

Leadership, Job Innovation, Work Engagement, and Performance in Provincial Philippine Hotels: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
Article history: Published: February 2026 Keywords: Leadership experience Job innovation Work engagement Hospitality management Phenomenology Provincial hotels Philippine tourism	The hospitality industry has undergone substantial transformation in recent years, reshaping the nature of work, leadership practice, and performance expectations within hotel organizations. In service-intensive environments, where outcomes depend heavily on human interaction and discretionary effort, leadership is increasingly experienced through everyday relational processes rather than formal authority alone. Despite growing empirical evidence linking leadership, job innovation, work engagement, and performance, limited attention has been given to how these relationships are lived and interpreted by hotel personnel, particularly in provincial Philippine contexts. This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of hotel managers and employees in Oriental Mindoro, an emerging tourism destination in the Philippines. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion involving ten participants from small- to medium-sized hotel establishments. Analysis followed a phenomenological thematic process aimed at uncovering shared meanings and essential structures of experience related to leadership, innovation, engagement, and performance. Findings revealed leadership as a relational and emotional presence that shaped participants' confidence, willingness to innovate, and sustained engagement in daily work. Job innovation was experienced as continuous adaptation and situational improvisation driven by operational necessity rather than formal innovation systems. Work engagement emerged as a dynamic, relational state rooted in recognition, respect, and perceived fairness. Performance was understood subjectively through service quality, teamwork, and guest satisfaction rather than through standardized metrics. Across all themes, leadership functioned as an enabling force that integrated innovation and engagement as pathways to effective performance under resource-constrained conditions. The study contributes to hospitality and leadership scholarship by foregrounding lived experience and contextual meaning, extending existing models beyond statistical associations. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of relational, trust-based leadership and context-sensitive management practices in strengthening innovation, engagement, and performance in provincial hotel settings.

1. Introduction

The hospitality industry has experienced significant transformation over the past five years due to global disruptions, accelerated digitalization, labor instability, and rising expectations for service adaptability. These shifts have intensified operational pressures on hotels and redefined the nature of managerial and employee work, particularly in service-oriented environments where performance depends heavily on human interaction and discretionary effort. Recent scholarship emphasizes that sustained competitiveness in hospitality is increasingly shaped by leadership quality, employee innovation, and work engagement rather than by structural or technological resources alone (Baum et al., 2023; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2023).

Leadership in contemporary hospitality contexts is no longer understood solely as formal authority or strategic oversight. Instead, it is enacted through everyday interactions that shape how managers and employees interpret responsibility, manage emotional labor, and respond to operational challenges. Studies published since 2021 consistently demonstrate that leadership behaviors characterized by trust, ethical conduct, support, and empowerment foster conditions conducive to job innovation and engagement, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and resource constraint (Eva et al., 2021; Lin, 2024; Suliati et al., 2025).

Job innovation in hotels is increasingly conceptualized as informal and adaptive rather than planned or system-driven. Managers and employees frequently innovate by modifying service routines, reallocating tasks, and improvising solutions to meet guest

expectations amid staffing shortages and fluctuating demand (Hu et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). These adaptive practices are closely tied to how leadership is experienced in daily work, influencing whether innovation is perceived as encouraged or risky.

Work engagement has likewise been reframed in recent literature as a relational and dynamic experience rather than a stable psychological state. Engagement fluctuates based on leadership interactions, recognition, and perceived fairness, particularly in emotionally demanding hospitality roles (De Castro & Ong, 2022; Lin, 2024). Engaged managers and employees are more likely to persist, innovate, and sustain service quality despite operational strain (Jameel et al., 2025).

Within the Philippine hospitality sector, these dynamics are intensified by structural challenges such as uneven access to training, high labor turnover, and disparities between urban and provincial tourism destinations. While national tourism policies emphasize workforce development and service excellence, empirical studies in the Philippines remain predominantly survey-based and concentrated in metropolitan areas (World Bank, 2024; Dela Cruz et al., 2024). Consequently, little is known about how leadership, innovation, engagement, and performance are *experienced* by hotel managers and employees in provincial contexts.

