

Developing Creative Leadership among Local Administrators for Smart Locality Advancement in Maha Sarakham Province

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Abstract

In an era of rapid change, developing creative leadership among local administrators is a critical factor in driving smart locality development in Maha Sarakham Province. Visionary thinking, systematic innovation, and flexible management are essential for sustainable transformation. This study aimed to: (1) examine the current state, desired state, and priority needs for creative leadership among local administrators; and (2) develop strategic guidelines to strengthen creative leadership for the concrete advancement of smart localities. A mixed-methods research design was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The sample consisted of 331 local administrators selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Statistical analyses included mean, standard deviation, and the Modified Priority Needs Index (PNI Modified). The findings revealed that the current state of creative leadership was at a high level ($M = 3.85$, $S.D. = 1.89$), while the desired state was at the highest level ($M = 4.80$, $S.D. = 1.98$). Priority needs for development, ranked from highest to lowest, were creativity (PNI Modified = 0.272), vision (0.257), individualized consideration (0.256), teamwork (0.249), flexibility (0.233), and imagination (0.215). The proposed guidelines consist of six major strategies and eighteen sub-strategies, all evaluated at the highest levels of appropriateness, feasibility, and utility ($M = 4.91\text{--}4.96$). Enhancing creative leadership among local administrators is therefore a key mechanism for advancing smart locality development. The findings provide practical and systematic guidelines that can strengthen leadership capacity in government organizations and support sustainable development in the digital era.

Keywords:

creative leadership, local administrators, smart locality, leadership development, Maha Sarakham Province

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Introduction

In the digital era, local development agendas worldwide are increasingly oriented toward building “Smart Localities,” where technology, innovation, and governance capacity are integrated to enhance public value (Krang et al., 2024). Leadership among local administrators is therefore pivotal for ensuring the successful implementation of smart development policies. Despite these aspirations, evidence indicates that 72% of local administrative organizations in Thailand still lack innovation-oriented development plans, relying instead on technology at an operational rather than a strategic level (Lim & Chuangchai, 2023). This gap suggests that technological adoption without visionary and creative leadership is insufficient to achieve the transformative goals of smart locality development (Worapongpat & Kangpheng, 2025).

International scholarship further reinforces this point. Nua-amnat et al (2021) found that creative leadership has a significant positive correlation with the capacity to initiate innovative public policies and with enhancing citizen satisfaction toward public services. However, in the Thai context, (Namwong & Chansirisira, 2020) reported that many local administrators remain anchored in conventional bureaucratic routines, with limited creative thinking skills and inadequate application of digital technologies for proactive development. Phimkoh et al (2015) also emphasized these challenges. These findings collectively underscore the leadership gap in Thai local governance and highlight the urgent need for frameworks that cultivate creative leadership aligned with smart locality transformation (Xunan & Worapongpat, 2023).

Maha Sarakham Province represents an appropriate empirical setting for such an investigation. As a semi-urban and semi-rural region currently piloting smart locality initiatives in several districts, it offers a unique context in which to explore both the opportunities and barriers of leadership-driven innovation (Pintong & Worapongpat, 2024). Preliminary evidence suggests that local administrators in the province still lack the creative mindset and strategic capacity required to effectively mobilize digital technologies and innovations for sustainable local development (Sirisawat & Chaiya, 2025). The researcher’s direct engagement with local administrative organizations through leadership capacity-building programs during the 2023–24 fiscal years provides further insights into these challenges, needs, and structural limitations (Sinjindawong et al., 2023). Although some research in Maha Sarakham has examined budget management and transparency, little attention has been paid to the development of creative leadership as a strategic pathway toward smart locality realization (Yasuttamathada & Worapongpat, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the present study aimed to develop practical and theoretically grounded guidelines for enhancing creative leadership among local administrators in Maha Sarakham Province. Employing a mixed-methods design, the study integrated quantitative

survey data from local administrators with qualitative insights derived from in-depth interviews to generate a comprehensive understanding of leadership capacity building.

The contribution of this research is twofold. First, it enriches the academic literature by offering empirical evidence that addresses the theoretical gap concerning leadership and governance capacity in the context of Thai local administration. Second, it provides actionable, policy-relevant guidelines to strengthen the professional competence of local administrators, thereby supporting the broader national agenda of digital transformation and smart locality development.

