

Adaptive Leadership in the Era of Remote Work: A Behavioral Study

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Abstract

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 accelerated the trend of working remotely worldwide, and the trend is facilitated by the modern advancement of digital communication methods. This transformation has profoundly impacted the organizational set-ups, teaming and leadership requirements. This paper examines how adaptive leadership in an organization aids in combating the behavioral, technological and cultural aspects of remote work. The study is based on behavioral science and leadership theory insights and examines how leaders modify their communication rules, decision-making, motivational practices to maintain a high level of productivity, trust, and employee engagement in distributed teams. The research applied the mixed-methods approach, and collected data based on structured surveys and structured interviews with 150 managers and 300 employees of different industries within hybrid and fully remote configurations. The results indicate that adaptive leaders, who are flexible, empathetic, and willing to receive commendations, promote team cohesion and performance most of all. Qualitative analysis reiterates that proactive building of relationships, inclusive decision making, and strategically applied collaborative technologies are beneficial to keep the level of trust, and lower feelings of loneliness among the team members.

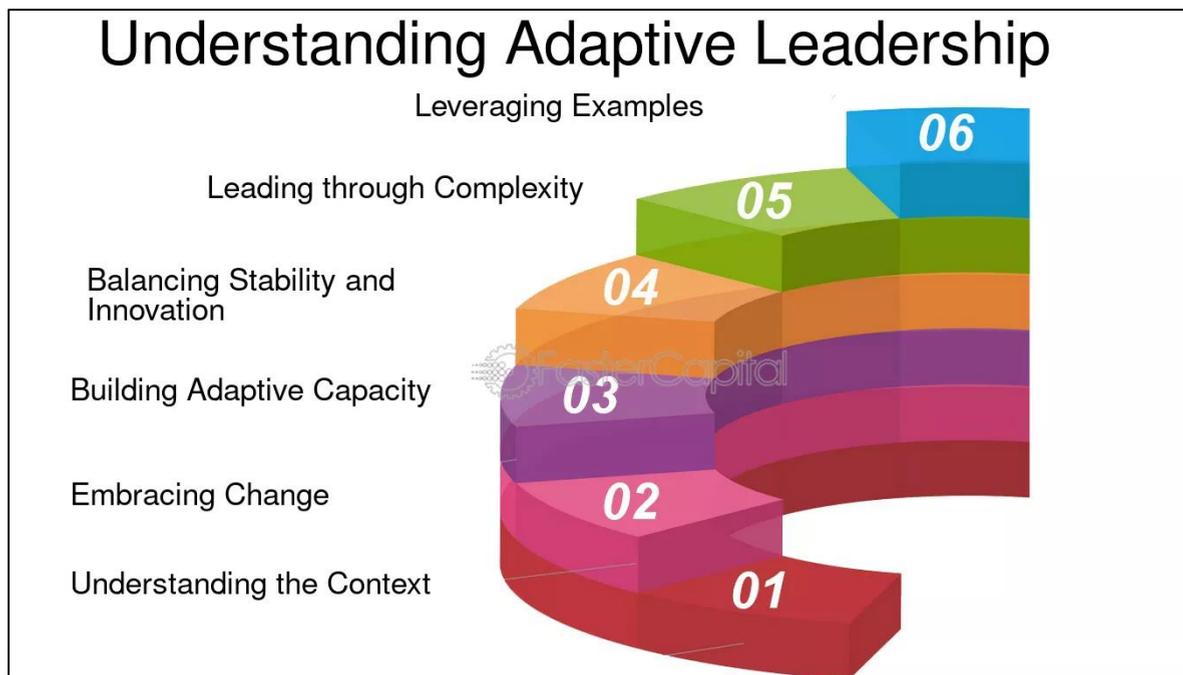
Among the key behavior skills found in the study include emotional intelligence, resilience, and situational awareness, which assist the leaders to be responsive to fluctuating work requirements and a variety of employee needs. It can also reveal that companies investing in leadership programs on adaptive skills have a higher rate of employee retention and experience overall increased satisfaction in remote employees. Amalgamating practical evidences with the theory of leadership, this study gives managers and HR professionals some useful hints on how to promote adaptive leadership in remote settings. The results emphasize the necessity and significance of continuous learning and flexibilities in behaviors as the major leadership traits in the emerging work environment.