Oriental Mindoro, an emerging tourism destination, presents a distinctive setting where hotel personnel operate within ecological sensitivity, seasonal demand, and limited institutional support. In this context, leadership is experienced not as abstraction but as a daily influence shaping confidence, initiative, and adaptive performance. The absence of phenomenological research in such provincial settings represents a significant gap in both Philippine and international hospitality literature.

In response, this study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of hotel managers and employees in Oriental Mindoro, focusing on how leadership is experienced and how it shapes job innovation, work engagement, and perceived performance in everyday hotel operations.

2. Literature Review

Recent hospitality scholarship increasingly conceptualizes leadership as a relational and experiential process rather than a purely structural or positional function. Unlike production-oriented industries, hotels operate through continuous interpersonal interaction, emotional labor, and real-time decision making, rendering leadership a lived phenomenon embedded in everyday practice. Studies since 2021 argue that leadership effectiveness in hospitality is shaped less by formal authority and more by how leadership behaviors are perceived, interpreted, and experienced by managers and employees in daily work contexts (Eva et al., 2021; Lin, 2024).

Transformational, servant, and authentic leadership frameworks dominate contemporary hospitality literature because of their emphasis on trust, ethical conduct, and empowerment. These leadership approaches have been consistently associated with higher levels of discretionary effort, psychological safety, and adaptive behavior in service environments characterized by uncertainty (Zhang et al., 2021; Jameel et al., 2025). However, scholars increasingly caution that leadership outcomes cannot be fully understood through style classification alone, as similar behaviors may be experienced differently depending on organizational culture, resource conditions, and local context.

Recent qualitative-oriented discussions highlight that leadership in hospitality is enacted through micro-level interactions such as listening, recognition, tolerance for error, and emotional support. These interactions shape employees' sense of legitimacy to act, confidence to innovate, and willingness to remain engaged under pressure (Lin, 2024). This perspective shifts leadership analysis from what leaders do to how leadership is *experienced*, reinforcing the relevance of phenomenological approaches.

Job innovation in hospitality has undergone conceptual refinement over the past five years. Rather than viewing innovation as a formalized organizational outcome, recent studies describe it as an informal, adaptive process embedded in daily work routines. Hotel managers and frontline employees innovate by adjusting service delivery, reconfiguring tasks, and improvising solutions in response to fluctuating guest demands and operational constraints (Hu et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022).

Empirical research indicates that such innovation is strongly influenced by leadership-induced psychological conditions, including autonomy, trust, and perceived support. Leadership behaviors that encourage openness to ideas and frame mistakes as learning opportunities foster sustained innovation, whereas punitive or rigid leadership suppresses adaptive behavior (Sulati et al., 2025). Importantly, innovation in hospitality is often necessity-driven, emerging from resource limitations rather than strategic planning. Recent studies also emphasize that innovation is unevenly enacted across contexts. Managers' and employees' willingness to innovate depends on how leadership behaviors are interpreted within specific organizational and cultural settings (Eva et al., 2021). This contextual variability underscores the limitation of purely quantitative models and supports calls for qualitative inquiry into how innovation is lived and understood in practice.

Work engagement has been widely examined in hospitality research since 2021, commonly defined through dimensions of vigor, dedication, and absorption. However, recent scholarship critiques static conceptualizations of engagement, arguing that engagement in service work is fluid and relational, shaped by daily leadership interactions and emotional exchanges (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2023; Lin, 2024).

Leadership styles emphasizing support, recognition, and meaningful involvement are consistently linked to higher engagement among hotel managers and employees (De Castro & Ong, 2022). In emotionally demanding environments, engagement is sustained when individuals feel valued, respected, and fairly treated. Conversely, lack of recognition and inconsistent leadership contribute to disengagement and withdrawal.

