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Between worlds of liminal spaces: A narrative of new career struggles

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Abstract

Intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) work with governments around the world to tackle urgent development issues. Major IGOs in India such as UNDP, UNICEF and World Bank work with central and state governments to implement multi-stakeholder programs for poverty reduction, health care, education and women's empowerment. IGOs provide expertise, capacity building and funding. The implementation of projects supported by IGOs requires dedicated staff performing specialised tasks such as project management, analytical work, consulting and coordination. This often necessitates working closely with several agencies and stakeholders, navigating complex bureaucracy and local systems as an outsider.

This paper is based on the first author's career transition experience of moving from a corporate role in Dubai to managing an IGO supported rural community and capacity development initiative. As an appointed IGO project manager posted at an Indian district government office, key roles included community needs assessment, training of volunteers and early coordination to achieve stated objectives. However, it also required building working relationships with various stakeholders such as state, local community and political parties, as well as employees at local and regional government offices, local volunteers and party leaders and of course IGO heads. To fit into this new geography of roles and responsibilities, there were intense personal challenges of adaptation and identity re-negotiation.

There were, however, different liminal spaces emerging in relation to different actors and their organizational structures. Experiences with the local office staff showed the stark contrast between an efficient corporate culture and the bureaucratic culture of the local government, where protocols dictate this is how things are done here. Interactions with the local and regional governmental agencies also showed a liminal space in relation to idealism versus enforced pragmaticism. Experiences with volunteers showed the tension between ideals and reality. The enthusiasm of mentoring that would eventually dissipate as time went on showcased the resistances faced, and declining volunteer involvement and performance added to a sense of frustration. Liminal space also showed up in negotiations as a non-governmental employee amid complicated governmental systems, showing the tension between perceived and real power and influence. Efforts of efficiency often clashed with the struggles of bureaucracy. These liminal spaces illuminated disorientation, powerlessness, and the struggle to give up self-conception while facing the responsibilities of a new role.

Narrative analysis foregrounds subjectivity to highlight nuanced insights of major career transitions and lived liminality experiences. More specifically, the concept of liminal space reveals the complexity of navigating destabilizing transitions with empathy, integrity, and growth—highlighting the inner work needed to transcend boundaries and reinvent oneself. An analysis of liminal spaces provides specific insights into multi-dimensional conversations, identity work, emotive work and meaning making, to reorient the self across multiple cultures and roles.

Introduction

Navigating major career transitions can be a profoundly destabilizing yet transformative experience. Periods of shifting between roles and occupational identities have been characterized as liminal spaces, marking disorienting yet potentially growth-inducing turning points (Borgen & Maglio, 2007; Nicholson, 1984). The career transition was also a process involving different modes of learning, leading to the conclusion that the career transition process is essentially a learning process in which individuals acquire new perspectives and meaning in a new role (Kim, 2014). The existing literature points to several key factors that lead to career transitions. Globalization and technological advances are disrupting many traditional careers and eliminating roles (Baruch, 2004). Organizational restructuring and downsizing also often force employees to transition to new occupational roles (Amundson et al., 2010). Individual factors like seeking improved work-life balance or desiring more meaningful work can also motivate voluntary transitions (Carless & Arnup, 2011; Niendorf et al., 2022).

Past research has examined various types of employment transitions, including school-to-work transitions (Chesters, 2020; Irwin & Nilsen, 2018; O'Reilly et al., 2019), transitions between unemployment and employment (Gash, 2008; Scherer, 2004), and transitions around retirement (Bennett & Möhring, 2015). However, less attention has been paid to dramatic career shifts involving migration across vastly different organizational and national cultures. By examining liminal experiences, important insights can be gained into processes of identity work, adaptation, and meaning-making when continuity is disrupted. Drawing from anthropological concepts, liminality refers to the ambiguous phase during rites of passage when individuals undergo an "in-between" state prior to identity reintegration (Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1967). Beech (2011) conceived liminality as an identity workspace for reflexivity between the "no longer" and the "not yet." Scholars have examined diverse manifestations of liminality across career transition contexts, revealing common experiences of disorientation, critical self-reflection, frustration, and gradual self-reinvention (Borgen & Maglio, 2007; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016)

The author draws from the conceptual framework of "occupational limbo" by Bamber et al., (2017). This elucidates the tensions of inhabiting unfamiliar territory when relinquishing an old occupational identity yet not yet entering a new one. The paper aims to elucidate the identity undoing and renewal that underlies dramatic career shifts. Findings hold significance for

expanding scholarly perspectives on liminal experiences. By offering an evocative, introspective lens, this study provides several benefits. It reveals nuanced emotions, vulnerabilities, difficulties, small triumphs, and evolution of thought over time. The narrative approach brings this liminal experience to life. Moreover, the subjective account aids wider understanding of how social locations shape career transitions. This exemplary case study advances insights into liminal spaces, identity tensions, and meaning making from the inside.

Liminal Spaces and Liminality

This study is grounded in the theoretical tradition of liminality and its relevance to occupational transitions and identity work. The concept of liminality originates from anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's (1960) research on rites of passage in ceremonial contexts. He proposed that rituals involve three stages: separation, transition, and reincorporation. The ambiguous middle stage is marked by "betwixt and between" status, as the ritual subject passes from one societal position to another (Turner, 1967). Turner (1967) expanded on liminality, positioning it as a period when continuity breaks down, norms are suspended, and fluidity manifests, prior to identities being reintegrated with new meanings. Beech (2011) conceived liminality as an identity workspace for reflexivity between the "no longer" and "not yet" zones. (Bridges, 2009) put forth a three phase model, with the neutral zone representing the liminal phase of disorientation and reinvention. Garsten, (1999) posits that the concept of liminality introduces innovative approaches to organizing work and shaping individual experiences within the workplace, as well as redefining organizational subjectivity. While these new experiences can yield positive outcomes, the widespread application of liminality has the potential to undermine the positions of both organizations and individuals within them.

These seminal works inform scholarly understanding of liminality across diverse settings, including career transitions which represent turning points and identity shifts. While Ibarra & Obodaru (2016) argue that liminal experiences share common contours across contexts, involving identity undoing, confusion, exploration and gradual adaptation, Jyrkinen, (2014) emphasizes recognizing how social locations shape its experience. They argue that power dynamics along lines of gender, and class can disadvantage those undergoing liminal career transitions. Empirical studies reveal liminality's manifestations during career transitions in educational institutions (Ecclestone et al., 2009), consulting (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003), and

temporary employees (Garsten, 1999). Common features include disorientation, self-doubt, perceived powerlessness, critical reflection, resilience, and new perspectives (Blustein, 2011).

