

Leadership Transformation in Hybrid Work Ecosystems: Developing an Integrated Management Framework

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop an integrated management framework for leadership transformation in hybrid work ecosystems by exploring how managers reconstruct coordination, trust, communication, inclusion, and performance control across digitally mediated and physically distributed work arrangements. This qualitative study was conducted using a grounded theory approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 22 participants from Tehran, including senior managers, middle managers, human resource professionals, and digital transformation specialists working in organizations that had adopted hybrid work arrangements. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. NVivo software was used to organize interview transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, and support the development of the final conceptual framework. The analysis produced four main categories: trust-based coordination, digital communication architecture, hybrid inclusion and fairness, and boundary-sensitive performance management. The core category was identified as adaptive leadership orchestration, referring to the leader's capacity to integrate autonomy, accountability, technological mediation, and relational cohesion in hybrid ecosystems. Participants emphasized that leadership in hybrid work no longer depends on physical supervision but on transparent expectations, intentional communication rituals, psychological safety, and equitable access to information and development opportunities. The findings suggest that hybrid work requires a transformation from presence-centered leadership to ecosystem-centered leadership. Effective hybrid leadership depends on designing work systems that balance flexibility with coordination, autonomy with accountability, and digital efficiency with human connection. The proposed integrated framework offers practical guidance for organizations seeking to institutionalize hybrid work without weakening trust, identity, collaboration, or performance.

Keywords: hybrid work; leadership transformation; adaptive leadership; management framework; qualitative research; Tehran; digital collaboration; organizational change

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1. Introduction

Hybrid work has become one of the most consequential organizational transformations of the post-pandemic era. Although flexible and remote work arrangements existed before the COVID-19 crisis, the pandemic accelerated their diffusion and transformed them from peripheral human resource practices into central features of organizational design. Hybrid work is now increasingly understood not merely as a combination of office-based and remote work, but as a dynamic work ecosystem in which employees, managers, teams, technologies, organizational routines, and performance systems interact across multiple locations and temporal arrangements.



Recent scholarship has therefore emphasized the need for clearer conceptualization of hybrid work, particularly because the term is often used inconsistently to describe different combinations of physical presence, digital collaboration, temporal flexibility, and organizational control (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025). In this context, leadership is no longer exercised only through co-presence, direct observation, and immediate informal interaction; rather, it is mediated through digital platforms, asynchronous communication, trust-based coordination, and intentional relational practices.

The transition to hybrid work has challenged traditional assumptions about managerial authority, supervision, and organizational control. In conventional office-based systems, leaders often relied on physical proximity to monitor activity, sustain social cohesion, transmit culture, and resolve ambiguity. Hybrid work weakens many of these informal mechanisms. Employees may work from home, shared spaces, client sites, or organizational offices; teams may interact synchronously or asynchronously; and managers may have limited visibility into daily work processes. As a result, leadership effectiveness increasingly depends on designing conditions under which employees can coordinate, collaborate, and perform without constant physical supervision. This transformation requires leaders to shift from presence-based control to outcome-based enablement, from informal availability to intentional communication architecture, and from standardized management routines to adaptive practices sensitive to task, role, technology, and employee needs.

Empirical studies suggest that hybrid work can produce positive organizational and employee outcomes when properly designed. Bloom, Han, and Liang (2024), for example, found that hybrid working from home improved employee retention without damaging performance, challenging managerial concerns that partial remote work necessarily reduces productivity. Earlier evidence from a large Chinese experiment also showed that working from home could improve performance under appropriate conditions, although contextual factors such as job type, employee preferences, and organizational support remain important (Bloom et al., 2015). Similarly, Choudhury, Foroughi, and Larson (2021) demonstrated that work-from-anywhere arrangements may enhance productivity by allowing employees greater geographic flexibility. These findings indicate that the managerial question is not whether hybrid work is inherently effective or ineffective, but how leadership systems can be redesigned to align flexibility, accountability, communication, trust, and organizational identity.

