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The Rise of Distributed Leadership Systems: A Qualitative Study of Power Redistribution in Digital Organizations

Siamak Dehkordi[1]*, Parviz Mokhtari[1]

1. Department of Strategic Management, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran

Abstract

This study aimed to explore how power is redistributed through distributed leadership systems in digital organizations and to identify the organizational mechanisms through which leadership authority becomes shared, negotiated, and technologically mediated. This qualitative study was conducted using an interpretive research design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 managers, team leaders, digital transformation specialists, product owners, and senior experts working in digital organizations in Tehran. Participants were selected through purposive sampling with maximum variation in organizational role, industry background, and managerial experience. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and focused on experiences of leadership decentralization, decision-making authority, digital coordination, algorithmic control, and cross-functional collaboration. Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Coding was performed in three stages: open coding, axial categorization, and selective theme development. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, peer review, and continuous comparison of emerging codes. The analysis generated five main categories: digital visibility and transparency as a source of power redistribution; expertise-based authority and role fluidity; platform-mediated coordination and algorithmic governance; participatory decision architectures and cross-functional coalitions; and the persistence of hierarchical control beneath distributed leadership rhetoric. Participants described digital organizations as environments in which formal managerial authority increasingly interacts with data access, technical expertise, network centrality, and collaborative platforms. Although leadership became more distributed in product, innovation, and problem-solving processes, power redistribution remained uneven because strategic decisions, resource allocation, and performance evaluation often continued to be controlled by senior executives. The study shows that distributed leadership in digital organizations is not simply a democratic dispersion of authority but a complex sociotechnical system in which power is redistributed through digital infrastructures, expertise networks, and collaborative routines while remaining constrained by formal hierarchy and algorithmic control.

Keywords: distributed leadership; digital organizations; power redistribution; digital transformation; qualitative study; algorithmic governance; Tehran

✉ *CORRESPONDING AUTHOR'S EMAIL

siamak.dehkordi.lead@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has altered the structural logic of contemporary organizations by shifting work from relatively stable bureaucratic arrangements toward networked, data-intensive, and platform-mediated forms of coordination. In traditional organizational designs, leadership authority was largely associated with formal position, vertical hierarchy, managerial control, and centralized decision rights. In digital organizations, however, value creation increasingly depends on rapid knowledge flows, cross-functional collaboration, agile experimentation, data-based decision-making, and continuous adaptation. These conditions challenge the assumption that leadership can be understood primarily as the influence exercised by a single formal leader. Instead, leadership increasingly appears as a distributed organizational capability enacted through interactions

among people, technologies, teams, routines, and digital infrastructures (Avolio et al., 2014; Cortellazzo et al., 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021).

The concept of distributed leadership provides a useful theoretical lens for examining these changes. Gronn (2002) argued that leadership should not be reduced to the behaviors of individual leaders but should be examined as a distributed unit of analysis involving patterns of conjoint agency, interdependence, and coordinated action. Similarly, Spillane (2006) conceptualized leadership as a practice stretched over leaders, followers, and the situation, emphasizing that leadership emerges from interactions rather than from formal role occupancy alone. This perspective is especially relevant in digital organizations because authority frequently moves toward those who possess critical knowledge, control data flows, interpret technological signals, or coordinate action across organizational boundaries. Distributed leadership therefore captures not only the sharing of tasks but also the redistribution of influence within complex organizational systems.

Research on shared, plural, and collective leadership has further expanded this perspective by showing that leadership can be enacted by multiple actors simultaneously or sequentially across organizational contexts. Pearce and Conger (2003) described shared leadership as a dynamic influence process among individuals in groups, while Denis et al. (2012) reviewed plural leadership as a broad family of approaches that foreground the combined influence of multiple leaders. Bolden (2011) also argued that distributed leadership is not a single model but a diverse body of research concerned with how leadership is stretched across organizational actors and practices. These perspectives are important because digital organizations rarely rely on a single locus of authority. Product owners, software engineers, data analysts, designers, customer-experience specialists, platform managers, and senior executives may all exercise leadership at different moments depending on the problem, the information available, and the expertise required.