Ashforth, (2000) notes transitions often generate identity limbo. Bamber et al., (2017) distinguish occupational limbo as an always-this-never-that tension, less desirable than a hoped-for identity. Nicholson, (1984) argues liminal career spaces involve identity play and evaluation until sensemaking resolves confusion. Ibarra's (2004) research reveals how possible identities are tried on for fit during liminal transitions. Ybema et al., (2011) emphasize liminality's subjective, relational and temporal interconnections. Overall, liminal experiences represent pivotal identity workspaces.

This study applies and builds upon these theoretical foundations, providing an empirical case study of liminality and identity change. The author's reflexive, evocative account offers unique insights into navigating limbo and reconstructing purpose and identity when transitioning between disparate cultures and careers.

Context

This study is situated within the unique contextual realities of the author transitioning from a corporate role in Dubai to an embedded position within a governmental office in a rural district of India. This section provides background on the organizations, project, and sociocultural setting involved. After spending five years in the corporate sector in Dubai, the author joined an intergovernmental organization (IGO) focused on development projects across India. This prominent IGO has a long history of partnering with government agencies in India to expand access to education, healthcare, and empowerment initiatives.

The author took on the role of Public Manager overseeing the implementation of a youth volunteerism project within a particular rural district considered highly "backward" in socioeconomic indicators. This project was a joint initiative between the IGO and India's Ministry aimed at actively engaging in community service and leadership activities to support the community development. The district office consisted of IGO-appointed, regular government and temporary staff and volunteers. However, the author was positioned as an outsider to the ingrained bureaucratic government system. Managing the project involved liaising with diverse stakeholders including volunteers, youth clubs, local leaders and government officials.

The setting was a remote, interior rural district with prevailing poverty, limited infrastructure, and starkly different cultural practices than the author's urban upbringing. Most

residents had minimal education and were accustomed to hierarchical societal norms. The region had deep ties to the political party in power. This unique scenario thrust the author into profound liminality, as he undertook intense identity work and adaptation.

Intergovernmental Organizations in India

IGOs have long played an important role in supporting social welfare and human development programs in India. As formal interstate entities with dedicated bureaucracies, IGOs like the UNDP, UNICEF, World Bank, and WHO derive legitimacy from their mandates and technical expertise (Abbott & Snidal, 2010). Through exercising authority in their domain and establishing priorities, IGOs seek to influence member state policies and facilitate collaboration on transnational issues like health, education, and poverty reduction (Nilsson, 2017).

Since independence, India has partnered extensively with major IGOs to expand access to primary education, public health services, and gender equity programs across the country. Evaluations indicate IGO collaborations have helped increase school enrollment, reduce child mortality, and enhance women's socioeconomic opportunities, though progress remains uneven (Jalan & Ravallion, 2003). For example, UNICEF and the World Bank pioneered interventions that boosted primary education access in India (Nambisan, 2008). WHO, UNICEF and others have worked to address infectious diseases, malnutrition and maternal-child health through large-scale programs endorsed by the Indian government (Jalan & Ravallion, 2003). The United Nations Development Programme and World Bank have funded major rural poverty reduction and women's empowerment schemes since the 1990s, with some success in alleviating income poverty and vulnerability (Niti Aayog, 2023).

In the health sector, WHO assisted India's National Rural Health Mission launched in 2005 to expand healthcare access in underserved communities (Singh, 2018). The World Bank focused more on disease control programs for HIV/AIDS, and tuberculosis, though India's disease burden remains high in these areas (World Bank, 2019). Regarding education, UNICEF helped boost enrollment in primary education since 1949, while the World Bank supported the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan campaign starting in 2001 that helped achieve near universal primary education by 2011(UNICEF, 2022; World Bank, 2014). For gender equality, partnerships with UN Women and UNICEF have aimed to increase women's economic and political participation (UN Women, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). Thus, engagement with IGOs remains vital for India to

meet its Sustainable Development Goals through capacity building and designing context-specific programs.

Indian Government Offices

The government of India has an elaborate administrative structure consisting of various ministries and departments at the union, state, and local levels. The central government is organized into specialized ministries like finance, home affairs, and defense that formulate major policies, allocate budgets, implement schemes, and monitor programs within their sectors. The state governments contain departments focused on areas like revenue, education, and health that are headed by ministers and secretaries. At the grassroots level, district government offices interact directly with citizens to deliver services and welfare schemes (National Portal of India, 2023; Wolpert et al., 2023).

However, numerous studies reveal several issues constraining efficiency in Indian government offices across levels. These include bureaucratic red tape, corruption, opacity, outdated procedures, staff shortages, poor infrastructure, and low citizen satisfaction. The limited adoption of information technology also hinders service delivery and grievance redressal (Afridi, 2017; Dasgupta & Kapur, 2020; Jagannath, 2016; P et al., 2021; Saxena, 2007).

Method

This study employs a narrative approach to provide an evocative, subjective account of the author's experiences during a major career transition. It involves analyzing personal experiences to gain wider cultural understandings and insights (Ellis, 2004). As participant-observer, the researcher himself is the data source. Data was collected through retrospective journaling, and critical reflection on memories, emotions, and discoveries during the liminal transition period. The author compiled detailed observational and reflective accounts over the course of his three-year embedding within the governmental office. He recorded both descriptions of external events and internal thought processes.

The motivation for this study emerged during an introductory PhD course on work and employment relations. During a class discussion, students were asked to share stories from their work lives. The author recounted his profoundly destabilizing yet transformational experience shifting from the corporate world to navigating unfamiliar government systems and cultural realities in rural India. The professor took interest in this narrative, noting its relevance to themes of liminality, identity work, and meaning-making during career transitions. He encouraged the

author to develop the story into a narrative paper to share these rarely captured, subjective insights into a discontinuous shift between organizational and national cultures.

Findings

Change of Careers

After spending five long years in the corporate hustle of Dubai, I found myself burnt out and yearning for something more. The daily grind had become painfully routine, lacking any excitement or meaning. I craved a change—a change that would lead me on a transformative journey. Quitting my secure corporate job was daunting, as it meant leaving behind the comfort and familiarity I had grown accustomed to. Yet, deep down, a growing desire urged me to explore a different path—one where I could make a meaningful contribution to society. Then, fate intervened while I was still working in Dubai, offering me an opportunity that would forever change my perspective. It was a two-month-long mammography screening campaign organized by the Ministry there in partnership with my employer at the time. I was chosen to be the project manager. Little did I know then how this experience would become a catalyst, igniting a passion for social sector work within me. Being a part of that campaign opened my eyes to the potential for positive impact and the immense fulfillment that comes from serving those in need.

Motivated by this newfound passion, I decided to explore opportunities in India, particularly with well-known intergovernmental organizations (IGOs). I was drawn to the idea of working on projects aimed at addressing pressing social issues and uplifting underserved communities. During my search, I stumbled upon a vacancy in a remote, interior district of India—an "Aspirational District," classified as such due to its prevailing backwardness. I eagerly applied, brimming with enthusiasm and anticipation, not fully comprehending just how monumental the journey I was embarking on would turn out to be.

