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Position Paper

Reimagining Leadership: Trends and Insights from the Past Five Years



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▶ Reimagining Leadership: Trends and Insights from the Past Five Years

Leadership has been a crucial area of study in diverse fields for many years. It has a significant impact on organizational success, industry development, societal progress, and global power dynamics. Research on leadership has continually evolved due to the ever-changing business landscape, the evolving organizational needs, the complexities in technological advancements, greater access to factual and anecdotal information, and shifting government regulations. Leading journals in the field contribute to scholarly discussions on contemporary issues that shape our understanding of leadership through rigorous and evidence-based research. However, the published research does not follow a thematic approach and is diverse and scattered.

This position paper thematically summarizes papers published in four journals Leadership Quarterly, Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, Leadership & Organization Development Journal, and Leadership in the past five years. An overview of current themes being studied, the methods of study is aimed to help researchers examine the areas of current research-insights from them and thus advance research in areas of interest.

The summary of findings in nontechnical language from journals will provide evidence-based insights on leadership to industry professionals.

A thematic review of the published research shows that widespread changes in society and industry such as unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the widespread adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI), the prevalence of Industry 4.0/5.0, and shifting leader–follower dynamics in increasingly multi-generational workplaces are reflected in the context used for research by the scholars. The themes that emerged included – digital leadership, inclusive leadership, ethical leadership, adaptive leadership, and change leadership. The context, the key findings around the leader and leadership are presented in the following paragraphs.

▶ Digital Leadership: Leaders in Times of Digital Transformation

Researchers are increasingly focused on the leadership demands posed by pervasive disruptive technology and digital transformation (which includes shifts from analog to digital technology, and the accompanying fundamental transformation of how information is created, processed, stored, and communicated across business sectors). Research has focused on how adoption of technologies, such as Machine Learning (ML) and Artificial Intelligence (AI), reshape leadership roles and competencies. It has been shown that AI-driven systems facilitate decentralized decision-making, requiring leaders to adopt a collaborative, empowering, and inclusive approach. Findings indicate that digitalization requires leaders to develop new competencies such as digital fluency, managing virtual or hybrid teams, leveraging data-driven insights, and fostering innovation in an increasingly volatile, tech-driven environment. Leaders' ability to manage networked organizations and help transition from hierarchical to more agile organizational structures has been shown to positively contribute to performance in the organization.

Agility and adaptability are increasingly recognized as essential skills among leaders for digital transformation. Studies suggest that responsive and flexible leaders not only embrace technological change but also effectively guide their organizations through rapid technological shifts. The ability to integrate digital tools and data analytics into decision-making processes is also perceived as a crucial skill for leaders in such a context.

Research has also focused on the importance of ethical considerations in AI-driven leadership, highlighting the potential ethical risks that arise as AI and automation become integral to business operations. Key ethical concerns that have been studied include biased algorithms, data privacy concerns, and large-scale job loss. Researchers have shown the need for leaders to exercise responsible leadership by ensuring transparency, fairness, and accountability in deploying AI technologies.

The research on digital-era leadership highlights the need for leaders to develop technical competencies, ethical awareness, ability to lead de-centralized organizations, and agility and adaptability in self.



Inclusive Leadership and Diversity

Inclusive leadership, equity, and diversity have become prominent themes in recent research. Studies in this area focus on fostering inclusive environments, leveraging of diverse backgrounds, and emphasizing of team level focus on decision-making. Key insights from research include the efficacy of design of context-specific solutions for addressing diversity challenges, for example bridging skill gaps among underrepresented groups as a means to improve career progression and retention. There is research that focuses on development of more sophisticated metrics to evaluate inclusive leadership. The central role of leadership in fostering inclusive, adaptable cultures during organizational change is found in multiple studies. Studies show that integrating diversity goals into measurement of leadership performance and thus take measures to improve leadership accountability helps improve outcomes related to improved organizational equity. These findings collectively highlight the evolving and complex leadership actions and behaviours that are needed to foster equitable practices within organizations.



Ethical Leadership

A growing body of research centers on the positive impact of ethical leadership, focusing on leaders' role in maintaining transparency, integrity, and accountability. Studies indicate that ethical leadership strengthens employee engagement, trust, and team performance. When leaders act with integrity and transparency, it enhances employees' commitment, motivation, and overall engagement. Empirical studies show that ethical leaders foster trust, which enhances collaboration and organizational cohesion. Ethical leaders who promote open communication, fairness, and accountability improve teamwork, creativity, and overall performance. Finally, ethical leadership significantly reduces workplace misconduct, as leaders who model ethical behaviour set clear expectations, serve as role models, and discourage unethical practices. These findings highlight the crucial role of ethical leadership in fostering a healthy, transparent, and high-performing organizational culture. Research also indicates that socially responsible and accountable leadership practices positively impact organizational reputation, as evidenced by improved credit ratings. It has been highlighted thus that the benefits of ethical leadership extend beyond internal stakeholders to include external stakeholders as well.



