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An Exploratory Study on How Civil Servants Resolve the Paradoxes of the "Iron Cage" of Bureaucracy in a "VUCA" World

Abstract

This study explores how Vietnamese civil servants address the complex paradoxes created by the "iron cage" of bureaucracy, particularly within the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment of modern public administration. Using in-depth qualitative interviews with 30 public officials from diverse regions and roles, this study uncovered a nuanced spectrum of adaptive strategies, including compliance, accommodation, collectivization, inertia, and distortion. By integrating classical and contemporary bureaucracy theories with real-world accounts, this study highlights how traditional hierarchical cultures and rigid procedures simultaneously support stability and impede effective adaptation. Comparative analysis of global and regional public sector reforms reveals both the unique and shared dilemmas faced by Vietnamese officials. The findings have significant implications for policy reforms, organizational change, and future research on state capacity, accountability, and innovation in developing countries. This paper argues that successful bureaucratic adaptation in a VUCA world requires balancing institutional orders with responsible discretion and fostering a culture of learning, resilience, and ethical public services.

Keywords:
bureaucracy; VUCA; civil servants; iron cage; paradoxes; public administration; adaptability; public governance

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, public sector organizations worldwide are increasingly challenged by environments that are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous—summed up by the now-common term "VUCA." The nature of these challenges is particularly acute in rapidly developing countries, such as Vietnam, where social transformation, digitalization, and economic globalization are reshaping both the demands on public administration and the expectations of citizens. In this context, civil servants are expected to uphold institutional stability and regulatory

consistency while simultaneously demonstrating flexibility, creativity, and responsiveness to changing needs.

This paradox lies at the heart of the bureaucratic system that Weber famously conceptualized. Bureaucracy, with its formal hierarchies, defined roles, and clear procedures, offers the promise of rational governance and fair service delivery. On the other, the rigidity of bureaucratic processes can result in what Weber termed the "iron cage"—a situation where adherence to established rules and the logic of appropriateness stifle innovation, delay action, and sometimes undermine the very goals of effective governance. The persistence of such paradoxes is a defining feature not only in Western democracies, but also in transitional and developing states.

In Vietnam, the legacy of a centrally planned administrative model, coupled with rapid reforms over the past three decades, has produced a distinctive blend of tradition and transformation in public sector management. While the state has adopted market-oriented reforms, decentralized certain functions, and sought to modernize its apparatus, many features of the Weberian bureaucracy remain deeply embedded. Civil servants today face the dual challenges of maintaining compliance with strict regulations and delivering results in the face of social expectations, digital disruptions, and shifting policy goals.

The "VUCA" framework has gained traction in both the academic literature and policy discourse as a way to understand why bureaucratic systems, originally designed for stability, now often struggle to keep pace with the speed and complexity of change. Volatility may stem from political turnover, economic crises, or even public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Uncertainty can arise due to ambiguous laws, unclear policy priorities, or limited access to reliable information. Complexity is amplified by the need to coordinate across sectors, levels of government, and stakeholder networks. Ambiguity can mean that officials must act despite a lack of precedence, guidance, or consensus.

A growing body of research has investigated these tensions, with some focusing on institutional reforms and others on leadership, accountability, and organizational culture. However, much of the scholarship remains concentrated on Western contexts, with relatively less attention paid to the daily, micro-level strategies that public officials in countries like Vietnam use to navigate paradoxical demands. Existing studies have identified a variety of adaptive practices—discretion, improvisation, collective decision-making, and even resistance—but have rarely integrated them into a holistic account of how the paradoxes of bureaucracy are experienced and managed in practice.

This study addresses this gap in literature. It seeks to provide an in-depth, empirically grounded analysis of how Vietnamese civil servants themselves perceive, interpret, and resolve the paradoxes of the "iron cage" amid the pressures of a VUCA environment. Specifically, the research was guided by the following questions.

1. What are the main paradoxes and tensions Vietnamese civil servants experience in their work?
2. What adaptive strategies do they employ to reconcile the bureaucratic order with the need for flexibility and innovation?
3. How do these strategies reflect broader institutional, cultural, and comparative trends in public-sector governance?

By situating the Vietnamese case within broader international literature and drawing on first-hand accounts from front-line and managerial officials, this paper aims to contribute both theoretical and practical insights into the study of bureaucracy, state capacity, and public sector reform. Ultimately, the analysis underscores that effective adaptation in the public sector is not only a matter of changing formal rules or

structures but also depends on fostering a culture of responsible discretion, learning, and ethical services —a message relevant for reformers and practitioners across diverse settings.

Bureaucracy, The "Iron Cage," and The Vuca Challenge

Classical and contemporary perspectives on bureaucracy

The concept of bureaucracy has long been foundational to the study of public administration and organizational theory. Max Weber's classic model described bureaucracy as the epitome of rational-legal authority: a system built on hierarchy, formal rules, impersonality, and division of labor. According to Weber, these features promote fairness, predictability, and efficiency, which are crucial for large-scale governance and modern state building. Weber's bureaucracy, however, never intended to be an unqualified ideal. He acknowledged the inevitable rise of the "iron cage"—a metaphor for the dehumanizing effects of rigid administrative routines, where rule-following becomes an end in itself, potentially crushing innovation, discretion, and personal meaning (Weber, 1947).