Despite this potential, hybrid work also introduces significant leadership challenges. Remote and hybrid workers may experience communication difficulties, work-home interference, procrastination, loneliness, and reduced social connection if work design is poorly managed (Wang et al., 2021). A systematic review by Charalampous et al. (2019) similarly showed that remote e-working affects multiple dimensions of well-being, including affective, cognitive, social, professional, and psychosomatic outcomes. These findings demonstrate that hybrid work is not simply a logistical arrangement; it is a psychological and relational condition that reshapes employees' experience of autonomy, belonging, workload, and professional development. For leaders, this means that managing hybrid ecosystems requires simultaneous attention to performance systems and human needs. Leaders must create clarity without rigidity, autonomy without isolation, and flexibility without fragmentation.

One of the most important dimensions of leadership transformation in hybrid work ecosystems is trust. In office-centered management systems, trust is often reinforced through visible effort, spontaneous interaction, and repeated informal encounters. In hybrid work, however, visibility is uneven. Employees who are frequently present in the office may be more visible to managers, while remote employees may risk being overlooked in decision-making, promotion, mentoring, and informal knowledge exchange. This creates the possibility of

proximity bias, whereby leaders unconsciously associate physical presence with commitment, engagement, or productivity. Research on telecommuting has long indicated that remote work may increase job satisfaction and reduce stress, but it may also weaken knowledge sharing and social integration if not actively managed (Allen et al., 2015). Therefore, leadership transformation requires moving from trust based on surveillance or presence toward trust based on role clarity, mutual accountability, transparent communication, and consistent feedback.

Another central issue concerns communication architecture. Hybrid work expands the number of communication channels but does not automatically improve communication quality. Digital tools may increase speed and documentation, yet they can also generate overload, ambiguity, meeting fatigue, and fragmented attention. Leaders must therefore design communication intentionally by distinguishing between synchronous and asynchronous work, formal and informal interaction, decision-making and social connection, and information sharing and collaborative problem-solving. Gratton (2021) argued that effective hybrid work design requires careful attention to place and time rather than a simplistic division between office and home. This insight is especially relevant for leadership because managers must determine which activities require co-presence, which can be performed asynchronously, and which need structured digital collaboration. Without such design, hybrid work may produce either excessive meetings or insufficient coordination.

Hybrid work also changes the meaning of inclusion and organizational culture. Organizational culture is often reproduced through shared routines, spatial symbols, informal interaction, and collective experiences. In hybrid ecosystems, employees may not participate equally in these cultural processes. Newcomers, younger employees, caregivers, and employees with limited home resources may experience hybrid work differently from senior or highly autonomous employees. Kniffin et al. (2021) emphasized that changes in work practices after COVID-19 have broad implications for workers, workplaces, and organizations, including social, psychological, and managerial consequences. Leadership in hybrid ecosystems must therefore address not only technical coordination but also fairness, belonging, and psychological safety. Employees need to feel that their location does not determine their voice, access, credibility, or career prospects.

The leadership literature offers useful foundations for understanding this transformation, but hybrid work also exposes gaps in existing models. Transformational leadership emphasizes vision, inspiration, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation; servant leadership highlights support, empowerment, and ethical responsibility; and adaptive leadership focuses on mobilizing people to respond to complex and changing conditions. Yet hybrid work ecosystems require a more integrated approach because leaders must simultaneously manage technological mediation, dispersed teams, flexible schedules, relational cohesion, and performance accountability. The leader becomes less a controller of tasks and more an architect of conditions. In this role, leadership is enacted through designing routines, shaping digital norms, ensuring fairness, sustaining trust, and enabling learning across locations and platforms.

