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1. Long-Serving Leadership and Institutional Decline

Dr. Maguni Charan Behera

mcbehera1959@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of institutional decline that emerges during prolonged leadership, particularly under founder-leaders. Institutions, like living organisms, pass through life-cycle stages—birth, growth, maturity, and decline—and each phase demands different leadership approaches. While founders often play a crucial role in establishing vision, stability, and early success, their extended tenure can sometimes hinder institutional adaptation and renewal. Drawing on organisational theories such as the Organisational Life Cycle Theory, Founder's Syndrome, Upper Echelons Theory, and Psychoanalytic perspectives, the study analyses how long-term leadership may gradually transform mission-driven stewardship into position-centred attachment. Psychological factors such as fear of losing status, identity tied to authority, and institutional cultures that discourage succession often reinforce leadership persistence. In many Indian institutions—such as educational trusts, religious bodies, NGOs, and political organisations—this pattern leads to centralised decision-making, weak succession planning, and suppression of innovation. Over time, such conditions produce stagnation, declining credibility, and institutional fragility. The paper argues that leadership must be understood as a time-bound responsibility rather than a permanent entitlement. Sustainable institutions require mechanisms such as leadership transition, delegation, shared governance, and succession planning. Ethical traditions that emphasise timely withdrawal from authority further reinforce the importance of responsible leadership transition for institutional vitality and long-term sustainability.

Keywords: *Founder's Syndrome, Organisational Life Cycle, Leadership Tenure, Institutional Decline, Succession Planning*

Like biological organisms, institutions exhibit a life cycle comprising emergence (birth), growth, maturity, and eventual decline or dissolution (death). Organisational decline is commonly manifested through symptoms such as deviation from foundational objectives, functional inertia, narrowing of

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operational scope, erosion of innovation, workforce downsizing, and declining public relevance. Institutional death, in its strict sense, denotes complete non-existence; however, long before this stage, institutions often undergo partial decline marked by ideological shifts, restructuring of functions, or divergence from the originally envisioned goals.

This life-cycle pattern appears to be a near-universal characteristic of institutions, though its temporal span varies considerably. Some organisations decline within decades, while others sustain vitality over centuries. Of particular analytical interest is the phenomenon of institutional decline occurring during the tenure of the founder, first chief executive, or initial head of affairs. Such cases merit scrutiny because founders typically assume leadership with strong vision, commitment, competence, and a sense of mission. In many instances, early achievements are rapid and substantial. Yet empirical observation suggests that, over time, a number of institutions begin to stagnate or decline even under the continued leadership of their founders.

Paradoxically, the individual who once embodied the institution's vitality may later be perceived as contributing to its decline. This shift is not necessarily a reflection of individual failure, but often of structural and psychological dynamics inherent in prolonged leadership. An instructive analogy may be drawn from individual life: a person initially works to earn income for familial welfare, but over time may become emotionally attached to work or wealth itself. What began as a means gradually transforms into an end, leading to neglect of the very purpose it was meant to serve. Similarly, institutional leadership may evolve from mission-oriented stewardship to position-centred attachment.

Why Do Leaders Persist in Their Positions?

Leaders often remain in power for long periods due to a combination of psychological, social, and institutional factors. Over time, many leaders begin to closely associate their personal identity and self-worth with the authority of their position. Leadership becomes habitual, and exercising power feels normal and necessary rather than temporary.

Another strong factor is fear—fear of losing relevance, respect, social status, or economic security once they step down. In many cases, family members, close associates, or social networks also benefit from the leader's position, creating additional pressure to continue. When institutions lack capable or visible successors, leaders may further justify their extended tenure by believing that only they can ensure stability.

In some cases, continued attachment to leadership positions also serves as a form of emotional or social refuge. The public authority, routine, and symbolic power associated with leadership can provide shelter from unresolved personal, domestic, or relational stresses. For such leaders, the www.theresearchers.asia

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institutional role offers structure, recognition, and control that may be lacking or difficult to negotiate in private life. Stepping away from the position would require confronting personal vulnerabilities that the leadership role brings temporarily escape.

Long-term leadership often has negative consequences. Leaders who remain in position for too long may find it difficult to adapt to new ideas, changing contexts, or emerging practices. Over time, they can become surrounded by loyal followers who discourage honest feedback, leaving leaders unaware of declining performance. Constructive criticism is frequently treated as opposition, and dissenting voices are marginalised. When leaders fail to develop a second line of leadership, institutions become fragile and overly dependent on one individual.

A leader may try to hide his weaknesses from competent staff. To do this, he may promote less capable or substandard staff and place them in positions where they confront efficient employees. When unqualified staff are given authority, their poor decisions and lack of competence become visible and create confusion. This practice demoralises efficient staff, weakens teamwork, and gradually leads to a decline in overall institutional efficiency.

From an organisational governance perspective, extended leadership tenure is usually counterproductive. Regular leadership transition helps institutions renew themselves, remain adaptable, and maintain legitimacy. Mechanisms such as term limits, shared leadership, and planned succession are widely recognised as ways to balance continuity with innovation.

When these mechanisms are absent, organisations often experience stagnation, loss of credibility, and eventual decline. In some cases, this decline becomes visible only after the founder or long-serving leader steps down, when successors lack the vision, authority, or preparation to lead effectively. Such situations typically result from weak succession planning, limited leadership development, and a leader's reluctance to share power during the institution's formative years.

