

Digital Leadership Transformation: A Meta-Synthesis of Theories, Constructs, and Future Directions

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop an integrated qualitative understanding of digital leadership transformation by synthesizing expert interpretations of its theoretical foundations, core constructs, organizational mechanisms, and future research directions. The study used a qualitative meta-synthesis design supported by semi-structured expert interviews. Participants were 22 senior managers, digital transformation consultants, information technology directors, organizational development specialists, and academic experts in Tehran who had direct experience with digital transformation projects. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached at the nineteenth interview, followed by three confirmatory interviews. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting 45–75 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded inductively and abductively, and analyzed using NVivo software. Trustworthiness was strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, audit trail documentation, and constant comparison of emerging codes. The findings produced five main categories: strategic digital sensemaking, transformation-oriented leadership capabilities, data-driven and human-centered decision-making, digital culture and learning agility, and ecosystem-based ethical governance. Participants described digital leadership not as the technical use of digital tools but as a multidimensional leadership logic through which leaders create strategic direction, mobilize organizational learning, redesign work processes, build trust in data and technology, and manage ethical tensions in digitally mediated environments. The findings also showed that digital leadership transformation requires a shift from hierarchical authority toward adaptive coordination, distributed intelligence, collaborative experimentation, and continuous capability renewal. Digital leadership transformation represents a systemic reconfiguration of leadership theory and practice in response to technological disruption, platform-based competition, datafication, and organizational complexity. The study contributes an integrated conceptual model that links digital vision, adaptive capabilities, cultural transformation, data ethics, and ecosystem orchestration. Future research should empirically test these constructs across industries and examine how digital leadership evolves under artificial intelligence, hybrid work, and algorithmic governance.

Keywords: digital leadership; digital transformation; meta-synthesis; qualitative research; leadership capabilities; digital culture; Tehran

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has become one of the most consequential organizational phenomena of the contemporary era because it changes not only the technologies used by organizations but also the assumptions through which organizations define strategy, structure, value creation, leadership, and competitive advantage. Earlier discussions of information technology often conceptualized technology as a functional support mechanism, but contemporary digital transformation research views digital technologies as strategic, generative, and institutionally disruptive forces. Digital transformation refers to organizational change triggered by digital technologies that reshape value creation paths, strategic responses, organizational structures, and business models (Vial, 2019). In this sense, digitalization is not merely the automation of existing routines; it is a deeper transformation in which data, platforms, artificial intelligence, analytics, cloud infrastructures, and digitally mediated relationships alter the logic of organizing itself. As Verhoef et al. (2021) argue, digital transformation



involves progressive movement from digitization to digitalization and finally to business-wide transformation, requiring new assets, capabilities, and strategic orientations. Therefore, leadership in digitally transforming organizations cannot be reduced to technology adoption. It involves the capacity to interpret technological disruption, mobilize collective learning, redesign organizational routines, and create strategic coherence under conditions of uncertainty.

The study of digital leadership has developed from earlier work on e-leadership, which examined how advanced information technologies mediate leadership processes across individuals, teams, and organizations. Avolio, Kahai, and Dodge (2000) defined e-leadership as a social influence process embedded in both technology and organizational structures, emphasizing that leadership and technology recursively shape one another. This early theoretical insight remains highly relevant because contemporary digital leadership operates through digitally mediated communication, algorithmic decision systems, hybrid work environments, virtual collaboration platforms, and data-intensive organizational infrastructures. However, digital leadership has moved beyond the question of how leaders communicate through technology. It now concerns how leaders create digital strategy, build digital culture, orchestrate ecosystems, govern data ethically, and enable continuous renewal in organizations exposed to rapid technological change. Cortellazzo, Bruni, and Zampieri (2019) showed that leaders play a crucial role in developing digital culture, managing dispersed stakeholders, enabling collaboration, and addressing ethical issues in digitalized contexts. This broader view positions digital leadership as a transformational capability rather than a narrow communication competence.

A central problem in the literature is that digital leadership remains theoretically fragmented. Some studies interpret it through the lens of digital business strategy, emphasizing the integration of information technology and business strategy into a unified strategic logic (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). Others frame digital leadership through dynamic capabilities, focusing on how leaders sense technological opportunities, seize digital possibilities, and reconfigure organizational resources for strategic renewal (Teece, 2007; Warner & Wäger, 2019). A third stream focuses on digital culture, agility, innovation, and organizational learning, arguing that successful digital transformation depends less on technology itself and more on cultural readiness, experimentation, and leadership-supported adaptation (Kane et al., 2015; Westerman et al., 2014). A fourth stream highlights ethical and human-centered issues, including surveillance, privacy, algorithmic bias, employee autonomy, trust, and the social consequences of data-driven management. These theoretical streams have produced valuable insights, but they have not yet converged into a sufficiently integrated understanding of digital leadership transformation as a multidimensional organizational phenomenon.