Weber's analysis is both prophetic and critical. Scholars have debated the value and limitations of bureaucratic systems. Merton (1940) and Gouldner (1954) highlighted "goal displacement" and the tendency for rules to become detached from the original purposes they were meant to serve. Later theorists, such as Lipsky (2010) and Evans (2015), focused on "street-level bureaucracy," emphasizing the discretion and coping mechanisms used by frontline public servants. Other critiques, including Bourdieu (2005), point to how bureaucratic fields become sites of power struggles, social reproduction, and subtle forms of exclusion or resistance.

In many developing and transitional contexts, including Vietnam, the bureaucratic model is deeply entrenched. However, efforts at reform—often inspired by New Public Management (NPM), digital governance, or collaborative networks—have only partially replaced traditional structures. The legacy of colonialism, socialist state-building, and recent marketization have created hybrid forms of public administration, where elements of the Weberian model persist alongside newer approaches (Christensen & Lægreid, 2011).

The "Iron Cage" and the paradoxes of bureaucratic life

The "iron cage" is not merely a metaphor for stagnation. It captures the lived experiences of public officials caught between competing imperatives: the security of rules versus the uncertainty of real-world problems, loyalty to superiors versus responsiveness to citizens, and efficiency versus fairness. These paradoxes manifest in countless ways: delayed service delivery due to excessive procedural checks, reluctance to innovate out of fear of reprimand, or ethical dilemmas when personal values clash with organizational directives.

Such dilemmas are intensified in environments characterized by high-power distance, collectivist cultures, and administrative traditions that discourage open dissent. In Vietnam, as in many East and Southeast Asian countries, Confucian values reinforce respect for hierarchy and harmony. This can help ensure discipline but may also contribute to risk aversion, resistance to feedback, and limited bottom-up innovation (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

The VUCA world: Disrupting traditional bureaucracy

The VUCA framework—Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity—originated in military strategy but now shapes management and governance worldwide (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). In the VUCA world, organizations and governments are facing challenges that are more dynamic and unpredictable than ever before,

requiring new approaches to management and decision-making. For bureaucracies, which are traditionally characterized by stability, predictability, and rigid adherence to rules, adapting to the realities of a VUCA environment presents significant challenges.

The volatility of the external environment has a profound impact on bureaucratic operations. Traditionally, bureaucracies are structured to manage stable and predictable environments with hierarchical decision-making processes that prioritize control and consistency. However, in a volatile context, bureaucratic procedures can become outdated or irrelevant, as changes in political, economic, or technological landscapes occur at a rapid pace. For example, rapid technological innovation has disrupted the functioning of many public-sector bureaucracies, who are often slow to adopt new technologies due to procedural constraints and resistance to change (Mergel et al., 2019).

Uncertainty is one of the most significant challenges that bureaucracies face in the VUCA world. Traditional bureaucratic structures are designed to make decisions on the basis of historical data, precedents, and established policies. However, in an environment where future outcomes are increasingly difficult to predict, bureaucrats may find themselves without reliable models or guidelines to follow, leading to paralysis or ineffective decision making (Ansell et al., 2021). Under conditions of uncertainty, bureaucracies may either overrely on established procedures or delay decisions in the hope that more information becomes available. However, this can lead to missed opportunities and slow responses to critical issues, as demonstrated during economic crises or natural disasters, where rapid and decisive actions are often required. Uncertainty also challenges the effectiveness of long-term strategic planning, which is a cornerstone of bureaucratic governance. As future conditions become more difficult to anticipate, bureaucracies must develop adaptive planning techniques, including scenario-based planning, which allows for flexibility in decision-making based on evolving conditions (Gordon & Glenn, 2009).

The complexity of the modern environment further complicates bureaucracies' work. In today's globalized world, public policy challenges are rarely isolated; they are often intertwined with a range of economic, social, political, and environmental factors. This interconnectedness can lead to wicked problems, defined by Rittel and Webber (1973), as problems that are difficult to define and even harder to solve because of the involvement of multiple stakeholders and conflicting interests. For bureaucracies, managing complexity requires cross-sector collaboration and interagency coordination, which are not always easy to achieve within the rigid hierarchical structures of traditional bureaucracies. Moreover, the rise of digital governance has added layers of complexity to bureaucratic operations as new technologies create new challenges related to cybersecurity, data management, and public accountability (Mergel et al., 2019). Bureaucracies must develop the capacity to manage these complex, cross-cutting issues, while maintaining coherence in their operations.