Research Objectives

1.To examine the current state, the desired state, and the essential needs regarding creative leadership among local administrators in local government organizations of Maha Sarakham Province.

2.To develop strategic guidelines for enhancing the creative leadership of local administrators in local government organizations of Maha Sarakham Province in order to concretely drive the realization of smart localities.

Literature Review

Concept of Creative Leadership

Creative leadership refers to a leadership approach that promotes an organizational environment conducive to innovation, knowledge creation, and adaptive problem-solving (Khaenamkhaew, et. al., 2023). Unlike traditional leadership models that emphasize control and hierarchy, creative leadership encourages participatory decision-making, flexibility, and experimentation.

Scholars often associate creative leadership with broader leadership theories. For instance, it shares characteristics with transformational leadership, particularly in inspiring followers to pursue innovative goals and challenge conventional practices. It also aligns with adaptive leadership, which highlights leaders' capacity to respond effectively to complex and changing environments (Lim & Chuangchai, 2023). Furthermore, innovation leadership emphasizes the role of leaders in fostering creativity as a strategic organizational asset (Namwong & Chansirisira, 2020).

Empirical studies indicate that creative leadership enhances employees' divergent thinking, supports idea generation, and facilitates organizational learning. In the public sector, such leadership is particularly important because administrative systems must respond to dynamic citizen needs while operating within regulatory constraints (Nua-amnat, et. al., 2021).

Creative leaders therefore play a crucial role in initiating policy innovations, improving public service delivery, and strengthening citizen satisfaction (Sirisawat & Chaiya, 2025).

Despite growing international interest, most studies on creative leadership have focused on private enterprises or large public organizations. Research examining creative leadership within local government administration remains limited, particularly in developing countries (Sinjindawong, et. al., 2023). This gap restricts understanding of how local leaders can foster innovation under resource constraints and decentralized governance structures (Thirawan, 2025).

Concept of Creative Economy

The creative economy represents a paradigm shift from resource-based production toward value creation driven by creativity, cultural assets, and intellectual capital (Worapongpat, 2025). It encompasses industries that rely on design, innovation, digital technology, and cultural heritage to stimulate sustainable economic growth (Worapongpat, 2025a).

Theoretical perspectives emphasize that the creative economy integrates art, culture, entrepreneurship, and technology into a cohesive development strategy. Creativity becomes a key factor in enhancing competitiveness, promoting local identity, and generating high-value products and services (Worapongpat, 2025b).

At the policy level, many governments adopt creative economy strategies to strengthen local development (Worapongpat, 2025c). These strategies include promoting creative clusters, supporting cultural entrepreneurs, and leveraging digital platforms to expand market access (Worapongpat, 2025d). Such initiatives are especially relevant for local governments seeking to diversify income sources and enhance community participation (Worapongpat, 2025e).

However, implementing creative economy policies requires more than infrastructure investment (Worapongpat, 2025f). Leadership capacity is a decisive factor in translating creative potential into tangible economic outcomes. Without leaders who encourage experimentation, collaboration, and innovation, creative economy initiatives often remain fragmented and unsustainable.

Concept of Smart Locality

The concept of smart locality evolves from the smart city framework, emphasizing the integration of digital technology, data-driven governance, and citizen engagement to enhance public service efficiency and quality of life (Worapongpat, 2025g). Smart localities employ digital platforms, intelligent infrastructure, and participatory governance mechanisms to address urban and rural development challenges.

Core dimensions of smart locality include digital governance, smart mobility, smart environment, smart economy, and smart citizen participation (Worapongpat N, 2025h).

Successful implementation requires not only technological infrastructure but also human and institutional capacities.

In many developing contexts, local government organizations face structural limitations such as insufficient digital infrastructure, limited technical expertise, and resistance to organizational change (Worapongpat, 2025i). Consequently, technological investment alone cannot ensure smart locality transformation.

Scholars increasingly argue that leadership plays a critical role in driving digital transformation (Worapongpat, 2025j). Leaders must promote innovation-friendly cultures, encourage inter-agency collaboration, and support personnel in developing digital competencies. Without such leadership support, smart initiatives risk becoming short-term projects rather than sustainable governance systems.