Digital leadership transformation is especially important because digital technologies intensify the complexity of leadership work. Leaders must operate across multiple temporal horizons: they must manage current operational performance while preparing the organization for uncertain technological futures. They must also manage contradictory demands: standardization and flexibility, automation and human judgment, speed and reflection, data-driven control and employee empowerment, platform efficiency and ethical accountability. Complexity leadership theory suggests that leadership in adaptive systems is not merely a top-down influence process but an enabling function that supports emergence, learning, and innovation across interconnected agents (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). This perspective is useful for understanding digital leadership because digitally transforming organizations are increasingly networked, interdependent, and nonlinear. In such environments,

leadership effectiveness depends on the ability to enable distributed intelligence, create adaptive spaces, coordinate knowledge flows, and transform uncertainty into collective learning.

The strategic dimension of digital leadership is equally central. Digital business strategy is broader and more embedded than traditional information systems strategy because digital technologies increasingly shape products, processes, customer relationships, and organizational boundaries (Bharadwaj et al., 2013). Digital leadership therefore requires leaders to connect technological possibilities with business model innovation, customer experience, operational redesign, and ecosystem positioning. El Sawy, Amsinck, Kræmmergaard, and Vinther (2016) define digital leadership as doing the right things for the strategic success of digitalization in the enterprise and its ecosystem. This definition is significant because it shifts attention from technology implementation to strategic judgment. A digitally competent leader is not necessarily the person with the deepest technical expertise but the person who can translate digital opportunities into organizational meaning, align stakeholders around transformation priorities, and institutionalize digital capabilities across business functions.

Another important construct in digital leadership transformation is organizational learning. Digital transformation generates ambiguity because new technologies often disrupt established knowledge, status hierarchies, professional identities, and decision routines. Leaders must therefore create learning architectures that allow employees to experiment, fail intelligently, reskill continuously, and participate in transformation rather than merely comply with it. Warner and Wäger (2019) showed that digital transformation requires dynamic capabilities such as digital sensing, digital seizing, and digital transforming. These capabilities are not only technical; they are social and managerial. They depend on leadership practices that support agile decision-making, cross-functional collaboration, and strategic renewal. Similarly, Benitez, Arenas, Castillo, and Esteves (2022) found that digital leadership capability can influence innovation performance through platform digitization capability. This suggests that digital leadership operates through organizational capability-building mechanisms rather than through isolated leader traits.

The human dimension of digital leadership has become more urgent as organizations adopt artificial intelligence, analytics, algorithmic management systems, and hybrid work platforms. While data-driven technologies can improve speed, prediction, and coordination, they can also produce new forms of opacity, dependency, bias, and employee resistance. Digital leaders must therefore balance technological rationality with human-centered governance. They need to create trust in digital systems, explain the logic of data-based decisions, protect privacy, and ensure that automation does not weaken human agency. The literature on digitalized leadership emphasizes that leaders must address ethical concerns and create relationships with multiple stakeholders in increasingly dispersed environments (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Digital leadership transformation therefore includes moral and relational competencies in addition to strategic and technical competencies.

Despite the growth of research on digital leadership, several gaps remain. First, many studies use conceptual, survey-based, or review designs, while fewer studies explore how experienced practitioners interpret digital leadership transformation in specific organizational contexts. Second, much of the literature separates leadership constructs such as vision, agility, innovation, culture, and ethics, although practitioners experience them as interconnected dimensions of transformation. Third, existing models often understate the contextual nature of digital leadership in non-Western or emerging-economy environments, where digital transformation may be shaped by institutional constraints, resource limitations, regulatory uncertainty, infrastructure gaps, and distinctive organizational cultures. Tehran provides a relevant context for such inquiry because organizations operating in

this environment face simultaneous pressures for digital modernization, managerial renewal, talent development, and adaptation to uncertain economic and technological conditions.