Ambiguity, or a lack of clarity about information or situations, is perhaps the most difficult aspect of the VUCA environment for bureaucracies to manage. In ambiguous situations, there may be multiple interpretations of the same data and bureaucrats may have no clear guidelines to follow. This can lead to interpretive flexibility, where different actors within the same bureaucracy come to different conclusions based on the same information, causing internal conflicts and inconsistent decision making (Weick, 1995).

Discretion in Street-Level Bureaucracy

One of the most well-documented strategies civil servants use to resolve the paradoxes of

bureaucracy at the individual level is discretion. Michael Lipsky's (2010) concept of street-level bureaucracy refers to civil servants who operate at the point of delivery of public services, such as social workers, police officers, teachers, and health inspectors. These individuals often have considerable discretion in interpreting and applying bureaucratic rules.

Although bureaucratic rules are designed to standardize procedures and ensure fairness, they are not always suited to the complexity and variability of real-world situations. In practice, civil servants must adapt rules to suit the unique contexts of the individuals or communities they serve. This exercise of discretion allows them to resolve the tension between rigid rule following and situational responsiveness (Lipsky, 2010). For example, a social worker may be required to follow strict guidelines regarding eligibility for welfare services; however, when faced with a client in urgent need who falls just outside the formal criteria, they might use their discretion to find an alternative solution. In this way, civil servants navigate between formal rules and the need for humanitarian flexibility (Evans 2010). Discretion is particularly important in addressing the paradox of bureaucracy, which demands consistency and fairness through rule adherence, while also requiring flexibility and responsiveness to individual circumstances. By exercising discretion, civil servants can reconcile these conflicting demands and apply rules in ways that are both effective and context sensitive.

Sensemaking in Ambiguous Situations

Civil servants often operate in environments where rules may be unclear, information may be incomplete, and situations may rapidly change. In such contexts, they rely on sensemaking to interpret ambiguous situations and determine the appropriate actions. Sensemaking, as described by Weick (1995), is the process by which individuals construct meaning from complex and uncertain situations. In bureaucracies, where procedures are designed for predictable scenarios, civil servants frequently encounter cases that do not fit neatly into the existing categories or protocols. Sensemaking helps them interpret these situations, allowing them to respond effectively, even when rules or guidance are insufficient or absent. By engaging in sensemaking, civil servants can resolve the paradox between the need for standardized procedures and the reality of unpredictable situations. This cognitive process allows them to maintain organizational stability while adapting their actions to address emerging challenges.

Adaptive Leadership at the Individual Level

Adaptive leadership is another strategy employed by civil servants at the individual level to resolve paradoxes of bureaucracy. Adaptive leadership, as described by Heifetz et al. (2009), involves the ability to adjust one's approach in response to changing circumstances, learn new ways to solve problems, and mobilize others to tackle complex challenges. Unlike traditional forms of leadership, which focus on maintaining order and control, adaptive leadership embraces change, uncertainty, and innovation. For civil servants, practicing adaptive leadership means moving beyond strict adherence to rules when necessary and taking the initiative to address evolving problems. In a bureaucratic context, this may involve challenging established norms, seeking creative solutions, and encouraging collaboration among colleagues to address novel situations. By adopting adaptive leadership, civil servants can resolve the tension between bureaucratic control and the need for flexibility in crises. This leadership style empowers them to respond to external pressures while maintaining organizational integrity.

Incremental Innovation and Continuous Learning

Civil servants can also resolve bureaucratic paradoxes through incremental innovation and a

commitment to continuous learning. Unlike large-scale reforms that may face resistance, incremental innovation allows civil servants to make small, gradual changes within the bureaucratic structure, improve processes, and find new ways to enhance service delivery without disrupting the system (Hartley, 2005). For example, a government employee might identify inefficiencies in an existing workflow and implement small changes to streamline the process, such as introducing a new digital tool or reorganizing work assignments to reduce delays. These changes are often initiated at the individual level and, if successful, can be adopted more widely within bureaucracy (Bessant and Tidd, 2007). Incremental innovation allows civil servants to resolve the paradox between the need for stability and demand for constant improvement. By gradually enhancing the processes, they can maintain organizational consistency while ensuring that the system adapts to new challenges and opportunities.

In addition to incremental innovation, continuous learning plays a crucial role in helping civil servants address the paradox of bureaucracy. Continuous learning refers to the ongoing process of acquiring new knowledge, skills, and perspectives to adapt to a changing environment (Argyris and Schön 1978). Civil servants who engage in continuous learning can respond better to evolving situations, especially in fields that are subject to rapid changes in policy, technology, or public expectations.

Personal Resilience and Emotional Intelligence

Finally, personal resilience and emotional intelligence are critical individual-level strategies that help civil servants navigate the stress and contradiction of bureaucratic work. Resilience refers to an individual's ability to recover from setbacks, adapt to challenging conditions, and continue to function effectively despite pressure or adversity (Luthans et al. 2006).