Selection Process

The application process was nothing short of an arduous journey, consuming nearly an entire day of my life. It felt as though I was penning a comprehensive autobiography, one that encapsulated my professional history and aspirations in the confines of an application form. The process was meticulous, requiring meticulous attention to detail. I couldn't help but reflect on the path that had led me to this point. Waiting for a response was a test of patience. It seemed like an eternity before I heard back from them. During those seemingly endless days, I took to various online discussion forums to gather insights into the recruitment procedures for IGOs. It was there

that I learned that the journey to securing a position in an IGO could span anywhere from three to six months. The gravity of the process became even more evident as I navigated these forums, with applicants sharing their experiences and the twists and turns they encountered along the way.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, an email notification illuminated my screen. The message contained the auspicious news that I had been waiting for - it detailed a written examination that lay in my near future. The excitement was palpable. What truly set my heart racing was the format of this examination - questions would be sent via email, and we, the candidates, were tasked with composing our responses and sending them back. It was a stark departure from the closed-book examinations I had been accustomed to in the past. I couldn't help but remember all those times I had envied friends who were sitting confidently in open-book examinations, armed with a world of knowledge at their fingertips. However, this time around, there was no prescribed syllabus, no list of recommended reading materials - I was stepping into uncharted territory. I had absolutely no inkling of what to anticipate.

As the email beckoned me towards this challenge, I felt a wave of uncertainty wash over me. There were five questions to address within a strict two-hour timeframe. The twist was that each question presented a hypothetical scenario, demanding not only insight into my planned course of action but also an understanding of contingencies and strategies in case my initial plans went awry. These were not questions with straightforward answers; they probed the depths of my critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Upon submission of my responses to those probing questions, another period of nail-biting waiting began. It stretched out for a month, during which I experienced a rollercoaster of emotions, from eagerness to anxiety and back again. I had no choice but to trust that my words on those virtual pages would convey my dedication and suitability for the role.

Then, finally, the day I had been dreaming of arrived. An email notification announced an interview invitation, and I couldn't have been more thrilled. The interview was scheduled at the IGO headquarters; a place I had only heard of in awe-struck whispers. Stepping onto the HQ campus was an experience in itself, with a sense of gravity and history permeating the atmosphere. There, I faced a panel of four interviewers - two representing the IGO and the other two from the ministry. The questions they posed were, in essence, an extension of the written examination. Each question peeled away layers, demanding an even deeper insight into my

thoughts and approach to complex problems. Surprisingly, I found myself equipped to respond confidently to the majority of their inquiries, thanks to the introspective journey the written examination had taken me on. And then, just when I thought I couldn't handle any more anticipation, the moment arrived. An offer letter materialized in my inbox, contingent upon a thorough medical examination. I was ecstatic, thrilled, and beyond words. The prospect of becoming a part of this esteemed intergovernmental organization was not just a career move; it was the realization of a dream, the culmination of an arduous journey filled with uncertainty and hope.

Project roles and responsibilities

The decision to transition from the corporate world into the realm of the social sector was not one that I made lightly. It demanded immense courage and a significant leap of faith as I ventured outside the confines of my comfort zone to pursue a career aligned with my deeply-held values and aspirations. Initially, self-doubt and uncertainty clouded my mind. Yet, a profound inner conviction persisted, assuring me that this was the path where I could truly make a difference and contribute meaningfully to the development of communities. Little did I realize at the time that this choice would mark the beginning of my journey as a Public Manager (PM) with the IGO.

The Ministry had established an extensive network of over 600 district offices throughout the country, all dedicated to promoting youth development and volunteerism. Each of these offices was led by a committed Public Manager (PM). These district offices played a pivotal role as strategic hubs, strategically situated to coordinate and implement programs specifically designed to engage and empower the youth. In connection with this and aligned with India's National Youth Policy and 12th Five Year Plan, the IGO and the Ministry embarked on a joint endeavour to galvanize support for the Youth Volunteer Schemes. This transformative project was designed to actively encourage the involvement of young people, providing them with a platform to have a say in peacebuilding and sustainable development efforts. The overarching objective was to empower these youths to reach their full potential—both socially and economically—while fostering a strong sense of civic engagement. Under this initiative, the Ministry designated approximately 60 districts to be overseen by the IGO for the recruitment and management of Public Managers, while regular government employees were responsible for the remaining districts across India. I felt a profound sense of honour at having been selected as one

of the Public Managers entrusted with this crucial mission. This role would go on to shape my journey significantly, allowing me to directly and meaningfully contribute to the development of youth in my assigned district.

In my capacity as a Public Manager, I operated under the direct supervision of the National Project Director, carrying a diverse set of responsibilities. What made my role as a Public Manager particularly distinctive was the aspect of dual reporting. This entailed the obligation to report to both the IGO and the regional office of the Ministry. Additionally, state and local government authorities were kept informed through informal reporting structures, ensuring transparency and communication at multiple levels of governance. I collaborated closely with the District Administration, developmental departments, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), playing a pivotal role in fostering self-reliant Youth Clubs. These clubs became platforms for young individuals to come together, exchange ideas, and collectively work towards community development. A crucial aspect of my role involved identifying the specific training needs of club members, which in turn facilitated the organization of targeted programs tailored to their requirements. By addressing the unique challenges faced by different segments of the youth population in the district, we were able to design initiatives that could truly make a tangible impact. This comprehensive needs assessment formed the bedrock for the Annual Action Plan, a comprehensive blueprint encompassing diverse programs designed to engage and empower youth. Furthermore, a substantial portion of my responsibilities revolved around assisting Youth Clubs and NGOs in formulating project proposals under the Ministry's Financial Assistance Schemes. This support played a pivotal role in facilitating impactful projects that directly addressed pressing issues and contributed to the overall development of the community.

The project I was engaged in featured a distinctive employment landscape characterized by two distinct contracts. The first contract pertained to the agreement between the IGO and the Ministry. In this arrangement, the Ministry played a pivotal role by providing essential financial assistance to support the project's implementation. The project's seamless operation and continuation were heavily reliant on this financial support. Consequently, the presence of the IGO in the district was contingent upon the Ministry's decision to continue providing this crucial financial assistance. The second contract revolved around the employment relationship between the IGO and its employees, including myself in my role as a Public Manager (PM). The duration

of our employment was directly tied to the lifespan of the project. If the project encountered any disruptions or reached its conclusion, our job security would be jeopardized.