Research Gaps and Limitations in Local Context

Existing studies on local governance leadership primarily examine general administrative effectiveness rather than innovation-driven development (Worapongpat, 2025k). Although leadership has been shown to influence organizational performance, limited research explicitly connects leadership approaches with creative economy strategies and smart locality frameworks.

Furthermore, empirical investigations often provide broad policy recommendations without proposing integrated development frameworks tailored to local administrative contexts (Worapongpat, 2025l). This limits the practical applicability of research findings. Another important limitation is the scarcity of studies focusing on provincial municipalities, (Worapongpat, 2026) where administrative capacity, budget constraints, and community structures differ significantly from metropolitan areas.

To address these gaps, the present study integrates concepts from creative leadership, creative economy, and smart locality development to construct a comprehensive analytical framework (Worapongpat, et. al., 2025). This framework enables systematic examination of leadership capacity, developmental needs, and strategic guidelines for local administrators, ensuring alignment with digital transformation and sustainable local development goals.

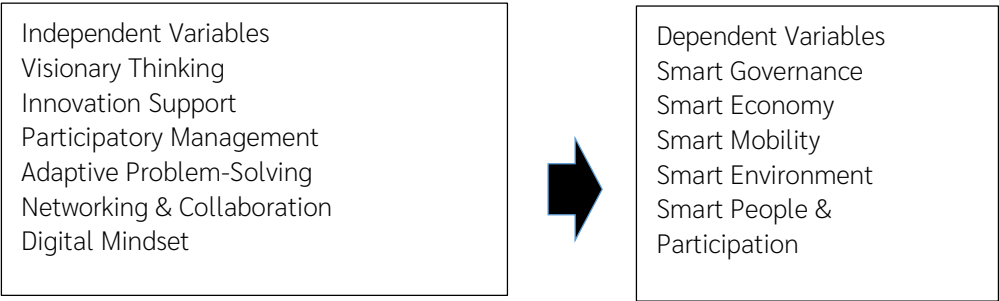


Figure 1. Research Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to obtain comprehensive insights into the development of creative leadership among local administrators. The integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches enabled both measurement of leadership conditions and in-depth exploration of practical development guidelines.

The research was conducted in two sequential phases.

Phase 1: Survey of Current Conditions, Desired Conditions, and Priority Needs

Population and Sample

The study population consisted of 1,025 local administrators in Maha Sarakham Province, including mayors, presidents of sub-district administrative organizations, municipal clerks, sub-district clerks, and heads of local government departments (Department of Local Administration, Fiscal Year 2024).

The sample size was determined using the Krejcie and Morgan sampling table, yielding 285 participants. Simple random sampling was employed to reduce bias.

Research Instruments

The study questionnaire consists of two parts:

Part 1: Demographic Information

A checklist covering respondents' position, educational background, years of service, and organizational affiliation.

Part 2: Creative Leadership Assessment

A five-point Likert-scale questionnaire measuring perceptions of both the current and desired states of creative leadership across multiple dimensions.

Instrument Development and Quality Assurance

The instrument was developed based on established theory, academic literature, and related empirical studies.

Content validity was evaluated by five experts using the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index. Items with IOC values of 0.50 or higher were retained.

A pilot study was conducted with 30 administrators outside the sample group to assess reliability. Internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. Responses were automatically recorded in Google Sheets. All returned questionnaires were screened to ensure completeness and data accuracy prior to analysis.

Data Analysis

Demographic data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages.

Perceptions of current and desired leadership conditions were analyzed using mean and standard deviation.

Priority needs were assessed using the Modified Priority Needs Index (PNImodified).

Phase 2: Exploration of Development Guidelines for Creative Leadership

Key Informants

Six key informants were purposively selected based on their recognized achievements in innovative local administration at the provincial or national level, and their expertise in local governance.

Research Instruments

Part 1: Informant Profile Form

Collecting demographic and professional background information.

Part 2: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Developed based on findings from Phase 1 to explore practical strategies and policy recommendations.