The present study addresses this gap by developing an integrated management framework for leadership transformation in hybrid work ecosystems. The study focuses on organizations in Tehran because many knowledge-based, service, consulting, technology, and professional organizations in large urban economies have adopted hybrid arrangements while still operating within cultures that have traditionally valued face-to-face managerial supervision. This context provides a valuable setting for examining how leaders reinterpret authority, trust, communication, and performance in hybrid conditions. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study uses qualitative inquiry to explore the lived managerial meanings and practices through which hybrid leadership

is constructed. By analyzing semi-structured interviews with managers, HR professionals, and digital transformation specialists, the study aims to identify the core categories that explain how leadership is transformed when work becomes spatially distributed, digitally mediated, and relationally complex. Accordingly, the aim of this study was to develop an integrated management framework for leadership transformation in hybrid work ecosystems based on qualitative evidence from organizations in Tehran.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative grounded theory design to develop an integrated management framework for leadership transformation in hybrid work ecosystems. Grounded theory was selected because the purpose of the study was not to measure predefined variables but to generate a conceptual explanation of how leadership practices, meanings, and management systems are reconstructed in hybrid work conditions. The research context included medium and large organizations in Tehran that had implemented hybrid work arrangements for at least one year. The participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experience with leading, designing, supporting, or evaluating hybrid work systems. The final sample consisted of 22 participants, including 8 senior managers, 6 middle managers, 5 human resource managers or specialists, and 3 digital transformation or organizational development specialists. The participants represented technology, finance, consulting, education services, telecommunications, and knowledge-based service organizations. Inclusion criteria were at least five years of professional experience, direct involvement in hybrid work implementation or management, and willingness to participate in a recorded interview. Participants who had only temporary or indirect experience with remote work during the early pandemic period but no current involvement in hybrid work systems were excluded.

Theoretical saturation guided the final sample size. After the twentieth interview, no substantially new conceptual categories emerged; however, two additional interviews were conducted to confirm category boundaries and strengthen theoretical saturation. The final sample included 13 men and 9 women. In terms of age, 4 participants were between 30 and 35 years old, 9 were between 36 and 45 years old, 6 were between 46 and 55 years old, and 3 were older than 55 years. Regarding organizational position, 8 participants were senior executives or directors, 6 were department or team managers, 5 were HR professionals, and 3 were digital transformation or organizational development specialists. Work experience ranged from 6 to 28 years, with most participants having more than 10 years of managerial or professional experience. This diversity was intended to capture multiple perspectives on hybrid leadership, including strategic, operational, technological, and human resource dimensions.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' experiences of leadership transformation in hybrid work ecosystems, including changes in communication, trust, supervision, performance evaluation, employee engagement, team cohesion, technology use, and organizational culture. The guiding questions included: "How has hybrid work changed the role of leaders in your organization?", "What leadership practices have become more important in hybrid teams?", "How do managers maintain trust and accountability when employees work across different locations?", "What challenges have emerged in communication and coordination?", and "What management framework would be needed for sustainable hybrid work?" Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings, request examples, and explore contradictions across participant accounts.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a quiet setting or through secure online platforms, depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. The researcher also kept analytic memos after each interview to document emerging codes, conceptual reflections, and potential theoretical relationships. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any stage. To protect anonymity, participants were identified using codes from P1 to P22, and organizational names were removed from transcripts.

