



Exile and Competence Inversion: Leadership Identity Reconstruction Among NSWDC Support- Staff Veterans

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how support-staff veterans from the Naval Special Warfare Development Group interpret identity disruption and leadership rebuilding following their departure from elite military service. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven support-staff veterans who served during the Global War on Terror and now hold civilian leadership roles in healthcare, federal service, training, and education. Three interconnected themes were identified: (1) Exile from Elite Excellence, (2) Mission Clarity to Civilian Ambiguity, and (3) Leadership Competence Inversion and Reconstruction. The findings expand Adaptive Leadership Theory by showing how poor support environments hinder effective adaptation and bolster Social Identity Theory by illustrating how the importance of elite identity and secrecy intensifies the reconstruction process. By emphasizing veterans' meaning-making, this study frames the transition from elite units as a multi-year identity development process involving mutual adaptation between veterans and civilian organizations, rather than a quick transfer of skills.

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Veterans occupy influential leadership roles across the U.S. workforce, with research consistently indicating their presence in executive, public, and entrepreneurial positions (Korn Ferry, 2023; Mael et al., 2022). Their leadership experience is generally characterized by accountability, disciplined execution, and sustained performance under pressure, qualities developed through high-stakes operational demands that civilian development pathways rarely mirror (Davis & Minnis, 2016; Shepherd et al., 2021). However, the transition from military service to civilian leadership remains inconsistent. Veterans often encounter high rates of underemployment, role mismatch, and long adjustment periods after separation (Davenport et al., 2024; Karre et al., 2023). These challenges are especially difficult for veterans whose leadership identities were shaped in elite, secrecy-focused environments, where the skills and cultural norms of service are the least transferable to civilian settings (Joseph et al., 2023; Shepherd et al., 2021).

While previous research has broadly explored the military-to-civilian transition (Ahern et al., 2015; Anderson et al., 2012; Bond et al., 2022; Castro & Kintzle, 2017; Flack & Kite, 2021; Pedlar et al., 2019), most studies focus on general veteran populations rather than elite, secrecy-bound units. Less is known about how veterans from highly specialized units experience the loss of their elite organizational identity and adapt their leadership practices in civilian settings governed by different cultural norms. One such unit is the Naval Special Warfare Development Group (NSWDG), commonly known as the Development Group, the U.S. Navy's most selective special operations organization. NSWDG is characterized not only by its operational intensity and secrecy but also by an internal culture of high standards, clear missions, and a strong sense of team identity. While public and scholarly attention often focuses on special operations operators, NSWDG relies heavily on highly skilled support staff who are experts in intelligence, communications, logistics, medicine, and mission planning, making their contributions vital to mission success. These individuals work within the same elite culture and secrecy constraints as operators, yet their post-service transitions remain largely understudied in veteran leadership research. Existing studies on special operations veterans primarily focus on operators and combat roles (Hunter, 2011, 2014), leaving the transition experiences of support personnel, whose identities are equally shaped by elite culture but with even less visibility, largely unexplored.

Research on veteran transition has mainly examined employment outcomes (Davenport et al., 2024), skill transfer (Davis & Minnis, 2016), or short-term adjustment challenges (Ahern et al., 2015; Castro et al., 2015). While these perspectives are useful, they often treat transition

as a process of transferring skills, implicitly assuming that military leadership abilities translate directly to civilian environments (Davis & Minnis, 2016; Pedlar et al., 2019). For veterans from elite units, this view might be limited; it looks at what veterans gain from service but not the identity rebuilding needed to effectively apply those skills in culturally different settings (Becker et al., 2023; Hunnicutt, 2022).

For veterans emerging from elite units such as NSWDG, this assumption may be incomplete. Leadership behaviors that demonstrate competence in high-stakes, mission-focused environments, such as direct communication, quick decision-making, and hierarchical authority, can be misunderstood or undervalued in civilian organizations that prioritize collaboration, tolerate ambiguity, and rely on negotiated influence (Becker et al., 2023; Northouse, 2022). Consequently, veterans from elite units may face not only occupational adjustment challenges but also deeper issues related to their leadership identity and professional self-image.

Two theoretical perspectives offer insights into these challenges: adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004). Adaptive leadership theory characterizes leadership transitions as adaptive challenges rather than technical problems, requiring individuals to reexamine values, behaviors, and assumptions in response to new environmental demands. From this perspective, successful adaptation depends on navigating, what Heifetz et al. (2009) call productive disequilibrium, the challenge zone that motivates learning without overwhelming the individual, and on accessing holding environments that provide both the pressure and psychological safety necessary for adaptive work (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017). Complementing this view, social identity theory emphasizes the importance of group membership in shaping identity and meaning (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004).