Bureaucratic work often involves managing conflicting demands, high workloads, and frustrations arising from rigid systems. Civil servants who exhibit personal resilience are better equipped to handle such challenges without becoming overwhelmed. Resilient individuals maintain their motivation and effectiveness even in environments where paradoxes such as rigidity versus flexibility or control versus responsiveness create ongoing stress. For example, in high-pressure environments, such as public health agencies or emergency services, resilient civil servants are able to adapt to rapidly changing conditions, manage stress, and continue to make effective decisions despite external pressures (Luthans et al., 2006).

In addition to resilience, emotional intelligence—the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions and those of others—is essential for civil servants. Emotional intelligence allows civil servants to navigate the interpersonal dynamics of bureaucratic organizations, resolve conflicts, and maintain positive working relationships, even when bureaucratic processes or external conditions are frustrating (Goleman 1995).Civil servants with high emotional intelligence are better able to cope with the frustrations of rigid bureaucratic systems and remain empathetic to the needs of the public, helping them manage the paradox of being both rule-enforcers and service providers.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how Vietnamese civil servants manage the paradoxes of bureaucracy in the VUCA context. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited to capture the lived experiences, subjective meanings, and adaptive strategies of public officials, which are often inaccessible to quantitative surveys. The focus was on depth, nuances, and the ability to uncover patterns of sensemaking and action that emerge from within the administrative field itself.

Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 civil

servants from a range of administrative levels and geographic regions across Vietnam. The sample included officials from central ministries, provincial departments, district offices, and commune-level agencies to ensure a diversity of perspectives. To maximize relevance and reliability, participants were required to have at least three years of experience in public administration.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit individuals with varying responsibilities, ranks (both managerial and frontline), and backgrounds (age, gender, and education). This diversity enabled this study to capture both shared patterns and significant differences in how paradoxes are experienced and resolved across the Vietnamese public sector.

Interviews were conducted over a six-month period. Each session lasted between 60 and 120 min, allowing sufficient time for open discussion. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, covering topics such as the experiences of bureaucratic tension and paradox, adaptive strategies (both formal and informal), perceptions of institutional reform, discretion, and accountability, and reflections on organizational culture, hierarchy, and citizen engagement.

The guide was piloted by five officials (whose data were not included in the final analysis) and revised to ensure clarity and flexibility. All the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, digitally recorded with consent, and professionally transcribed for accuracy.

Transcripts were coded using a combination of open, axial, and selective coding techniques, following the grounded theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding identified discrete concepts and initial categories, axial coding explored relationships among themes, and selective coding integrated the findings into a coherent explanatory model. The coding was iterative and comparative—new interviews were continuously compared with previous data to refine categories and test emerging explanations.

Results

The strategies CSs use in their job performance depend on many factors and each

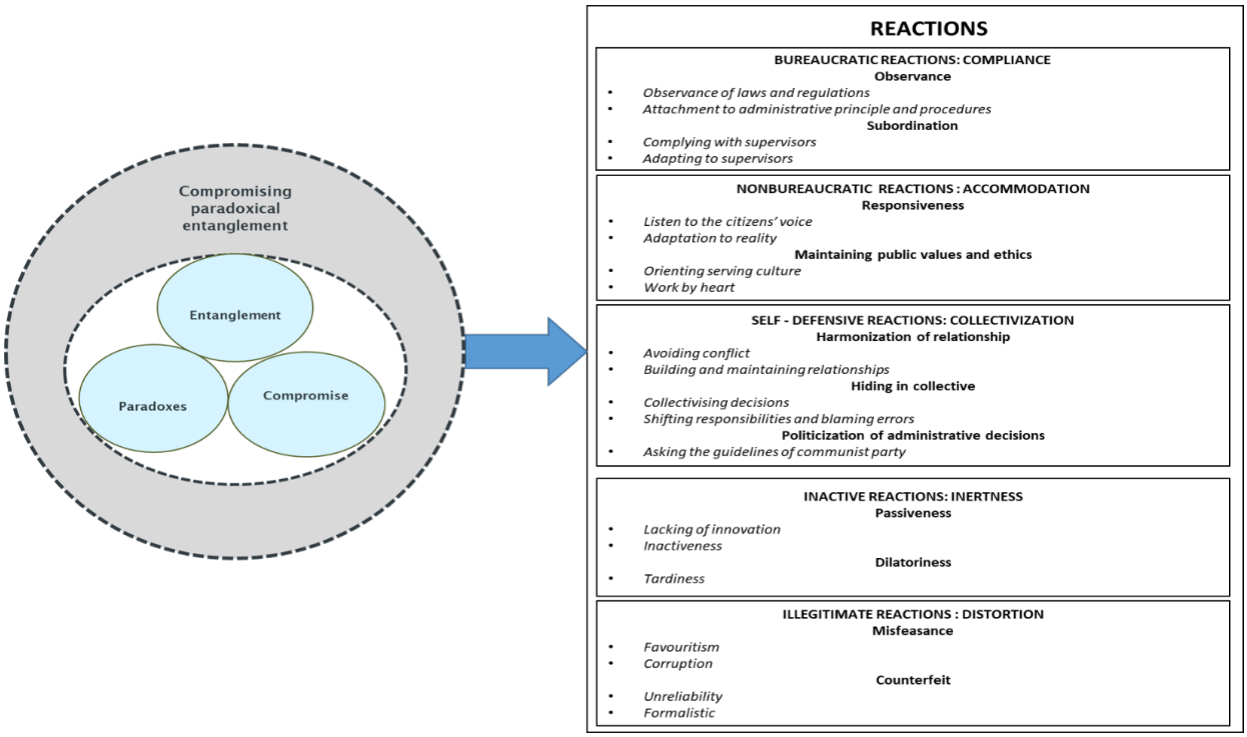

Figure 1. Responsive Reactions Undertaken to Compromising Paradoxical Entanglement
Source: Developed by Author