Data analysis was conducted using grounded theory coding procedures. First, open coding was performed line by line to identify initial concepts related to hybrid leadership practices, managerial challenges, employee expectations, digital coordination, trust, fairness, and performance systems. Second, axial coding was used to group related concepts into broader categories and subcategories. During this stage, the relationships among contextual conditions, leadership actions, intervening conditions, and consequences were examined. Third, selective coding was used to identify the core category and integrate the main categories into a coherent management framework. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, assign codes, compare coded segments, retrieve participant quotations, and develop category structures. To enhance credibility, coding decisions were reviewed repeatedly, and constant comparison was used across participants, roles, and organizational contexts. Member checking was conducted with five participants who reviewed the emerging categories and confirmed that the interpretation reflected their experiences. Peer review was also used by discussing the coding structure with two qualitative research experts. Dependability was strengthened through an audit trail that included interview guides, coding notes, memos, category definitions, and framework revisions.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that the study included a diverse group of professionals with direct experience in hybrid work leadership. Of the 22 participants, 13 were men and 9 were women. Regarding age distribution, 4 participants were 30–35 years old, 9 were 36–45 years old, 6 were 46–55 years old, and 3 were over 55 years old. In terms of organizational role, 8 participants were senior managers or executives, 6 were middle managers, 5 were human resource managers or specialists, and 3 were digital transformation or organizational development specialists. Participants came from six organizational sectors: technology and software services (5 participants), finance and insurance (4 participants), consulting and professional services (4 participants), education and training services (3 participants), telecommunications (3 participants), and knowledge-based service firms (3 participants). Their professional experience ranged from 6 to 28 years, and 16 participants reported having more than 10 years of managerial or specialist experience. All participants had direct experience with hybrid work systems in Tehran-based organizations.

Trust-based coordination and outcome visibility. The first main category was trust-based coordination, which refers to the replacement of presence-based supervision with transparent expectations, measurable outputs, and mutual accountability. Participants repeatedly stated that hybrid work made traditional visual control ineffective. Managers could no longer evaluate commitment by observing who arrived early, stayed late, or appeared busy in the office. Instead, they had to define outputs more clearly and create shared visibility around priorities, deadlines, and responsibilities. One senior manager explained, “Before hybrid work, some managers

confused presence with performance. Now we have to ask what exactly was delivered, not how many hours someone sat at a desk” (P4). Another participant noted, “Trust became a management system, not just a personal feeling. If goals are unclear, remote work looks risky; if goals are clear, people become more responsible” (P11). The subcategories of this theme included output-based evaluation, role clarity, transparent task ownership, mutual accountability, and reduced dependence on physical monitoring. Participants emphasized that trust did not mean the absence of control; rather, it required redesigning control around outcomes instead of location. In the proposed framework, trust-based coordination functions as the structural foundation of hybrid leadership because it allows flexibility to coexist with accountability.

Digital communication architecture. The second main category was digital communication architecture, referring to the intentional design of communication channels, meeting routines, documentation systems, and decision-making flows in hybrid work. Participants indicated that hybrid teams suffered when communication was left to spontaneous messages, excessive meetings, or fragmented digital platforms. Effective leaders created explicit norms about when to use synchronous meetings, when to use asynchronous updates, where decisions should be documented, and how team members should access information. One HR manager stated, “The problem was not lack of tools; we had too many tools. The real issue was that nobody knew which platform was official for decisions, which one was for discussion, and which one was for reporting” (P8). A middle manager similarly explained, “Hybrid leadership is calendar design, meeting discipline, and documentation. Without these, remote people are always behind the conversation” (P15). Subcategories included communication rhythm, platform discipline, asynchronous documentation, meeting efficiency, and decision transparency. Participants emphasized that leaders needed to act as architects of communication rather than merely active communicators. In this category, communication was not viewed as an individual skill alone but as a designed managerial infrastructure that determines whether hybrid work produces coordination or confusion.

Hybrid inclusion and fairness. The third main category was hybrid inclusion and fairness. Participants reported that hybrid work created new risks of unequal visibility, unequal access to informal information, and unequal career opportunities. Employees who were physically present in the office could more easily participate in spontaneous conversations, gain managerial attention, and influence decisions. Remote employees, by contrast, could be excluded from informal networks even when their formal performance was strong. One participant stated, “The biggest danger is invisible inequality. Nobody says remote employees are less important, but important conversations still happen in corridors” (P2). Another manager observed, “If leaders are not careful, hybrid work creates two classes of employees: those near the manager and those behind the screen” (P17). The subcategories of this theme included proximity bias, equal voice in meetings, inclusive decision-making, access to mentoring, psychological safety, and career fairness. Participants emphasized that effective hybrid leaders deliberately included remote employees in discussions, documented informal decisions, rotated meeting times, monitored participation patterns, and evaluated employees based on contribution rather than visibility. In the proposed framework, hybrid inclusion and fairness serve as the relational and ethical core of leadership transformation because they prevent flexibility from becoming a source of marginalization.