A qualitative meta-synthesis approach supported by semi-structured expert interviews is appropriate for this study because digital leadership transformation is an interpretive, multidimensional, and evolving phenomenon. Rather than testing a predefined model, the present study seeks to synthesize theoretical constructs and practitioner meanings into a coherent conceptual framework. By interviewing senior managers, digital transformation consultants, IT directors, organizational development specialists, and academic experts in Tehran, the study captures how digital leadership is understood by individuals who have directly observed or managed transformation processes. The aim of this study is to develop an integrated qualitative model of digital leadership transformation by synthesizing expert perspectives on its theories, constructs, organizational mechanisms, and future directions.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative meta-synthesis design supported by semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the design was to integrate theoretical insights from the digital leadership and digital transformation literature with the lived professional interpretations of experts involved in digital transformation initiatives. The study was exploratory and interpretive because the objective was not to test a predetermined hypothesis but to identify the meanings, categories, and conceptual relationships through which digital leadership transformation is understood in organizational practice. The research setting was Tehran, Iran, where many public, private, technology-based, financial, educational, and service organizations are currently experiencing pressure to modernize managerial systems through digital tools, analytics, platform-based services, and hybrid work practices.

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria were: at least five years of professional experience in leadership, information technology management, organizational development, digital transformation consulting, or academic research on leadership and management; direct involvement in at least one digital transformation, digital strategy, enterprise systems, data analytics, or organizational redesign project; willingness to participate in an audio-recorded interview; and residence or professional activity in Tehran. The exclusion criteria were lack of direct experience with digital transformation projects, inability to participate in a full interview, or unwillingness to permit transcription and anonymous use of the data. The final sample consisted of 22 participants: six senior executives, four IT directors, four digital transformation consultants, three human resource or organizational development managers, three university faculty members specializing in management or information systems, and two innovation managers. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Saturation occurred at the nineteenth interview, when no substantially new codes or categories emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability and conceptual adequacy of the findings.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the literature on e-leadership, digital transformation, digital business strategy, dynamic capabilities, digital culture, and ethical governance. The interview guide included open-ended questions such as: “How do you define digital leadership in organizational transformation?”, “What capabilities distinguish digital leaders from traditional leaders?”, “How do leaders create readiness for digital transformation?”, “What role do data, analytics, and

artificial intelligence play in leadership decisions?”, “What cultural barriers prevent digital leadership transformation?”, and “What ethical challenges should digital leaders manage in the future?” Follow-up questions were used to clarify meanings, elicit examples, and explore contradictions in participants’ narratives.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted face-to-face or online depending on participant availability. Before each interview, participants received an explanation of the research purpose, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was removed, and participants were coded as P1 to P22. Field notes were written after each interview to record contextual observations, initial analytic reflections, and emerging conceptual links.

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software. The analysis followed an inductive-abductive thematic synthesis procedure. First, all transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data. Second, initial open coding was conducted line by line to identify meaningful units related to digital leadership transformation. Third, similar codes were grouped into subcategories through constant comparison. Fourth, subcategories were compared with theoretical concepts from the literature, including e-leadership, dynamic capabilities, digital business strategy, digital culture, and complexity leadership. Fifth, main categories were developed by integrating empirical codes and theoretical constructs. Finally, relationships among categories were synthesized into a conceptual model of digital leadership transformation.

Trustworthiness was ensured through several strategies. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, in which selected participants reviewed summaries of the interpreted findings. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, category development, and analytic memos. Confirmability was strengthened through peer review by two qualitative research experts who examined the coherence between raw data, codes, and categories. Transferability was supported by providing detailed descriptions of participants, research context, sampling criteria, and analytic procedures. The coding process produced five main categories: strategic digital sensemaking, transformation-oriented leadership capabilities, data-driven and human-centered decision-making, digital culture and learning agility, and ecosystem-based ethical governance.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 22 participants from Tehran. In terms of gender, 15 participants were male and 7 were female. Regarding professional background, 6 participants were senior executives, 4 were IT directors, 4 were digital transformation consultants, 3 were human resource or organizational development managers, 3 were university faculty members, and 2 were innovation managers. In terms of education, 5 participants held a bachelor’s degree, 10 held a master’s degree, and 7 held a doctoral degree. Professional experience ranged from 6 to 24 years, with an average of approximately 13 years. Twelve participants worked in private-sector organizations, five in public or semi-public organizations, three in universities, and two in consulting firms. The demographic pattern indicated that the participants had sufficient managerial, technical, and academic diversity to provide a multidimensional understanding of digital leadership transformation.

Strategic digital sensemaking. The first category showed that digital leadership begins with the ability to interpret digital disruption and translate it into strategic meaning for the organization. Participants emphasized

that many organizations adopt digital tools without understanding the strategic logic behind them. Digital leaders were described as individuals who can explain why transformation is necessary, what kind of future the organization is preparing for, and how digital technologies connect with business value. One participant stated, “In our company, the problem was not lack of software; the problem was that managers could not explain what digital transformation meant for our business model” {P4}. Another participant explained, “A digital leader must reduce confusion. Employees hear words like AI, platform, dashboard, and automation, but they need someone to connect these words to their daily work” {P11}. This category included the subcategories of digital visioning, strategic interpretation, environmental scanning, narrative construction, and future-oriented decision framing.