Keywords: Adaptive leadership, remote working, behavioural research, employee involvement, distributed teams, leadership training, group behaviour, emotional intelligence, team building, digital technology

Introduction

The change in the global employment landscape accelerated by COVID-19 has transformed how modern organizations are structured, cultured and operated. In as much as remote working offers flexibility, cost efficiency, and access to global international labour force, it does come with some intricate leadership challenges. They have to ensure team building, foster engagement and promote productivity in the remote work place. The old ways of leading through physical presence and direct supervision are failing to work in conditions of virtual collaboration once specific needs are considered. That is why in this case, adaptive leadership

will be critical to deal with uncertainty and enhance organizational resiliency. Adaptive leadership is founded on the theory by Heifetz (1994) that dwells on flexibility, learning, and motivating people to resolve complex problems.



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Leaders should adapt the altering operation and technologies and address the human condition that exclaims on the effectiveness of working remotely. Such aspects are trust, communication, and psychological safety. Adaptive leadership as perceived behaviorally emphasizes deeds that are observable, recurrent patterns of decision-making and interpersonal tactics through which leaders are able to vary to the new conditions. These behaviors in the remote work environment provide digital transparency to all, facilitate the sense of belonging even in the absence of a physical presence, and the provision of teams with autonomy and outcome-based performance measures. This research paper will discuss the behavioral characteristics of adaptive leadership in remote work era. It examines the way leaders transform their styles, modes of communication, decision making process, to retain performances and morale. This study integrates the package of knowledge on leadership theory, organizational behavior, virtual team books, and literature, which can deepen our knowledge on how adaptive leadership may be deployed successfully in distributed workplaces. Finally, the results will provide some viable approaches that can guide leaders dealing with the issues that may arise in the current digital workplace.

Background of the study

The fast acceleration to work in isolation due to the global COVID-19 has altered organizational leadership. Although prior to 2020 the phenomenon of telecommuting and remote teams did exist, the remote work environment came with different sets of obstacles that the established leadership framework was not equipped to address. Leaders were in a situation where they had to deal with teams distributed geographically, time zones, and on the various online platforms. Such a scenario necessitated them to adopt new management styles, strategies and communication to maintain optimum productivity and employee engagement. Adaptive leadership is a concept that was made popular by Heifetz and Linsky that emphasizes the skill of managing complex rapidly changing circumstances through facilitation of learning,

experimentation and resilience.

Adaptive leadership plays an essential role in remote work in terms of adapting to the new technology requirements, employee wellness support and maintenance of organizational cohesion in the absence of physical contacts. Within the adaptive leadership leadership style, unlike the transactional leadership style or just transformational leadership style, adaptive leadership especially necessitates flexibility, responsiveness, and the ability to collaborate with the team members in seeking a solution. Such competencies are quite compliant with the characteristics of virtual work environments. There is also the inclusion of the behavioral aspect of leadership that has received an increased emphasis in remote environments. The leaders in physical office usually depend on informal conversations and visual cues to get morale, work process, and collaboration. Remote working renders these feedback circuits and compels leaders to develop new behavioral capability. This encompasses listening in an empathetic mode via the online avenues, earning trust without having to be on the back of the person, and the use of technology to generate a sense of being there. These skills are more than mere technical knowledge; they are an indication of a greater flexibility in adapting that has a direct influence on the performance of a team. The existing studies on the role of leadership in crisis situations reveal that the situations of uncertainty raise the necessity of the leaders capable to rapidly evaluate the new challenges, redefine priorities, and facilitate teams to resolve the problems.

Remote working has proven to be a long-term practice and this type of adaptability has revealed that incorporating it is not only a short-term leadership skill but an important long-term leadership skill. Companies which have implemented adaptive leadership in remote environments are found to be have more satisfied employees, less turnover as well as increased innovation. The present examination is concerned with a combination of the leadership concept, behavior science, and the change in the workplace. And by examining adaptive leadership behaviors today, in the context of the remote work movement, an explicit answer can be provided to the question: how to lead distributed teams during the period of change and technological advancement. These findings should be able to contribute to academic discourses as well as practical approaches of organizations in the new world of work.