Qualitative findings in recent literature suggest that engagement is not merely an individual psychological state but a shared experience negotiated through relationships. Engagement fluctuates based on workload, leadership consistency, and perceived fairness, reinforcing the need to examine engagement as it is lived rather than solely as it is measured.

Hospitality performance research over the last five years increasingly recognizes that performance outcomes are rarely direct products of leadership alone. Instead, leadership influences performance indirectly through mediating mechanisms such as job innovation and work engagement (Zhang et al., 2021; Jameel et al., 2025). These findings align with service-dominant logic, which positions value creation as emerging through interaction rather than standardized output.

However, scholars note that performance in hospitality is often subjectively defined by managers and employees. Rather than relying exclusively on formal metrics, individuals evaluate performance through guest satisfaction, service recovery, teamwork, and the ability to maintain quality under pressure (Nguyen & Kim, 2023). These subjective interpretations are shaped by contextual constraints, emotional labor, and personal standards of professionalism.

Recent studies argue that performance meanings vary across organizational and cultural contexts, particularly in resource-constrained environments. This variability highlights the importance of capturing performance as experienced and interpreted by those responsible for delivering service.

Philippine hospitality research conducted since 2021 reflects global trends while emphasizing culturally embedded values such as relational harmony, moral responsibility, and collective resilience. Studies indicate that Filipino hotel managers and employees place high value on leadership behaviors demonstrating care, fairness, and shared accountability (De Castro & Ong, 2022; Llave & Ylaggan, 2024).

Despite these insights, the Philippine literature remains dominated by cross-sectional surveys concentrated in urban or well-developed tourism areas. There is a notable scarcity of qualitative and phenomenological studies examining leadership, innovation, engagement, and performance in provincial contexts. Emerging destinations such as Oriental Mindoro present distinct structural conditions, including seasonal demand, limited training access, and fluid role boundaries, yet these contexts remain underrepresented in empirical research.

Moreover, existing studies often infer mechanisms statistically rather than exploring how managers and employees make sense of leadership and innovation in everyday work. This gap limits the contextual relevance of leadership development initiatives and human resource interventions in provincial settings.

The reviewed literature confirms strong relationships among leadership, job innovation, work engagement, and performance in hospitality. However, three critical gaps persist. First, there is limited understanding of how these relationships are *experienced* by hotel managers and employees in their daily work. Second, the dominance of quantitative designs constrains insight into meaning-making processes underlying innovation and engagement. Third, provincial Philippine hospitality contexts remain largely unexplored.

Addressing these gaps requires a phenomenological approach that foregrounds lived experience, interpretation, and context. By examining how leadership is experienced and how it shapes innovation, engagement, and performance in Oriental Mindoro hotels, the present study responds directly to these limitations and contributes contextually grounded knowledge to hospitality leadership scholarship.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of hotel managers and employees in relation to leadership, job innovation, work engagement, and performance. Phenomenology was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of meaning as constructed through everyday experience, making it particularly appropriate for service contexts where behavior is shaped by interaction, emotion, and situational judgment (Creswell & Poth, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Ten (10) participants were purposively selected from small- to medium-sized hotel establishments in Oriental Mindoro. Participants included hotel managers, supervisors, and frontline employees directly involved in service delivery and operational decision-making. Inclusion criteria required at least one year of hospitality experience and active employment during the post-pandemic recovery period. This ensured sufficient experiential depth relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Guest et al., 2024).

Data were gathered through two qualitative methods, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and one focus group discussion (FGD) involving all participants. Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and focused on experiences of leadership, innovation, engagement, and performance. The FGD, lasting about 90 minutes, facilitated collective reflection and validation of shared experiences. Data collection was conducted in English or Filipino, depending on participant preference. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed a phenomenological thematic approach. Transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion, after which significant statements were identified and coded. These were clustered into meaning units and synthesized into themes representing the essence of participants' experiences. Bracketing was employed to minimize researcher preconceptions. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation, audit trails, and reflexive memo writing (Saunders et al., 2023).