Separation from a highly visible elite group can undermine self-identity, especially when new environments do not provide similar sources of belonging or recognition (Joseph et al., 2023; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004) and undermine self-identity, especially when new environments do not provide similar sources of belonging or recognition (Joseph et al., 2023; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004). When the primary ingroup dissolves upon separation, social identity theory predicts that individuals will experience diminished self-concept and seek new group affiliations to restore coherence, a process that civilian environments, lacking equivalent elite structures, are often poorly positioned to support (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004; Joseph et al., 2023). These frameworks together indicate that leadership

transitions for veterans from elite units are not just behavioral but also identity-based and socially influenced.

LEADERSHIP IDENTITY THEORY AND VETERAN TRANSITION

Leadership identity, which describes how individuals see themselves as leaders and find purpose in leadership roles, provides a more accurate way to understand veterans' transitions from elite units than general identity frameworks alone. Unlike broader occupational or social identities, leadership identity is formed through ongoing relationships and interactions within organizations, constantly validated or challenged by others' responses and the expectations of new settings (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). For veterans whose leadership identity was developed in clear, feedback-rich military environments, transitioning to civilian organizations where leadership legitimacy is less well-defined can lead to what Joseph et al. (2023) call reculturation stress, the psychological strain caused by the difference between a strongly held cultural identity and a new social context.

This disruption is documented across veterans' studies literature; however, it is rarely framed specifically in terms of leadership identity. Becker et al. (2023) found that veterans going through career transitions often experience identity reconceptualization as one of the most destabilizing aspects of the process, especially when civilian employers fail to recognize or validate the skills veterans associate with their professional self-concept. Shepherd et al. (2021) similarly showed that former elite military professionals faced significant identity and cultural dissonance during reintegration; dissonance that is qualitatively different from that seen in the general veteran population due to the intense cultural immersion and role specificity typical of elite units. Flack and Kite (2021) also established that maintaining identity continuity, specifically the extent to which veterans can form new social connections after separation, influenced their wellbeing outcomes during transition.

What sets secrecy-bound veterans from elite units apart is the compounded intensity of dynamics. Smith and True (2014) identified warring identities, simultaneous, competing self-definitions as military and civilian, as a significant predictor of psychological distress in post-9/11 veterans. In elite units where identity salience is heightened by exclusivity, shared sacrifice, and extended organizational immersion, the dissolution of military identity is correspondingly more severe (Joseph et al., 2023). The inability to articulate the extent of prior leadership experience worsens this challenge and, without the ability to communicate classified roles, veterans face

a structural barrier to establishing civilian credibility, which hampers the development of a new leadership identity in civilian settings (Davenport et al., 2024; Shepherd et al., 2021).

Dominant reintegration frameworks, including military transition theory (Pedlar et al., 2019) and skill-transfer approaches (Davis & Minnis, 2016; Davenport et al., 2024) have historically focused on what veterans lose during transition, such as structure, rank, and occupational role, rather than the adaptive identity work through which veterans rebuild meaning and leadership purpose (Hunnicutt, 2022). From this perspective, successful transition is not about skill transfer but about identity development a process where veterans redefine what it means to lead, on whose terms, and within which organizational culture. This process is neither quick nor straightforward. Research on leader development consistently shows that leadership identity stabilization occurs over long periods, shaped by accumulated relational experiences, feedback, and contextual demands rather than single learning events (Day et al., 2014).

Long-term studies of veteran adjustment support this pattern, revealing ongoing identity recalibration well beyond immediate post-separation, often taking several years to stabilize meaningfully (Day et al., 2014; Park et al., 2021; Pedlar et al., 2019). Overall, these insights suggest that veterans from elite units shifting into civilian leadership face not just behavioral adjustments but also a challenge in reconstructing their leadership identity a challenge that transition models focused on employment outcomes and skill translation are not well-equipped to handle.

Despite increasing interest in veteran leadership (Bonini et al., 2024; Chughtai et al., 2024; Northouse, 2022), empirical studies rarely explore how these adaptive and identity processes develop for veterans from secrecy-bound, high-performance units. Even fewer studies differentiate between operators and support staff (Becker et al., 2023; Pedlar et al., 2019), obscuring vital role-specific differences in their transition experiences. This gap restricts the understanding of how military culture within elite units influences leadership recalibration over time and how civilian organizations can better support these veterans' integration.

This qualitative study explored how former NSWDC support-staff veterans experience adaptive challenges and rebuild their leadership identity after leaving military service and entering civilian leadership roles. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research focuses on veterans' own meaning-making as they navigate the loss of elite status, encounter ambiguity in civilian organizations, and reevaluate their leadership abilities in new settings. By emphasizing lived experiences rather than program

outcomes or skill inventories, the study sheds light on the internal processes through which elite veterans reinterpret leadership, belonging, and professional legitimacy.