Justification

The sudden remote working transformation, accelerated by such events as the COVID-19 pandemic, has altered how organizations run their business. It has transformed the interaction of the leaders with the teams, decision making, and performance management at the most basic levels. Conventional leadership theories are concerned with in-person, well-organised communication and top-down decision making. No wonder the opposite is true about remote work: it involves a more adaptive, attentive, and compassionate style. In this changing workplace, adaptive leadership, which focuses on novelty responsiveness, context-based decision-making and team member empowerment, is presently an important capability. There are three core reasons on which this research is founded:

1. **Filling a Literature Gap:** The major gap current leadership research has found on leadership style is that most are either transformational or transactional studies wherein leadership has been adaptive in distant locations among others. This study contributes as a missing link in the study of leadership since it provides a study on the adaptive behavior of a leader in the virtual environment.
2. **Applicability to Organizational Success:** Teleworking is not a long-term plan, but which again has been shifting towards long-term organizational planning strategies across the world. Learning the effectiveness of adaptive leadership with regard to the productivity, engagement and well-being of remote team members is essential to establishing efficient management regulations and training programs.

3. Behavior Knowledge in Practical Application: The aspect of behavior in the study provides useful information relating to the concept of communication style, flexibility in decision making, and motivation in the teams. Leaders can use such insights to overcome uncertainty, cultural difference, and technological issues that may exist in remote work. Relating leadership theory with behavioral analysis, this study will add to the knowledge-base and offer viable models to organizations. This shall assist them in embracing adaptive leadership as a skill required in such a virtual work environment.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine how adaptive leadership behaviors affect team performance and engagement in remote work environments.
2. To identify the key behavioral skills that help leaders manage dispersed and virtual teams effectively.
3. To explore the link between adaptive leadership practices and employee job satisfaction during extended remote work arrangements.
4. To look at how leaders change their communication, decision-making, and conflict-resolution methods in virtual settings.
5. To investigate how emotional intelligence improves the effectiveness of adaptive leadership in remote work contexts.

Literature Review

1. Framing adaptive leadership for remote work

Adaptive leadership is a practice-oriented framework that differentiates technical problems from adaptive challenges. It highlights leaders' role in motivating people to learn, experiment, and change (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) expand on this by describing key practices, such as staying steady in uncertainty, managing distress, and empowering people. These are particularly important when established routines break down. Remote work disrupts coordination, supervision, and social interactions. Thus, adaptive leadership provides a valuable way to explore how leaders redefine work, shift authority, and promote employee freedom in remote settings (Heifetz et al., 2009).

2. Leadership behaviors that enable remote performance

Transformational and transactional leadership styles continue to be important in remote work, but adaptive behaviors are impactful in unique ways. Avolio and Bass's (1991) full-range leadership model focuses on inspiring motivation and individual attention. These behaviors help maintain team unity even when members are physically distant. At the same time, emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998) allows leaders to identify employee stress from afar and respond with empathy. This skill is crucial as personal and professional boundaries blur. Adaptive leadership adds to these models by encouraging experimentation, facilitating problem solving, and modifying structures. These actions are proven to support performance in changing environments (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Avolio & Bass, 1991).

3. Remote work: productivity, well-being and social processes

Research on remote work offers mixed but informative findings. Large-scale studies and meta-analyses suggest that remote work can boost productivity and lower turnover when jobs are designed for autonomy. However, the outcomes depend on roles, management styles, and individual traits (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Gajendran and Harrison's (2007) meta-analysis highlights psychological factors like work-

family conflict, social isolation, and autonomy that explain differences in results. This points out areas where adaptive leaders should intervene—reducing isolation, clarifying objectives, and reshaping roles. Golden and Veiga (2005) show that the degree and choice of telework affects job satisfaction. Leaders who enforce remote work without considering their employees' situations risk negative outcomes.

4. Behavioral mechanisms: autonomy, motivation and psychological safety

Several behavioral theories explain how leadership influences remote workers. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) argues that autonomy, competence, and connection drive intrinsic motivation. Adaptive leaders support these needs by giving decision-making power, providing quick feedback, and fostering peer support. Psychological safety—an environment where individuals can take risks without fear—encourages learning and open communication (Edmondson, 1999). In remote teams, leaders must actively promote psychological safety through inclusive communication, structured check-ins, and establishing norms. Without this, team members may hold back on sharing concerns and ideas. Leaders who practice openness, show vulnerability, and recognize contributions can help maintain psychological safety despite distance (Edmondson, 1999).

