

Original Research Article

## Leadership development from an organizational behavior perspective: A case study of Zhen Huan in *Empresses in the Palace*

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**Abstract:** Leadership development is a central topic in organizational behavior research. Using Zhen Huan in *Empresses in the Palace* as a case, this study applies organizational behavior theory to examine the process of leadership development through qualitative case analysis. The findings indicate that Zhen Huan's leadership evolved through three stages: Organizational adaptation, relationship and resource integration, and strategic leadership. Her development demonstrates that leadership is not an innate trait but a dynamic capability cultivated through continuous learning, environmental adaptation, and strategic decision-making. This study extends leadership research by introducing a classic television drama as a management case and provides practical implications for leadership development in contemporary organizations.

**Keywords:** organizational behavior; leadership development; case study; television drama; *Empresses in the Palace*

### 1. Introduction

Leadership development is a central topic in organizational behavior because leadership is increasingly recognized as a dynamic capability rather than an innate personal trait.

*Empresses in the Palace* provides a representative case for examining leadership development through Zhen Huan's transformation from an inexperienced newcomer to an influential leader.

Previous studies have mainly focused on literary and communication perspectives, while leadership development remains underexplored. This study applies organizational behavior theory to examine Zhen Huan's leadership development.

### 2. Literature review

Leadership development is widely regarded as a dynamic process shaped by organizational learning, environmental adaptation, and practical experience rather than an innate personal trait. Contemporary organizational behavior emphasizes that effective leadership develops through continuous interaction with organizational contexts.

Case study is an effective approach for examining leadership development because it illustrates leadership behaviors within specific organizational settings. As one of the most influential Chinese television dramas, *Empresses in the Palace* presents a complete leadership development process through the transformation of Zhen Huan. Although previous studies have mainly focused on literary and communication perspectives, leadership development in the drama has received limited attention. Therefore, this study applies organizational behavior theory to examine Zhen Huan's leadership development and its implications for contemporary organizations.

### 3. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine the leadership development of Zhen Huan in *Empresses in the Palace*. Case study is widely recognized as an effective method for exploring complex organizational phenomena within specific contexts. As one of the most influential Chinese television dramas, *Empresses in the Palace* provides a complete leadership development process, making it an appropriate case for organizational behavior research.

The analysis is guided by organizational behavior theory and focuses on three dimensions of leadership development: Adaptive capability, relationship management, and strategic decision-making. The leadership characteristics demonstrated by Zhen Huan at different stages are systematically examined to reveal how leadership evolves through environmental adaptation, organizational learning, and resource integration. Rather than evaluating the fictional narrative itself, this study emphasizes the managerial implications reflected in the leadership development process.

## 4. Leadership development of Zhen Huan

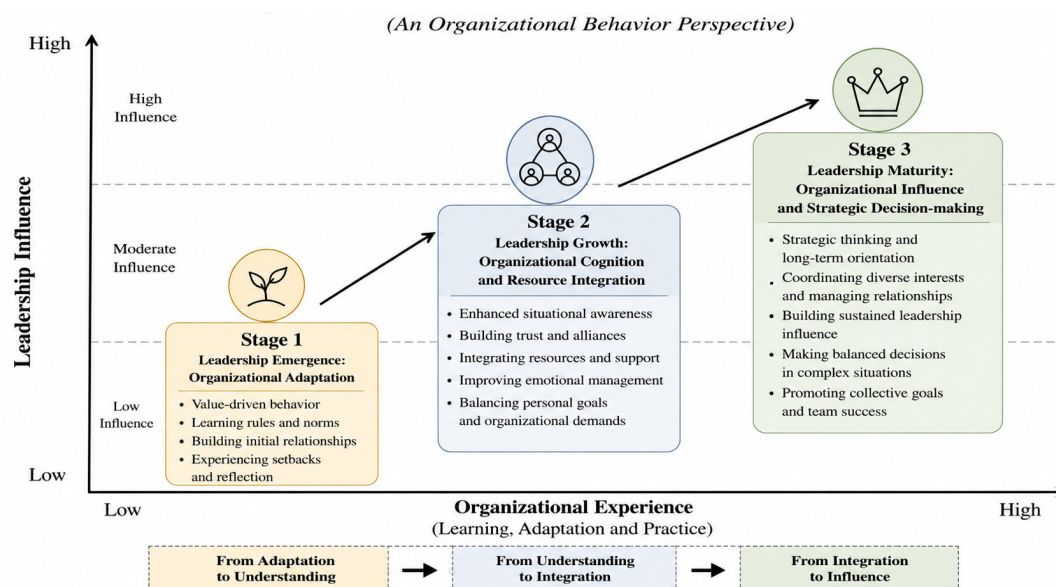


Figure 1. Leadership development model of Zhen Huan.