The guiding research question for this study is: How do support staff veterans from NSWDG experience adaptive challenges after transitioning into civilian leadership roles? Exploring this question adds to veteran studies and leadership research in three ways. First, it broadens empirical understanding of adaptive leadership theory by demonstrating how adaptive challenges emerge during identity-disrupting transitions. Second, it improves social identity theory by showing how elite group membership and secrecy heighten the process of identity reconstruction after separation. Third, it amplifies the voices of an underrepresented veteran group, providing practical insights for organizations, transition programs, and executive coaches working with elite veterans in civilian leadership roles.

METHODS

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a qualitative research design with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how former NSWDG support-staff veterans experience challenges in adapting into civilian leadership roles after transitioning from the military. IPA is well suited to investigating how people interpret significant life changes and identity shifts, especially in situations involving cultural displacement and leadership adjustments (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). The method emphasizes participants' lived experiences and how they find meaning, while allowing for interpretive analysis of how these experiences are understood and shared. IPA was selected because transitioning from elite, secrecy-bound military units to civilian leadership is a complex adaptive challenge that survey-based or outcome-focused methods cannot fully capture. Instead of evaluating program effectiveness or skill transfer, this study examined how participants understand the loss of elite identity, navigate civilian ambiguity, and rebuild leadership competence over time.

PARTICIPANTS

The research was conducted in the United States and involved seven NSWDG support-staff veterans who served during the Global War on Terror era (2001–2021) and have been out of the U.S. military for at least three years before participating. All participants held civilian leadership positions in various sectors, including healthcare, federal service, defense contracting, education, and private industry. Their separation periods ranged from 3–17 years,

providing insights into both early and long-term adaptation experiences. For this study, all participants identified as a veteran, which is defined as someone who served on active duty in the U.S. military and was discharged under conditions other than dishonorable, in accordance with the definitions from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the inclusive framework of the *Journal of Veterans Studies*. The participants served in support roles for NSWDG, such as intelligence, communications, logistics, medical support, or mission planning, within the same elite organizational culture and secrecy constraints as special operations operators. Participants are identified by their assigned pseudonyms (P1–P7) to protect confidentiality and ensure anonymity. Demographic details are provided in aggregate to reduce the risk of identification, given the small and specialized NSWDG community.

RECRUITMENT

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling, strategies often used in qualitative research with hard-to-reach populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Initial outreach was conducted through veteran-serving organizations and private professional networks that support special operations veterans. Participants who met the eligibility criteria were invited to refer additional potential participants. Recruitment materials highlighted voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the prohibition on disclosing classified information. Individuals with prior personal or professional relationships with the researcher were excluded to reduce potential power imbalances and bias.

DATA COLLECTION

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, with sessions simultaneously recorded using Otter.ai for transcription accuracy. Interviews ranged from 65 to 95 minutes, with an average duration of 78 minutes. A semi-structured interview guide ensured consistency across participants while allowing flexibility to explore individual experiences thoroughly. The guide was organized into five thematic areas: (1) cultural context and separation from NSWDG (i.e., In your own words, can you describe what being at NSWDG was like? and How would you describe the experience of leaving NSWDG?); (2) navigating civilian ambiguity (i.e., Tell me about a situation in your civilian role where you faced uncertainty or less-defined rules than you were used to.); (3) leadership identity and adaptation (i.e., How would you describe your leadership identity at NSWDG? and Has your sense of self as a leader changed since you left?); (4) transition challenges and support systems (i.e., What challenges have you faced while adapting to civilian leadership roles? and Who or what

has helped you the most?); and (5) future leadership goals. This structure reflected the study's theoretical grounding in adaptive leadership theory and social identity theory, while remaining flexible enough to allow participants to create their own meaning.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded not to disclose classified or sensitive operational information. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed using Otter.ai. All transcripts were reviewed and verified by the researcher for accuracy prior to analysis, and military-specific terminology was clarified during follow-up communication as needed. Member checking was conducted in two stages: real-time paraphrasing during interviews to ensure understanding and a follow-up review of thematic summaries provided to participants two to three weeks later. All participants reviewed their summaries and minor clarifications were added to the final analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis followed the iterative stages of interpretative phenomenological analysis outlined by Smith et al. (2009). Each transcript was analyzed individually to maintain idiographic detail before examining cross-case patterns. The analysis involved repeated readings of transcripts, exploratory notes focused on descriptive and interpretive aspects, development of emergent themes, and synthesis across cases to identify shared meaning structures. The analysis process focused on both convergence and divergence in participants' experiences. Discrepant cases were kept and analyzed to improve depth, rather than dismissed as outliers. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to how participants described identity disruption, leadership misalignment, and adaptive learning in civilian settings. MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software was used to organize and retrieve coded data; however, all interpretive decisions were made by the researcher.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study received institutional review board approval from the University of Charleston, WV: IRB-UCWV-2025-01. All participants provided informed consent before the interviews and were reminded that participation was voluntary and could be stopped at any time without penalty. Due to the classified nature of NSWDCG operations, participants were explicitly instructed not to share any classified information. Any accidental mentions of sensitive material were removed from transcripts and analysis. Identifying information was replaced with pseudonyms, and all data were stored on encrypted institutional servers accessible only to the researcher. The researcher's previous