Digitalization intensifies this shift by changing the material and informational conditions under which leadership is practiced. Digital technologies make work more visible, traceable, and measurable; they also create new spaces for collaboration, such as dashboards, project-management platforms, enterprise social media, data repositories, and agile workflow systems. Nambisan et al. (2017) argued that digital innovation changes the locus and logic of innovation management because digital technologies enable distributed agency, fluid boundaries, and recombinable resources. Yoo et al. (2010) similarly emphasized that digital innovation creates a new organizing logic characterized by convergence, generativity, and layered modular architectures. In such contexts, leadership depends less on issuing instructions through formal chains of command and more on mobilizing distributed knowledge, interpreting ambiguous signals, and enabling collective action across interdependent units.

At the same time, the rise of distributed leadership does not mean that power disappears. Rather, power is reconfigured. Digital organizations may decentralize some decision rights while centralizing others through data governance, platform architecture, algorithmic evaluation, and strategic resource allocation. Orlikowski and Scott (2008) argued that organizational life should be understood through sociomaterial entanglements, meaning that human action and technological systems are deeply interwoven. Leonardi and Treem (2020) similarly emphasized that digitization increases behavioral visibility, making actions more observable, analyzable, and subject to managerial interpretation. These insights suggest that digital technologies do not merely support leadership distribution; they also shape who becomes visible, whose expertise is recognized, which decisions become data-driven, and how authority is legitimized.

Power redistribution in digital organizations is therefore paradoxical. On one hand, digital tools can democratize access to information, enable lower-level employees to influence decisions, and allow teams to self-organize around complex problems. Agile methods, cross-functional squads, cloud-based collaboration, real-time analytics, and platform ecosystems may all strengthen distributed leadership by enabling faster communication and broader participation. On the other hand, the same digital systems may create new forms of surveillance, algorithmic control, and performance discipline. Kellogg et al. (2020) showed that algorithmic technologies can reshape workplace control by embedding evaluative and directive mechanisms into technical systems. Therefore, leadership distribution in digital organizations may involve both empowerment and control, both decentralization and recentralization, and both autonomy and technological discipline.

Complexity leadership theory also provides a relevant foundation for this inquiry. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) argued that leadership in knowledge-producing organizations should enable adaptive capacity within complex adaptive systems. From this viewpoint, leadership is not limited to administrative control but includes enabling conditions for emergence, innovation, and self-organization. Digital organizations operate under uncertainty, rapid technological change, and nonlinear market dynamics. Their leadership systems must therefore support adaptive responses, experimentation, and distributed intelligence. However, these adaptive processes require coordination mechanisms that prevent fragmentation. The central challenge is not simply whether power should be centralized or decentralized, but how organizations design leadership systems that balance autonomy, accountability, expertise, and strategic coherence.

Despite growing interest in digital leadership and distributed leadership, the intersection between these areas remains underdeveloped. Much of the digital leadership literature focuses on leader competencies, transformation strategy, technological readiness, and cultural change (Avolio et al., 2014; Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Conversely, distributed leadership research has often been developed in educational, healthcare, and public-sector settings, with less attention to digitally intensive organizations. The specific mechanisms through which digital infrastructures redistribute power inside organizations remain insufficiently understood. It is unclear how employees experience shifts in authority, how expertise becomes a source of leadership legitimacy, how collaborative platforms mediate decision-making, and how formal hierarchy persists within apparently distributed systems.

The context of Tehran-based digital organizations provides a valuable setting for examining these issues. Digital firms in emerging economies often face simultaneous pressures of technological acceleration, institutional uncertainty, talent competition, resource constraints, and changing managerial expectations. These pressures may intensify the need for distributed leadership while also reinforcing managerial control. In such organizations, power redistribution is likely to be shaped not only by digital tools but also by organizational culture, leadership traditions, professional expertise, and market turbulence. A qualitative design is therefore appropriate because it allows close examination of participants' lived experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes regarding leadership and power.

