

Organizational Adaptability and Leadership Evolution: An Integrative Literature Review

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how leadership evolves in response to organizational adaptability requirements in contemporary organizations operating under conditions of uncertainty, technological change, and environmental complexity. This qualitative study used a semi-structured interview design to examine leadership evolution and organizational adaptability among managers and organizational experts in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling from technology, manufacturing, financial services, consulting, healthcare, and public-service organizations. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved after 21 interviews, followed by three confirmatory interviews, resulting in a final sample of 24 participants. The interview protocol focused on perceived environmental change, leadership practices, decision-making patterns, learning routines, innovation capacity, and mechanisms through which leaders support adaptation. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Initial codes were generated inductively, grouped into subthemes, and then organized into higher-order categories through constant comparison, memo writing, peer checking, and iterative refinement. The analysis produced five main categories: interpretive vigilance and environmental sensing, distributed leadership and adaptive decision-making, ambidextrous balancing of stability and renewal, institutionalized learning and knowledge recombination, and trust-based resilience in adaptive change. Participants emphasized that adaptability was not merely a structural or technological capability but a leadership-enabled process through which organizations detect weak signals, mobilize collective intelligence, tolerate experimentation, and convert disruption into learning. The findings showed that leadership evolution involves a shift from command-based authority toward facilitative, networked, learning-oriented, and human-centered leadership practices. The study concludes that organizational adaptability depends on the co-evolution of leadership mindset, organizational learning routines, and flexible governance mechanisms. Adaptive organizations require leaders who can maintain operational coherence while creating spaces for experimentation, dialogue, and strategic renewal. These findings contribute to leadership and organization theory by integrating adaptive leadership, dynamic capabilities, organizational learning, and ambidexterity into a qualitative model of leadership evolution.

Keywords: organizational adaptability; leadership evolution; adaptive leadership; dynamic capabilities; organizational ambidexterity; qualitative research; Tehran.

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1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by volatility, technological disruption, competitive turbulence, institutional uncertainty, and shifting stakeholder expectations. Under such conditions, adaptability has become a central organizational capability rather than a peripheral managerial concern. Organizational adaptability refers to the capacity of an organization to sense environmental changes, interpret their strategic meaning, reconfigure internal capabilities, and respond through timely behavioral, structural, and cognitive adjustment. This concept is closely connected to the dynamic capabilities perspective, which argues that competitive advantage in changing environments depends not only on the possession of resources but also on the ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences in response to rapid environmental change (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). In this sense, adaptability is not a single event or isolated reaction; it is



an ongoing organizational process through which firms renew themselves while preserving sufficient continuity for coordinated action.

The evolution of leadership theory reflects the same shift from stability-oriented management to adaptive, relational, and complexity-sensitive forms of organizing. Classical leadership approaches often emphasized hierarchy, authority, role clarity, and the leader's personal capacity to direct followers toward predetermined goals. Later theories, including transformational leadership, broadened this view by emphasizing vision, inspiration, motivation, and the leader's role in shaping organizational change (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Although these perspectives remain influential, contemporary organizational environments require a deeper understanding of how leadership functions when goals are ambiguous, knowledge is distributed, and solutions cannot be fully specified in advance. Adaptive leadership theory responds to this challenge by distinguishing technical problems, which can be solved through existing expertise, from adaptive challenges, which require learning, experimentation, and shifts in values, roles, and relationships (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). From this perspective, leadership is less about providing all answers and more about mobilizing people to confront uncertainty and develop new capacities.

Organizational adaptability is also strongly linked to the literature on exploration and exploitation. March (1991) argued that organizations must balance exploitation, which involves refinement, efficiency, execution, and reliability, with exploration, which involves experimentation, search, variation, and innovation. Excessive exploitation may produce short-term efficiency but long-term rigidity, while excessive exploration may generate creativity without operational discipline. Organizational ambidexterity theory extends this insight by arguing that successful organizations must simultaneously pursue alignment and adaptability, efficiency and innovation, and stability and renewal (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Leadership plays a decisive role in this balancing process because leaders influence the allocation of attention, resources, legitimacy, and decision rights between existing operations and emerging opportunities. Therefore, leadership evolution is inseparable from the organizational need to manage paradoxical demands.

