

Leadership Identity Reconstruction During Digital Transformation: A Phenomenological Investigation

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore how organizational leaders reconstruct their leadership identity during digital transformation and how they make sense of authority, competence, relational influence, and ethical responsibility in digitally mediated work environments. A qualitative phenomenological design was adopted to investigate the lived experiences of leaders involved in digital transformation initiatives in Tehran-based organizations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling from private, public, and semi-public organizations undergoing digitalization, platformization, automation, or data-driven restructuring. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 leaders, including senior executives, middle managers, project managers, and digital transformation coordinators. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached, and each interview lasted approximately 50 to 75 minutes. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis involved repeated reading, open coding, clustering of meaning units, category development, and interpretive synthesis of the shared essence of leadership identity reconstruction. The findings revealed four main categories: identity destabilization and loss of expert-centered authority, transition from command-based leadership to facilitative digital orchestration, relational renegotiation of trust and influence in hybrid human–technology systems, and emergence of a reflexive learning-oriented leadership identity. Participants described digital transformation as a disruptive experience that challenged their previous self-understanding as decision-makers, technical experts, and controllers of organizational processes. However, they also reported developing new identity scripts based on learning agility, collaborative sensemaking, ethical data use, and the ability to mobilize people around uncertain technological futures. Leadership identity reconstruction during digital transformation is not merely a cognitive adaptation to new tools but a deep phenomenological process through which leaders reinterpret who they are, how they influence others, and what responsible leadership means in digitally transformed organizations.

Keywords: leadership identity; digital transformation; phenomenology; digital leadership; identity work; Tehran; qualitative research

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become one of the most consequential forces reshaping contemporary organizations. It is no longer limited to the implementation of new technologies or the automation of existing routines; rather, it refers to a broad organizational transformation in which digital technologies alter value creation, coordination mechanisms, decision-making processes, organizational structures, and relationships with stakeholders (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). Cloud computing, artificial intelligence, data analytics, digital platforms, algorithmic systems, and networked communication infrastructures have transformed the nature of managerial work by increasing speed, transparency, interdependence, and uncertainty. As organizations become more digitally embedded, leadership is increasingly exercised in contexts where information flows rapidly, expertise is distributed across human and non-human actors, and traditional boundaries between strategy, technology, people, and operations become less stable (Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Kane et al., 2019).



The leadership implications of digital transformation are profound. Previous research has shown that digital transformation requires more than technological investment; it depends on leadership capabilities, organizational culture, strategic agility, learning processes, and the ability to mobilize people around uncertain and evolving futures (Warner & Wäger, 2019; Westerman et al., 2014). Leaders are expected to create digital vision, enable innovation, manage resistance, coordinate cross-functional collaboration, interpret data, and build cultures that support experimentation and adaptation. However, these expectations do not simply add new tasks to an unchanged leadership role. They alter the meaning of leadership itself. In digitally transforming organizations, leaders may no longer be recognized primarily as controllers, planners, or holders of superior expertise. Instead, they are increasingly expected to act as facilitators, sensemakers, ecosystem builders, ethical interpreters, and orchestrators of human–technology collaboration (Avolio et al., 2000; Cortellazzo et al., 2019).

This shift raises an important identity-related question: what happens to leaders' understanding of themselves when the foundations of their authority, expertise, and influence are transformed? Leadership identity refers to the extent to which individuals define themselves, and are recognized by others, as leaders (Day & Harrison, 2007; DeRue & Ashford, 2010). It is not a fixed personal trait but a socially constructed, relational, and evolving self-understanding. Individuals come to see themselves as leaders through internal self-definition, social recognition, role expectations, organizational narratives, and repeated interactions in which leadership is claimed and granted (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Epitropaki et al., 2017). Leadership identity is therefore constructed at the intersection of personal meaning, relational validation, and organizational context.