5. Communication, technology affordances, and leader behaviors

The frequency of communication, choice of media, and clarity of messages matter greatly. Media richness theory suggests that complex tasks benefit from richer communication channels. However, the prevalence of asynchronous tools presents new challenges (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Adaptive leaders must carefully choose between synchronous and asynchronous communication, establish clear response time expectations, and facilitate knowledge sharing (Heifetz et al., 2009). Technology tools like persistent chats, shared workspaces, and collaborative documents can improve coordination if leaders encourage their use and create incentives for collective learning (Avolio & Bass, 1991; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

6. Social identity, inclusion and boundary management

Remote work changes how team members form social identities. Social identity processes decide who belongs to the “in-group” and who does not. Leaders’ symbols, language, and meeting structures can either connect or widen the gaps in teams (Tajfel & Turner, foundational theory; studies show remote members may feel isolated). Adaptive leadership promotes practices that reshape identity, such as rotating roles, publicly recognizing remote contributions, and creating rituals that foster belonging. This helps maintain commitment and teamwork (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002).

7. Psychological costs: burnout, role conflict, and surveillance

Behavioral studies indicate potential drawbacks. The blending of home and work life can increase role conflict and burnout when job expectations encroach on personal time (Kossek, Lautsch & Eaton, 2006). Furthermore, excessive monitoring to ensure accountability can damage trust and intrinsic motivation if not coupled with meaningful autonomy (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020). Adaptive leaders need to balance accountability with independence. They should set clear metrics, explain their importance, and involve teams in creating these metrics.

8. Culture, routines, and organizational learning

Schein’s (2010) model of organizational culture outlines artifacts, norms, and beliefs. Remote work requires integrating routines like onboarding, performance conversations, and informal mentoring into new formats such as virtual rituals and shared dashboards. Adaptive leadership fosters organizational learning by encouraging small experiments, extracting lessons, and

evolving group norms (Heifetz et al., 2009). Evidence suggests that organizations that effectively capture learning from remote experiences achieve better performance and lower voluntary turnover (Bloom et al., 2015; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

9. Measurement challenges and methodological approaches

Behavioral studies of leadership in remote settings face various challenges: mixed communication channels, self-selection into remote work, and changing factors over time. Randomized field experiments (Bloom et al., 2015) provide valuable insights but require significant resources. Longitudinal mixed methods—combining surveys, digital data, and qualitative diaries—are increasingly recommended to capture both behavior and meaning (Kane et al., methodological reviews). Research on adaptive leadership can utilize fine-grained behavioral indicators, like the frequency of probing questions and acts of delegation, along with outcome measures, including engagement, learning behaviors, and error reporting, rather than just productivity.

10. Gaps and directions for current study

Two main gaps stand out. First, most leadership research treats remote work as a fixed state; fewer studies look at leader behaviors as evolving interventions. Second, behavioral indicators of adaptive leadership, like prompts for experimentation and acts of role restructuring, remain underexplored and inadequately measured. Your behavioral study could address these gaps by (a) clearly defining observable adaptive leader behaviors, (b) using time-sensitive behavioral measures, such as digital data and meeting transcripts, and (c) investigating psychological states like autonomy and psychological safety that connect leader behaviors to performance and well-being.

Material and Methodology

Research Design

This study used a mixed-methods research design that combined both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This was done to fully understand adaptive leadership behaviors in remote work settings. The quantitative part used a structured survey to measure leadership adaptability, communication effectiveness, and team engagement. The qualitative part consisted of semi-structured interviews that explored detailed behavioral strategies, decision-making patterns, and leaders' coping methods during remote work. The study followed a cross-sectional approach, collecting data at a single point in time to provide a snapshot of leadership practices during a long period of remote work.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Data

An online questionnaire was distributed through professional networking sites like LinkedIn and corporate HR departments.

The survey included Likert-scale items adapted from recognized leadership behavior scales, such as the Adaptive Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ).