Ethical principles of informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data security were strictly observed in accordance with current qualitative research standards (American Psychological Association, 2023).

4. Findings

4.1 Theme 1: Leadership as a Source of Confidence and Psychological Safety

Participants consistently described leadership as a critical source of confidence that enabled independent action and decision-making in daily hotel operations. Leadership was experienced not merely as directive authority but as an interpersonal presence that legitimized initiative and reduced fear of failure. When leaders demonstrated trust and openness, managers and employees felt psychologically safe to act, experiment, and take responsibility for outcomes.

One participant reflected on this experience:

“When leadership shows trust, I don’t hesitate to act. I feel that even if the decision is not perfect, the intention to improve is respected.” (Participant 3)

This narrative illustrates psychological safety as a lived condition rather than an abstract construct. Confidence emerged when participants perceived that leadership valued intention, effort, and learning over fault-finding. Similar sentiments were echoed during the focus group discussion:

“Supportive leadership gives us courage. We don’t wait to be told what to do—we take responsibility.” (FGD Participant)

Recent hospitality literature supports this experiential account. Studies show that leadership behaviors emphasizing trust, ethical consistency, and openness foster psychological safety, which in turn strengthens confidence and proactive behavior among service employees (Eva et al., 2021; Lin, 2024). Psychological safety has been shown to be especially important in hospitality contexts where decisions are made under time pressure and public scrutiny. Rather than encouraging risk avoidance, supportive leadership creates a climate where individuals feel authorized to act in the best interest of service quality.

From a phenomenological perspective, confidence in this study was not experienced as personal assertiveness alone, but as relational validation. Leadership presence shaped how participants interpreted their own legitimacy to decide and act, reinforcing the view that confidence in hospitality work is socially and contextually constructed.

4.2 Theme 2: Job Innovation as Everyday Adaptive Practice

Participants consistently framed job innovation as an everyday adaptive practice rather than as formal creativity or strategic novelty. Innovation was embedded in routine problem-solving, operational adjustments, and improvisation driven by necessity. In the context of limited staffing, fluctuating guest demands, and resource constraints, innovation became a practical response to daily challenges.

One manager explained:

“Innovation is how we survive daily operations—changing schedules, helping other departments, adjusting service flow.” (Participant 7)

This account highlights innovation as lived adaptation rather than planned initiative. Participants did not associate innovation with formal programs or new technologies but with situational judgment and flexibility. During the FGD, participants emphasized the decisive role of leadership responses to failure:

“If leaders allow mistakes as learning, innovation continues. If mistakes are punished, people stop trying.” (FGD Participant)

These experiences align with recent findings that hospitality innovation is largely informal and contingent on leadership tolerance for error and learning orientation (Hu et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Suliati et al., 2025). Leadership behaviors that frame mistakes as part of improvement encourage sustained innovation, while punitive responses suppress experimentation and reinforce routine compliance.

The phenomenological data suggest that innovation was experienced as moral responsibility rather than optional behavior. Participants innovated not to be creative per se, but to fulfill service obligations under constraint. Leadership shaped whether this adaptive effort was sustained or withdrawn, reinforcing the view that innovation in hospitality is relationally enabled.

4.3 Theme 3: Engagement as Emotional and Relational

Work engagement was consistently described as an emotional and relational experience rather than a stable state of energy or enthusiasm. Participants emphasized that engagement emerged when effort was acknowledged and when leadership demonstrated respect and understanding. Feeling valued sustained commitment even under physical and emotional strain.

One participant shared:

“Engagement comes when effort is recognized. Even when tired, you stay committed because you feel seen.” (Participant 1)

This narrative reflects engagement as an affective bond between the individual and the organization, mediated through leadership interaction. Engagement fluctuated based on daily encounters, recognition practices, and perceived fairness rather than remaining constant over time.