Instrument Validation

The interview protocol was reviewed by five experts to ensure content validity using the IOC index.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews were conducted face-to-face. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded. Field notes and photographic documentation were also collected. All recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was employed to systematically code and categorize emerging themes. The findings were synthesized into strategic and practical guidelines for enhancing creative leadership among local administrators.

Ethical Consideration

This research adhered to ethical standards for human-subject research. Participants were informed of the research objectives and procedures prior to participation. Informed consent

was obtained, and participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. All data were used solely for academic purposes.

Findings

Current Conditions, Desired Conditions, and Development Needs of Creative Leadership

The findings indicate that the overall current level of creative leadership among local administrators was at a ‘moderate’ level, whereas the desired level was rated ‘high’ across all dimensions. A comparison between current and desired conditions revealed developmental gaps in every dimension.

The largest gaps were identified in vision and imagination, followed by flexibility, indicating priority areas for leadership development.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Gap Values across Dimensions

Dimension of Creative Leadership	Current State (M ± S.D.)	Desired State (M ± S.D.)	Gap
1. Individualized Consideration	3.36 ± 0.79	4.56 ± 0.62	+1.20
2. Vision	3.21 ± 0.83	4.71 ± 0.59	+1.50
3. Teamwork	3.51 ± 0.77	4.61 ± 0.61	+1.10
4. Imagination	3.16 ± 0.85	4.66 ± 0.63	+1.50
5. Flexibility	3.31 ± 0.71	4.61 ± 0.51	+1.30
Overall	3.31 ± 0.81	4.63 ± 0.61	+1.32

In the current condition, ‘teamwork’ received the highest rating, followed by individualized consideration. In contrast, all dimensions in the desired condition were rated at a ‘high’ level.

Priority Needs Assessment

Priority needs were further examined using the Modified Priority Needs Index (PNImodified).

Table 2. Overall Creative Leadership was Rated at a ‘High’ Level in the Current State and at a ‘Very High’ Level in the Desired State, Reflecting Strong Expectations for Leadership Enhancement

Dimension of Creative Leadership	Current State (M ± S.D.)	Interpretation	Desired State (M ± S.D.)	Interpretation	PNI Modified	Rank
1. Individualized Consideration	3.95 ± 1.91	High	4.94 ± 1.94	Very High	0.256	3*
2. Vision	3.89 ± 1.94	High	4.86 ± 1.86	Very High	0.257	2*
3. Teamwork	3.97 ± 1.92	High	4.92 ± 1.87	Very High	0.249	4
4. Imagination	3.99 ± 1.91	High	4.82 ± 1.85	Very High	0.215	6
5. Flexibility	3.81 ± 1.84	High	4.92 ± 1.87	Very High	0.233	5
6. Creativity	3.93 ± 1.98	High	4.96 ± 2.11	Very High	0.272	1*
Overall	3.96 ± 1.91	High	4.91 ± 1.99	Very High	0.247	–

The top three priority needs were: Creativity, Vision and Individualized Consideration. These dimensions represent the most urgent areas requiring capacity development among local administrators.

Development Guidelines for Creative Leadership

Findings from in-depth interviews with key informants led to the formulation of six strategic guidelines for strengthening creative leadership. First, individualized consideration emphasizes the importance of promoting continuous professional development, implementing fair performance evaluation systems, ensuring equitable opportunities, and providing appropriate recognition and rewards to personnel. Second, vision highlights the need to formulate clear long-term organizational directions, apply strategic planning tools, encourage participatory planning processes, and communicate the vision effectively across all levels of the organization. Third, teamwork focuses on fostering a collaborative organizational culture, encouraging open communication, supporting team-based innovation, and creating safe environments that enable collective problem-solving.

Fourth, imagination underscores the role of encouraging creative thinking in planning processes, promoting learning through experimentation, and actively engaging personnel in innovation activities. Fifth, flexibility involves strengthening the organization’s adaptability to

emerging challenges, integrating new technologies into operations, empowering personnel in work design, and utilizing data to support adaptive decision-making. Finally, creativity entails integrating new ideas with existing practices, encouraging participatory idea generation, building innovation networks, and strengthening collaboration with the community. Together, these six strategic guidelines provide a comprehensive framework for enhancing creative leadership within organizations.

Evaluation of the Proposed Guidelines

The proposed guidelines were evaluated by nine experts in terms of appropriateness, feasibility, and utility.