Transformation-oriented leadership capabilities. The second category referred to the capabilities that enable leaders to move digital transformation from vision to implementation. Participants argued that successful digital leadership requires agility, cross-functional coordination, experimentation, resource orchestration, and continuous capability renewal. Digital transformation was described as an ongoing process rather than a temporary project. One participant noted, “The leader who thinks digital transformation has a start and finish date has not understood it; every new system creates new needs, new resistance, and new learning” {P2}. Another participant stated, “Digital leadership means creating movement between IT, human resources, operations, and strategy. If these units work separately, digital transformation becomes only a technical project” {P16}. The subcategories of this theme included agile coordination, resource reconfiguration, cross-functional integration, experimentation, and adaptive implementation.

Data-driven and human-centered decision-making. The third category indicated that digital leadership transformation requires the integration of analytics and human judgment. Participants emphasized that data can improve decision-making, but only when leaders understand its limitations, communicate its meaning, and protect human agency. Several participants criticized the superficial use of dashboards and performance indicators. One participant said, “Some managers think that if they have a dashboard, they are data-driven. But data without interpretation can create false confidence” {P8}. Another participant stated, “Employees accept data-based decisions when they believe the leader is using data to improve work, not to control or punish them” {P19}. This category included the subcategories of analytics literacy, evidence-based decision-making, interpretive judgment, employee trust, and responsible data use.

Digital culture and learning agility. The fourth category showed that digital leadership transformation depends on cultural readiness and organizational learning. Participants repeatedly emphasized that resistance to digital transformation is often cultural rather than technical. Digital leaders were described as builders of psychological safety, learning routines, and experimentation spaces. One participant explained, “The most important skill is not knowing every technology; it is creating a culture where people are not ashamed to learn from younger colleagues or admit that old routines no longer work” {P6}. Another participant said, “Digital transformation fails when employees feel that technology is being imposed on them. They must feel that they are part of the change” {P13}. This category included the subcategories of learning culture, psychological safety, digital skill development, resistance management, and participatory change.

Ecosystem-based ethical governance. The fifth category showed that digital leadership extends beyond internal organizational control and involves ecosystem coordination and ethical responsibility. Participants argued that digital leaders must manage relationships with customers, suppliers, technology vendors, regulators, platform partners, and employees. They also emphasized ethical concerns such as privacy, algorithmic bias, surveillance,

transparency, and accountability. One participant stated, “A digital leader must ask not only whether a technology works, but also what kind of power it gives the organization over people” {P21}. Another participant explained, “When we work with platforms and vendors, leadership becomes ecosystem management. You are responsible for decisions that are partly outside your formal hierarchy” {P10}. This category included the subcategories of stakeholder coordination, platform governance, privacy protection, algorithmic accountability, and ethical foresight.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first finding of the study was that digital leadership transformation begins with strategic digital sensemaking. Participants emphasized that leaders must interpret digital disruption and create a coherent narrative that connects technology with organizational purpose, business value, and future direction. This result is consistent with Vial’s (2019) view that digital transformation involves strategic responses to disruptions created by digital technologies. It also aligns with Bharadwaj et al. (2013), who argue that digital business strategy is not a subordinate IT plan but an integrated organizational strategy shaped by digital resources and capabilities. The finding suggests that digital leaders act as translators between technological complexity and organizational meaning. They reduce uncertainty by explaining why transformation is needed, what strategic opportunities it creates, and how employees should understand their roles in the transition. This expands earlier e-leadership theory by showing that digital leadership is not only about influencing followers through information technology but also about constructing strategic meaning in technology-saturated environments (Avolio et al., 2000).

The second finding was that digital leadership requires transformation-oriented capabilities, including agility, experimentation, cross-functional integration, and resource reconfiguration. Participants described digital transformation as an ongoing process of strategic renewal rather than a one-time implementation project. This finding strongly supports the dynamic capabilities perspective. Teece (2007) argues that organizations need to sense opportunities, seize them, and reconfigure resources in changing environments. Warner and Wäger (2019) similarly show that digital transformation depends on dynamic capabilities that enable organizations to continuously adapt to digital disruption. The present study extends this literature by showing that these capabilities are not abstract organizational properties; they are enacted through leadership practices such as coordinating between IT and business units, encouraging experimentation, reallocating resources, and maintaining momentum despite resistance. Digital leadership therefore functions as a capability-building mechanism that helps organizations move from fragmented digital initiatives toward integrated transformation.