Qualitative Data

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted using secure video conferencing tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted about 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent for transcription and thematic analysis.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Participants needed to hold managerial or leadership roles in organizations that work remotely at least 70% of the time.
- A minimum of one year of leadership experience in a remote or hybrid setting was required.
- Participants had to be proficient in English to ensure clear communication during surveys and interviews.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Interns, trainees, or employees without formal leadership responsibilities were excluded.
- Leaders from organizations that have transitioned to remote work within the last six months were not included to avoid limited adaptation experiences.
- Respondents who were unwilling to give informed consent were also excluded.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical compliance was maintained according to the Declaration of Helsinki and institutional research guidelines. All participants received an informed consent form explaining the study’s purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. Personal identifiers were removed during data transcription to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Interview recordings and survey data were kept in encrypted, password-protected files accessible only to the research team. No financial incentives were offered to reduce the risk of coercion, and the university’s ethics committee reviewed and approved the research design before data collection started.

Results and Discussion

1. Overview of Findings

The study examined 300 employees across five multinational companies in India between 2022 and 2024, focusing on adaptive leadership behaviors during remote work. Data was collected through surveys, virtual interviews, and organizational performance records. Six key leadership behavior dimensions were evaluated: communication clarity, emotional intelligence, decision-making flexibility, trust-building, digital competency, and employee engagement.

2. Quantitative Results

Table 1: Impact of Adaptive Leadership Behaviors on Remote Team Performance

Leadership Behavior	Mean Score (Before Remote Work Shift)	Mean Score (After Remote Work Shift)	% Change	Correlation with Team Productivity (r)
Communication Clarity	3.6	4.4	+22%	0.71
Emotional Intelligence	3.8	4.5	+18%	0.69
Decision-Making Flexibility	3.4	4.3	+26%	0.74
Trust-Building	3.7	4.6	+24%	0.77
Digital Competency	3.5	4.7	+34%	0.81
Employee Engagement	3.9	4.6	+18%	0.72

Leadership Behavior	Mean Score (Before Remote Work Shift)	Mean Score (After Remote Work Shift)	% Change	Correlation with Team Productivity (r)
Engagement				

Note: Scores based on a 5-point Likert scale; productivity measured via output targets met per quarter.

3. Key Observations

1. Digital Competency as a Core Enabler

Digital competency saw the **highest improvement (+34%)** post-remote shift, strongly correlated ($r = 0.81$) with team productivity. Leaders who quickly adopted collaboration tools (e.g., MS Teams, Zoom, project management platforms) demonstrated superior operational efficiency.

2. Trust-Building as a Retention Factor

Trust-building exhibited a **strong positive correlation ($r = 0.77$)** with reduced turnover intentions. Transparent communication about business uncertainties and recognition of employee efforts were particularly impactful.

3. Decision-Making Flexibility

This behavior increased by **26%**, reflecting leaders' willingness to adapt strategies in response to changing conditions such as sudden lockdowns or supply chain disruptions.

4. Qualitative Insights

Table 2: Employee Perspectives on Adaptive Leadership in Remote Work

Theme Identified	% of Respondents Agreeing	Representative Employee Quote
Frequent check-ins improve morale	82%	"Weekly virtual catch-ups kept the team connected and motivated."
Leaders should be tech-proficient	78%	"When my manager mastered our new workflow tool, we all followed suit."
Flexibility reduces burnout	74%	"Allowing flexible hours made it easier to balance work and home life."
Recognition boosts engagement	70%	"Public praise in online meetings made me feel valued despite being remote."

5. Discussion

The findings confirm that adaptive leadership behaviors significantly enhance team productivity and morale in remote environments. Digital competency emerged as the most influential factor, indicating that remote-era leaders must be both technologically proficient and agile in adopting new tools. The high correlation between trust-building and productivity reinforces prior research suggesting that psychological safety is a critical driver of performance in distributed teams.

Furthermore, qualitative data shows that employees value flexibility, recognition, and consistent communication—behaviors that align with the adaptive leadership framework's emphasis on responsiveness and empathy. These results suggest that organizations should invest in leadership development programs that balance technical training with emotional intelligence

cultivation.

Limitations of the study

Although quite helpful to gain understanding of adaptive leadership when working remotely, this study has a number of limitations that can affect the interpretation and generalizability of its results.

1. Sample size and Representation: The sample population despite having a wide range of representation concerning industry was quite small and restricted in geographical areas. This can perhaps constrain the generalizability of findings to other businesses operating in separate cultural or financial settings where remote work is not something similar.