The dynamic capabilities perspective provides another important foundation for understanding adaptability. Teece et al. (1997) conceptualized dynamic capabilities as the firm's ability to renew competences in changing environments, while Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) emphasized that such capabilities often consist of identifiable organizational and managerial processes such as product development, strategic decision-making, alliancing, and knowledge integration. In later elaborations, dynamic capabilities are often discussed through sensing, seizing, and transforming activities, which describe how organizations identify opportunities, mobilize resources, and reconfigure structures and routines. Leadership is embedded in each of these activities. Leaders shape what the organization notices, how it interprets signals, which opportunities receive investment, and how resistance to transformation is addressed. Consequently, adaptability cannot be reduced to market responsiveness; it involves interpretive, relational, and political processes through which leaders and organizational members construct the meaning of change.

Complexity leadership theory further advances this discussion by conceptualizing organizations as complex adaptive systems in which innovation and adaptability emerge from interactions among agents rather than from top-down control alone. Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2007) argued that leadership in knowledge-era organizations should enable adaptive dynamics, informal networks, learning, and emergence while still maintaining necessary administrative coordination. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) later developed the idea of

leadership for organizational adaptability, emphasizing the creation of “adaptive space” where novel ideas, experimentation, and entrepreneurial action can interact with formal operating systems. This perspective is especially relevant for organizations that must remain reliable while also responding to disruptive changes. Leadership evolution, therefore, involves the capacity to connect formal structures with informal networks, operational discipline with creativity, and strategic direction with distributed intelligence.

Organizational learning is another essential mechanism through which adaptability is developed. Cohen and Levinthal (1990) introduced absorptive capacity as the ability to recognize the value of external knowledge, assimilate it, and apply it to commercial ends. Crossan, Lane, and White (1999) described organizational learning as a multilevel process involving intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing. These models show that adaptability depends on how knowledge travels across individual, group, and organizational levels. Leadership influences whether weak signals are ignored or discussed, whether mistakes are punished or examined, and whether local insights become institutional routines. In adaptive organizations, learning is not confined to formal training programs; it is embedded in decision-making, reflection, experimentation, cross-functional collaboration, and feedback loops.

At the same time, the practical realities of contemporary organizations reveal that adaptability is not always achieved smoothly. Many organizations invest in digital transformation, agile methods, knowledge management systems, and innovation programs, yet still remain constrained by rigid authority structures, risk-averse cultures, slow decision-making, and fragmented communication. Kotter (2012) argued that traditional hierarchical operating systems are often insufficient for fast strategic change and suggested that organizations require more agile, network-like systems operating alongside formal hierarchy. This idea is consistent with complexity and ambidexterity perspectives, both of which suggest that adaptive performance requires interaction between structure and flexibility. Leadership evolution is therefore not simply a matter of changing individual leadership style; it involves redesigning leadership as a distributed and system-level capability.

The Iranian organizational context, particularly in Tehran as the country’s major economic, administrative, and technological center, provides a meaningful setting for examining organizational adaptability and leadership evolution. Organizations in Tehran operate under conditions of market fluctuation, regulatory pressure, technological acceleration, talent mobility, and institutional complexity. These conditions intensify the need for leaders who can guide organizations through uncertainty while maintaining employee commitment and operational continuity. In such environments, leadership must integrate strategic foresight, participatory decision-making, learning orientation, and resilience. However, many organizations continue to rely on centralized authority, short-term control, and reactive decision-making, which may restrict adaptive capacity. This tension makes the study of leadership evolution especially important.

Despite the richness of existing literature, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature on adaptability is conceptually fragmented across dynamic capabilities, organizational learning, ambidexterity, complexity leadership, strategic agility, and change management. Second, leadership is often treated either as an individual competency or as a contextual variable, rather than as an evolving organizational mechanism that enables sensing, learning, experimentation, and renewal. Third, qualitative evidence from non-Western organizational contexts remains relatively limited, especially regarding how managers themselves understand the relationship between adaptability and leadership evolution in practice. Addressing these gaps requires an integrative qualitative approach that connects theoretical perspectives with lived managerial experience.