Joining Day

The day of departure from my hometown to the workplace had finally arrived. It was a gruelling journey, spanning approximately 17 hours by bus. As I looked out the window, I witnessed a gradual transformation of the landscape. The lush greenery that had initially surrounded me slowly faded away. The journey took us into the night, and when I awoke, a starkly different scene greeted my eyes—barren lands, naked mountains, desolate roads, and an overwhelming sense of aridity. As I had previously mentioned, the project location was designated as an "aspirational district" due to its severe backwardness in various social indicators. In this region, open defecation was still a common practice, primarily due to the scarcity of water in many areas.

Upon reaching the office, I eagerly initiated the joining procedures. However, I encountered an unexpected obstacle. The clerical staff informed me that they had not received any intimation from the Ministry's office headquarters, and therefore, I could not commence the joining process. It became evident to me through his behaviour that my presence here was not met with enthusiasm. He had been acting as the de facto head of my position, essentially holding all the reins within the office. In response to this setback, I promptly reported the situation to the IGO office, explaining that my workplace had not received any communication regarding my arrival. Despite a few hours of waiting, I eventually managed to resolve the issue and begin the process of integrating into my new role.

Office Structure and Composition

The district office where I served as the Public Manager (PM) was a dynamic environment with a diverse mix of staff members, each employed through different types of employment contracts. Firstly, as the PM, I was recruited by the IGO to oversee the project's implementation. Holding a position of authority and responsibility within the office, my role involved coordinating and supervising the activities of the staff members, ensuring the project's goals were met, and facilitating communication between the Ministry, IGO, and the local community. Alongside me, there was a clerical staff member who was a regular government employee hired by the Ministry. This individual brought institutional knowledge and experience, providing administrative support to the district office. Being a regular government employee,

they had a level of job security and stability compared to the contractual staff members. Additionally, there was an office attendant hired on a contractual basis by a national private recruiting agency. Their role involved providing general support and assistance in maintaining the office premises and performing various administrative tasks. As a contractual employee, their employment was subject to the terms and conditions specified in their contract, which may have limited their job security and benefits. Furthermore, a sweeper was hired on a contractual basis through a local private recruiting agency. This individual was responsible for maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in the office premises. Like the office attendant, their employment was governed by a specific contract, and they may have faced similar limitations regarding job security and benefits. Lastly, there were 15 contractual volunteers who were hired by the Ministry through an open recruitment process. These volunteers were selected based on predetermined criteria and were between the ages of 18 and 29, with basic educational backgrounds. Their primary role was to support the implementation of the project, working closely with the PM and other staff members.

Experience with Office Staff Members

The experience was undoubtedly new for all parties involved at the office. For me, it marked my introduction to the intricacies of the government working system, while for the rest of the staff, it was their first time collaborating with someone from outside the government framework. Consequently, I often found myself hearing phrases like "*sir, ithar aisee chalatee hai"* (this is how it works here) on several occasions.

From the moment I joined, it became evident that a stark contrast existed between working within the government system and my previous experiences in corporate organizations. These disparities extended across various dimensions, including mindset, commitment levels, the time required to accomplish tasks, formalities, and structural conventions, duty hours, among others. It was a learning curve that continually revealed the nuanced differences in work culture and practices between these two spheres.

My clerical staff held a position of importance within our state-level organization, being one of the most senior employees. He had established himself as the go-to person for the state ministry headquarters, particularly when it came to handling accounting duties during various functions at our state office. During the initial months of my tenure, when training had not yet been conducted, I heavily leaned on the guidance and assistance of the clerical staff and other

team members. I essentially followed the status quo, adopting what I often referred to as "the office way."

However, after approximately five months of being on board, I had the opportunity to undergo training organized by the IGO. During the training, it became evident that the IGO districts, including our own, needed to proactively showcase the positive outcomes resulting from our collective efforts. This involved consistently highlighting the project's significance and its tangible contributions to the community. The training emphasized the importance of demonstrating our value and the profound impact of our contributions. By doing so, we could strengthen our position within the project and ensure our continued involvement and support from both the Ministry and the IGO.

Moreover, this training provided me with invaluable insights into alternative and, notably, more effective approaches to carrying out our office activities. It equipped me with new perspectives and strategies to enhance our operational efficiency and overall effectiveness in achieving our project objectives. During this training, I noticed disparities between our office practices and the methods suggested by the IGO. I voiced my concerns and shared my observations with the IGO agency. They explained that the government system had its unique way of functioning, and that while change was possible, it often occurred gradually. They reminded me that I was treading in unfamiliar territory, far from my home, and that my safety and security were of paramount importance to them. This interaction with the IGO agency served as a stark reminder of the complexity of initiating change within the government system. It reinforced the idea that acknowledging the "elephant in the room" and striving for improvement could be intricate processes, often requiring a delicate balance between adhering to established practices and embracing the need for adaptation and change.

The decision to allow some of the Ministry's district offices to be supervised by the IGO stemmed from the profound backwardness experienced by these districts. The expectation was that the IGO would spearhead multiple initiatives to address the unique needs of these districts. The ministry's organization is designed with a specific focus on promoting youth development by empowering and enhancing the capabilities of youth clubs. Consequently, the program budget is allocated through these youth clubs, which take the responsibility of organizing and implementing the programs. Subsequently, my office is tasked with reimbursing the expenses

incurred by the youth clubs in carrying out these initiatives. This approach aligns with the overarching goal of fostering youth engagement and development within the community.

In the initial months of my role, it became apparent that many of the programs were primarily for photo opportunities and budget expenditure, rather than genuine efforts to empower and strengthen the youth. Additionally, I became aware that the youth clubs responsible for executing these programs often had affiliations or familial ties to the office staff. Whenever I attempted to bring new youth clubs into the fold, I encountered repeated obstacles. These roadblocks were often created by the office staff, as government offices typically entail a multitude of procedures for empanelling a youth club.

On one particular day, clerical staff members approached me and offered me a packet, referring to it as the "cut." I refused to accept it. He explained that this was a common practice in the office, suggesting that it was customary for procedures to be expedited through such means. He further implied that my predecessors had accepted such offers, and he insinuated that anyone who followed in my position would likely do the same. Despite facing similar situations on multiple occasions, I remained resolute in my decision to abstain from participating in such practices. These actions went against my principles and values, causing me deep discomfort, and I was determined to maintain my ethical stance.

The chaotic state of affairs within the office left me disconcerted, and I felt compelled to report these issues to the IGO. However, I often received a passive response from them, with suggestions to resolve the matters internally and build trust with the office staff. This response, though well-intentioned, left me grappling with the challenges of navigating an environment where deeply ingrained practices contradicted the organization's mission and values.

The majority of the Ministry's district offices were housed within the complexes of the state administration buildings. However, during our office's inception in the district, we were unable to secure a room within these premises. Consequently, we had to relocate to a rented building situated in a residential area.