Recent hospitality studies support this relational interpretation of engagement. Research indicates that leadership recognition, fairness, and emotional support are among the strongest predictors of sustained engagement in high-contact service roles (De Castro & Ong, 2022; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2023; Lin, 2024). In emotionally demanding environments, engagement is maintained not through workload reduction alone but through meaningful acknowledgment and interpersonal connection.

From a phenomenological standpoint, engagement in this study was lived as dignity at work. Participants remained engaged when leadership affirmed their value as contributors rather than treating them solely as functional resources. This insight challenges static, measurement-driven views of engagement and underscores its dynamic and relational nature.

4.4 Theme 4: Innovation and Engagement as Pathways to Performance

Participants rarely defined performance using formal indicators such as productivity metrics or financial outcomes. Instead, performance was understood through the ability to maintain service quality, ensure teamwork, and satisfy guests under challenging conditions. Innovation and engagement were perceived as the means through which effective performance was achieved.

One participant explained:

“Good performance is when guests are satisfied and the team works well, even with limited resources.” (Participant 5)

This experiential definition emphasizes relational outcomes rather than numerical targets. Performance was evaluated through lived success—smooth operations, positive guest feedback, and collective effort. Participants consistently linked performance to their capacity to innovate adaptively and remain engaged despite constraints.

Recent studies confirm that leadership rarely influences performance directly in hospitality settings. Instead, leadership effects are transmitted through job innovation and work engagement, which act as behavioral and psychological pathways to performance (Zhang et al., 2021; Jameel et al., 2025). However, the present findings extend this understanding by showing how these pathways are experienced subjectively by managers and employees.

From the participants' perspective, performance was meaningful when it reflected resilience, cooperation, and service integrity. This reinforces calls in recent literature to adopt context-sensitive and experience-based approaches to performance evaluation, particularly in resource-constrained and provincial hospitality environments (Nguyen & Kim, 2023).

Taken together, the four themes reveal leadership as a relational force that integrates confidence, innovation, engagement, and performance into a coherent lived experience. Leadership shaped whether participants felt safe to act, motivated to adapt, emotionally committed, and effective in their roles. These findings deepen recent hospitality scholarship by moving beyond statistical associations and illuminating how leadership processes are lived and enacted in everyday practice.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This phenomenological study revealed leadership as a lived, relational experience that shapes job innovation, work engagement, and perceived performance among hotel managers and employees in a provincial Philippine context. Leadership was not experienced as positional authority but as daily interaction that cultivates trust, confidence, and emotional connection. These experiences enabled adaptive innovation, sustained engagement, and context-sensitive performance despite operational constraints.

Job innovation emerged as situational improvisation driven by necessity, while engagement fluctuated based on leadership recognition and respect. Performance was personally and collectively defined through service quality, teamwork, and guest satisfaction rather than formal indicators. These findings extend recent hospitality literature by revealing how established relationships among leadership, innovation, engagement, and performance are *lived and enacted* in everyday practice.

5.2 Recommendations

Hotel organizations should strengthen leadership development programs that emphasize relational competence, ethical conduct, and psychological safety. Leadership training should prioritize communication, trust-building, and recognition practices that legitimize initiative and adaptive decision-making.

Hotels are encouraged to institutionalize learning-oriented innovation practices by normalizing reflection, experimentation, and shared problem-solving. Regular debriefings and peer-learning sessions can help sustain innovation without increasing burnout. Human resource systems should recognize engagement as dynamic and relational, incorporating emotional support and fairness into supervisory practices. Performance evaluation frameworks should integrate qualitative indicators aligned with service realities, particularly in provincial contexts.

Finally, future research should expand phenomenological and comparative studies across provincial tourism destinations to deepen understanding of leadership and innovation in diverse hospitality environments.

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