percent budget is properly utilized (FDir2). These findings indicate that the institution faces two constraints simultaneously, a lack of resources and accountability for failing to spend what has been allocated, a demand that generic leadership frameworks do not typically anticipate but that recurs across Philippine schools located in geographically isolated areas (Jemmy et al., 2026). Across all four strategies, male leaders leaned toward procedural fairness and female leaders toward relational and stakeholder-centered resolution, though both groups converged on communication, consultation, and fairness as the operative requirements of effective conflict management.

These three sets of findings, concerning gender roles in problem-solving, gender and decision-making styles, and strategies for managing conflict, together generated a contextualized Problem-Solving and Decision-Making model for school leaders in a state college in Masbate. The model comprises five components arranged as an iterative cycle rather than a linear sequence, since participants described returning to earlier stages as situations developed. Contextual awareness serves as the entry point, in which leaders read the institutional, cultural, and social conditions of a problem before defining it, as illustrated by participants who spoke of looking at the people, culture, and context involved (FDir2), a

prominence consistent with the collectivist orientation of the setting (Enriquez, 1992; Hofstede, 2001) and reflective of the conditions of an island institution where the range of feasible options is often narrower than the range of desirable ones. Analytical and reflective assessment follows, as leaders identify causes, examine evidence, and consider the durability of proposed solutions, with male participants expressing this as root cause analysis and structural soundness and female participants expressing it as careful weighing of perspectives and consequences, both describing analytic work that differs in the kind of evidence treated as primary. Collaborative consultation and communication is the component participants emphasized most, and it is also the point at which the gendered contrasts described earlier largely dissolve, since leaders of both genders treat consultation as obligatory rather than optional, a finding that supports Spillane's (2006) account of leadership as distributed practice and is consistent with evidence that collaborative leadership carries measurable improvement effects (Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Gender-responsive decision-making makes explicit what the first three components leave implicit, treating gender not as noise to be controlled but as a perspective to be deliberately included, a position participants themselves advanced by holding that combining orientations produces decisions that are both effective and fair, and one that carries the institution's statutory gender and development obligations into everyday decision practice rather than confining them to compliance reporting. Adaptive and accountable institutional action closes the cycle, encompassing the implementation, monitoring, and adjustment of decisions, with accountability in this setting including audit and budget utilization requirements, as the findings on notices of audit observation locate this component within the participants' working reality rather than in abstraction (Hallinger & Heck, 2010).

Taken together, these findings address the study's objectives by demonstrating that leadership effectiveness within this setting is contingent rather than universal, consistent with Fiedler (1967), that it is distributed rather than concentrated among individual leaders, consistent with Spillane (2006), and that it is gendered in expression without being gender-determined in capability, a claim consistent with the qualified meta-analytic record on gender and leadership (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly et al., 1992, 2003; Gil-Espinoza et al., 2026) and with role congruity theory's account of how difference in leadership is perceived and evaluated (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These results contribute to the field by offering a contextualized model that integrates contextual awareness, analytical assessment, collaborative consultation, gender-responsive decision-making, and adaptive institutional accountability into a single iterative framework for school leadership in a Philippine island setting, and this synthesis of findings provides the empirical and theoretical grounding for the recommendations and conclusions presented in the chapter that follows.

CONCLUSION

Gender roles influence how school leaders in this state college approach problems and decisions. The influence operates on emphasis, framing and expression rather than on competence. Male leaders foreground structure, policy and results. Female leaders foreground relationships, inclusion and human consequence. Both converge on consultation and collaboration, which function as the institution's default mode of decision-making. Participants attributed more explanatory weight to professional experience and role expectations than to gender. The contextualized PSDM model integrates these orientations across five interacting components, and it is grounded in the conditions of a resource-constrained island institution rather than imported from settings with different constraints.

Four recommendations follow. School leaders should develop analytical and relational competence together rather than treating either as a substitute for the other, since the data show effectiveness arising from their combination. Higher education institutions should institutionalize leadership development that is explicitly gender-responsive and participatory, which would move gender and development beyond compliance reporting into decision practice. Policymakers may consider integrating contextualized models of this kind into leadership training frameworks for state universities and colleges, particularly those in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas. Future researchers should test and refine the model in other Philippine higher education institutions, ideally with larger and more varied participant groups.

Three limitations bear on how these findings should be used. The study draws on eight leaders in a single state college, so the findings describe that setting rather than Philippine higher education generally. It reports the perspectives of deans, directors and department heads only, without the counterpoint of faculty, students or non-teaching personnel who experience these leadership practices from the receiving end. Several of the gendered contrasts reported here are participants' characterizations of one another as much as descriptions of their own behavior. They may therefore document how leadership is perceived in the institution rather than how it is performed. A design combining leader interviews with observation or subordinate accounts would help distinguish the two.

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