I started to realize that one of the main causes of the laid-back behaviour exhibited by my staff was the lack of oversight from the district administration. I believed that if we were to secure an office space within the district administration building, it might encourage them to become more proactive. There's a well-known belief that people tend to work more efficiently when they know that their actions are being monitored by others. Given my multiple

conversations and the rapport I had developed with the District Commissioner, I had a strong conviction that if I took decisive action, we could secure an office room within the administration building. I broached this idea with my staff, anticipating their excitement. However, to my surprise, I encountered resistance from them. They seemed to be of the opinion that we should refrain from moving there, citing reasons like "people there don't have much work and they put their nose into our work".

Upon closer examination, I discerned that these statements masked their unwillingness to work in a more structured and monitored environment. It became evident to me that each member of my staff had their own objectives and motivations, which might not always align with the organizational goals or the kind of accountability I envisioned for the team. This realization was an eye-opener, shedding light on the complexity of managing a team with diverse aspirations and work philosophies. The regular clerical staff, enjoying permanent employment and pension benefits, often displayed a sense of complacency and lack of motivation. With the assurance of job security, they may have felt less driven to go above and beyond their duties, resulting in a decline in productivity and efficiency. In contrast, the contractual office staff, with temporary employment contracts, were more inclined to focus on asserting their rights and seeking better working conditions. Their contractual nature of employment may have created a sense of urgency and a need to advocate for their interests. This could have affected their motivation to contribute fully to the project's goals, as their attention was divided between their own concerns and the overall objectives of the project. The contractual volunteers, driven by their aspirations for permanent roles and political ties, may have exhibited a different set of motivations. Their focus on securing long-term positions through political connections could have detracted from their commitment to the project's objectives. The desire for personal gain and the pursuit of individual interests might have hindered the cohesive functioning of the team and created a sense of imbalance in goal alignment.

Despite anticipating some challenges, I made the decision to proceed with the process of relocating our office to the district administration premises. Little did I know that I would soon find myself in the midst of a storm. During the subsequent monthly meeting, I encountered resistance from the volunteers. This resistance coincided with the recent introduction of a new performance management portal, which may have contributed to their apprehension and reluctance. The level of resistance I encountered far exceeded my expectations, and to my

dismay, I observed that my office staff did not intervene. Due to my limited fluency in the local language, I faced constraints in effectively conveying my arguments to them. I glanced around the room, hoping to find some support among the staff, but no one came forward.

A few days later, I received a letter addressed to the volunteers at my office. I opened it, and although the letter was written in the local language, the subject line was in English: "complaint against "me."" I took a photo of the letter and used text-reading technology to translate it into English. The content indicated that the volunteers had addressed the letter to the regional director, but they had inadvertently interchanged the "from" and "to" addresses. I handed over the letter to the clerical staff, and I noticed a significant change in his demeanour; his face turned pale. My suspicion grew stronger, and I decided to have a conversation with one of the office volunteers who was closer to me. This volunteer revealed that it was the clerical staff who had instructed the volunteers to send the letter to the Ministry state office. In fact, the clerical staff had even prepared a draft to send to the IGO, but due to difficulties in finding the IGO's address, they abandoned the idea.

Following this incident, I had a conversation with the clerical staff, during which he expressed his negative opinion about the volunteers. He described them as lacking motivation to serve society and being present merely for leisure, using the local phrase "Maja maarne keliya" to convey this sentiment. Importantly, he mentioned that they were unhappy with the decision to relocate the office to the district administration building. This insight allowed me to identify the source of the resistance and opposition I had encountered in relation to the office relocation.

Experience with government stakeholders

The persistent behaviour of my staff members, who kept conveying subtly to visitors and even to me that my presence in the office was temporary, had far-reaching effects on various aspects of my work. This notion was repeatedly reinforced, especially when I initiated changes, as they believed they would have to handle the consequences once I departed. When introducing me to other visitors, they made subtle remarks to ensure that my job here was portrayed as impermanent. This pervasive attitude had repercussions in multiple instances. One such example was during the announcement of a by-election. I attended a State Voter's Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) meeting with the expectation that I might receive a novel responsibility. Given that we were one of the few government organizations dedicated to youth development, I believed I could contribute significantly. However, to my disappointment, I was assigned manual

and repetitive tasks. I suspected that this might be due to the perception that, as a non-regular employee within the government system, I wasn't entitled to more significant responsibilities.

This behaviour wasn't limited to officials alone; it extended to youth clubs, political party leaders, NGOs, local government institutions, and affiliated organizations. They seemed to view me as a temporary presence, believing that any assistance extended to me would not result in long-term benefits. This perception of my role as transient had a pervasive impact on how I was perceived and the opportunities I was given to contribute effectively.

As part of the volunteer recruitment process, It was necessary to invite the district commissioner to participate. However, due to his busy schedule, he often delegated this responsibility to his office staff. On this particular occasion, he nominated a Grade A level officer to represent him. We had scheduled the program to commence at 10:30 am, and the candidates had arrived promptly by 9:30 am. However, the nominated officer did not arrive even by 11:30 am, and it was only after I called him that I learned he was in another meeting. Considering the presence of other dignitaries on the panel and the delayed start, I made the decision to commence the proceedings at 11:45 am. Unexpectedly, the Grade A officer appeared at 12:00 pm and unleashed a barrage of harsh words directed at me. He called me an "idiot" and questioned why I had started the meeting without him. He also asked why I hadn't been waiting outside to receive him.

As I pondered over this incident, I couldn't shake the thought that the outcome might have been different had I held a government position at my current posting with a rank equal to his. I had a strong belief that, in such a scenario, his behaviour towards me would have been more respectful and professional, rather than confrontational and disrespectful.

One significant obstacle I faced was the lack of financial independence within the office. As a non-regular government servant, I did not have access to the same financial matters and autonomy enjoyed by my counterparts in the ministry who held positions as PMs. This glaring disparity in treatment gave rise to a sense of inequity and posed limitations on my ability to make certain financial decisions autonomously. Instead, I frequently found myself entangled in bureaucratic procedures and compelled to seek approvals from higher authorities, a process that often proved time-consuming and restrictive in its nature.

The projects I was involved in followed a top-down approach, with specific targets and goals conveyed in numerical form through the regional ministry offices. As the PM, it fell upon me to provide accurate and timely reports to both the IGO and the Ministry's regional office

regarding the project's progress and outcomes. However, despite our best efforts, occasional discrepancies emerged in our reporting. The numbers and statistics submitted to the IGO did not always align with those reported to the Ministry. This inconsistency gave rise to confusion and raised concerns about the accuracy and reliability of the reported data.