Accordingly, this study examines distributed leadership systems as sociotechnical arrangements through which power is redistributed, negotiated, and constrained in digital organizations. Rather than treating distributed leadership as a normative ideal, the study investigates how it is actually experienced by organizational members. The study focuses on the mechanisms that enable authority to move across teams, the role of digital platforms in shaping influence, the tensions between autonomy and control, and the persistence of hierarchy beneath

distributed leadership discourse. The aim of this study was to explore how power is redistributed through distributed leadership systems in digital organizations and to develop a qualitative understanding of the mechanisms, tensions, and outcomes of this redistribution among Tehran-based digital organizations.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative interpretive design to explore how distributed leadership systems shape power redistribution in digital organizations. The interpretive approach was selected because the purpose of the study was not to test a predetermined hypothesis but to understand how organizational members construct meaning around leadership authority, digital coordination, expertise, participation, and control. The research setting consisted of digital organizations located in Tehran, including firms active in software development, financial technology, e-commerce, digital marketing, platform services, business analytics, and online service delivery. These organizations were selected because their work processes depended heavily on digital platforms, cross-functional collaboration, data-based decision-making, and rapid adaptation.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling with maximum variation. Inclusion criteria were having at least three years of professional experience in a digital organization, direct involvement in team-based or cross-functional decision-making, and sufficient familiarity with leadership processes during digital transformation. Participants included senior managers, middle managers, product owners, team leaders, digital transformation specialists, data analysts, software project managers, and senior experts. The final sample consisted of 24 participants. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, when no substantially new codes emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm and refine the emerging categories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was designed around five main domains: experiences of leadership distribution, changes in formal and informal authority, the role of digital platforms in decision-making, the influence of expertise and data access on power, and tensions between autonomy and control. Sample interview questions included: “How are important decisions made in your organization?” “Who has influence when digital projects face uncertainty?” “How do digital tools affect leadership and authority?” “Can you describe a situation in which power shifted from formal managers to technical or cross-functional teams?” and “What limits the redistribution of leadership authority in your organization?” Probing questions were used to deepen participants’ explanations and elicit concrete examples.

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. All interviews were conducted in Persian, audio-recorded with participants’ consent, and transcribed verbatim. To preserve confidentiality, participants were assigned codes from P1 to P24, and all organizational identifiers were removed from the transcripts. Ethical principles included voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, the right to withdraw, and secure storage of interview files.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis followed an iterative coding process. In the first stage, open coding was used to identify meaningful units related to leadership distribution, authority, expertise, digital visibility, decision-making, platform coordination, and control. In the second stage, related codes were compared and grouped into axial categories. In the third stage, selective themes were developed to explain the broader pattern of power redistribution in digital organizations. NVivo was used to

organize transcripts, code segments, compare categories, retrieve quotations, and examine relationships among themes.

To improve trustworthiness, several strategies were applied. Credibility was strengthened through member checking with six participants who reviewed the preliminary interpretations. Peer debriefing was conducted with two qualitative researchers familiar with leadership and organizational studies. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, category development, and analytic memos. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memo-writing to reduce researcher bias. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context, participant characteristics, and analytic categories.

3. Findings and Results

The participants included 24 professionals working in digital organizations in Tehran. In terms of gender, 15 participants were male and 9 were female. Regarding organizational position, 5 were senior managers, 6 were middle managers, 4 were product owners, 3 were software or technical team leaders, 3 were digital transformation specialists, and 3 were senior experts in data analytics, marketing technology, or platform operations. Participants' ages ranged from 29 to 51 years. In terms of work experience, 6 participants had 3–5 years of experience, 9 had 6–10 years, and 9 had more than 10 years. Regarding industry background, 6 participants worked in software development firms, 5 in fintech companies, 4 in e-commerce organizations, 3 in platform-based service companies, 3 in digital marketing agencies, and 3 in business analytics or consulting firms. The diversity of participants allowed the study to capture different experiences of leadership distribution across digital organizational contexts.