Table 3. Dimension of Creative Leadership Development

Dimension of Creative Leadership Development	Appropriateness (M ± S.D.)	Interpretation	Feasibility (M ± S.D.)	Interpretation	Utility (M ± S.D.)	Interpretation
Individualized Consideration	4.91 ± 0.25	Very High	5.00 ± 0.00	Very High	5.00 ± 0.00	Very High
Vision	4.91 ± 0.25	Very High	4.95 ± 0.13	Very High	4.95 ± 0.13	Very High
Teamwork	4.91 ± 0.25	Very High	4.95 ± 0.13	Very High	5.00 ± 0.00	Very High
Imagination	4.91 ± 0.25	Very High	4.95 ± 0.13	Very High	4.90 ± 0.16	Very High
Flexibility	4.91 ± 0.25	Very High	4.91 ± 0.25	Very High	4.95 ± 0.13	Very High
Creativity	4.95 ± 0.13	Very High	4.86 ± 0.29	Very High	4.95 ± 0.13	Very High
Overall	4.91 ± 0.25	Very High	4.94 ± 0.16	Very High	4.96 ± 0.09	Very High

Table 3 indicates that all aspects of the proposed leadership development framework were rated at the highest level. Specifically, appropriateness, feasibility, and utility were all assessed as “very high.” These findings demonstrate a strong consensus among experts regarding both the practical applicability and the contextual suitability of the framework, suggesting that it is well-aligned with real-world organizational needs and capable of effective implementation.

Discussion

Creative Leadership Conditions in Local Administration

The findings indicate that creative leadership among local administrators is presently at a relatively ‘high’ level, suggesting that leadership practices have begun to adapt to the demands of modern public administration. The prominence of flexibility reflects the dynamic nature of local governance, where administrators must respond to policy changes, budget constraints, and community expectations. This adaptability is consistent with contemporary leadership theories emphasizing resilience and responsiveness in complex organizational environments (Phuangpanya, 2024). The result may also reflect the decentralization policies that encourage local governments to assume greater administrative autonomy. Such conditions require leaders to make timely decisions and adjust strategies to local socio-economic contexts.

Expectations for Creative Leadership Development

The very high expectations for creative leadership indicate that administrators recognize creativity as a strategic competency rather than an optional trait. Creativity enables leaders to develop innovative solutions, improve service delivery, and manage limited resources more effectively (Chantarasombat, 2021). This finding supports theoretical perspectives that identify creativity as a core component of innovation-oriented leadership. In rapidly changing governance environments, leaders are expected to anticipate emerging challenges and design adaptive responses. Therefore, the strong demand for creative leadership development reflects broader institutional pressures toward modernization and digital transformation in the public sector.

Priority Areas for Leadership Development

The identification of creativity, vision, and individualized consideration as priority needs suggests that local administrators require stronger strategic and human-centered leadership capabilities. *Vision* allows leaders to set long-term development directions, while *creativity* supports innovative policy implementation. *Individualized consideration* enhances personnel motivation and organizational cohesion (Chompotjananan & Vichit-Vadakan, 2022). These priorities indicate a shift from traditional administrative leadership toward more transformational and participatory approaches. Such transformation is essential for local governments operating in increasingly complex socio-economic environments.

Implications for Smart Locality Development

Although this study cannot not establish causal relationships, the findings suggest that strengthening creative leadership may support local governments in their transition toward smart locality initiatives. Leaders who promote creativity and strategic thinking are more likely to

encourage digital innovation, cross-sector collaboration, and citizen-centered services (Gqamane, & Taylor, 2013). Thus, creative leadership can be viewed as an enabling factor that enhances organizational readiness for smart governance rather than a direct determinant of smart locality outcomes.

Conclusions

This study provides empirical evidence regarding the conditions and developmental needs of creative leadership among local administrators in Maha Sarakham Province in the northeast region of Thailand. The findings highlight noticeable gaps between existing leadership practices and expected competencies, particularly in creativity, vision, and individualized consideration.

The proposed development guidelines offer a structured framework for strengthening leadership capacity across key dimensions. Expert evaluation indicates that these guidelines are contextually appropriate and practically feasible for local administrative implementation.