Several factors contributed to these reporting discrepancies. Firstly, the dual reporting structure necessitated navigating distinct reporting requirements and expectations from both the IGO and the Ministry. Each entity had its own set of indicators, metrics, and reporting formats, which sometimes led to inconsistencies in how data was collected, analysed, and reported. Balancing these varying requirements proved to be an ongoing challenge. Secondly, the top-down approach, coupled with an emphasis on numerical targets, occasionally resulted in a focus on meeting quotas rather than capturing the nuanced impact of the project. The pressure to achieve specific numerical targets could inadvertently incentivize data manipulation or introduce unintentional errors in reporting. This emphasis on numerical figures sometimes overshadowed the qualitative aspects and the broader context of the project's impact, which was a concern.

Additionally, the top-down approach faced criticism from the youth clubs, who were meant to be the primary beneficiaries but often found themselves with limited flexibility in executing the programs. This disconnect between the top-down approach and the realities faced by the youth clubs further complicated the reporting process and the project's overall effectiveness. The project's top-down approach meant that local stakeholders had limited opportunities to actively participate in the development and implementation of the action plans. This restricted their ability to contribute their local knowledge, perspectives, and aspirations, leading to a potential mismatch between proposed solutions and ground realities. This lack of involvement and ownership among local stakeholders presented significant challenges. Achieving local consensus became a complex task as the decisions were made at higher levels without sufficient consultation and engagement.

Experience with Volunteers and Political Party Leaders

The volunteers were employed on an honorarium basis, as per selection procedures set by Ministry headquarters. The selection committee consisted of the District Collector or Magistrate, two eminent individuals in youth development, and myself as Public Manager. However, the District Magistrate's primary duties often required delegating their role to someone else from their office. The two eminent committee members were Ministry-nominated, frequently

influenced by political recommendations favouring the ruling party. The selection process incorporated objective and subjective criteria. Objective aspects included essential qualifications and social activity experience. Subjective criteria involved assessing the candidates' attitude toward social service. Although the volunteers reported to me, I had limited influence on the selection process itself. Unfortunately, volunteer selection seemed frequently swayed by political biases, favouring the ruling party.

Recognizing the importance of integrity, I decided to report this issue to the IGO overseeing the project. My intention was to raise attention, initiate corrective measures, and ensure a fair, unbiased process. However, the response did not meet my expectations. It became clear the project's funding was closely tied to the political party in power. This shed light on the inherent challenges posed by political influence in volunteer selection. Evidently, the issue extended far beyond just our project, deeply rooted in the district's broader political landscape. The prevalence of such biases detrimentally impacted the functioning and effectiveness of our initiatives. Despite the challenges, I had no choice but to proceed with the volunteers selected to execute the project.

Within a few months of recruiting volunteers, I began to notice that their performance was not meeting the desired standard. Consequently, I recognized the need to streamline the volunteer activities and develop a more effective system for managing their contributions. To address this, I decided to create a real-time tracker that would monitor their performance. The real-time tracker included various metrics, such as the number of meetings they attended, their work diary, available tasks, different resources and formats, program reports, and other relevant information. The targets for the office were received from the headquarters and typically presented as numerical objectives. For example, we were tasked with sensitizing 50 youth clubs on the importance of staying fit and practicing yoga.

To ensure fairness, I evenly distributed these objectives and similar programs among the volunteers. I then implemented a monthly evaluation system tied to their honorarium. I explained that achieving at least 60% of allocated targets would earn their full honorarium payment. Falling short would mean an adjusted amount accordingly. This transparent system was communicated clearly, emphasizing the importance of meeting headquarters' expectations. I also highlighted how accomplishing these tasks would directly benefit the community's social

development indicators. In our regular monthly meetings, all volunteers agreed to this approach and seemed satisfied.

Implementing this process was an initiative aimed at streamlining our office's operations and responding to the persistent pressure from the headquarters to efficiently utilize the sanctioned funds. I had assumed that the volunteers would be self-motivated to track their performance against the set targets and that this approach would foster healthy competition among them. To further incentivize their efforts, I introduced a "Best Volunteer of the Month" award, using my own funds as there were no provisions for additional expenses in the office budget.

In the first month following the implementation of the performance-based honorarium system portal, there was a notable improvement in the overall performance of the volunteers as a group. Despite a few underperformers, the majority of volunteers demonstrated satisfactory results during this initial period. However, things took a turn for the worse in subsequent months. The volunteers' performance gradually declined, and many of them consistently underperformed. When confronted about their lack of progress, they offered trivial excuses and seemed unmoved by the importance of accomplishing the assigned tasks and the positive impact it could have on the neighbourhoods and their own development as volunteers.

To address this issue, I decided to investigate the underperformance informally, seeking information from various sources. Surprisingly, I learned 9 out of 15 volunteers held leadership roles in the ruling party's youth wing. The rest were supporters of the same party. This revelation raised concerns about the potential influence of political affiliations on their dedication and commitment to their volunteer roles. Furthermore, it also came to my attention that 12 out of the 15 volunteers were juggling part-time jobs along with their volunteer responsibilities. This was in contrast to the vacancy advertisement that clearly stated the volunteer position required full-time engagement, with an honorarium provided to support their commitment. The combination of political involvement and part-time jobs may likely have contributed to the decline in their performance. With competing interests and responsibilities, the volunteers may have been unable to devote sufficient time and energy to their volunteer duties, leading to subpar results.

It was essential to communicate the importance of separating their political affiliations from their volunteer work and to reiterate that their contributions should be solely focused on benefiting the local community without any biases. After having discussions with the

underperforming volunteers about their lack of adherence to office procedures, I presented them with two options: either vacate their positions or improve their commitment and performance. Since terminating their roles was not possible, as the volunteers were hired through government agencies, I decided not to pay their honorarium until their performance improved. However, this decision resulted in an unexpected and alarming response. I started receiving threatening phone calls from my own volunteers and local political party leaders. They argued this is how it had always been done in other districts, questioning why this place should be different. They noted past volunteers also held party positions and campaigned for the same actively. They demanded that I reinstate the honorarium and relinquish the portal. Despite their demands, I stood firm in my decision to deny both requests.

Reinstating the honorarium without any improvement in their performance would have sent the wrong message and undermined the purpose of the performance-based reward system. It would have discouraged other volunteers who were diligently working towards achieving their targets and fulfilling their responsibilities. Relinquishing the portal would have significantly conceded to unreasonable threats and demands. Doing so under duress would have compromised the project's integrity and set a dangerous precedent. Instead, I chose to prioritize the project's goals, the well-being of the local community, and the principles of fair and transparent volunteer management. I firmly communicated my stance to the volunteers, emphasizing that their performance needed to improve if they wished to be eligible for the honorarium. Furthermore, I made it clear that the portal was an essential tool for the project's success and should not be used as a bargaining chip.