Accordingly, this study explores organizational adaptability and leadership evolution through semi-structured interviews with managers and organizational experts in Tehran. By integrating insights from leadership theory, dynamic capabilities, ambidexterity, complexity theory, and organizational learning, the study seeks to develop a thematic understanding of how leadership practices evolve when organizations face uncertainty and continuous change. The aim of this study was to identify the main leadership mechanisms through which organizations develop adaptability and to explain how leadership evolves from authority-centered direction toward distributed, learning-oriented, and adaptive forms of organizational action.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews. Although the article is positioned conceptually around an integrative literature review of organizational adaptability and leadership evolution, the empirical component was designed as a qualitative inquiry into how managers and organizational experts interpret and experience adaptive leadership practices in contemporary organizations. A qualitative design was appropriate because the study aimed to explore meanings, patterns, experiences, and interpretive processes rather than to test predefined hypotheses. The research population consisted of senior managers, middle managers, human-resource directors, strategy consultants, innovation managers, and organizational-development specialists working in Tehran-based organizations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because they possessed direct experience with organizational change, strategic adaptation, digital transformation, restructuring, or leadership-development initiatives. Snowball sampling was also used after initial interviews, as several participants introduced other information-rich cases. The final sample included 24 participants. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, when no substantially new themes emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm and refine the emerging categories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with participants from private, semi-public, and public-sector organizations in Tehran. The interview guide included open-ended questions about environmental uncertainty, organizational responsiveness, leadership style, decision-making during change, learning from crises, innovation routines, employee participation, resistance to change, and the relationship between formal authority and adaptive action. Example questions included: “How does your organization recognize the need for adaptation?”, “What leadership behaviors help or prevent adaptive responses?”, “How are new ideas evaluated and implemented?”, and “How do leaders balance stability with innovation?” Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in a quiet setting either face-to-face or online according to participant availability. All interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. Participants were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. To protect anonymity, participants were coded from P01 to P24.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis followed an iterative process of familiarization, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting, consistent with established qualitative thematic procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, interview transcripts were read several times to develop immersion in the data. Second, meaningful segments related to adaptability, leadership evolution, decision-making, learning, and organizational change were coded line by line. Third, similar codes were compared and grouped into preliminary subthemes. Fourth, subthemes were organized

into higher-order categories through constant comparison and analytic memo writing. NVivo was used to manage transcripts, code segments, retrieve quotations, compare cases, and refine thematic clusters. To enhance trustworthiness, the study used peer review of coding decisions, member checking with selected participants, preservation of an audit trail, and comparison of emerging themes with relevant theoretical concepts. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the transcripts and direct use of participant quotations. Transferability was supported by detailed description of participants and organizational context, while dependability and confirmability were addressed through systematic documentation of analytic decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 24 participants from Tehran-based organizations. Fifteen participants were men (62.5%) and nine were women (37.5%). In terms of age, seven participants were between 30 and 39 years old (29.2%), eleven were between 40 and 49 years old (45.8%), and six were 50 years old or older (25.0%). Regarding educational level, three participants held bachelor's degrees (12.5%), fourteen held master's degrees (58.3%), and seven held doctoral degrees (29.2%). Participants represented diverse organizational fields, including technology and digital services ($n = 6$; 25.0%), financial services ($n = 5$; 20.8%), manufacturing and industrial firms ($n = 5$; 20.8%), healthcare and pharmaceuticals ($n = 3$; 12.5%), public-service organizations ($n = 3$; 12.5%), and management consulting ($n = 2$; 8.3%). In terms of managerial or professional experience, eight participants had 5–10 years of experience (33.3%), nine had 11–15 years (37.5%), and seven had more than 15 years (29.2%). This diversity allowed the study to capture multiple perspectives on adaptability, leadership evolution, and organizational change.

The first main category was **interpretive vigilance and environmental sensing**. Participants repeatedly emphasized that adaptive organizations are distinguished by their ability to detect early signals of change before such signals become urgent threats. This category included continuous scanning of markets, technologies, regulations, customer expectations, competitor behavior, and workforce trends. However, participants argued that sensing alone was insufficient unless leaders created interpretive forums where signals could be discussed openly. One senior strategy manager explained, “The problem is not that we do not see change; the problem is that we do not always give meaning to it early enough” (P04). Another participant stated, “In adaptive organizations, leaders listen to weak signals from employees, customers, and even complaints. They do not wait for the crisis to become official” (P11). The findings suggest that leadership evolution begins when leaders move from reactive problem-solving to anticipatory interpretation. In this pattern, leaders function as meaning-makers who help the organization understand which changes matter, which assumptions are becoming obsolete, and where strategic attention should be redirected.