Digital transformation can disrupt this identity construction process. Many leaders have built their authority on accumulated experience, technical knowledge, hierarchical position, and control over information. Digital transformation can weaken these identity anchors by making knowledge more distributed, decision-making more data-driven, communication more transparent, and organizational change more continuous. A manager who once derived legitimacy from knowing more than subordinates may find that younger employees possess stronger digital fluency. A leader who once controlled information flows may encounter digital dashboards, platforms, and algorithmic systems that make performance data visible to multiple stakeholders. A senior executive who once relied on stable planning cycles may face iterative experimentation, agile methods, and rapid strategic pivots. Such experiences can create identity tension, uncertainty, and even threat.

Identity theory provides a useful lens for understanding these experiences. Organizational identity research suggests that individuals define themselves in relation to roles, groups, values, narratives, and institutional expectations (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). When organizational contexts change, individuals must engage in identity work: the ongoing effort to form, maintain, repair, revise, or transform a coherent sense of self (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identity work becomes especially intense during role transitions, organizational change, or periods in which existing self-definitions are challenged. Ibarra's (1999) concept of provisional selves is particularly relevant because it shows how professionals in transition experiment with possible identities before fully internalizing a new role. Digital transformation can similarly require leaders to experiment with unfamiliar leadership selves: the data-informed leader, the agile coach, the collaborative facilitator, the digital strategist, or the ethical steward of technology.

The issue is not merely whether leaders acquire digital skills. Although digital literacy is important, leadership identity reconstruction involves a deeper reconfiguration of meaning. Leaders must reinterpret what it means to be competent when expertise is no longer concentrated in the leader. They must reconsider what it means to

exercise authority when influence depends on networks, platforms, and cross-functional collaboration. They must redefine responsibility when algorithmic systems, data infrastructures, and automated decisions mediate organizational action. They must also renegotiate their relationships with employees who may simultaneously need guidance, autonomy, psychological safety, and opportunities to participate in transformation. In this sense, digital transformation becomes a site of identity destabilization and identity reconstruction.

Existing leadership research has increasingly acknowledged the importance of identity in leadership development. Day and Harrison (2007) argued that leadership development involves individual, relational, and collective identity processes. DeRue and Ashford (2010) emphasized that leadership identity is co-constructed through claiming and granting processes. Epitropaki et al. (2017) further showed that leadership and followership identities operate across multiple levels of analysis and shape how individuals interpret influence, role legitimacy, and group membership. These perspectives suggest that leadership identity during digital transformation should be examined not only as an individual psychological phenomenon but also as a relational and organizational process.

At the same time, digital transformation research has focused mainly on strategy, capabilities, business models, technology adoption, organizational culture, and performance outcomes (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021; Warner & Wäger, 2019). While this literature has generated valuable insights, it has given comparatively less attention to the lived experience of leaders whose identities are being reconstructed through transformation. Studies on digital leadership often identify competencies such as vision, collaboration, agility, communication, innovation, and openness to change (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). However, competency-based accounts may understate the existential and phenomenological dimensions of digital transformation. Leaders do not simply perform new competencies; they must also become different kinds of leaders in their own self-understanding and in the eyes of others.

This gap is especially important in contexts where digital transformation intersects with hierarchical organizational traditions, centralized decision-making, and strong expectations of managerial authority. In such contexts, the shift toward agile, data-driven, participatory, and digitally mediated leadership may create intense identity contradictions. Tehran-based organizations provide a valuable context for studying this phenomenon because many organizations are simultaneously exposed to global digital trends, local institutional constraints, resource limitations, generational differences in digital capability, and evolving expectations regarding organizational modernization. Leaders in these organizations often face the dual challenge of preserving legitimacy within established managerial cultures while adopting new leadership practices compatible with digital transformation.

A phenomenological approach is appropriate for investigating this issue because the central concern is not only what digital transformation changes structurally, but how leaders experience, interpret, and make meaning of those changes. Phenomenology focuses on lived experience and seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by participants (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Through semi-structured interviews, leaders can describe moments of uncertainty, resistance, learning, loss, adaptation, and renewed self-understanding. Such accounts can reveal the deeper identity processes that remain hidden in purely quantitative or competency-based studies.