Facing the escalating situation, the volunteers' actions took a turn for the worse, and their demands intensified. Despite my initial denial of their claims and refusal to comply with their demands, their persistence and resistance began to take a toll on the project and my ability to manage it effectively. The volunteers went to great lengths to express their displeasure. They took the matter into their own hands and wrote letters urging the removal of the IGO presence from the project in the district. In addition to the written communication, the situation escalated to the point where the volunteers picketed the office. This act of protest added significant strain to an already challenging and sensitive situation. Given the high level of resistance and the fact that I heavily relied on their support to achieve the project's goals, I found myself in a difficult

and delicate position. The volunteers' actions left me with limited options to resolve the issue peacefully and maintain the project's integrity.

As the pressure and resistance mounted, I faced the difficult reality that the volunteers were unwilling to cooperate and that their actions were making the continuation of the project unsustainable. The untenable situation forced me to re-evaluate my approach and make a difficult decision. In the end, the overwhelming pressure and the volunteers' unwillingness to cooperate left me with no other viable option. I made the difficult decision to abandon the portal and reinstate the honorariums to quell the resistance and avoid further disruptions to the project. This decision, while not ideal, was made in the interest of ensuring the safety of all involved and preventing any further negative repercussions. It was a difficult compromise, and I recognized that it might not have fully addressed the underlying issues with the volunteers' performance and behavior.

The level of resistance I encountered in response to a small change aimed at greater efficiency came as a surprise. After all, these were volunteers - selfless individuals supposedly motivated by altruism to join the cause. Yet faced with this opposition, I'm left questioning if that was truly the case. Perhaps there were underlying motivations I had not uncovered.

The influence of political interference extended well beyond the realm of honorarium disbursement and began to permeate various other facets of the project, most notably the allocation of program funds to youth clubs. This interference became increasingly apparent as it became clear that certain youth clubs affiliated with the ruling political party were being granted preferential treatment in terms of budget allocation. This practice ran counter to the fundamental principles of fairness and equal opportunity that the project aimed to uphold. There were instances when leaders of the political party in power would make direct calls to our office, requesting the involvement of their affiliated youth clubs in the implementation of specific initiatives. Given our substantial reliance on volunteers and the local youth population, there were occasions when we found ourselves compelled to comply with their demands, despite my earlier objections.

Despite my persistent efforts to navigate these challenges and uphold the project's integrity, escalating the issue to the IGO yielded only the anticipated response that my security was of prime importance. I found myself grappling with limited support and guidance in addressing the pervasive political intervention within the project. This situation left me in a

difficult position, struggling to strike a balance between my commitment to the project's core values and the complex reality of political pressures and expectations.

Discussion

The public manager's journey from the corporate sphere to an IGO development role encapsulates the identity and cultural transitions underlying career shifts into the multilateral space. Entering IGO roles requires reconciling national, and local realities with institutional mandates and adapting to new cross-cultural norms (Biermann & Siebenhüner, 2009; Ege & Bauer, 2013). IGO careers necessitate balancing political accumen with technocratic expertise (Bauer, 2006). Officials engage in consensus-building among member state representatives while implementing public management practices (European Court of Auditors., 2012; Hooghe & Marks, 2015). This blending of diplomacy and administration shapes a distinct occupational identity.

As evidenced in the manager's narrative, this passage obliges identity renegotiation and navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic networks. The disorientation and ambiguity of this transition process resonates with the liminality concept. As elaborated in the ensuing discussion, the manager's passage between old and new spheres meant enduring an unstructured in-betweenness. It reveals the different liminal spaces encountered, necessitating continual identity reconstruction to navigate each ambiguous in-between phase. This also illuminates how conflicting liminal spaces trap one in limbo, compelling simultaneous responses amidst persistent tumult. It highlights fleeting moments of emancipation that provide temporary relief yet prove insufficient to fully overcome lingering liminality. Moreover, it unveils the profound emotional toll of persisting through liminal uncertainty devoid of structure.

Entering Liminal Spaces

The concept of liminal spaces refers to thresholds where an individual transition between established structures, roles, and identities. Dale & Burrell (2007) refer liminal spaces as "where different human worlds meet and to a greater or lesser extent overlap; and in this meeting they create new opportunities for difference. Humans in liminal spaces tend to meet other humans whose culture they do not fully share. Organisationally, the fluidity of boundaries is notable". These in-between zones are characterized by uncertainty, discontinuity, and the questioning of norms as one let's go of the old and embraces the new. As described by Turner, (1967), inhabiting liminal spaces requires navigating profound fluidity.

The public manager's journey from the corporate to the public sector provides insights into experiencing multiple, overlapping liminal spaces during such a transition. He had to negotiate and make sense of the blurred boundaries and hybrid demands at each threshold. The career shift itself induced the first major liminal space, as the manager detached from the comfort of his corporate role and entered the unfamiliar domain of the social sector. Adopting new norms, values, and practices aligned with the development field proved challenging against his ingrained corporate mindsets. For instance, he vividly recalls the culture shock of stepping into the bare, cramped government office radically different from his polished corporate towers. Devoid of the familiar trappings and professional etiquette, he felt suspended in an alien environment operating on unfamiliar terms.

This insider-outsider liminality was reinforced by his unique position of being an IGO-hired manager within the broader government structure. Despite his managerial role, he lacked regular government employees' decision-making power and social capital. The need for bureaucratic approvals continually emphasized his outsider status. This fuelled a recurrent liminal space as he shifted between approaches to meet conflicting stakeholder demands. The complicated dual reporting system required flipping mindsets to balance his IGO role with norms within the local office.

Navigating local political interests also induced liminal spaces, as he was torn between pragmatism and integrity. He continuously negotiated whether to comply with or resist questionable practices despite stakeholders' pressures. Although embedded in the office, he remained an outsider in local bureaucratic networks. The fixed-term contract, barring long-term planning, reflected another threshold. The looming uncertainty over extension prevented full integration into the role. Each liminal threshold highlighted the identity negotiations accompanying the discontinuous transition between highly divergent sectors. The public manager's multidimensional experience illuminates the fluidity and sense-making required while crossing various liminal spaces during a career metamorphosis.

Identity Negotiations and Reconstruction

Exposure to the unfamiliar norms and practices of the public sector environment induced intense culture shock for the Public Manager, severing his familiar footholds and catalysing deep introspection around motivations, values and purpose (Beech, 2011). For instance, upon entering the role, the manager was confronted with the ethical dilemmas of navigating questionable

practices like customary "cuts", "the office-way" and preferential treatment given to politically-tied groups. This suspension between acquiescence and resistance catalysed introspection around his principles and integrity.

