

Sarili Ko Naman: Lived Experiences of Employees Who Voluntarily Demoted Themselves

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Abstract: This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of employees who voluntarily stepped down from high-ranking positions to lower roles within the same organization. The study aimed to understand the motivations behind voluntary demotion, how individuals perceived their transition, and the implications for administrators and human resource managers. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews with faculty members from higher education institutions in Koronadal City who had served at least two years in leadership roles before stepping down. Thematic analysis revealed that burnout and workload stress, a toxic work environment, a lack of administrative support, professional misalignment, and the pursuit of personal goals were the primary factors influencing their decisions. After transitioning, participants reported improved work-life balance, reduced stress, enhanced job fulfillment, and renewed focus on teaching and personal growth. However, some experienced reduced decision-making authority, diminished influence, and perceived loss of prestige. Despite these challenges, most participants viewed voluntary demotion as a strategic and necessary decision to preserve well-being and achieve professional alignment. The findings highlight the importance of transparent communication, structured transition support, and employee-centered leadership practices in fostering sustainable and healthy organizational environments.

Keywords: Voluntary Demotion, Burnout, Work-Life Balance, Phenomenology, Leadership Transition, Employee Well-Being.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Voluntary demotion is increasingly recognized as a response to burnout and organizational stress. Burnout has been associated with excessive workload and emotional exhaustion (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Leadership fatigue and misalignment between personal values and institutional expectations may influence decisions to step down from managerial roles. Within academic institutions, hierarchical expectations and organizational politics further complicate leadership experiences.

Furthermore, Nelson, Sandra, and Robison (2025) revealed that burnout and the struggle to maintain work-life balance are key factors driving senior employees in high-pressure industries, such as finance and technology, to voluntarily step down to lower positions. This trend is especially noticeable in technology hubs like Silicon Valley, where long hours, high expectations, and constant innovation create significant pressure. In response, employees in leadership roles often choose to demote themselves to regain control over their time and mental well-being. Companies like Google and Microsoft are supporting this shift by encouraging senior employees to take lower-pressure roles to prioritize mental health and long-term productivity (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).

The study aims to disseminate research findings on employee burnout and voluntary demotion to academic researchers, government agencies, industry professionals, and the public through journal publications, conferences, webinars, workshops, social media, and policy briefs. Success will be measured through engagement metrics, stakeholder feedback, and evidence of policy or organizational improvements, while key findings will be shared in both detailed academic reports and accessible summaries for practitioners and broader audiences.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Motivational theories provide insight into voluntary demotion decisions. Maslow (1943) emphasized the importance of fulfilling psychological and self-actualization needs, while Herzberg et al. (1959) distinguished between hygiene factors and motivators in job satisfaction. When administrative burdens outweigh intrinsic motivation, employees may seek roles better aligned with personal and professional goals.

III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design based on Husserl's (1931). Participants were seven faculty members from higher education institutions in Koronadal City who previously held high-ranking positions for at least two years. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews using semi-structured guide questions. Thematic analysis was conducted systematically through transcription, coding, categorization, and theme development. Ethical approval and informed consent were secured before data collection.

IV. RESULTS

Five major themes emerged regarding reasons for stepping down: burnout and workload stress; toxic work environment; lack of administrative support; professional misalignment; and pursuit of personal goals. Post-transition experiences revealed improved work-life balance, greater job fulfillment, personal and professional growth, loss of influence or prestige, and mixed emotional experiences. Findings suggest that voluntary demotion represents a strategic coping mechanism rather than professional failure.

V. DISCUSSION

Findings revealed burnout, lack of support, and professional misalignment as dominant themes. Consistent with Maslach and Jackson (1981), participants described emotional exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment. Improved work-life balance and renewed intrinsic motivation aligned with Herzberg's motivational factors.

VI. CONCLUSION

Voluntary demotion among academic leaders reflects complex personal and organizational dynamics. Burnout, insufficient support systems, and professional misalignment significantly influence leadership withdrawal. Institutions should promote transparent communication, supportive transition frameworks, and proactive burnout prevention strategies to foster healthier organizational cultures.

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