In sum, while leadership persistence may be sustained by personal insecurities and institutional weaknesses, it ultimately undermines the long-term vitality and sustainability of organisations.

Long tenure of founder-leaders is a common feature of many Indian institutions such as educational trusts, religious bodies, cooperatives, political parties, and voluntary organisations. In their early stages, these institutions often benefit from strong and committed leadership. Founders usually provide vision, direction, and personal sacrifice, which help institutions take shape and gain stability. However, when such leadership continues for too long, it can gradually weaken institutions instead of strengthening them. Several leadership and organisational theories help explain why this happens.

Some important theories are:

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Organisational Life Cycle Theory: This theory is propounded by Larry E. Greiner (1972) and Ichak Adises (1979). According to this theory, institutions pass through different stages of development, such as birth, growth, maturity, and decline. The proponents of the theory argue that each stage requires a different style of leadership. In the early stages, centralised control and strong personal authority are often effective. As institutions mature, they require delegation, professional management, shared decision-making, and openness to new ideas. When founder-leaders continue to govern mature institutions in the same centralised way, they prevent necessary adaptation. In the Indian context, many private universities and educational trusts illustrate this problem. Despite having good infrastructure and funding, they often stagnate because academic freedom, innovation, and institutional learning are restricted by continued personal control.

Founder's Syndrome Theory: Douglas K. Logan (1986) is the main proponent of this theory. The founder's syndrome theory explains that founders refuse to let go of authority even after the institution has stabilised. The organisation becomes closely identified with the founder's personality rather than institutional rules or systems. Decision-making remains personalised, loyalty is valued more than competence, and succession planning is ignored. The leader declares that he/she has done, not we. In India, many NGOs, religious missions, and cultural organisations function in this manner. While they may flourish under the founder's energy in the beginning, they often struggle or collapse after the founder's decline because no second line of leadership has been developed.

Upper Echelons Theory: Donald Hambrick and Phyllis Mason (1984) are proponents of this theory. The theory highlights how long-serving leaders shape institutional outcomes through their own experiences and worldviews. Over time, leaders become locked into familiar ways of thinking and may find it difficult to respond to new challenges. Prolonged tenure reduces openness to innovation, technology, and social change. In Indian public sector institutions, cooperatives, and autonomous bodies, this has often resulted in stagnation. Leaders shaped by earlier administrative cultures may resist reforms, digital systems, or new governance practices, even when the external environment clearly demands change.

Psychoanalytic Theory: Sigmund Freud is the main proponent of this theory. The theory focuses on the psychological dimensions of leadership. Long-serving leaders may develop a strong emotional attachment to power and status. Criticism is seen as a personal threat, not as constructive feedback. Such leaders tend to surround themselves with loyal followers rather than competent and independent thinkers. In Indian political parties and socio-cultural organisations, this leads to weak internal

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democracy, suppression of dissent, and concentration of power within a small inner circle. Although these arrangements may look stable from the outside, they slowly drain institutional vitality.

Leadership persistence is therefore not just an individual problem but an institutional and cultural one. In many Indian organisations, there are no clear tenure limits, succession norms are weak, and founders are treated with deep reverence. Leaders derive their identity and authority from their position, while institutions depend heavily on the leader's personal networks and legitimacy. This mutual dependence discourages leadership transition and prevents the emergence of new leaders. Over time, institutions lose flexibility, accountability, and relevance.

Long-term leadership is not inherently negative. It becomes harmful when it blocks adaptation, discourages succession, and concentrates authority in one person. Indian institutions, shaped by strong founder traditions and hierarchical values, are especially vulnerable to this problem. For institutions to remain healthy and effective, leadership must be understood as temporary, authority must be shared, and succession must be planned as a normal and necessary process rather than treated as a crisis.

Conclusion

Leadership, whether in the family, society, or institutions, is expected to be time-bound. Every role has a proper beginning and a proper end. Stepping aside at the right moment is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a measure of maturity, effectiveness, and ethical responsibility. Progress and continuity depend not only on assuming authority but also on relinquishing it when one's role has been fulfilled. Institutional decline is seldom caused solely by external challenges or individual incompetence. More often, it emerges from a misalignment between leadership tenure, organisational life cycles, and changing social conditions. When leaders remain beyond their effective period, institutions struggle to renew themselves. Innovation slows, legitimacy weakens, and future leadership remains underdeveloped. The absence of planned succession further reinforces this stagnation, as leaders come to see their continued presence as unavoidable rather than temporary.

Indian philosophical traditions offer a powerful ethical lens to understand this process. The principle of *tyāga*—renunciation after the completion of duty—has long been regarded as a marker of moral stature and social respect. In contrast, *bhoga*, or the continued enjoyment of power and privilege beyond the appropriate time, is viewed not as success but as moral decline. Reputation in this tradition is not earned by how long one holds authority, but by the willingness to relinquish it gracefully.

Within the classical *varna* framework, social roles were function-based and duty-oriented, not permanent entitlements. Authority was linked to responsibility, and withdrawal from power was seen as a necessary stage in the ethical life cycle. Although such frameworks cannot be directly applied to www.theresearchers.asia



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modern institutions, their underlying values remain relevant. Leadership gains legitimacy when it is exercised as service and relinquished with detachment.

In conclusion, sustainable institutions are built not on prolonged control but on ethical transition. Leaders who practise *tyāga*—by preparing successors and stepping aside at the right time—preserve both institutional strength and personal reputation. Those who cling to authority through *bhoga* risk not only institutional stagnation but also the erosion of their own moral standing.