concrete situation. In general, there are five main strategies, as shown in the figure below.

The analysis of interviews with Vietnamese civil servants revealed a dynamic and multifaceted set of responses to the paradoxes of bureaucracy in the VUCA environment. Five principal strategies have emerged: compliance, accommodation, collectivization, inertia, and distortion. Each strategy reflects an adaptive logic shaped by personal motivation, organizational culture, and the realities of public administration in Vietnam.

Compliance: The comfort and constraints of rule-following

Compliance is a passive defensive strategy for responding to circumstances. There are two groups of response reactions in this category: observance and subordination. Most CSs were inclined to observe the legal provisions and administrative principles. On the one hand, this helps guarantee the consistency, fairness, and accuracy of work implementation. However, this can also lead to inflexibility in the implementation process. The compliance strategy is concretized in the following substrategies:

First, most CSs said that legal observance was more important than creativity. Therefore, they tended to apply legal regulations and administrative procedures in a correct, even rigid way. Consequently, their work implementation is extremely mechanical, takes time, and even causes trouble for people.

Second, the observance of the "compliance with the orders' principle creates inequality in the state administrative relationship between leaders and staff. The former has the right to give concrete orders or enforce obligatory regulations on the latter, and check the implementation thereof. The latter must carry out regulations and orders. As a result, subordinate CSs become increasingly dependent on leaders, frequently asking their superiors' opinions when dealing with difficulties and complying with superiors' orders unconditionally.

Third, CSs usually compromise leaders. In reality, owing to the centralization mechanism, leaders and managers have the right to make administrative decisions. In many cases, for individual reasons, the promulgation of decisions is not conformable to sequence, procedure, or even law provisions. However, most CSs felt that they should not close their minds against the leaders' unsatisfactory decisions.

For many officials, strict adherence to established laws, regulations, and instructions from superiors remains the primary means of managing complexity and risks. This "compliance first" orientation is deeply rooted in both the Vietnamese administrative tradition and broader Confucian cultural values. Compliance ensures procedural fairness and protects individuals from blame, especially in an environment in which mistakes can result in disciplinary action or reputational loss.

Civil servants described compliance as both a "safe harbor" and a source of frustration. One district officer stated,

> *"When you follow the rules exactly, you won't get into trouble. However, sometimes even when you know that a regulation is outdated or unsuitable, you cannot deviate without approval. It slows everything down."*

While compliance promotes organizational stability, it can also stifle initiative and responsiveness, particularly during periods of rapid change or policy uncertainty. Officials noted that strict rule-following sometimes led to "passing the buck" or excessive paperwork, as no one wished to take responsibility for deviations or innovation.

Accommodation: Flexibility and service orientation

The strategies CSs used to undertake to compromise paradoxical entanglement were mostly passive and less creative. However,

Many CSs had more active, responsible, and flexible perspectives and behavior towards the difficulties and tensions in their job, enabling their performance to run more smoothly and be more efficient and responsive. A second group of respondents reported a more proactive and flexible approach—what might be termed "accommodation." These officials prioritize citizen needs and outcomes, and seek ways to work within or around the system to deliver effective services. They used discretion to interpret ambiguous rules, expedite urgent requests, or adjust standard procedures in line with contextual realities.

One commune leader explained the following:

> *"Some rules cannot account for the real situation of the people. If we followed every procedure exactly, the villagers would have suffered unnecessary delays. We try to find solutions that are still legal, but fit local needs."*

Accommodation often involved informal negotiation, seeking pre-approval from superiors, or working collectively to legitimize exceptions. Respondents emphasized that such flexibility was constrained by institutional hierarchy—initiative was often only possible with tacit or explicit backing from leaders. Internationally, similar forms of "pragmatic discretion" have been documented in street-level bureaucracies, especially in societies in which formalism coexists with strong service norms (Lipsky, 2010; Evans, 2015). In Vietnam, this balance is delicate; while public servants value flexibility, they are keenly aware of the risks of overstepping boundaries.

Collectivization: Sharing responsibility and reducing risk

CSs were aware of their role as representatives of the state in working with the people. Job performance has a significant effect on both people and society. Indeed, in cases of mistakes in the process of implementation, the consequences would be so serious that CSs themselves could not take individual responsibility. Therefore, a group of defensive strategies, namely collectivization, is used by CSs to protect themselves and help them avoid trouble at work. These strategies include several sub-strategies: harmonization of relationships, hiding in the collective, and politicization of administrative decisions.