The first main category was **digital visibility and transparency as a source of power redistribution**. Participants repeatedly stated that digital platforms changed power relations by making work processes, decisions, performance indicators, and communication patterns more visible. In traditional structures, managers often controlled information and used this control as a source of authority. In digital organizations, however, dashboards, project-management tools, shared documents, analytics systems, and collaborative platforms allowed more employees to access operational information and participate in decision-making. One product owner explained, "Before, the manager had the report and others waited for interpretation. Now everyone sees the dashboard, and the person who understands the data better can influence the decision, even if that person is not the manager" (P8). This visibility redistributed power by weakening the monopoly of formal managers over information. However, participants also noted that visibility created new pressures because employees knew that their tasks, delays, and outputs were constantly observable. A technical team leader stated, "Transparency gives the team more voice, but it also means that every mistake becomes visible very quickly" (P13). Thus, digital visibility simultaneously enabled participation and intensified accountability.

The second main category was **expertise-based authority and role fluidity**. Participants emphasized that leadership in digital organizations often shifted toward those with specialized knowledge rather than those with formal titles. Technical expertise, data literacy, product knowledge, user-experience insight, and platform familiarity became major sources of informal authority. In complex digital projects, formal managers often depended on experts to interpret problems and propose solutions. A senior data analyst noted, "In meetings, the final word is not always from the manager. When the issue is about user behavior or algorithmic performance,

people wait for the data team to explain what is really happening" (P19). This finding suggests that power was redistributed through knowledge asymmetry: those who could interpret digital complexity gained influence. Participants also reported that roles became more fluid, especially in agile teams where leadership changed according to project phase. A software project manager explained, "During architecture design, the senior developer leads. During customer testing, the UX lead has more authority. During release planning, the product owner becomes central" (P11). Leadership was therefore enacted as temporary, situational, and expertise-driven rather than permanently attached to a single position.

The third main category was **platform-mediated coordination and algorithmic governance**. Participants described digital platforms as active mediators of leadership, not merely neutral tools. Task-management systems, performance dashboards, workflow automation, customer analytics, and algorithmic recommendation systems shaped priorities, allocated attention, and structured accountability. Several participants stated that platforms sometimes replaced direct managerial supervision by defining deadlines, assigning tasks, monitoring progress, and generating performance reports. One digital transformation specialist observed, "The platform has become a silent manager. It tells us what is late, who is responsible, what the priority is, and where the bottleneck is" (P6). This platform-mediated coordination distributed leadership by reducing dependence on direct command; teams could coordinate through shared digital systems. However, it also created algorithmic forms of control. A platform operations expert said, "We say teams are autonomous, but the algorithm decides what is urgent. If the system ranks an issue as high priority, everyone follows it" (P22). Therefore, leadership authority was redistributed not only among people but also into digital systems that structured organizational attention and action.

The fourth main category was **participatory decision architectures and cross-functional coalitions**. Participants reported that digital organizations increasingly relied on cross-functional teams, agile ceremonies, sprint reviews, product councils, and collaborative decision forums. These structures allowed employees from different units to participate in decisions that had previously been made by senior managers alone. A middle manager stated, "In our product council, marketing, technology, finance, and customer support all have a voice. The decision is not owned by one department anymore" (P4). Participants viewed these participatory architectures as essential because digital problems were too interconnected for isolated decision-making. Power was redistributed through coalition-building, negotiation, and collective problem framing. However, participants also noted that participation was more genuine when decision rules were clear. A product owner commented, "When everyone can speak but nobody knows who decides, participation becomes exhausting. Distributed leadership needs clear decision rights, otherwise it becomes endless discussion" (P10). This category shows that distributed leadership requires structured participation rather than unregulated involvement.

The fifth main category was **the persistence of hierarchical control beneath distributed leadership rhetoric**. Although participants described meaningful decentralization in operational and project-level decisions, they also emphasized that strategic priorities, budgets, hiring, promotion, and final resource allocation remained largely controlled by senior executives. Some participants believed that organizations used the language of distributed leadership while preserving traditional power relations. A senior expert stated, "They say leadership is shared, but when the decision affects money or reputation, hierarchy returns immediately" (P17). Another participant observed, "Teams are free to decide how to do the work, but not always free to decide what work matters" (P2). This distinction between operational autonomy and strategic authority was central to participants' experiences. Distributed leadership was real in problem-solving, experimentation, and daily coordination, but