familiarity with NSWDCG culture helped build rapport but required careful attention to potential bias. To address this, analytic decisions were documented throughout the research, and peer debriefing with external qualitative experts improved interpretive rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trustworthiness was established using several interconnected strategies based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) qualitative validation framework. Credibility was achieved through investigator triangulation, where an external qualitative researcher independently coded a subset of transcripts and compared emergent themes with the primary analyst: member checking conducted in two phases, reflexive journaling maintained throughout data collection and analysis, and peer debriefing with external qualitative scholars who reviewed coding choices and emerging interpretations. The researcher's prior service as an NSWDCG support member was documented reflexively throughout, with analytic memos recording assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretive decisions to reduce the risk of over-identification.

Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions, including in-depth accounts of participants' experiences, organizational contexts, and demographic factors, allowing readers to determine how applicable the findings are to similar elite or high-performance environments. Dependability was upheld with a thorough audit trail involving transcripts, coded data, thematic outlines, and reflexive journals, as well as a code-recode process that monitored the consistency of analytical decisions over time. Confirmability was established through the same audit trail, peer debriefing, member checking, and the use of verbatim participant quotations throughout the findings, enabling readers to assess the credibility of thematic interpretations directly from participant language.

FINDINGS

This study examined how former NSWDCG support-staff veterans experience adaptive challenges after leaving elite military service and transitioning into civilian leadership roles. Analysis of seven semi-structured interviews using IPA identified three interconnected main themes that reflect participants' shared meaning-making processes during the transition: (1) exile from elite excellence, (2) from mission clarity to civilian ambiguity, and (3) leadership competence inversion and reconstruction. Together, these themes show a long-term adaptive process where participants faced identity disruption, organizational

misalignment, and the need to adjust leadership behaviors developed in high-stakes, secrecy-filled settings. Instead of seeing transition as a straightforward transfer of skills, participants described a multi-year journey of renegotiating professional legitimacy, authority, and belonging within civilian organizations that operate under different norms, expectations, and measures of success.

Each main theme includes several subthemes that highlight different yet overlapping aspects of participants' experiences. Although the themes are shown separately for clarity in analysis, participants' stories showed these experiences are deeply connected. The loss of elite identity often heightened feelings of civilian ambiguity, which in turn led to challenges in leadership competence and spurred adaptive change. A summary (Table 1) of the main and subthemes from cross-case analysis.

As shown in Table 1, participants' experiences centered around three key adaptive challenges that developed through identity disruption, organizational confusion, and leadership adjustment. Theme 1, exile from elite excellence, describes participants' feelings of identity loss, perceived decline in performance standards, and community displacement after leaving NSWGD. This theme reflects the initial destabilization as they transitioned from a highly mission-driven, elite environment into civilian

organizations that lacked similar sources of meaning, urgency, and connection.

EXILE FROM ELITE EXCELLENCE

Participants described separation from NSWGD as an exile from an elite organizational culture that profoundly shaped their identity, standards, and sense of belonging. Instead of viewing the transition as a typical career move, veterans saw leaving NSWGD as a rupture from a closely bonded, performance-driven environment that offered clear meaning, legitimacy, and purpose. This exile appeared across three interconnected dimensions: loss of elite identity, perceived decline of standards, and community displacement.

Loss of Elite Identity

Participants consistently described experiencing a destabilizing loss of identity after separating from NSWGD. Being part of the unit had been a key source of professional legitimacy and self-identity, and without it, some participants struggled to find their value in civilian life. Several participants emphasized that the elite status, which was constantly reinforced within NSWGD, held little meaning after they separated. Participant 6 expressed this loss directly, stating, "DEVGRU only hired the top one

SUPERORDINATE THEME	SUBTHEME	PARTICIPANTS	ILLUSTRATIVE EXCERPTS (ABRIDGED)
Exile from Elite Excellence	Identity Loss	P2, P6, P7	"I still today feel like I'll never have that experience back again" (P2); "DEVGRU only hired the top 1% of the Navy" (P6).
	Standards Gap	P5, P6, P7	"The rest of the world isn't like that place." (P7); "We didn't try to do the bare minimum because someone's life was on the line." (P5).
	Community Displacement	P2, P4	"You're on a speeding train ... then you're out there...by yourself trying to figure it out" (P4).
From Mission Clarity to Civilian Ambiguity	Loss of Unified Purpose	P3	"The civilian world is an amorphous blob...you have to create your own mission" (P3).
	Competing Priorities & Diffuse Authority	P1, P2	"We have SOPs, but they're vague. I'm told I've done it wrong, but nothing says I'm wrong" (P1); "You're advocating for patients...caught in the middle" (P2).
	Ambiguity Tolerance	P3	"You have to accept that two things can be true at the same time" (P3).
Leadership Competence Inversion and Reconstruction	Competence Inversion: Directness Misread	P2, P7	"People get their feelings hurt a lot easier...I have to be more diplomatic" (P2); "I kind of ran it like a drill instructor at first" (P7).
	Pace and Bias for Action	P6	"It was clear early on it was better to ask forgiveness than permission" (P6).
	Collaborative Reconstruction	P2, P4, P5, P6	"I work for you guys; tell me your issues and we'll figure it out" (P4); "Most people just want to be heard instead of being told what to do" (P6).