### 4.1. Embryonic stage: Organizational adaptation and behavioral exploration

Leadership development begins with adaptation to a new organizational environment rather than the acquisition of authority. At this stage, individuals learn organizational rules, establish interpersonal relationships, and adjust their behaviors to environmental expectations. Zhen Huan's early experience in the imperial court represents this initial stage.

Initially, Zhen Huan relied on sincerity and trust to build interpersonal relationships. Although these qualities earned recognition, they also revealed her limited understanding of organizational rules. Facing power conflicts, she often acted according to personal values rather than organizational realities, which weakened her organizational position.

From an organizational behavior perspective, her leadership remained at the stage of adaptation. She focused on understanding the environment instead of influencing it and lacked the ability to coordinate relationships or integrate resources. Continuous organizational conflicts gradually reshaped her understanding of leadership, preparing her for the next stage of development.

### 4.2. Growth stage: Organizational cognition and resource integration

Following organizational adaptation, leadership development entered a growth stage characterized by organizational cognition and resource integration. During this stage, Zhen Huan gradually shifted from passive adaptation to active organizational coordination. She developed a deeper understanding of organizational dynamics and began to integrate interpersonal resources to strengthen her influence.

After returning to the imperial court, Zhen Huan no longer relied solely on personal morality but adjusted her strategies according to organizational circumstances. She established cooperative relationships with trustworthy allies, strengthened organizational coordination, and gradually built a stable support network. These relationships became important resources for subsequent leadership development.

Meanwhile, continuous organizational learning improved her situational judgment and strategic awareness. Through practical experience, she became more capable of coordinating relationships, integrating resources, and responding flexibly to organizational challenges. From the perspective of

organizational behavior, this stage represents the transition from organizational adaptation to organizational coordination and provides the foundation for mature strategic leadership.

#### 4.3. Mature stage: Organizational influence and strategic decision-making

Leadership reached its mature stage when Zhen Huan became capable of influencing organizational decisions and maintaining organizational stability. At this stage, leadership was reflected not only in personal competence but also in strategic judgment, resource coordination, and long-term organizational influence.

With accumulated experience and established interpersonal networks, Zhen Huan gradually shifted from responding to conflicts to shaping organizational outcomes. She coordinated alliances, integrated organizational resources, and adopted flexible strategies to address environmental uncertainty. Rather than relying solely on authority, she exercised leadership through communication, trust, and strategic decision-making.

From the perspective of organizational behavior, this stage represents the transformation from organizational coordination to strategic leadership. Zhen Huan's development demonstrates that leadership is a dynamic capability cultivated through continuous adaptation, organizational learning, and strategic practice. The case suggests that sustainable leadership depends on the integration of individual competence, interpersonal relationships, and organizational strategy.

### 5. Discussion

The findings suggest that leadership development is a dynamic process shaped by organizational adaptation, continuous learning, resource integration, and strategic decision-making rather than an innate personal trait. By applying organizational behavior theory to *Empresses in the Palace*, this study extends previous research beyond literary and communication perspectives and demonstrates the value of television dramas as case materials for leadership research. The findings also provide practical implications for leadership development by emphasizing adaptive capability, organizational learning, and strategic thinking in complex organizational environments.

### 6. Conclusion

This study examined Zhen Huan's leadership development from an organizational behavior perspective and demonstrated that leadership is a dynamic capability developed through continuous interaction with organizational environments. By introducing a classic television drama into leadership research, the study expands the application of case study in organizational behavior. Future research may compare different television dramas or real organizational cases to further examine leadership development across diverse organizational contexts.

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