Firstly, in the area of building, maintaining, harmonizing relationships and avoiding conflict, as most CSs explained, civil service activities are complicated, so they need to maintain relationships with members of their organization and relevant agencies to facilitate their work implementation. The majority of CSs tried to avoid conflict and maintain good relations with their colleagues, harmonizing with collective and heightened collectivism. Most interviewees said that it was better to ignore weaknesses, mistakes, or negative feedback to their colleagues in the evaluation of job performance in order to avoid displeasing them. Consequently, the evaluation results did not reflect the truth, leading to the fact that weaknesses and shortcomings could not be settled thoroughly.

Second, CSs are inclined to take collective coverage by collectivizing administrative decisions, responsibilities, and mistakes. As many interviewees revealed, their job relates to the legitimate rights and interests of public service users, which CSs are there to satisfy on behalf of the state.

Many civil servants have described reliance on collective processes for decision-making, especially in cases involving ambiguity, risk, or controversial outcomes. Decisions were often made in committees or working groups, or by seeking consensus among peers and superiors. This approach offers several advantages.

- Risk mitigation: By distributing responsibility, individuals avoid being singled out if a decision is questioned later.

- Maintaining harmony: Group decisions minimize interpersonal conflicts and reinforce organizational cohesion.
- Institutional legitimacy: Collectivization aligns with the cultural expectations of shared leadership and avoids the appearance of personal ambition.

As one provincial official stated:

"In important matters, we always consult as a team. In other words, if anything occurs, no one person is blamed. It is safer for everyone."

While collectivization can enhance legitimacy and support, it may also slow decision-making and dilute accountability. Some respondents admitted that the process could become a form of "blame avoidance" or even inaction, especially when no one wished to take the lead on difficult issues.

Inertia: Coping through passivity and resistance to change

Inertia is derived from many causes, including conditional causes such as social and cultural contexts, guaranteed status, bureaucratic obstacles, weak performance management practices, and the strategies that CSs adopt in response to the phenomenon. A notable subset of interviewees reported adopting a passive stance in the face of bureaucratic paradoxes. This "inertia" often reflects learned helplessness, resignation, or simple risk aversion. Several factors contribute to this mind-set.

- Job security: Civil service positions in Vietnam offer stable employment, reducing the incentive to challenge established routines.
- Organizational culture: A high power distance and respect for authority can suppress dissent and innovation.
- Previous experience: Failed reform efforts or a lack of recognition of the initiative may discourage future efforts.

One central government staff member explained,

"When you have seen many changes come and go, and nothing really improves, you start to think: just do your job, don't try to change too much."

This inertia is not unique in Vietnam. Comparative research in East Asia and post-socialist societies has shown that guaranteed tenure, hierarchical control, and bureaucratic overload can foster passivity and "working to rule," especially when innovation is not rewarded (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

Distortion: Rule bending, bypassing, and corruption

This category explains why policies, laws, regulations, and principles cannot be effective and efficient in practice. Centralized power leads to its abuse. The higher the position CSs hold, the more power and public resources they receive, specifically, the right to make decisions and have access to information about such resources. In particular, CSs working in areas that are likely to lead to conflicts of interest, such as the provision of public services, recruitment and appointment, tendering, licensing and approval of projects, inspections and audit investigation, handling of violations, granting of land use rights certificates, land acquisition and allocation, compensation, and resettlement. In the process of carrying out the tasks and powers assigned to them, CSs face the fact that in many cases, their personal interests may conflict with their obligations, tasks, and powers assigned by the state. At this time, CSs have to make difficult choices between their own personal interests and the interests of the agencies, state, or work. Integrity requires public employees to always put the interests of the agency and the state above the interests of the individual and to carry out the duties, powers, and tasks assigned by the state, losing democratization and supervision mechanisms. The unconditional compliance of subordinates easily leads to superiors' manipulation of power,

which results in the distortion of regulations, laws, and policies, and opportunities for corruption. In a contradiction reflected by many interviewees, the Law on Anti-Corruption existed, but as mentioned, the rules are too general, merely formalities, and many are obsolete. When unlawfully discovered by law enforcement agencies, there are sufficient reasons for "internal handling", or "closing the door to solutions".

Finally, a small but significant number of civil servants described instances where rules were bent, bypassed, or selectively enforced—sometimes to expedite service, and sometimes for personal or political gain. This "distortion" can take several forms:

- Informal shortcuts: Skipping steps or modifying procedures to meet urgent needs.
- Favoritism: Preference for particular individuals or groups, often under pressure from local elites or higher authorities.
- Petty corruption: Accepting unofficial payments or gifts to accelerate processes or ignore minor violations.

One interviewee said:

"Sometimes, the only way to get things done is to use connections or find a shortcut. Otherwise, the paperwork will never move."