Table 1 Superordinate and Subordinate Themes Derived from Cross-Case Analysis.

Note. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality. Quotations are abridged for clarity and formatted in accordance with APA 7 guidelines.

percent of the Navy; we were the best.” Although this identity was unquestioned within the unit, they noted that civilian settings offered no comparable validation. Similarly, Participant 2 reflected on the lasting impact of this loss, stating, “I still today feel like I’ll never have that experience back again.” The ongoing nature of this feeling indicates that identity disruption was not limited to the immediate transition but persisted for years after separation.

For some participants, losing their elite identity happened gradually. Participant 7 initially underestimated how leaving NSWDG would affect them, only to feel more disconnected once they were in civilian life. They stated: “Once I got to college, I realized I didn’t really fit anywhere.” This delayed awareness shows that identity disruption often develops over time rather than happening immediately after separation.

Standards Gap

In correlation with identity loss, participants expressed shock at what they saw as a gap between NSWDG’s performance standards and those of civilian organizations. Participants often compared the urgency, precision, and accountability found in elite military operations with the ambiguity or acceptance of mediocrity they faced in civilian workplaces. Participant 7 stated, “The rest of the world isn’t like that place, the rest of the world doesn’t operate at that level,” which highlights a perceived misalignment between elite expectations and civilian norms. Participant 5 similarly reflected on the moral weight of military performance, explaining, “We didn’t try to do the bare minimum because someone’s life was on the line.” In civilian contexts, the absence of life-or-death consequences changed how urgency and accountability were understood. Importantly, participants did not describe civilian colleagues as incompetent; instead, they highlighted a fundamental difference in stakes and expectations. The standards gap acted as an adaptive challenge, prompting veterans to reevaluate how excellence, effort, and leadership are defined outside elite military environments.

Community Displacement

The loss of the elite community worsened disruptions to identity and standards. Participants described NSWDG as a highly cohesive social system built on trust, shared risk, and mutual reliance. Separating from this community created a sense of isolation that many veterans found hard to reproduce in civilian life. Participant 4 used a vivid metaphor to describe this displacement, stating, “You’re on a speeding train, and then all of a sudden you’re out there by yourself trying to figure it out.” This imagery captures both the intensity of elite service and the abruptness of separation. Participant 2 echoed this sense of loss, noting,

“There’s a unique place to be around a bunch of unique people, and I don’t think I’ll ever have that again.” Several participants recognized the difficulty in forming meaningful connections after separation. Even when support was accessible, veterans hesitated to seek or accept it. As Participant 2 admitted, “I haven’t been great at reaching out...not because people haven’t tried to help, but because I wasn’t good at accepting support.” This reluctance reflects how norms of elite self-reliance continued after separation, often increasing isolation instead of reducing it. Together, these subthemes illustrate how exile from elite excellence served as the initial destabilizing condition of participants’ transition experience.

Loss of identity, dissonance in standards, and community displacement created a deep sense of dislocation that influenced how participants interpreted later civilian experiences. This exile did not just lead to adaptation; it shaped the perspective through which ambiguity and leadership adjustments were later understood. As the next theme shows, the lack of clear mission and cohesive authority in civilian organizations worsened the difficulties caused by elite exile.

FROM MISSION CLARITY TO CIVILIAN AMBIGUITY

Participants consistently compared the clarity, urgency, and coherence of NSWDG missions with the ambiguity they faced in civilian organizations. Within NSWDG, purpose was clear, authority was well defined, and success criteria were understood and shared. After separation, veterans described moving into environments where priorities were vague, authority was negotiated rather than assigned, and expectations were often implicit or inconsistent. This shift from mission clarity to civilian ambiguity created a lasting adaptive challenge that changed how participants understood leadership, accountability, and meaning.

