

# From “Campus Thinking” to “Workplace Thinking”: Barriers and Breakthrough Strategies in the Leadership Transformation of New Professionals

**Xiaofei Li**

School of Communication,  
University of California, Davis,  
California, Davis, United States,  
95616  
xfeli@ucdavis.edu

## **Abstract:**

The transition from “campus thinking” to “workplace thinking” represents one of the most pivotal psychological and professional shifts that early-career professionals undergo upon entering full-time employment. As organizations increasingly prioritize leadership competencies among new hires, the shift from “student-dependent mindsets” to “proactive leadership orientations” has emerged as a critical determinant of career success. Notably, such transitions are not straightforward and entail a range of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral barriers for new entrants. This study seeks to identify these barriers and corresponding breakthrough strategies in the context of workplace transitions for early-career professionals. Based on ten peer-reviewed studies, this research employs systematic literature analysis and comparative analysis to synthesize existing theories and develop propositional frameworks. The findings reveal that the critical barriers are the “insufficient self-leadership awareness”, “role identity deficits”, and “resistance to organizational cultural adaptation”. Corresponding breakthrough strategies include “structured onboarding”, “targeted mentoring”, “systematic mindset restructuring”, and “managerial identity cultivation”. By unpacking these processes incrementally, this study aims to enrich leadership development theory and provide organizations with actionable insights to optimize talent development practices.

**Keywords:** school-to-work transition, leadership mindset, managerial identity work, organizational socialization, career adaptability

## 1. Introduction

In the current dynamic job market, the leadership development of new entrants has garnered growing scholarly and organizational attention. Generation Z professionals entering the workforce possess strong expertise in digital technology and creativity, but they often lack experience in navigating organizational complexities and fulfilling people management roles. According to Fang and Saks, the school-to-work transition (STWT) is more than a mere job transition; it is an “identity reconstruction” that significantly impacts job satisfaction and performance [1]. The need for companies to develop flexible and autonomous employees with leadership potential from the initial stages of employment is increasingly pressing. As Takeuchi et al. say, “This means that new graduates need to transition from ‘campus thinking’ to ‘workplace thinking’ mindset that shifts from dependence on guidance and assessment to independence and shared action [2].”

Throughout this paper, the two key research questions to be addressed are: What are the most significant obstacles preventing new employees from successfully transitioning from campus thinking to workplace thinking? What are the breakthrough strategies that can facilitate such a shift? The research adopts a systematic literature analysis approach, integrating empirical findings in current peer-reviewed journals on the topics of leadership identity, transition from education to work, and management development are integrated. Comparative analysis is employed to compare various theoretical approaches, examining core components across frameworks, such as Career Construction Theory and Identity Work Theory. It connects theoretical insights into leadership development to the adaptive processes of new employees. Practically, it provides organizations with guidelines to ensure new employees receive adequate training.

## 2. The Challenge of Transitioning from Campus to Workplace Thinking

The transition from “campus thinking” to “workplace thinking” is a profoundly complex process that requires more than mere skill acquisition. It involves redefining one’s self-concept and learning to interact effectively in professional contexts. For most new entrants, this transition is accompanied by “confusion, emotional turmoil, and mismatches between expectations and reality”, rendering the shift from “campus thinking” to “workplace thinking” particularly challenging. Campus environments are characterized by frequent guidance, structured assessments, and an emphasis on individual student performance. The workplace, by contrast, requires adaptability to change,

proactive action (rather than waiting for instructions), emotional self-regulation, and the ability to manage others to achieve collective goals.

### 2.1 Cognitive and Capability Barriers

A critical challenge lies in cognitive habits. New employees often retain “student thinking” patterns, including dependence on authority figures, a need for clear guidance, and a tendency to prioritize individual tasks over collaborative organizational objectives. Crane highlights that top performers are often promoted to managerial roles without recognizing that the thinking patterns that made them successful individual contributors differ significantly from those required for effective leadership [3]. Gentry et al. echo this finding, noting that new managers often struggle to transition from “being performers” to “being leaders”[4]. The shift from “doing” to “leading” necessitates a fundamentally new mindset that prioritizes organizing and supervising others rather than performing tasks independently. New employees may still seek approval from superiors, hesitate to take initiative, or avoid assuming leadership responsibilities in organizational settings.

Beyond cognitive barriers, capability gaps also impede leadership transformation. Career adaptability research emphasizes that professional development extends beyond technical competencies to include psychological agility and resourcefulness. Van der Horst et al. confirm that students who participate in customized career adaptation interventions, such as workshops combining self-assessment and career planning, exhibit greater confidence and job satisfaction in their initial roles [5]. This aligns with Fang and Saks, who say that “young people’s capacity to imagine their future work self is a strong predictor of job search activity, tenacity, and success [1].” The clearer one’s vision of their professional self-in-action, the more adept they are at translating that vision into practice. Conversely, new employees without a coherent professional identity often have vague career goals and struggle to apply collegiate experiences to workplace contexts. This lack of a unified professional identity dampens motivation and undermines the internal drive critical for leadership development.