While some forms of distortion were rationalized as necessary "grease" for the bureaucratic machine, others were seen as undermining public trust and the integrity of the civil service. Respondents stressed that such practices are often driven by external pressures, ambiguous regulations, or institutional inertia.

Patterns and variations

The analysis revealed that these five strategies are not mutually exclusive. Many officials described shifting between them depending on context, leadership signals, or perceived risk of action versus inaction. Younger officials, those with international experience, and individuals in reform-oriented agencies are somewhat more likely to embrace accommodation and innovation. By contrast, long-serving staff in highly regulated sectors tended to favor compliance and collectivization.

Regional differences were also observed in the present study. Urban officials reported greater pressure on results and citizen feedback, prompting more flexible approaches. Rural and remote respondents faced unique constraints—limited resources, strong local networks, and less oversight—which shaped both opportunities for discretion and the risk of distortion.

Finally, the findings highlight the complex interplay between personal motivation, organizational incentives, and the broader political-administrative environment. Successful adaptation often requires not only individual courage or skill but also supportive leadership, clear signals from policymakers, and accountability mechanisms that reward innovation while protecting against abuse.

Discussion

The strategies identified in this study — compliance, accommodation, collectivization, inertia, and distortion—highlight both the complexity and adaptability of Vietnamese public administration in a VUCA environment. These responses resonate with, but also challenge, the prevailing theories of bureaucracy, discretion, and public sector reform. This section analyzes the findings through several key dimensions: theoretical alignment, international comparison, organizational culture, reform implications, and future challenges.

Theoretical reflections: Reconciling structure and agency

The dominance of **compliance** in Vietnamese civil services reflects the enduring power of the Weberian logic. In highly formalized systems, rules are seen as both protective and prescriptive,

providing legitimacy, minimizing personal risk, and enabling accountability. However, as Merton (1940) and later scholars have observed, overreliance on rules can foster rigidity, stifle initiative, and disconnect procedures from real-world outcomes. This is especially pronounced in transitional societies, where legal frameworks are often in flux and ambiguous guidance is common.

Accommodation as a strategy aligns with research on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010; Evans, 2015). It illustrates how discretion is exercised not as an act of rebellion, but as a form of pragmatic adaptation. Civil servants selectively interpret or modify procedures to meet citizens' needs, maintain service delivery, and bridge the gap between policy and practice. This confirms that front-line officials are not passive implementers but active sense-makers, balancing personal judgment, ethical considerations, and institutional constraints.

Collectivization is particularly salient in the Vietnamese and broader Asian contexts. While group-based decision-making has long been recognized as a risk-mitigation tool, its widespread use underscores the cultural preference for harmony, shared responsibility, and avoidance of direct confrontation (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Such approaches can help legitimize difficult choices and diffuse blame, but they may also dilute individual accountability and slow reform.

Inertia reflects the shadow side of institutional stability: when innovation is not rewarded and organizational learning is weak, civil servants may retreat into passive compliance or "working to rule." This finding supports international research showing that job security, high-power distance, and weak performance incentives combine to entrench conservative behavior (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

Finally, **distortion** exposes the limits of formal accountability systems. When rules are ambiguous or pressures are intense, some officials bend or bypass procedures—sometimes rationalized as "practical necessity–sometimes veering into corruption or favoritism. This highlights the persistent challenge of enforcing integrity, particularly in settings where oversight is variable, and the norms of gift-giving or patronage remain strong.

International comparison: Uniqueness and commonality

While these findings are deeply embedded in the Vietnamese context, they also reflect global patterns. In China, Japan, and Korea, similar tensions exist between hierarchical disciplines and the need for local innovation. For example, studies in China have reported that officials rely heavily on collectivization and accommodation to balance the demands of central mandates with local realities (Wong, 2012). In OECD countries, public servants also report frustration with red tape and contradictory goals, although such systems may allow more open dissent and structured feedback (Bryson et al., 2006).

What distinguishes Vietnam is its particular combination of rapid reform, lingering socialist legacies, and Confucian values. The hybrid administrative model—part bureaucratic, part networked, part market-oriented—creates unique adaptation opportunities and constraints. The coexistence of multiple logics (compliance, negotiation, discretion, and avoidance) can make reform both creative and complicated.

Organizational culture, leadership, and change

This research confirms that organizational culture is a powerful force shaping individual and group behavior. Civil servants often calibrate their actions based on the signals they receive from leaders, prevailing norms within their agencies, and perceptions of risk versus reward. Where leaders are supportive of responsible innovation and provide "psychological safety," officials are more likely to embrace accommodation and propose new solutions. Conversely, punitive or

hierarchical management styles foster compliance, inertia, and covert distortion.

Leadership also plays a critical role in mediating the effects of VUCA. Adaptive leaders—those who communicate transparently, encourage learning, and model ethical judgments —can help organizations respond effectively to volatility and uncertainty (Heifetz et al., 2009; Johansen, 2017). However, without broader institutional support, individual leadership is often insufficient for overcoming entrenched barriers.