limited in strategic governance. Participants therefore described power redistribution as partial, conditional, and reversible. Digital organizations decentralized authority when speed and expertise were needed, but recentralized authority when risk, resources, or institutional legitimacy were involved.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first finding showed that digital visibility and transparency were central mechanisms of power redistribution in digital organizations. Participants indicated that dashboards, shared platforms, real-time reports, and collaborative documents weakened managerial control over information and enabled broader participation in decision-making. This finding aligns with distributed leadership theory, which argues that leadership is stretched across people, tools, and situations rather than located solely in formal leaders (Gronn, 2002; Spillane, 2006). It also supports research on behavioral visibility, which suggests that digital technologies make organizational actions more observable and therefore change how coordination and influence occur (Leonardi & Treem, 2020). In this study, visibility redistributed power by allowing employees with stronger interpretive capacity to influence decisions. However, visibility also intensified accountability and created pressure because work became more traceable. This duality supports sociomaterial perspectives suggesting that technology simultaneously enables and constrains human action (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). Therefore, digital transparency should not be interpreted only as empowerment; it is also a mechanism through which organizations monitor performance and discipline behavior.

The second finding revealed that expertise-based authority and role fluidity are defining features of distributed leadership systems in digital organizations. Participants emphasized that influence moved toward those who possessed relevant technical, analytical, or product-related knowledge. This finding is consistent with shared and plural leadership research, which suggests that leadership may emerge dynamically from multiple actors depending on task requirements and expertise (Denis et al., 2012; Pearce & Conger, 2003). It also supports complexity leadership theory, which emphasizes adaptive problem-solving in knowledge-intensive systems (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In digital organizations, problems are often ambiguous, fast-changing, and technically complex; therefore, formal authority alone is insufficient. The person who can interpret data, diagnose system behavior, understand customer experience, or connect technical and commercial priorities may temporarily become the most influential actor. This does not eliminate formal leadership but repositions it as an enabling function. Managers remain important, but their authority increasingly depends on their ability to mobilize distributed expertise rather than simply command compliance.

The third finding concerned platform-mediated coordination and algorithmic governance. Participants described digital platforms as coordination infrastructures that assign tasks, display priorities, monitor progress, and direct attention. This finding extends distributed leadership theory by showing that leadership distribution in digital organizations is not only interpersonal but also technological. Digital platforms become part of the leadership system because they structure communication, sequence work, define urgency, and make performance visible. This interpretation is consistent with digital innovation research, which argues that digital technologies enable distributed agency and reshape organizational processes (Nambisan et al., 2017; Yoo et al., 2010). At the same time, the finding supports algorithmic control literature, which shows that algorithmic systems can embed managerial authority into technological mechanisms (Kellogg et al., 2020). Therefore, distributed leadership in

digital organizations may involve a paradox: authority is decentralized away from individual managers, but some of that authority is recentralized into platforms, metrics, and algorithms. This suggests that digital leadership systems require critical attention to the politics of technology design.

The fourth finding showed that participatory decision architectures and cross-functional coalitions enable distributed leadership by creating structured spaces for shared influence. Participants described product councils, agile ceremonies, sprint reviews, and cross-functional meetings as mechanisms through which decision-making became more collective. This finding aligns with research showing that digital transformation requires new organizational structures, coordination mechanisms, and capabilities (Verhoef et al., 2021). It also supports the view that distributed leadership depends on interactions among actors rather than on isolated individuals (Bolden, 2011; Spillane, 2006). However, participants also warned that participation without decision clarity can produce ambiguity, fatigue, and conflict. This is an important contribution because it challenges overly idealized accounts of distributed leadership. Effective power redistribution requires not only voice but also governance. Organizations must clarify who contributes, who decides, how disagreement is resolved, and how accountability is assigned. Without such architecture, distributed leadership may become symbolic participation or inefficient consensus-seeking.