Therefore, the present study investigates leadership identity reconstruction during digital transformation through a qualitative phenomenological design. It examines how leaders in Tehran-based organizations

experience the destabilization of previous leadership identities, how they construct new meanings of authority and competence, how they renegotiate relational influence in digitally mediated environments, and how they integrate ethical and learning-oriented dimensions into their emerging leadership identity. The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences through which leaders reconstruct their leadership identity during digital transformation in Tehran-based organizations.

2. Methods and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of leaders who had participated in digital transformation initiatives. Phenomenology was selected because the purpose of the study was to understand how leaders experienced and interpreted the reconstruction of their leadership identity, rather than to test predefined hypotheses or measure causal relationships. The focus was on participants' subjective meanings, identity tensions, role interpretations, and sensemaking processes during digital transformation. The study population consisted of leaders working in Tehran-based organizations that had implemented or were implementing digital transformation initiatives, including enterprise resource planning systems, customer relationship management platforms, data analytics dashboards, automation projects, digital service channels, artificial intelligence tools, agile project structures, or platform-based business processes.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: holding a formal leadership or managerial role, having at least five years of managerial experience, direct involvement in at least one digital transformation initiative during the previous three years, and willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. Exclusion criteria were: lack of direct involvement in digital transformation, less than one year of experience in the current organization, or inability to participate in a full interview. A total of 22 participants were interviewed. The sample included 7 senior executives, 8 middle managers, 4 digital transformation or information technology project managers, and 3 human resource or organizational development managers. Participants came from banking and financial services, telecommunications, healthcare services, retail, education technology, public service organizations, and knowledge-based companies in Tehran. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached; after the nineteenth interview, no substantially new conceptual categories emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and completeness of the categories.

Data were collected only through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as: "How has digital transformation changed your understanding of yourself as a leader?", "Can you describe a moment when your previous leadership style no longer seemed effective?", "How have your relationships with employees changed during digital transformation?", "What new expectations have emerged from you as a leader?", and "How do you now define successful leadership in a digitally transforming organization?" Follow-up questions were used to elicit concrete examples, emotional meanings, identity tensions, and reflective interpretations. Interviews lasted between 50 and 75 minutes and were conducted in a private setting or through secure online communication when necessary. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Ethical principles were observed, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis began with repeated reading of transcripts to obtain a holistic understanding of each participant's lived experience. Meaning

units related to leadership identity, authority, competence, role tension, digital change, relational influence, and self-reconstruction were identified and coded. Initial open codes were then compared, merged, and organized into subcategories. Through constant comparison, interpretive reflection, and movement between individual accounts and the full data set, the codes were clustered into four main categories. NVivo was used to manage transcripts, organize codes, retrieve coded segments, compare participant groups, and support analytic memo writing. To enhance trustworthiness, the study used prolonged engagement with the data, peer review of selected codes, member checking with six participants, and maintenance of an audit trail documenting coding decisions, category development, and interpretive revisions.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed diversity in gender, age, organizational level, and sector. Of the 22 participants, 14 were men and 8 were women. In terms of age, 4 participants were between 30 and 39 years old, 11 were between 40 and 49 years old, and 7 were 50 years old or older. Regarding organizational position, 7 participants were senior executives, 8 were middle managers, 4 were digital transformation or information technology project managers, and 3 were human resource or organizational development managers. In terms of sector, 5 participants worked in banking and financial services, 4 in telecommunications and information technology, 3 in healthcare services, 3 in retail and customer service organizations, 3 in education or education technology, 2 in public service organizations, and 2 in knowledge-based companies. Managerial experience ranged from 6 to 24 years, with most participants having more than 10 years of leadership experience.