▶ Adaptive Leadership and Organizational Resilience

Researchers have focused on how leaders foster innovation and build resilient organizations in the current environment described popularly as, volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) and brittle, anxious, non-linear, and incomprehensible (BANI).

At an individual level skills and competencies such as emotional intelligence, cognitive flexibility, and resilience have been shown to help leaders stay calm, make informed decisions amid uncertainty, and drive effective change management. It has been shown that leaders who practice adaptive leadership (used to describe the ability to mobilise individuals and organizations to address complex, evolving challenges by fostering adaptability, critical thinking, and collective problem-solving in uncertain environments. The skills to diagnose the system, engage stakeholders, and adjust strategies to meet changing conditions are seen as integral to adaptive leadership) often involve their teams in decision-making, which increases engagement and fosters a sense of ownership and accountability. The adoption of collaborative approaches and building of resilient teams equipped to overcome complex challenges has been shown to enhance organizational performance. From an organizational learning perspective, leaders who encourage experimentation and embrace failures foster organizational agility, continuous learning, and effective change management.



Studies have also proposed various frameworks and models to develop adaptive leadership competencies. These frameworks emphasize that leaders must be open to continuous feedback and develop strategies consistent with organizational goals.

These findings highlight the increasing significance of adaptive leadership, establishing it as a critical competency for driving innovation, building resilience, and sustaining success in a dynamic business environment.

▶ Innovation and Change: Leaders as Change Agents

Research increasingly emphasizes the role of leadership in driving both large-scale and small-scale change initiatives and highlights that leaders who encourage learning through continuous feedback and risk-taking foster a culture of innovation (challenging the status quo) and creativity (inventiveness). Such leaders are considered catalysts for innovation and agents of change that drive their organizations toward success.

Fostering a culture of psychological safety by actively empowering their teams and encouraging risk-taking without fear of failure has been shown to be an effective leadership action. Aligning with the organization's broader strategic goals fosters an ecosystem where change is proactively managed, anticipated, and embraced. Focus of the leader on creating a culture of continuous learning has been shown to help sustain changes.

Effective leadership in the context of change also facilitates collaboration across departments, thereby breaking down of silos to ensure a free flow of new ideas that drive sustained innovation and competitive advantage. Major findings show that leaders who prioritize emotional intelligence and adaptive leadership excel at driving change, effectively navigating complex human dynamics and organizational resistance. Furthermore, it has been shown that leaders who balance short-term results with long-term innovation goals build more resilient, future-ready organizations.



► Prominent Methodologies in Leadership Research

The insights and themes presented above have been based on empirical studies and reviews of past research published in four leading journals of leadership (mentioned earlier). Ninety percent of the research is empirical of which 60 percent uses quantitative methods that employ large sample sizes. About 20% of research publications are based on qualitative research, using interviews, case studies, and ethnography based on grounded theory. While most studies use one kind of methodology and study the phenomenon at one point of time there is a small percentage that uses mixed methodologies and an even smaller that use longitudinal methods. The use of mixed methods and longitudinal methods while time taking can help develop realistic and deeper insights as compared to point in time studies. Also, multi-level modelling studies, though a minority, formed 10% of the quantitative studies. Such studies help analyze the impact of the leader across various organizational levels.

► Conclusion

In summary, the largely empirical research maybe characterised as committed to address contemporary and complex challenges. Several common ideas emerge as essential for effective leadership across various key themes in leadership research (i.e., digital, inclusive, ethical, adaptive, and change-oriented leadership). First, the emphasis on adaptability and responsiveness to change emerges as crucial traits as organizations face the challenge of managing rapid technological social shifts. This idea extends beyond mere adaptation to actively fostering environments that encourage experimentation and continuous learning. Second, ethical considerations are central across all five key themes, emphasizing accountability, transparency, and fairness as pillars of trustworthy leadership. From promoting diversity to managing AI-driven systems, these ethical considerations set standards for organizational integrity. Third, a people-centred approach that emphasizes empowerment and collaboration is essential for building high-performing teams that can overcome challenges over time. Finally, contemporary research on leadership emphasizes the significance of emotional intelligence, as leaders must balance strategic focus with empathy to foster psychological safety and resilience. These common threads reflect a shift toward a leadership mindset that co-creates value (leader-stakeholder) while being accountable.

The ideas expressed in this paper present a collective work by:

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* This white paper is based on an analysis of 540 papers published over the past five years in Leadership Quarterly, Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, Leadership & Organization Development Journal, and Leadership.

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