Loss of Unified Purpose

Participants described NSWDG as an environment where the mission served as a unifying framework that guided decision-making, efforts, and identity. The mission was externally defined, time-limited, and impactful, allowing leaders to act decisively within a shared understanding of risk and responsibility. In contrast, civilian organizations often lacked a comparable sense of collective purpose. Participant 1 explained that within NSWDG, performance was not limited by role boundaries when mission success was at stake, stating, “If you showed you were capable of doing something for the mission, there was no ceiling over your head.” This clarity sharply contrasted with civilian settings, where participants felt they had limited authority and unclear paths to contribute. Participant 4 reflected on

this difference in values, saying that the civilian workplace often seemed “[f]ocused on finances and performance to make money, rather than taking care of your people.” The lack of a unifying mission forced participants to create their own sense of purpose instead of having it provided through organizational structure. Participant 3 described this difficulty metaphorically, stating, “The civilian world is an amorphous blob...you have to create your own mission.” This change required some participants to redefine what motivates leadership and what makes it legitimate in environments that provided fewer shared anchors for meaning.

Competing Priorities and Diffuse Authority

Besides losing clarity of the mission, participants also struggled with civilian systems that had competing priorities and unclear authority structures. Unlike military hierarchies, where command relationships resolve tension and guide actions, civilian leadership involves working with multiple stakeholders with overlapping and sometimes conflicting demands (Northouse, 2022; Pedlar et al., 2019). Participant 2 described his civilian leadership role as operating “[a]most like an island,” caught between patient advocacy, professional peers, and administrative politics. Without a clear chain of command, decision-making depended on negotiation rather than directive authority. Participant 1 similarly expressed frustration with inconsistent procedural guidance, stating, “We have SOPs [Standard Operating Procedures], but they’re vague. I’m told I’ve done it wrong, but nothing says I’m wrong.”

Several participants observed that civilian leadership demanded acceptance of unresolved tensions. Participant 3 described this as learning to hold contradictory realities at the same time, adding, “You have to accept that two things can be true at the same time.” Instead of resolving ambiguity through authority, participants were expected to manage it through influence, communication, and compromise skills that had been secondary to execution in elite military settings.

Ambiguity, Urgency, and Meaning

Participants also mentioned difficulty adapting to less urgency in civilian settings. In NSWDC, operational tempo and life-or-death stakes made decisions feel immediately important. In civilian roles, the lack of these stakes changed how effort, accountability, and motivation were viewed. Participant 7 expressed frustration with what he perceives as civilian tolerance for failure, stating, “People accept failure a little too readily. They give up when they meet resistance.” Participant 5 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing that military urgency comes from consequences, stating, “We didn’t do the bare minimum

because somebody’s life depended on it.” At the same time, participants recognized moments when civilian work temporarily gave a sense of purpose. Participant 2 described how the crisis response during the COVID-19 pandemic felt like a time when purpose reappeared, stating, “It felt like serving the country again. I had a purpose.”

These moments highlighted how veterans kept seeking environments that resembled mission clarity, even after leaving the military. The shift from mission clarity to civilian ambiguity created a lasting adaptive challenge for participants. The loss of a unified purpose, conflicting priorities, and diffuse authority forced veterans to reinterpret leadership beyond traditional hierarchical structures. Instead of removing ambiguity, successful adaptation involved learning to operate within it. As the next theme shows, this ongoing ambiguity directly tested participants’ leadership skills, leading to a period of misalignment and eventual realignment.

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCE INVERSION AND RECONSTRUCTION

The third overarching theme reflects participants’ recognition that leadership behaviors valued and rewarded within NSWDC were often misunderstood or undervalued in civilian organizational settings. Participants described an initial phase of competence reversal, where traits once linked to effectiveness, such as directness, speed, decisiveness, and authority, became sources of conflict rather than credibility. Over time, many participants engaged in leadership rebuilding, adjusting their approaches to meet civilian expectations while maintaining key aspects of their military identity.

Competence Inversion: When Strengths Become Liabilities

Participants frequently described entering civilian leadership roles with confidence in their leadership, only to encounter unexpected resistance. Behaviors that signaled competence in elite military environments were often perceived as abrasive, rigid, or emotionally detached in civilian settings. Participant 2 reflected on the need to adjust his communication style, stating, “People get their feelings hurt a lot easier in the civilian world...I can’t just tell someone to get it together; I have to be more diplomatic.” Similarly, Participant 7 acknowledged that his initial approach mirrored military training norms rather than civilian motivational structures, stating, “I kind of ran it like a drill instructor at first. I didn’t fully understand what motivated people.”

Speed and a bias for action, both crucial in operational settings, also caused misalignment. Participant 6 pointed out that in military environments, quick action was often

rewarded, stating, “It was clear early on it was better to ask forgiveness than permission.” In civilian organizations, however, this same approach clashed with norms that emphasize consultation, consensus, and procedural harmony. Several participants reported receiving feedback that challenged their self-view as leaders. Participant 3 recalled being labeled as arrogant despite seeing their behavior as confidence rooted in competence, stating, “There’s a difference between arrogance and confidence, and I’m confident but that doesn’t always translate the same way.” These experiences led participants to question leadership assumptions that had previously gone unchallenged, signaling the start of adaptive disequilibrium.