Identity destabilization and loss of expert-centered authority. The first main category reflected the destabilization of leaders' previous identity as expert decision-makers and authoritative controllers. Participants described digital transformation as a process that exposed the limits of their prior knowledge and weakened the symbolic authority they had accumulated through experience. Many leaders stated that before digital transformation they were recognized as people who "knew the answers," controlled operational information, and directed employees through hierarchical decision-making. However, digital tools, data dashboards, younger digitally fluent employees, and cross-functional transformation teams challenged this identity. One participant explained, "For many years, people came to me because I had the final answer. During the digital project, I realized that sometimes the youngest analyst in the room understood the system better than I did. That was not just a technical challenge; it was a personal shock." Another participant stated, "The difficult part was not learning the software. The difficult part was accepting that my old confidence was based on a world that no longer existed." This category shows that digital transformation created a form of identity interruption. Leaders experienced a temporary gap between who they had been and who the new organizational environment required them to become. This destabilization was accompanied by anxiety, defensiveness, humility, and reflection. Some participants initially resisted digital change because they perceived it as a threat to their credibility. Others gradually interpreted the loss of expert-centered authority as an opportunity to reconstruct leadership around learning, curiosity, and shared problem-solving.

Transition from command-based leadership to facilitative digital orchestration. The second category concerned the reconstruction of leadership identity from command and control toward facilitation, coordination, and orchestration. Participants increasingly described effective leadership as the ability to connect people,

technologies, data, and strategic priorities rather than personally control all decisions. Digital transformation required leaders to coordinate software vendors, IT specialists, operational employees, senior executives, customers, and external consultants. In this context, leadership identity shifted from “being the commander” to “being the integrator.” One participant said, “I used to think leadership meant giving clear instructions. Now I think it means creating the conditions where different people can make sense of the problem together.” Another participant noted, “In digital transformation, you cannot lead by shouting from the top. You have to translate between business people, technical people, and employees who are afraid of losing their routines.” Participants emphasized that digital transformation required listening, translation, mediation, and sensemaking. They reconstructed their identity around enabling others to participate in change. This did not mean that authority disappeared; rather, authority was reinterpreted as the capacity to align diverse actors around uncertain and evolving technological goals. Leaders who successfully adapted described themselves as facilitators of experimentation, protectors of learning space, and orchestrators of distributed expertise. In contrast, leaders who remained attached to command-based identity experienced frustration because digital transformation required faster feedback, greater employee participation, and more adaptive coordination than traditional hierarchy could provide.

Relational renegotiation of trust and influence in hybrid human–technology systems. The third category revealed that leadership identity reconstruction occurred through changing relationships with followers, teams, and technologies. Participants reported that digital transformation altered trust relations because employees questioned whether technologies were designed to support them or monitor them. Leaders had to reconstruct their identity as trustworthy interpreters of digital change. One participant explained, “Employees did not ask me only what the new system does. They asked, ‘Will this system replace us? Will it judge us? Will management use this data against us?’ I understood that my role was not technical training only; I had to rebuild trust.” Another participant said, “When everything became visible on dashboards, people became nervous. I had to show that data is for learning, not punishment.” These experiences show that leadership identity became deeply relational. Leaders were not only implementing technology; they were mediating the emotional, ethical, and social meanings of technology. Influence depended on whether employees believed that leaders could protect fairness, dignity, and psychological safety during digital change. Participants also described the emergence of hybrid human–technology leadership systems in which decisions were shaped by both managerial judgment and digital data. This required leaders to balance algorithmic outputs with contextual understanding. As one participant stated, “The dashboard gives numbers, but leadership is understanding the story behind the numbers.” Thus, participants reconstructed their identity as relational sensemakers who connected technological visibility with human interpretation.