The third finding concerned the relationship between data-driven decision-making and human-centered leadership. Participants did not reject analytics or artificial intelligence; rather, they warned against treating data as a substitute for interpretation, dialogue, and ethical judgment. This finding aligns with the literature emphasizing that digital transformation creates both opportunities and tensions. Verhoef et al. (2021) argue that digital transformation changes organizational capabilities, structures, and metrics, while Cortellazzo et al. (2019) stress that leaders must address ethical and relational concerns in digitalized contexts. The present findings suggest that effective digital leaders combine analytics literacy with social intelligence. They use dashboards, metrics, and predictive systems to support decisions, but they also explain the meaning of data, recognize its limitations, and protect employee trust. This is particularly important in organizations where data systems may be perceived as

tools of surveillance or managerial control. Digital leadership transformation therefore requires responsible data sensemaking, not merely technical analytics adoption.

The fourth finding was that digital culture and learning agility are central to digital leadership transformation. Participants repeatedly stated that cultural barriers are often more difficult than technical barriers. This is consistent with Kane et al. (2015), who argued that strategy, leadership, and culture are more decisive than technology alone in digital transformation. It also supports Westerman, Bonnet, and McAfee's (2014) argument that digital maturity depends on both digital capabilities and leadership capabilities. The present study shows that digital leaders create cultural readiness by encouraging learning, psychological safety, experimentation, and employee participation. This finding also resonates with complexity leadership theory, which views leadership as an enabling process that supports adaptation and emergence in complex systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In digital transformation, employees must often abandon familiar routines, acquire new skills, and collaborate across traditional boundaries. Leaders who create safety for learning and experimentation reduce resistance and increase the likelihood that digital transformation becomes embedded in daily organizational practice.

The fifth finding was that digital leadership involves ecosystem-based ethical governance. Participants described digital leadership as extending beyond internal hierarchy into relationships with vendors, platforms, customers, regulators, and external partners. This finding aligns with El Sawy et al. (2016), who define digital leadership in relation to the strategic success of digitalization across the enterprise and its business ecosystem. It also connects with research on platform digitization and innovation performance, which suggests that digital leadership influences outcomes through the development of platform-related capabilities (Benitez et al., 2022). However, the present study adds an ethical dimension by showing that ecosystem leadership also requires attention to privacy, algorithmic accountability, surveillance, and stakeholder trust. In digitally connected organizations, leaders make decisions within networks of technological dependency and shared responsibility. Therefore, digital leadership transformation should be understood as both strategic orchestration and ethical governance.

Taken together, the findings suggest that digital leadership transformation is a multidimensional construct composed of strategic, capability-based, cultural, analytic, and ethical dimensions. The study contributes to theory by integrating fragmented streams of digital leadership research into a coherent conceptual model. Earlier studies have separately emphasized e-leadership, digital business strategy, dynamic capabilities, digital culture, and ethical leadership. The present study shows that these dimensions are interdependent. Strategic sensemaking gives direction to transformation; dynamic capabilities convert direction into action; data-driven decision-making improves organizational intelligence; digital culture enables learning and adaptation; and ethical ecosystem governance protects legitimacy and trust. This integrated model helps explain why many digital transformation initiatives fail when organizations focus only on technology investment while neglecting leadership transformation.

The findings also have contextual significance. Participants from Tehran described digital leadership in relation to resource constraints, organizational hierarchy, uncertainty, and uneven digital readiness. These contextual conditions made sensemaking, cultural change, and ethical trust especially important. In environments where digital transformation is shaped by institutional instability or uneven infrastructure, leaders must do more than import technological models from advanced digital economies. They must adapt digital leadership practices to local organizational realities, workforce capabilities, regulatory pressures, and stakeholder expectations. This

suggests that future theories of digital leadership should be context-sensitive rather than assuming that digital leadership capabilities operate uniformly across all national and institutional settings.

The study also contributes to methodological understanding by demonstrating the value of qualitative expert interviews for synthesizing digital leadership constructs. Much of the literature on digital transformation uses surveys, conceptual frameworks, or firm-level case studies. These approaches are useful but may not fully capture the interpretive complexity of leadership transformation. By using expert narratives, this study identified how practitioners connect theoretical constructs in practice. For example, participants did not separate digital vision from culture, or analytics from trust. Their narratives showed that digital leadership is experienced as a practical synthesis of strategic interpretation, organizational mobilization, and ethical responsibility. This supports the use of qualitative approaches for theory development in emerging management domains.

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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