Boundary-sensitive performance management and adaptive capability development. The fourth main category was boundary-sensitive performance management, which refers to the leader’s responsibility to balance flexibility, workload, well-being, and continuous capability development. Participants explained that hybrid work often blurred boundaries between work and personal life. Some employees extended their working hours,

responded to messages late at night, or felt pressure to prove productivity while working remotely. Leaders therefore had to manage not only tasks but also rhythms of availability, recovery, and sustainable performance. One digital transformation specialist said, “Hybrid work fails when managers think flexibility means everyone is always available. The best leaders protect boundaries and still keep performance high” (P20). Another participant added, “We learned that people need training for hybrid work. Managers need training too. It is not natural to lead a team you do not see every day” (P6). Subcategories included availability norms, workload transparency, well-being monitoring, digital fatigue prevention, leader capability development, and employee self-management skills. Participants emphasized that hybrid leadership requires continuous learning because both managers and employees must develop new competencies in digital collaboration, autonomy, communication, emotional intelligence, and boundary management. This category completes the integrated framework by linking performance sustainability with adaptive learning.

The selective coding process identified **adaptive leadership orchestration** as the core category. This concept describes the leader’s capacity to coordinate the technical, relational, ethical, and performance dimensions of hybrid work into a coherent management system. The integrated framework developed from the findings consists of four interconnected pillars: trust-based coordination, digital communication architecture, hybrid inclusion and fairness, and boundary-sensitive performance management. These pillars are mutually reinforcing. Trust requires clear communication; communication must be inclusive; inclusion depends on fair performance systems; and performance sustainability requires boundary-sensitive leadership. The framework suggests that leadership transformation in hybrid work ecosystems is not a single behavioral change but a systemic shift from managing people through physical presence to orchestrating work through clarity, technology, fairness, and adaptive support.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first major finding of this study was that leadership transformation in hybrid work ecosystems requires a shift from presence-based supervision to trust-based coordination and outcome visibility. Participants emphasized that hybrid work made traditional forms of visual control insufficient and sometimes counterproductive. This finding is consistent with prior telecommuting and hybrid-work research showing that flexible work arrangements can be effective when employees have clear goals, appropriate autonomy, and supportive managerial systems (Allen et al., 2015; Bloom et al., 2015; Bloom et al., 2024). The present study extends this literature by showing that trust in hybrid work is not merely an interpersonal attitude but a designed coordination mechanism. Leaders must translate trust into clear role expectations, visible deliverables, shared responsibility, and regular feedback. This interpretation also aligns with Choudhury et al. (2021), who found that geographic flexibility can support productivity when organizational systems permit employees to work effectively outside traditional office structures. In the Tehran-based organizations examined in this study, participants described a managerial culture historically influenced by face-to-face supervision and direct accessibility. Hybrid work disrupted this assumption and forced leaders to distinguish between activity and contribution. Therefore, the study suggests that hybrid leadership requires a new logic of control: not the elimination of control, but its transformation from behavioral observation to performance transparency. This is important because many managerial concerns about hybrid work

arise from perceived loss of control. The findings indicate that such concerns can be reduced when leaders establish outcome visibility, clear priorities, and mutual accountability.