While the study focused on a specific provincial context, its findings contribute to a broader understanding of leadership development in decentralized governance systems. Strengthening creative leadership may enhance organizational adaptability, support innovation in public service delivery, and improve institutional readiness for digital-era governance.

Suggestions

Policy Recommendations

Leadership Capacity Development. Relevant government agencies should implement continuous training and professional development programs that strengthen creative leadership competencies among local administrators. These programs should emphasize strategic thinking, innovation management, participatory governance, and adaptive problem-solving to enhance administrative effectiveness in digitally driven governance environments.

Resource and Budget Support. Sustainable budget allocation mechanisms should be established to support smart locality initiatives. Financial and technical resources should be prioritized for digital infrastructure, innovation-driven projects, and human capital development to ensure continuity of local development programs.

Monitoring and Evaluation Systems. Government agencies should establish systematic monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the effectiveness of leadership development initiatives. Performance indicators and data-driven evaluation tools should be used to ensure that leadership enhancement programs align with local development goals and can be continuously improved.

Practical Implications

Enhancing Existing Leadership Strengths. As the findings indicate that creative leadership is already present at a relatively strong level, local administrative organizations should build upon these existing capacities through advanced training, peer-learning networks, and knowledge-sharing platforms.

Adoption of Development Guidelines. The proposed creative leadership development framework, evaluated as highly appropriate and feasible, can be adopted as a structured guideline for designing leadership training curricula and organizational development plans within local government agencies.

Integration into Local Development Planning. Local authorities may incorporate creative leadership principles into strategic planning processes, administrative policies, and innovation-driven projects to enhance organizational adaptability and governance effectiveness.

Recommendations for Future Research

Long-Term Impact Assessment. Future studies should investigate the long-term effects of creative leadership development on organizational performance, public service innovation, and socio-economic transformation in local communities.

Digital Governance and Innovation Tools. Further research should explore how digital technologies, data-driven governance systems, and innovation management tools can strengthen leadership effectiveness and support sustainable smart locality development.

Advanced Analytical Approaches. Future research may employ advanced quantitative techniques, such as structural equation modeling or longitudinal analysis, to examine causal relationships between leadership competencies and smart governance outcomes.

New Knowledge

From the study, new knowledge was generated and synthesized into a conceptual framework illustrating the integrated relationship between creative leadership development and smart locality transformation through innovative governance mechanisms.

The study found that creative leadership development should emphasize three core components: creativity, vision, and individualized consideration. These components function as key drivers that enhance flexible administration, strengthen teamwork, and stimulate organizational innovation.

Such leadership capabilities contribute to improving digital governance readiness, inter-agency collaboration, and public service effectiveness, which collectively form the foundation for sustainability.

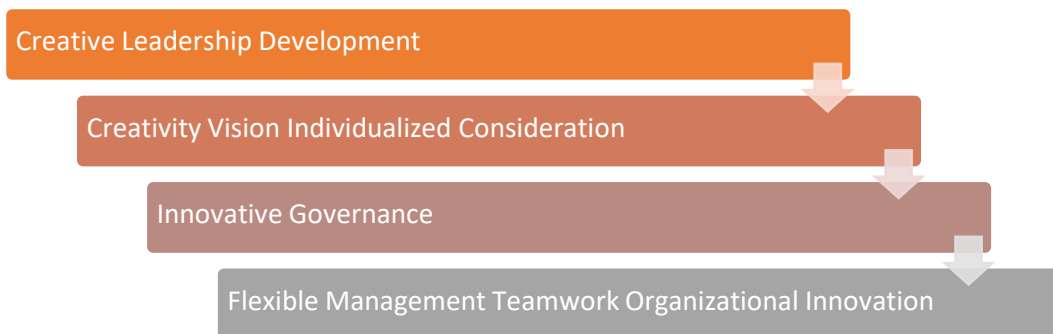


Figure 2. Components of Creative Leadership Development

Figure 2 depicts the components of creative leadership development, comprising creativity, vision, and individualized consideration. These components serve as a foundational driver of innovative governance. This process enhances flexible management, collaborative teamwork, and organizational innovation, which collectively enable government agencies to advance toward sustainable smart locality development.

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