Adaptive Learning and Leadership Reconstruction

Following periods of misalignment, participants described engaging in intentional adaptive learning to rebuild leadership skills. This process involved experimentation, reflection, and responsiveness to feedback rather than discarding military-derived strengths. Participants highlighted learning to recalibrate authority, communication, and influence to fit civilian settings. Participant 4 described adopting a more facilitative leadership style, stating, “I’ve always taken a servant-leadership mentality. I work for you guys, tell me your issues, and we’ll figure it out.” This change signified a shift from directive leadership to relational engagement. Participant 6 also highlighted the importance of listening, stating, “Most people just want to be heard instead of being told what to do.” Participants also learned how to tailor motivation and expectations. For example, Participant 3 explained that effective leadership requires understanding each employee’s needs instead of applying one-size-fits-all standards, stating, “Now I know how to incentivize every one of these employees.” This shift away from standardized performance models common in military settings needed more emotional effort and patience.

Hybrid Leadership Identity

Over time, participants described developing hybrid leadership identities that combined military decisiveness with civilian relational skills. Instead of abandoning their previous experience, participants adjusted their leadership styles to suit new settings. Participant 4 described this evolution as liberating, stating, “I can look at any problem and figure it out...that flexibility allows for creativity and problem solving.” Participant 2 similarly emphasized adaptability, stating, “You fall back on your training, but you learn to adjust it to fit the situation.” These reflections suggest that the reconstructed leadership competence was not a retreat from excellence but an expansion of capability. Notably, participants emphasized that this

reconstruction was gradual. Most described multi-year adjustment periods marked by trial and error rather than immediate success. Access to mentorship, peer feedback, or supportive organizational environments facilitated learning, whereas the absence of such structures prolonged misalignment.

Leadership competence inversion was one of the most destabilizing aspects of the transition for participants, as it challenged deeply held assumptions about authority and effectiveness. Through adaptive learning, reflection, and contextual experimentation, participants reconstructed leadership identities that connected elite military experience with civilian organizational realities. This process highlights that successful transition involved not just transferring skills but also renegotiating meaning, legitimacy, and self-concept as leaders. Collectively, these three themes illustrate how NSWDG support-staff veterans experienced transition as a prolonged, adaptive process involving identity disruption, organizational ambiguity, and leadership reconstruction rather than as a straightforward transfer of military leadership skills.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how Naval Special Warfare Development Group (NSWDG) support-staff veterans experience adaptive challenges after leaving military service and moving into civilian leadership roles. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), three interconnected themes, exile from elite excellence, from mission clarity to civilian ambiguity, and leadership competence inversion and reconstruction, highlight how participants interpret identity disruption, organizational misalignment, and leadership adjustment over time. Overall, these findings suggest that veterans transition from elite units is not a straightforward transfer of skills but a long-term, adaptive, and identity-driven process.

Participants’ experiences of exile from elite excellence reflected more than nostalgia for a prestigious organization; they revealed a deep disruption to personal and professional identity. Social identity theory explains how membership in a highly visible group provides coherence, legitimacy, and psychological security (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 2004). For participants, separation from NSWDG removed a key source of validation without providing an equivalent civilian ingroup, leading to disorientation and a loss of professional grounding. Participants who later found new affiliative structures through professional networks or veteran communities described a partial restoration of identity stability, a pattern consistent with research showing that

social connectedness and community belonging are among the strongest factors affecting veteran wellbeing after separation. (Flack & Kite, 2021; Joseph et al., 2023)

The shift from mission clarity to civilian ambiguity further exposed the adaptable nature of participants' challenges. In line with adaptive leadership theory, some participants encountered problems that could not be solved through technical expertise alone and required a redefinition of purpose, authority, and success (Heifetz et al., 2009). Participants described civilian organizations as lacking the urgency, coherence, and decisional clarity that previously guided their leadership. Those who learned to tolerate ambiguity and operate within diffuse authority structures reported better adaptation, while those without access to supportive holding environments the relational and organizational structures that contain adaptive stress while allowing learning (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017) experienced prolonged frustration or disengagement. These findings highlight that successful reintegration depends not only on individual flexibility but also on the organizational context.

Leadership competence inversion was the most destabilizing part of the transition. Behaviors rewarded in NSWDG (e.g., directness, speed, decisiveness) were often misunderstood in civilian settings, challenging participants' ideas about effectiveness and legitimacy. This inversion matches Heifetz and Linsky's (2017) description of adaptive disequilibrium, where familiar skills lose their value before new ones are learned. Over time, participants experimented deliberately and reflected, reconstructing leadership identities that combined military strengths with civilian relational norms a process aligned with DeRue and Ashford's (2010) view of leadership identity as constantly negotiated through relational claiming and granting. This rebuilding viewed adaptation not as loss but as an expansion of leadership capacity, consistent with Day et al.'s (2014) findings that leader development lasts longer when it involves identity-level change rather than just learning new behaviors.