The fifth finding indicated that hierarchical control persists beneath distributed leadership rhetoric. Participants reported that although digital organizations often decentralize operational decision-making, senior executives continue to control strategy, budgets, hiring, promotion, and resource allocation. This finding is consistent with plural leadership research, which recognizes that distributed and hierarchical forms of leadership frequently coexist rather than replace one another (Denis et al., 2012). It also reflects complexity leadership theory's distinction between adaptive and administrative functions: organizations need distributed adaptation but also require formal structures for coordination, legitimacy, and resource control (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The present study shows that power redistribution is partial and conditional. Employees may gain authority over how work is performed, but not necessarily over which strategic priorities are selected. Thus, distributed leadership in digital organizations should be understood as a layered system in which operational autonomy, expertise-based influence, platform control, and executive hierarchy interact continuously.

Overall, the findings suggest that distributed leadership systems in digital organizations are best understood as sociotechnical power arrangements. Power is redistributed through visibility, expertise, platforms, participation, and cross-functional collaboration, but it is also constrained by hierarchy, metrics, algorithms, and resource control. This interpretation contributes to leadership literature by moving beyond the simple opposition between centralized and decentralized leadership. The evidence indicates that digital organizations do not abandon hierarchy; rather, they combine hierarchy with distributed expertise and platform-mediated coordination. This hybrid form may be particularly important in uncertain environments where organizations need both speed and coherence. Distributed leadership enables rapid adaptation and local problem-solving, while hierarchy maintains strategic alignment and institutional accountability.

The study also contributes to digital transformation literature by showing that leadership transformation is not merely a matter of developing digital competencies among formal leaders. It involves deeper changes in the architecture of power. Digital transformation changes who has access to information, who can interpret organizational signals, who can mobilize others, and who can define priorities. As a result, leadership becomes less a fixed managerial role and more an emergent system of influence distributed across human and technological

actors. This does not mean that formal leaders become irrelevant. Rather, their role changes from command and control toward enabling, boundary-spanning, sensemaking, and governance of distributed authority. Leaders must design conditions under which expertise can influence decisions while ensuring that distributed authority does not become fragmented or politically ambiguous.

The findings further suggest that distributed leadership should be evaluated by examining actual decision rights rather than organizational rhetoric. Many organizations claim to empower teams, but the depth of power redistribution depends on whether teams can influence strategic priorities, resource allocation, product direction, and performance criteria. If teams only control execution while senior leaders control all consequential choices, leadership distribution remains limited. Therefore, future research and practice should distinguish between operational distribution, epistemic distribution, technological distribution, and strategic distribution of power. This distinction can help scholars and practitioners assess whether distributed leadership is substantive or merely symbolic.

The first limitation of this study is that it was conducted among digital organizations in Tehran, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other national, cultural, or institutional contexts. The second limitation is that the study relied on interview data, meaning that the findings reflect participants' perceptions and interpretations rather than direct observation of leadership practices. The third limitation is that the sample included professionals from several types of digital organizations, which increased variation but may have reduced the ability to analyze industry-specific patterns in depth. Finally, because power redistribution is a dynamic process, a cross-sectional qualitative design may not fully capture how distributed leadership systems evolve over time.

Future research should examine distributed leadership systems through longitudinal designs that follow digital organizations across different stages of growth, crisis, scaling, or transformation. Comparative studies could investigate how power redistribution differs between startups, mature digital firms, public-sector digital units, and platform-based organizations. Researchers should also examine the role of algorithmic systems in leadership distribution, especially how metrics, dashboards, and automated decision tools influence authority, autonomy, and accountability. Mixed-methods studies could develop and test measurement models of power redistribution in digital leadership systems. Future research may also compare employee, middle-manager, and executive perspectives to identify tensions between perceived empowerment and actual decision rights.

For practice, digital organizations should design distributed leadership intentionally rather than assuming that digital tools automatically create empowerment. Managers should clarify decision rights, create transparent governance structures, and ensure that participation is connected to real influence. Organizations should recognize technical and analytical expertise as legitimate sources of leadership while preventing expertise-based authority from becoming exclusionary or opaque. Digital platforms should be designed not only for monitoring performance but also for enabling learning, dialogue, and collaborative sensemaking. Senior leaders should also examine whether their claims of distributed leadership are supported by actual redistribution of strategic influence, resources, and accountability. Effective distributed leadership requires a balance between autonomy and alignment, participation and clarity, technological coordination and human judgment.

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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