Emergence of a reflexive, learning-oriented, and ethically responsible leadership identity. The fourth category captured the development of a new leadership identity grounded in reflexivity, continuous learning, and ethical responsibility. Participants who moved beyond initial identity threat described digital transformation as an opportunity for personal renewal. They began to define leadership less as possession of stable expertise and more as willingness to learn, unlearn, and model adaptation. One participant stated, “I learned that if I pretend to know everything, my team hides problems. When I openly say, ‘I am learning too,’ they participate more honestly.” Another participant explained, “Digital transformation forced me to ask what kind of leader I want to be when machines, data, and people are all part of decision-making.” Participants emphasized that ethical responsibility

became more salient as digital systems increased surveillance, data collection, and automated evaluation. Leaders had to consider privacy, transparency, employee dignity, bias, and fairness. The reconstructed leadership identity was therefore not only digital but also moral and reflective. Participants described effective digital-era leaders as those who can hold uncertainty, encourage experimentation, protect people from irresponsible technological implementation, and continuously revise their own assumptions. This category represents the integrative outcome of the identity reconstruction process: leaders moved from threatened authority to reflexive responsibility, from fixed expertise to learning agility, and from hierarchical control to ethically grounded digital stewardship.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study show that leadership identity reconstruction during digital transformation is a complex lived process involving destabilization, experimentation, relational renegotiation, and ethical integration. The first finding indicated that leaders experienced digital transformation as a disruption of expert-centered authority. Participants described moments in which their accumulated experience, hierarchical position, and previous decision-making confidence were challenged by digital tools, younger employees' technological fluency, and data-driven systems. This result is consistent with identity construction theory, which argues that individuals form situated identities in relation to organizational cues, role expectations, and changing social contexts (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). When digital transformation changes the cues through which leadership is recognized, leaders must revise their self-understanding. The finding also aligns with Petriglieri's (2011) argument that identity threat occurs when valued self-definitions are questioned or weakened. In this study, leaders did not experience digital transformation only as operational change; they experienced it as a challenge to who they believed themselves to be as competent and legitimate leaders.

This finding also supports previous research on managerial identity work. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) showed that managerial identity is often marked by tension between organizational discourses, role expectations, and personal narratives. Similarly, participants in the present study struggled between the old discourse of managerial control and the new discourse of digital agility. Their identity work involved interpreting whether the loss of expert authority represented failure, obsolescence, or an invitation to adopt a different leadership self. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argued that organizations shape identity through normative expectations about what kind of person employees should become. Digital transformation appears to intensify this process by producing a new normative image of the leader as agile, digitally literate, collaborative, data-informed, and innovation-oriented. Leaders who could not immediately embody this image experienced identity strain.

The second finding showed that leaders reconstructed their identity from command-based authority toward facilitative digital orchestration. Participants increasingly defined leadership as the ability to connect diverse actors, translate between technical and non-technical groups, and create conditions for collaborative sensemaking. This finding is strongly aligned with digital leadership literature. Cortellazzo et al. (2019) concluded that leaders in digitalized contexts must build relationships with multiple and dispersed stakeholders, enable collaboration, and address complexity. Similarly, Warner and Wäger (2019) found that digital transformation involves ongoing strategic renewal and dynamic capabilities, including agility, rapid sensing, and organizational reconfiguration. The present study extends these findings by showing that such capabilities are not only organizational or

behavioral; they are also identity-based. Leaders must come to see themselves as orchestrators of distributed expertise rather than as isolated sources of direction.

This category also supports leadership identity theory. DeRue and Ashford (2010) proposed that leadership identity is socially constructed through claiming and granting processes. In digital transformation, leaders cannot simply claim authority through position; their leadership must be granted by employees, IT specialists, consultants, and cross-functional teams who evaluate whether the leader enables meaningful participation and coordination. The shift from command to orchestration therefore reflects a transformation in the social basis of leadership identity. Authority becomes less dependent on hierarchy and more dependent on relational credibility, facilitative competence, and the ability to mobilize collective intelligence. This result also resonates with Uhl-Bien and Arena's (2018) view that adaptive organizations require leadership that enables emergence, connectivity, and adaptability rather than merely enforcing administrative control.