Implications for reform and capacity building

These findings have significant implications for public sector reform in Vietnam and similar contexts.

- Balancing rules and discretion: Reforms should focus on clarifying where flexibility is permitted, providing frameworks for responsible discretion, and aligning incentives with the desired outcomes.
- Strengthening accountability: While group decision-making reduces risk, reforms must ensure that it does not lead to diffused responsibility or impede performance management. Clear standards, transparent reporting, and citizen feedback can support accountability, without stifling innovation.
- Fostering a culture of learning: Building adaptive capacity requires not only technical training, but also organizational processes that encourage experimentation, reflection, and the sharing of best practices.
- Addressing integrity risks: Anti-corruption efforts must be integrated with broader administrative reforms, recognizing that distortions often emerge from ambiguity, overload, or misaligned incentives.

International experience suggests that reforms are most successful when they combine formal structural changes with investments in people and cultures. Digital transformation, for example, can streamline processes and enhance transparency; however, its impact depends on how well civil servants are prepared to use new tools and engage with citizens.

Navigating the future: Toward an ambidextrous bureaucracy

The findings point to the need for what organizational theorists call "ambidexterity"—the capacity to maintain stability and order while also exploring new solutions and adapting to change (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). For the Vietnamese bureaucracy, this means that

- Investment in leadership development that fosters resilience, vision, and collaborative problem-solving
- Empowering civil servants at all levels to contribute to ideas and learn from failures.
- Maintaining essential safeguards and public values while reducing unnecessary rigidity and bureaucratic overload.

Above all, reform should be viewed as an ongoing process, not as a one-time event. VUCA environments will continue to challenge public administration, but with a combination of clear direction, flexible systems, and a strong ethical foundation, bureaucracies can become more efficient, trusted, and adaptive in serving the public good.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Vietnamese civil servants operate within a complex paradox shaped by the enduring "iron cage" of bureaucracy and the disruptive demands of a VUCA environment. Their adaptive strategies—compliance, accommodation, collectivization, inertia, and distortion—reflect a continuous balance between maintaining institutional order and addressing the need for flexibility, innovation, and public responsiveness.

Summary of key insights

The persistence of compliance highlights the continuing dominance of Weberian bureaucratic

principles in Vietnam's public administration. Although these principles foster stability, they also constrain creativity and slow responsiveness. Accommodation and collectivization demonstrate that civil servants are actively engaged in pragmatic problem-solving, albeit within boundaries shaped by hierarchical authority and cultural norms emphasizing harmony and risk aversion.

Inertia underscores the challenges in motivating change and innovation, often linked to job security and organizational culture. Distortion, as a minority practice, points to systemic vulnerabilities that threaten integrity and public trust.

Together, these findings emphasize that bureaucratic reform cannot be reduced to procedural adjustment alone. A holistic approach that integrates institutional redesign, cultural transformation, and capacity-building is essential.

Policy recommendations

Regulatory frameworks should explicitly define areas where civil servants have discretion backed by guidelines and accountability mechanisms. Training programs can develop skills in ethical judgments and adaptive decision-making.

Encouraging collective decision-making should be balanced with clear accountability structures. The platforms for stakeholder engagement and citizen feedback can enhance transparency and trust. Investing in leadership development focuses on adaptive leadership, emotional intelligence, and ethical stewardship. Organizational culture should reward innovation, learning, and responsible risk-taking.

Digitalization and process simplification can reduce unnecessary red tape, freeing officials from focusing on value-added activities. Technology should be integrated with human-centered design to improve service delivery. Anti-corruption efforts must address the root causes of distortion, including unclear regulations and excessive bureaucratic burdens. Whistleblower protection, independent oversight, and transparent complaint mechanisms are also essential.

Strategic implications for Vietnam

Vietnam's ongoing public-sector reforms offer opportunities to implement these recommendations. Aligning reforms with the country's broader socioeconomic development goals, such as the National Strategy on Public Administration Reform, will help ensure coherence and sustainability. Building partnerships with international organizations and learning from regional neighbors can facilitate knowledge transfer and innovation.

The findings also highlight the importance of managing cultural changes alongside structural reforms. Initiatives that promote public service ethos grounded in accountability, service orientation, and ethical conduct are vital for long-term institutional resilience.

Future research directions

This study opens avenues for further investigation, including:

- Quantitative research to measure the prevalence and impact of adaptive strategies across different regions and sectors
- Comparative studies have examined how other transitional and developing countries manage similar paradoxes.
- Evaluation of specific reform initiatives aimed at enhancing discretion, reducing inertia, and curbing distortion
- Exploration of citizen perceptions and experiences to complement official perspectives.

Ultimately, this research underscores that navigating the paradoxes of bureaucracy in a VUCA world requires more than just procedural compliance. It demands a shift toward an ambidextrous bureaucracy—one that values stability and order, but embraces flexibility, innovation, and ethical

public service. By fostering such a culture, Vietnam's civil service can better meet the complex demands of governance in the twenty-first century.

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