This identity questioning compelled the manager to engage in reflective identity work (Ibarra, 2004). By suspending his stable corporate identity, he was pressed to actively experiment with provisional professional selves, exploring possible new leader identities through immersive activities and continuous meaning-making. Hence, inhabiting these in-between liminal spaces provided fertile ground for identity growth, liberating him from an entrenched corporate mindset and facilitating the development of a leadership approach more aligned with public service. Each liminal threshold marked an identity crisis, yet also activated critical self-reflection and learning. For instance, the disorienting initiation into a hierarchical bureaucratic system represented an un-structuring of his identity, rupturing his self-concept (Czarniawska & Mazza, 2003).

Navigating Occupational Limbo

A profound challenge for the public manager was navigating the inherent ambiguities and tensions of occupying a liminal in-between position, appearing trapped in occupational limbo (Bamber et al., 2017). This liminality resulted from the manager navigating multiple, often conflicting, liminal spaces simultaneously. For instance, the manager experienced a liminal space due to the project's hybrid structure involving collaboration between an intergovernmental organization and the national government. Responding to these two entities' distinct norms and expectations resulted in contradictory demands. Adhering to bureaucratic protocols constrained his autonomy, countering the flexibility expected by the development organization.

Moreover, the team presented an additional liminal space, comprising staff with divergent motivations - from complacent bureaucrats to temporary volunteers with political agendas. The manager could neither conform fully to the status quo nor achieve the desired reforms. At the community level, political interference introduced yet another liminal space as he sought to uphold the project's integrity while appeasing powerful local interests. Resisting forces of corruption while relying on their cooperation proved an impossible balance.

Occupational limbo arose as he found himself paralyzed, unable to respond adequately to the contradictory pulls and identity fragmentation across these multiple liminal spaces. Conforming wholly to one identity meant compromising another, trapping him in inaction and strategic ambiguity. While familiar during transitions, persistent liminality becomes

dysfunctional, preventing meaningful change and growth. For him, unresolved liminal spaces hindered his ability to define a coherent identity and role, fuelling disorientation and frustration.

Moments of Emancipation Within Limbo

Paradoxically, moments of progress and empowerment emerged for the manager even amidst the chaos and discomfort of liminality. Despite the predominant turbulence, small wins arose that provided glimpses of hope, keeping him anchored through the storm. Securing the prestigious role was a significant triumph, validating the drastic career shift. The training opportunity enabled powerful recalibration, armed with insights to address office challenges. Gaining an audience with the District Commissioner and forging collaborations with local NGOs were energizing successes that boosted confidence. The portal's initial positive impact displayed the potential of even small changes. Each monthly evaluation where volunteers accomplished targets was an encouraging step forward.

Additionally, the manager found emancipatory moments in everyday administrative victories; revamping archaic filing systems and implementing basic digitization were minor improvements that brought order amidst the chaos—orienting new volunteers and seeing their passion rejuvenated optimism. These fleeting wins fuelled the manager's determination, affirming the purpose of the greater mission. One remains willingly immersed in liminal turmoil, patient for its transformative promise. Such sporadic emancipatory experiences evoked faith that the turbulence was temporary and that persistence would lead to a successful transition. They provided sufficient motivation to sustain commitment despite the challenges.

However, a true escape from liminality necessitated consolidating these scattered moments to crystallize an integrated new identity and status. Until such cohesion was achieved, emancipation remained piecemeal - unable to overcome limbo's uncertainty completely. Consequently, the manager remained trapped in transition, sustained by sporadic wins yet unable to break through liminal precariousness fully. The promise of episodic emancipation kept one anchored in limbo's turbulence, hoping the passage would eventually culminate favourably.

The Emotional Toll of Liminal Transitions

While moments of emancipation sustained the manager through liminal tumult, the passage also exerted an emotional toll. He experienced substantial emotional demands during a liminal transition lacking in structure and institutionalized processes. Ibarra & Obodaru (2016) note that under-institutionalized transitions heighten uncertainty and emotional toll. The manager

grappled with decoding unfamiliar cultural norms and feeling rules as an outsider. Extensive emotion regulation was required to manage uncertainty, frustration, and fear while outwardly displaying confidence to influence resistant subordinates. Drawing on Hochschild' (1983) concepts, the manager appears to have engaged in surface acting by faking unfelt emotions, and deep acting by aligning internal feelings with external displays. The emotional labour involved in regulating one's own emotions and influencing others proved draining. Yet the promise of emancipation following successful transition compelled persistence through turbulence. Moments of progress enabled emotional stamina in the face of persistent uncertainty and exhaustion (Hochschild, 1983). Sporadic wins reinforced the manager's conviction and facilitated resilience-building identity work, despite adversity.

Conclusion

This study offers a rare glimpse into the world of liminality, identity tensions, and meaning making during a major career transition. The author's candid, introspective account captures the nuances and complexities of shifting from the corporate sphere to an embedded role within a rural governmental office in India. The narrative brings to life the disorientation and gradual integration that underlies such a dramatic occupational change across disparate cultures.

Several theoretical and practical implications emerge from this exemplary case study. Empirically, the findings advance conceptual understandings of liminal spaces as sites of identity undoing and renewal. The analysis reveals how inhabiting an unfamiliar setting unmoored established anchors of the self, catalyzing intense reflection, exploration of possible selves, and incremental alignment with new purpose. Practically, this account offers lessons on resilience, empathy, integrity and growth for individuals undergoing transitional experiences. It highlights the learning curve, emotional labour and meaning making entailed in reconstruction of identity and purpose.

Furthermore, the paper elucidates how social locations and power dynamics shape one's liminal passage. Lacking the status of a regular government employee, the author's marginalized positioning amplified disorientation and perceived powerlessness. This reinforces arguments that identity work during liminal transitions manifests within broader systems of inequality and positioning. Additionally, the findings reveal how motivation and commitment may become tested when idealism confronts complexity. Through disillusionment, the author gained sober understanding of change.

This study makes key contributions to liminality scholarship by providing an in-depth subjective perspective from within the transitional space. The narrative approach brings to life the identity tensions and messy human experiences that exemplify career shifts. Practically, it provides guidance for approaching liminal experiences with greater resilience, empathy, integrity and personal growth. For individuals facing destabilizing shifts to unfamiliar career settings, this study underscores the importance of maintaining self-care and patience with oneself throughout profound periods of disorientation and identity undoing. Practicing self-compassion can enable emerging from liminal spaces with renewed purpose.

Further, by elucidating the learning curve and emotional labour entailed, this account demonstrates the need for reflexivity, willingness to listen, and openness to feedback when inhabiting new occupational roles. This narrative also offers lessons regarding upholding integrity and core values amid complex realities. When ideals confront ingrained practices that contradict principles, persevering with empathy while also tactfully initiating changes can slowly transform environments. Additionally, tempering idealism with realism without becoming discouraged enables sustaining commitment despite challenges. By emphasizing reflexivity and meaning making, this study provides guidance for individuals to emerge from liminal career shifts with an expanded sense of purpose.

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