### 2.2 Emotional and Identity Barriers

Emotional barriers play a critical role in hindering this transformation. Indeed, the shift from student to result-oriented professional often triggers significant anxiety and self-doubt. Takeuchi et al. identify it as the “Protean Paradox”: young newcomers value autonomy and self-direction yet feel constrained by organizational structures that limit freedom [2]. In contexts of low perceived orga-

nizational support, tensions between self-expression and conformity can lead to frustration and disengagement. As DeRue and Ashford note, leadership is not a static status, but an interactive, co-constructed identity enacted through social interactions [6]. The first key step in becoming a leader is claiming a leadership identity, which means one that requires recognition and trust from others. However, new employees may perceive this act as risky, fearing they will be seen as overstepping or presumptuous. Behaviors such as remaining silent in meetings, avoiding conflict, and downplaying their capabilities are common risk-aversion strategies that ultimately impede the development of leadership confidence.

### **2.3 Organizational Barriers and Lack of Support**

Another critical barrier stems from organizational factors, particularly the absence of structured onboarding and mentoring processes. The first few months of employment are pivotal, as new employees learn about leadership behaviors, communication norms, and organizational culture. Frögéli et al. conducted a systematic review revealing that structured onboarding processes, which integrate on-the-job training and mentorship, significantly enhance role clarity and socialization outcomes [7]. Unfortunately, many organizations treat onboarding as a mere formality, lacking such structured support. Eby et al. further confirm through meta-analysis that mentorship positively impacts protégés' job performance, motivation, and job satisfaction across youth development, academic, and organizational contexts. Ironically, a large number of new employees lack access to seasoned guidance from experts who understand organizational dynamics, leaving them to navigate the unspoken nuances of workplace interactions without support [8].

## **3. Transitioning to Leadership Mind-Sets**

Addressing these challenges requires more than training it demands complex processes of cognitive restructuring and social learning. The initial breakthrough hinges on developing a leadership mindset. Crane highlights that most initiatives that most leadership development initiatives are counterproductive, as they focus on modifying behaviors such as communication, delegation without addressing the underlying cognitive models that drive those behaviors [3]. New employees need opportunities to explore assumptions about authority, teamwork, and responsibility. Reflective practices, such as journaling and guided group discussions, can help them recognize how student expe-

riences have shaped their professional attitudes. Gentry et al. suggest that organizations should design structured initiatives focused on people management, enabling new professionals to develop frameworks for translating technical expertise into relational efficacy [4]. These initiatives should prioritize emotional intelligence development, helping new leaders understand that leadership learning begins with self-awareness and extends to understanding others.

### **3.1 Improved Career Adaptability and Professional Development**

Career adaptability development is another key strategy. Drawing on Savickas' Career Construction Theory, Van der Horst et al. identify four core resources for adaptability: concern for the future, sense of control over one's behavior, openness to possibilities, and confidence in navigating change [5]. Organizations can design modules to strengthen these resources, framing challenges as learning opportunities. Fang and Saks emphasize that defining "one's future work self" acts as a "motivational compass" to boost resilience and tenacity [1]. Best practices include one-on-one coaching, career visioning exercises, and quarterly reflection sessions to review progress toward long-term goals. Critically, these practices integrate leadership development into daily work routines rather than treating it as a separate training activity.

### **3.2 The Role of Organizational Culture and Support Systems**

Organizational culture plays a decisive role in enabling such personal development. Takeuchi et al. highlight that organizational socialization is enhanced when new employees perceive alignment between their personal development and organizational support structures [2]. Organizational learning centers can operationalize this by establishing clear development plans for new hires. Frögéli et al. emphasize that well-structured learning environments with mentorship yield stronger socialization outcomes [7]. Kowtha adds that socialization is faster and more effective when job requirements align with employees' educational backgrounds [9]. Collaborative efforts between educational institutions and employers can help bridge the theoretical-practical gap, ensuring students develop realistic expectations about management and workplace dynamics.

### **3.3 Managerial Identity Work as a Development Path**

As new entrants progress through these processes, managerial identity work becomes increasingly important.

Westen et al. define managerial identity work as a process through which managers continually negotiate their self-perceptions and others' perceptions of their leadership roles [10]. Their systematic review identifies four core dimensions of this process: knowledge, awareness, motivation, and privilege—all of which shape the development and maintenance of leadership identities. Organizations should facilitate reflective conversations with early-career employees to explore these dimensions, balancing authenticity and adaptability. Discussing topics such as power dynamics and inclusion communicates to young leaders that organizational processes involve ethical and effective management of power—a critical competency for leadership success. DeRue et al. note that leadership identities are co-constructed through mutual recognition; thus, organizations should create “low-stakes contexts” for young professionals to practice leadership behaviors without fear of failure [6].