Together, these findings expand both adaptive leadership theory and social identity theory. Adaptive leadership is empirically supported by showing how productive disequilibrium occurs during identity-disrupting transitions rather than in isolated organizational change events. Participants' three-to-six-year adaptation paths challenge prevailing transition frameworks that treat reintegration as a bounded, short-term process (Pedlar et al., 2019; Karre et al., 2023) and underscore the need for sustained holding environments that support adaptive work well beyond the immediate post-separation period. Social identity theory is refined by demonstrating how elite identity salience and secrecy constraints deepen identity disruption and

slow reintegration, building on prior work on conflicting identities in post-9/11 veterans (Joseph et al., 2023; Smith & True, 2014) by placing that conflict within a specific elite organizational context. Identity renegotiation was found to be both psychological and structural, influenced by organizational recognition, cultural compatibility, and opportunities for affiliation, a finding consistent with Becker et al.'s (2023) demonstration that civilian employer responses to veterans' self-presentation directly shape the trajectory of identity reconstruction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings clearly affect organizations and transition programs working with veterans from elite units. Employers often recruit veterans for discipline and decisiveness, qualities reliably linked to military leadership strengths (Davis & Minnis, 2016; Mael et al., 2022), but they may overlook the identity reconstruction needed for sustained leadership success. Shepherd et al. (2021) identified this gap as a factor in cultural dissonance and early attrition among veteran hires from elite units. Organizations that provide mentorship, feedback-rich environments, and psychologically safe spaces help veterans adapt their leadership behaviors without losing core strengths. Leadership development efforts should explicitly focus on identity work, managing ambiguity, and relational leadership, rather than just on translating skills.

Veteran transition programs might improve by framing reintegration as a multi-year, adaptable process. While transition support programs exist to assist veterans broadly including VA-administered initiatives such as Solid Start, Community Reintegration, and Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Centers, as well as peer-led models such as Veteran X (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2023). These initiatives primarily address mental health stabilization and general reintegration rather than the identity reconstruction and leadership recalibration specific to veterans from elite, secrecy-bound units (Karre et al., 2023; Shepherd et al., 2021). Programs designed for this population should therefore build on these existing foundations while explicitly incorporating reflective learning, peer support within confidentiality constraints, and continuous mentorship rather than short-term orientation models. Lastly, executive coaching can act as a crucial supportive environment, offering the relational challenge and psychological safety that Heifetz et al. (2009) identify as essential for effective adaptive work, helping veterans experiment with hybrid leadership identities that connect military and civilian norms.

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was small and homogeneous, consisting of former NSWVG support-staff veterans, which limits the extent to which the results apply to other military groups. Second, the sample was demographically homogeneous; all participants were male, Caucasian, and served in enlisted ranks ranging from E-5 to E-8. Detailed demographic information was otherwise reported only in aggregate to protect participant confidentiality, given the small and specialized nature of the NSWVG community. These characteristics limit replicability and may not reflect the transition experiences of female veterans, veterans of color, those who served in officer or junior enlisted roles, or those who faced greater challenges in their civilian transitions. Finally, as a qualitative study using interpretative phenomenological analysis, the findings aim to provide an in-depth understanding rather than broad generalizations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study highlights the necessity for longitudinal research on identity reconstruction during extended post-separation periods. Comparative studies across elite military units that include women, veterans of color, and veterans of varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds would clarify how identity salience intersects with role, gender, race, and organizational culture.

Future research should also examine civilian organizational readiness; specifically, how civilian leaders interpret and respond to the leadership behaviors of veterans from elite units. Viewing transition as a reciprocal adaptive process one that requires adjustments from both the veteran and the receiving organization would broaden current frameworks that mainly focus on veteran adaptation (Hunnecutt, 2022; Shepherd et al., 2021) and encourage further research into organizational culture, onboarding practices, and leadership development.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that NSWVG support-staff veterans view transition as an ongoing process of adaptive learning and identity rebuilding rather than a simple career change. Exile from elite excellence, exposure to civilian uncertainty, and the reversal of leadership competence collectively changed how participants understood leadership, legitimacy, and belonging. By combining adaptive leadership theory and social identity theory, this research redefines veteran

transition from elite units as a dynamic interaction between individual meaning-making and organizational context. By centering veteran voices and lived experiences, this study adds to a growing body of scholarship that moves beyond deficit-based narratives of veteran transition toward frameworks emphasizing adaptation, growth, and leadership development. For veterans, successful reintegration does not depend on abandoning prior identity but on creating hybrid leadership styles that navigate ambiguity while maintaining core values forged in service, a process that requires not only individual resilience but also organizational cultures willing to meet veterans in the complexity of that reconstruction.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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