The second main category was **distributed leadership and adaptive decision-making**. Participants described adaptability as impossible when decision-making authority remains concentrated at the top of the hierarchy. They argued that environmental speed requires faster, more localized, and more collaborative decisions. Distributed leadership did not mean the absence of formal authority; rather, it referred to the delegation of problem-solving responsibility to teams and experts closest to operational realities. A human-resource director noted, “When every decision waits for the CEO, adaptability becomes a slogan. Real adaptability starts when teams are trusted to

decide within clear boundaries” (P07). Another participant explained, “The new role of leadership is not to control every answer but to create the conditions where the right people can solve the right problem quickly” (P16). This category included empowerment, cross-functional teams, participatory meetings, rapid decision cycles, and reduced bureaucratic delay. The findings indicate that leadership evolution involves a shift from command-centered authority toward enabling leadership, where leaders design decision spaces rather than monopolizing decisions.

The third main category was **ambidextrous balancing of stability and renewal**. Participants did not define adaptability as constant change or uncontrolled experimentation. Instead, they emphasized the need to balance operational reliability with innovation. Many described adaptability as the ability to preserve core organizational identity and service continuity while simultaneously testing new processes, technologies, and business models. A manufacturing executive stated, “If we change everything, people become confused; if we change nothing, the market leaves us behind. Leadership is knowing what must stay stable and what must be redesigned” (P02). A technology-sector participant similarly noted, “Our best leaders protect the core but challenge the habits around the core” (P19). This category included strategic prioritization, controlled experimentation, pilot projects, dual structures, and selective resource allocation. The findings show that leadership evolution requires paradox management: leaders must maintain alignment and efficiency while creating room for exploration, innovation, and renewal.

The fourth main category was **institutionalized learning and knowledge recombination**. Participants emphasized that adaptive organizations learn systematically from customers, failures, projects, competitors, and employees. Learning was not perceived as an individual attribute but as an organizational routine. Participants referred to after-action reviews, internal knowledge-sharing sessions, mentoring, digital knowledge repositories, and cross-unit learning as mechanisms that transform experience into capability. One innovation manager stated, “We do not become adaptive by having smart individuals; we become adaptive when lessons move from one team to another” (P13). Another participant explained, “A mistake is useful only if the organization remembers it. Otherwise, we repeat the same crisis with a different name” (P21). This category shows that leadership evolution is closely connected to knowledge circulation. Leaders support adaptability when they legitimize learning from error, encourage knowledge recombination across departments, and institutionalize reflection as part of organizational work.

The fifth main category was **trust-based resilience and human-centered adaptation**. Participants consistently warned that adaptability fails when change is experienced by employees as threat, pressure, or managerial fashion. They argued that adaptive capacity requires psychological safety, trust, transparent communication, and emotional resilience. A senior manager stated, “People accept adaptation when they believe leaders are honest about the reason for change and fair in its consequences” (P09). Another participant observed, “In our organization, resistance decreased when employees were invited into the conversation before the decision was finalized” (P22). This category included transparent communication, employee involvement, fairness, attention to workload, emotional support, and leadership credibility. The findings suggest that leadership evolution is not only strategic or structural but also relational and ethical. Adaptive leadership requires leaders to help employees tolerate uncertainty, participate in change, and maintain commitment during disruption.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first finding showed that organizational adaptability depends on interpretive vigilance and environmental sensing. Participants emphasized that adaptive organizations do not merely collect information; they interpret weak signals and convert them into shared strategic awareness. This finding aligns with the dynamic capabilities perspective, particularly the sensing dimension of strategic renewal, which emphasizes the identification and interpretation of opportunities and threats in changing environments (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). It also supports Cohen and Levinthal's (1990) concept of absorptive capacity, because organizations can only benefit from external knowledge when they possess the prior knowledge, routines, and interpretive capacity required to recognize its value. The findings extend these perspectives by highlighting the leadership dimension of sensing. In the participants' accounts, leaders were not simply decision-makers after information had been processed; they were facilitators of collective interpretation. This means that leadership evolution involves moving beyond top-down scanning toward dialogic sensemaking, where employees, customers, experts, and boundary-spanning actors contribute to understanding environmental change. This result is consistent with complexity leadership theory, which views adaptive capacity as emerging from interaction, information flow, and distributed intelligence rather than from command authority alone (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Therefore, interpretive vigilance can be understood as both a strategic capability and a leadership practice.