### 3.4 Role Of Mentoring as Long-Term Support

Mentorship is a key enabler of sustained leadership transformation. Eby et al. find that mentored individuals exhibit higher motivation and psychological well-being compared to their unmentored peers [8]. Mentorship not only accelerates skill development but also fosters emotional intelligence and social learning critical for leadership. Effective organizational mentorship programs should go beyond traditional hierarchical models to include reverse mentorship, allowing young employees to share technical and cultural expertise with senior management. This two-way knowledge exchange strengthens organizational agility while supporting the leadership growth of new entrants.

### 3.5 The Interdependence of Individual and Organizational Growth

Collectively, these strategies highlight that the transition from campus to workplace thinking is best supported by both individual and environmental drivers. From an individual perspective, cultivating a leadership mindset, enhancing adaptability, and developing a managerial identity lay the psychological foundation for senior leadership roles. From an organizational perspective, structured onboarding, supportive culture, and mentorship initiatives enable new hires to build the confidence and foresight needed to embark on leadership journeys.

Therefore, the leadership transformation process for early-career professionals reveals the interdependence of development and learning. “Leaders are made, not born; instead, leaders are made by experiences that are likely to counteract their assumptions and boost potential.” As young professionals navigate workplace uncertainty, “they

come to understand that authority is less about giving directions and more about giving guidance.” They transform from people who need to be led to those who lead others. The transition from “campus thinking” to “workplace thinking” is therefore a process of development and transformation rather than mere behavioral change.

## 4. Conclusion

The transition from “campus thinking” to “workplace thinking” is a profound transformation that extends far beyond acquiring new technical skills, demanding fundamental shifts in mindset and self-understanding. This analysis reveals that psychological and organizational barriers collectively hinder young professionals from emerging as effective leaders within the workplace culture. Entrenched campus thinking patterns, transitional uncertainty, and inadequate organizational integration processes collectively impede this development. Yet, evidence confirms that with targeted support mechanisms to navigate these transitions, young professionals can reframe their self-concept from dependent learners to proactive agents of change.

Leadership transformation requires shifts at both the individual and organizational levels. Organizations that cultivate supportive ecosystems and implement structured mentoring processes instill in new employees a value system centered on collective success rather than individual achievement. When encouraged to prioritize shared goals, these employees gain confidence in influencing others and owning outcomes, which evolves into organizational assets that strengthen leadership pipelines and foster innovation cultures. Leadership development, in this sense, is a socially constructed process shaped by individual effort and organizational nurture.

Though this research provides critical insight, it acknowledges that leadership transformation is neither linear nor universal. Cultural contexts and individual dispositions uniquely shape each professional's adaptive journey. Future research spanning diverse cultural settings could further explore how such factors modulate leadership development trajectories. Regardless, the findings underscore a core truth: authentic leadership potential is realized through the convergence of education, reflection, and an organizational environment that empowers individuals to lead with purpose, empathy, and resilience.

## References

- [1] Fang, R. T., & Saks, A. M. (2022). A self-regulatory model of how future work selves change during job search and the school-to-work transition. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 138, Article 103783. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2022.103783>

- [2] Takeuchi, N., Takeuchi, T., & Jung, Y. (2021). Making a successful transition to work: A fresh look at organizational support for young newcomers from an individual-driven career adjustment perspective. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 128, Article 103587. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2021.103587>
- [3] Crane, B. (2022). Leadership mindsets: Why new managers fail and what to do about it. *Business Horizons*, 65(4), 447-455. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2021.05.005>
- [4] Gentry, W. A., Logan, P., & Tonidandel, S. (2014). Understanding the leadership challenges of first-time managers strengthening your leadership pipeline. *Center for Creative Leadership*, 18, 1-17.
- [5] van der Horst, A. C., Klehe, U.-C., Brennkmeijer, V., & Coolen, A. C. M. (2021). Facilitating a successful school-to-work transition: Comparing compact career-adaptation interventions. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 128, Article 103581. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2021.103581>
- [6] DeRue, D. S., & Ashford, S. J. (2010). Who will Lead and Who will Follow? a Social Process of Leadership Identity Construction in Organizations. *The Academy of Management Review*, 35(4), 627-647. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.35.4.zok627>
- [7] Frögéli, E., Jenner, B., & Gustavsson, P. (2023). Effectiveness of formal onboarding for facilitating organizational socialization: A systematic review. *PloS One*, 18(2), e0281823. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0281823>
- [8] Eby, L. T., Allen, T. D., Evans, S. C., Ng, T., & DuBois, D. L. (2008). Does mentoring matter? A multidisciplinary meta-analysis comparing mentored and non-mentored individuals. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 72(2), 254-267. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2007.04.005>
- [9] Kowtha, N. R. (2011). School-to-work transition and newcomer socialisation: The role of job-related education. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 17(6), 747-763. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1833367200001152>
- [10] Westen, W., & Graça, M. (2024). Managerial identity work: a systematic literature review with a conceptual model. *Management Review Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-024-00481-6>