The second finding concerned the importance of digital communication architecture. Participants did not describe communication problems simply as failures of individual communication skill; rather, they presented communication as an organizational design issue. Hybrid work multiplies channels, locations, schedules, and interaction modes, making communication architecture a central leadership responsibility. This finding supports Wang et al. (2021), who identified ineffective communication as a major challenge in remote work, and it is also consistent with Gratton's (2021) argument that hybrid work must be designed around the dimensions of place and time. The present study adds that leaders must create explicit communication rhythms and platform rules to prevent hybrid work from becoming either meeting-heavy or information-poor. In hybrid teams, undocumented decisions and informal office conversations can quickly produce asymmetry between employees who are physically present and those working remotely. Participants therefore emphasized asynchronous documentation, decision transparency, and disciplined meeting design. This finding contributes to leadership theory by suggesting that the hybrid leader is not only a communicator but also a communication architect. Leadership is enacted through the design of communication infrastructures that determine how information moves, how decisions are recorded, and how employees coordinate across distance. In this sense, digital communication architecture becomes a form of managerial power and inclusion because it shapes who knows what, when, and through which channel.

The third finding showed that hybrid work intensifies the leadership challenge of inclusion and fairness. Participants repeatedly warned that hybrid work can create invisible inequalities between employees who are physically close to managers and those who are digitally connected but socially distant. This finding is consistent with earlier research indicating that remote work may weaken social integration, knowledge sharing, and professional visibility if not actively managed (Allen et al., 2015; Charalampous et al., 2019). It also resonates with broader post-pandemic workplace scholarship emphasizing that changes in work arrangements have social and psychological consequences for employees and organizations (Kniffin et al., 2021). The present study extends these insights by identifying hybrid inclusion as a leadership capability rather than merely an HR policy concern. Participants suggested that inclusive hybrid leadership requires deliberate practices such as documenting informal decisions, inviting remote employees to speak first in meetings, monitoring participation, rotating access to high-visibility projects, and ensuring that mentoring is not limited to employees who are physically present. This finding is especially important because hybrid work can appear fair at the policy level while remaining unequal in everyday practice. Formal flexibility does not guarantee equal voice, equal recognition, or equal opportunity. Therefore, leadership transformation must include awareness of proximity bias and active design of inclusive routines. The findings suggest that hybrid leadership should be evaluated not only by productivity outcomes but also by the degree to which it preserves psychological safety, belonging, and career fairness across work locations.

The fourth finding was that hybrid leadership requires boundary-sensitive performance management and adaptive capability development. Participants emphasized that flexibility can become harmful when employees feel continuously available or when managers interpret remote work as requiring constant digital responsiveness. This finding aligns with research showing that remote work may blur work–family boundaries, increase after-hours work, and affect well-being if boundaries are not managed (Allen et al., 2015; Charalampous et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021). The current study contributes to this discussion by linking boundary management directly to

leadership transformation. Participants did not view well-being as separate from performance; instead, they described sustainable performance as dependent on availability norms, workload transparency, digital fatigue prevention, and employee self-management. This finding also indicates that hybrid leadership is developmental. Managers and employees both need new capabilities, including digital communication, autonomous work planning, emotional intelligence, documentation discipline, and conflict management across channels. The framework therefore positions adaptive capability development as a continuous organizational process rather than a one-time training intervention. In hybrid ecosystems, leaders must learn to diagnose when flexibility supports productivity and when it produces overload, isolation, or fragmentation. This requires a more nuanced leadership approach that integrates performance, well-being, and learning.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that leadership transformation in hybrid work ecosystems is systemic rather than behavioral alone. The core category, adaptive leadership orchestration, captures the leader's role in integrating trust, communication, inclusion, and sustainable performance into a coherent management framework. This framework contributes to the literature by moving beyond binary debates about whether office work or remote work is superior. Recent studies show that hybrid work can maintain performance and improve retention when designed effectively (Bloom et al., 2024), while conceptual work emphasizes that hybrid work involves complex combinations of location, modality, and temporality (Lauring & Jonasson, 2025). The present study builds on these insights by explaining how leadership practices must transform to make hybrid work viable. The proposed framework indicates that hybrid work does not reduce the importance of leadership; rather, it increases the need for intentional leadership. When physical proximity declines, leadership must become more explicit, more designed, and more ethically attentive. Leaders must create the conditions under which distributed employees can coordinate effectively, access information equitably, maintain trust, and perform sustainably.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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