The second finding indicated that distributed leadership and adaptive decision-making are essential for organizational responsiveness. Participants argued that centralized decision-making delays adaptation because information and authority become separated: those who understand the problem lack decision rights, while those with authority may be distant from operational realities. This finding supports adaptive leadership theory, which emphasizes mobilizing people to face adaptive challenges rather than relying exclusively on leader-provided solutions (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). It also aligns with Uhl-Bien and Arena's (2018) argument that leadership for adaptability requires enabling conditions and adaptive spaces through which ideas can move across formal and informal networks. The participants' emphasis on bounded empowerment is especially important. They did not advocate an unstructured or leaderless organization; rather, they described a model in which leaders clarify strategic boundaries, distribute authority, and accelerate local problem-solving. This finding also connects to Kotter's (2012) argument that traditional hierarchy must be complemented by more agile network-like structures to address rapid strategic change. Accordingly, leadership evolution should not be interpreted as the disappearance of hierarchy but as the redesign of hierarchy so that it enables rather than blocks adaptive action.

The third finding revealed that adaptability requires ambidextrous balancing of stability and renewal. Participants rejected the simplistic view that adaptability means continuous change. Instead, they described adaptive leadership as the capacity to protect core organizational identity while challenging obsolete routines. This finding strongly aligns with March's (1991) distinction between exploration and exploitation and with organizational ambidexterity theory, which argues that organizations must simultaneously pursue efficiency and innovation (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). In practical terms, the participants' accounts suggest that leaders become adaptive when they manage contradictions rather than eliminate them. They must maintain operational reliability, customer commitments, and employee role clarity while also opening space for experimentation, digital renewal, and new business models. This finding expands the literature by showing

that ambidexterity is experienced by managers as a leadership judgment problem: deciding what to stabilize, what to question, and how much disruption the organization can absorb at a given time. Thus, leadership evolution is not only a shift toward flexibility but also a more sophisticated capacity for paradox management.

The fourth finding showed that institutionalized learning and knowledge recombination are core mechanisms of adaptability. Participants emphasized that organizational learning becomes valuable when lessons are transferred across units and embedded into routines. This result is consistent with Crossan et al.'s (1999) 4I framework, which explains organizational learning as a process moving from individual intuition to group interpretation, collective integration, and organizational institutionalization. It also supports Eisenhardt and Martin's (2000) view that dynamic capabilities often consist of identifiable processes such as knowledge integration, product development, and strategic decision-making routines. The interview data add an important practical insight: learning requires leadership protection. Participants suggested that employees often hide mistakes or local insights when leaders punish failure, ignore feedback, or treat learning as ceremonial. Therefore, adaptive leadership must create routines through which experience is converted into organizational memory. In this sense, adaptability is not produced by isolated innovation projects but by repeated cycles of reflection, recombination, experimentation, and institutionalization. Leadership evolves when leaders become architects of learning systems rather than merely evaluators of performance outcomes.

The fifth finding demonstrated that trust-based resilience and human-centered adaptation are necessary for sustainable organizational change. Participants emphasized that employees support adaptation when they perceive change as meaningful, fair, transparent, and participatory. This finding complements adaptive leadership theory, which recognizes that adaptive challenges involve loss, anxiety, identity disruption, and conflict (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). It also extends complexity leadership theory by showing that adaptive spaces require not only structural flexibility but also relational safety. Without trust, employees may resist change, conceal information, or comply superficially while withholding commitment. This finding is also consistent with transformational leadership theory, particularly its emphasis on inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and the leader's role in shaping commitment during change (Bass, 1985). However, the present findings suggest that contemporary leadership evolution must move beyond charismatic inspiration toward transparent, ethical, and participatory change practices. Adaptive organizations need leaders who can reduce fear, acknowledge uncertainty, and involve employees before resistance becomes institutionalized. Therefore, resilience is not simply an individual psychological trait; it is a relational and organizational condition shaped by leadership credibility.

Overall, the findings suggest that organizational adaptability is best understood as an integrated leadership-enabled capability. The five categories identified in this study—interpretive vigilance, distributed decision-making, ambidextrous balancing, institutionalized learning, and trust-based resilience—are mutually reinforcing. Environmental sensing without distributed decision-making may produce awareness without action. Distributed authority without ambidextrous discipline may produce fragmentation. Experimentation without learning routines may produce repeated mistakes. Change without trust may produce compliance rather than commitment. This integrated view contributes to the literature by connecting dynamic capabilities, adaptive leadership, ambidexterity, organizational learning, and complexity leadership into a qualitative model of leadership evolution. The findings indicate that leadership evolves from authority-based direction toward system-level enablement:

leaders increasingly act as interpreters, connectors, designers of adaptive space, guardians of learning, and builders of trust.

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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