The third finding concerned the relational renegotiation of trust and influence in hybrid human–technology systems. Participants reported that employees' concerns about surveillance, job security, algorithmic judgment, and data visibility required leaders to act as interpreters and protectors of trust. This finding is consistent with the broader digital transformation literature, which argues that digital transformation produces structural and cultural consequences, not only technological changes (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). Technologies such as dashboards, analytics platforms, and automated monitoring systems can alter power relations by making employee behavior more visible and measurable. Leaders must therefore manage the meaning of visibility. If employees interpret digital systems as punitive surveillance, resistance increases. If they interpret them as tools for learning and improvement, participation becomes more likely.

This finding also contributes to leadership identity research by showing that digital transformation changes the relational conditions under which leaders are recognized as legitimate. Epitropaki et al. (2017) emphasized that leadership and followership identities are embedded in multilevel relational processes. In this study, followers granted leadership identity to those who could humanize digital transformation, explain the purpose of data, and protect fairness. Thus, leaders reconstructed their identity through trust-building practices. The quote “The dashboard gives numbers, but leadership is understanding the story behind the numbers” captures an important phenomenological insight: digital-era leadership identity is formed at the boundary between data and meaning. Leaders are not replaced by data; rather, their identity is reconstructed around the responsible interpretation of data within human contexts.

The fourth finding showed that the reconstructed leadership identity was reflexive, learning-oriented, and ethically responsible. Participants who successfully adapted to digital transformation described leadership as continuous learning, humility, unlearning, experimentation, and ethical stewardship. This finding is consistent with Ibarra's (1999) theory of provisional selves, according to which professionals in transition experiment with new identities before fully internalizing them. During digital transformation, leaders experimented with new ways of appearing competent: asking questions instead of giving immediate answers, admitting uncertainty, learning from younger employees, and facilitating experimentation. Such behaviors initially felt risky because they contradicted older identity scripts of managerial confidence. Over time, however, they became part of a reconstructed leadership identity based on learning agility.

This finding also aligns with Day and Harrison's (2007) identity-based view of leadership development. Leadership development is not merely skill acquisition; it involves deeper shifts in self-definition at individual,

relational, and collective levels. Participants in this study developed a more complex leadership identity that integrated personal humility, relational facilitation, and collective transformation. This reconstructed identity was also ethical because digital transformation raised concerns about privacy, transparency, bias, surveillance, and employee dignity. Cortellazzo et al. (2019) emphasized that digital leaders must address ethical concerns in digitalized environments. The present study supports this view and adds that ethical responsibility becomes part of the leader's self-definition. Leaders began to ask not only "How can we implement technology?" but also "What kind of leader am I when technology changes how people are evaluated, monitored, and included?"

Taken together, the findings suggest that leadership identity reconstruction during digital transformation follows a processual pattern. First, leaders encounter identity destabilization when old sources of authority become insufficient. Second, they experiment with facilitative and collaborative leadership behaviors. Third, they renegotiate trust and influence with employees in digitally mediated environments. Fourth, they integrate a new identity centered on learning, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility. This process is not linear for all leaders, and some may move back and forth between resistance and adaptation. Nevertheless, the shared essence of participants' experiences indicates that digital transformation produces a deep identity transition from the leader as controller to the leader as digital sensemaker and ethical orchestrator.

The study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it extends digital transformation research by foregrounding the lived experience of leaders rather than focusing only on strategy, technology, or organizational capabilities. Second, it contributes to leadership identity theory by showing how digital transformation functions as an identity-disrupting context that alters the claiming and granting of leadership. Third, it adds a phenomenological understanding of digital leadership by showing that digital leadership is not simply a competency profile but an identity reconstruction process. Finally, the study offers practical insight into why some leaders resist digital transformation: resistance may not be only technical or strategic but also identity-protective. Leaders may resist because transformation threatens their sense of competence, authority, and recognition.

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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