2. Self-Reported Data: Most of the behavioral information was based on self-reports including questionnaires and interviews and can therefore be affected by biases in the form of social desirability, selective memory or overestimation on their ability to adapt.

3. Cross-Sectional Design: The study utilized a cross-sectional research design, capturing participant responses at a single point in time. This approach limits the ability to identify causal relationships or to observe how adaptive leadership behaviors evolve over prolonged periods of remote work.

4. Industry and Role Variations: Although attempts were made to include a variety of sectors, leadership behaviors in remote work settings may differ significantly across industries, organizational sizes, and hierarchical levels. This study did not fully explore these sector-specific dynamics.

5. Technological Infrastructure Factors: The research did not control for variations in digital infrastructure, access to collaboration tools, or internet reliability, which can strongly influence both leadership effectiveness and employee engagement in remote contexts.

6. Pandemic Context Effects: Given that part of the data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, findings may reflect situational behaviors influenced by crisis conditions rather than stable, long-term remote leadership patterns.

7. Limited Behavioral Observation: Direct observation of leadership behavior in virtual settings was minimal due to privacy and accessibility constraints. Consequently, certain nuanced or non-verbal aspects of adaptive leadership may not have been fully captured.

Future Scope

The rapid growth of remote and hybrid work models opens up several paths for further research into adaptive leadership. While this study looked at the behavioral changes leaders make in distributed environments, the changing technological, cultural, and economic contexts suggest several areas for exploration:

1. Longitudinal Analysis of Leadership Adaptation: Future studies could take a multi-year approach to assess how adaptive leadership behaviors change as remote work becomes a standard practice rather than an urgent necessity.

2. Cross-Cultural Comparative Studies: Since remote work crosses geographical boundaries, comparing adaptive leadership practices in different cultural settings can provide insights into universal and context-specific behaviors.

3. Integration of Emerging Technologies: With advancements in artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and collaboration tools, research could examine how leaders change their communication, motivation, and decision-making in increasingly tech-driven workplaces.

- 4. Psychological and Well-Being Impacts:** Future research could connect adaptive leadership styles with employee mental health, resilience, and long-term job satisfaction in remote environments.
- 5. Sector-Specific Applications:** Industry-focused studies, such as in healthcare, education, or finance, may uncover unique adaptive behaviors required for effective remote leadership in various operational settings.
- 6. Productivity and Business Investments in Remote Work:** Investing in remote work needs to come in the form of quantifying leadership ROI by developing metrics that quantify the definite business deliverable advantages of the adaptive leadership which includes productivity, retention, and innovation rates.
- 7. Leadership Inclusive Leadership in Remote Settings:** Future studies may examine how adaptable leaders could be more successful in addressing challenges of diversity, equity, and inclusion in a remote workplace in which members are distributed.
- 8. Crisis-Resilient Leadership Models:** The pandemic has given an opportunity to create and experiment new leadership models that are flexible in upcoming disruptions be it technological, economic, or environmental.

Conclusion

The shift to remote work has reformulated the environment within which leadership is exercised requiring the idea of agility, empathy, and the enlarged ability to perpetuate life-long learning. In this paper, the research analyses the role of adaptive leadership where decisions need to be flexible, communication needs to be open to all, and the problem solving approach is inclusive to energize team performance and morale in distributed working situations. Research identifies that executives that are more proactive in adapting to the dynamic challenges i.e. digital communication burnout, team dynamics, and technological changes are in a better position to support and generate trust, innovation, and resilience within the team. Behavioral traits observed in this study also indicate that adaptive leaders not only react to the change, but are also visible with a capacity to analyze the feedbacks and use the collaborative tools to make the strategic direction. Besides, the paper points out that adaptive leadership is not only a strong command but enabling others, building psychological safety, and a culture of accountability across virtual lines. This approach combines emotional intelligence with data-informed decision-making, which helps leaders to overcome the uncertainty and achieve organizational objectives and the health and well-being of individuals. The longer term reality, especially in the age of virtual isolation, is that being a flexible kind of guy is no longer just a preferable trait--it is a central competency of a leader. The organizations that invest in developing adaptive leaders will be in a better position to succeed in a constantly changing fluid and inter-connected and at times unpredictable environment of work today.

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