

Evolutionary Mechanisms of Leadership Adaptation During Organizational Crises: A Multi-Case Analysis

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a qualitative understanding of the evolutionary mechanisms through which leaders adapt their roles, decision-making patterns, and relational practices during organizational crises. A qualitative multi-case design was used to examine leadership adaptation across five organizations in Tehran that had experienced acute operational, financial, technological, or market-related crises during the previous three years. Participants were selected through purposive sampling from senior managers, middle managers, crisis-response coordinators, and experienced employees directly involved in crisis management. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 participants until theoretical saturation was achieved. Interviews focused on crisis interpretation, leadership responses, decision authority, emotional management, resource mobilization, organizational learning, and post-crisis change. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Within-case and cross-case comparisons were conducted to identify recurring adaptation patterns and case-specific variations. The analysis generated five main categories: rapid sensemaking and signal recomposition, redistribution of decision authority, improvisational resource recombination, relational containment and trust preservation, and post-crisis learning with routine transformation. The findings showed that leadership adaptation during crises did not occur as a single planned intervention but as an evolutionary process involving variation, selection, and retention of leadership practices. Leaders first reconstructed ambiguous signals into actionable meanings, then shifted from centralized control toward distributed responsiveness, recombined limited resources, stabilized employees emotionally, and institutionalized effective crisis practices after the immediate threat declined. Leadership adaptation during organizational crises is best understood as a dynamic evolutionary capability rather than a fixed competency. Effective crisis leaders create adaptive space, preserve trust, mobilize distributed intelligence, and transform crisis-driven improvisations into durable organizational routines.

Keywords: leadership adaptation; organizational crisis; evolutionary mechanisms; multi-case analysis; organizational resilience; qualitative research; crisis leadership.

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1. Introduction

Organizational crises have become a defining condition of contemporary management because organizations operate in environments characterized by volatility, ambiguity, technological disruption, geopolitical instability, reputational vulnerability, and rapid stakeholder reaction. A crisis is not merely a severe problem or a temporary interruption; it is an event or sequence of events that threatens organizational viability, disrupts established routines, compresses decision time, and exposes the insufficiency of ordinary managerial assumptions. Classic crisis research emphasizes that crises are low-probability but high-impact events marked by ambiguity, urgency, and consequential threat (Pearson & Clair, 1998). More recent integrative perspectives argue that crises must be understood simultaneously as internal operational disruptions and external stakeholder events, because organizations must manage both the substantive problem and the interpretation of the problem by employees, customers, regulators, media, and wider publics (Bundy et al., 2017). Therefore, crisis leadership is not reducible



to technical problem solving; it involves sensemaking, decision coordination, legitimacy preservation, emotional containment, and organizational learning.

Leadership becomes particularly consequential during crises because the assumptions embedded in ordinary management systems often become unreliable. Stable environments allow leaders to rely on formal planning, hierarchical reporting, standardized procedures, and incremental decision cycles. Crises, however, interrupt these mechanisms. Information becomes incomplete, routines become obsolete, employee anxiety increases, and external stakeholders demand rapid explanations and visible accountability. Boin et al. (2005) argue that crisis leadership requires leaders to make sense of unclear events, make critical decisions under pressure, communicate meaning, coordinate response, and support learning after the crisis. This perspective shows that leadership during crisis is simultaneously cognitive, behavioral, relational, and political. Leaders must interpret what is happening, decide what matters, mobilize people around priorities, and preserve confidence when the organization's normal interpretive order has been destabilized.

The present study approaches crisis leadership through the concept of adaptation. Adaptation refers to the capacity of leaders and organizations to modify assumptions, structures, behaviors, and routines in response to environmental disruption. In strategic management, adaptation has often been examined through the dynamic capabilities perspective, which explains how organizations sense environmental change, seize emerging opportunities or threats, and reconfigure resources to maintain viability under changing conditions (Teece et al., 1997). From this view, crisis leadership can be interpreted as a micro-foundational driver of dynamic capability because leaders shape how signals are interpreted, how resources are redeployed, and how new routines are retained. However, while dynamic capabilities research has explained organizational-level reconfiguration, less is known about the concrete leadership mechanisms through which adaptation emerges during the lived experience of crisis.

Complexity leadership theory provides another important lens for understanding leadership adaptation in crises. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) argue that organizations are complex adaptive systems in which leadership should not be understood only as the behavior of formal leaders but as a dynamic process that enables learning, innovation, and adaptive emergence. In crisis conditions, centralized command may be necessary for coherence, but excessive centralization can slow local problem solving and suppress frontline intelligence. Adaptive leadership therefore requires a balance between administrative control and enabling conditions for distributed action. Leaders must create enough structure to prevent chaos while allowing enough flexibility for novel solutions to emerge. This balance is central to the evolutionary character of crisis adaptation: multiple possible responses are generated, some are selected because they work under pressure, and some become retained as new organizational routines.

Sensemaking theory further clarifies why leadership adaptation begins with interpretation. Weick (1995) conceptualized sensemaking as the process through which people construct meaning when events are uncertain, surprising, or disruptive. During crises, leaders are not simply responding to objective facts; they are constructing provisional meanings from partial signals. Weick et al. (2005) later emphasized that sensemaking is an ongoing social process through which organizational actors enact, interpret, and revise reality. This is especially relevant in crisis contexts because the same event may be interpreted as a temporary disturbance, a strategic threat, a moral failure, or an opportunity for transformation. Leadership adaptation therefore depends on the leader's ability to organize attention, reduce interpretive fragmentation, and transform confusion into coordinated action.

Organizational resilience research also contributes to understanding leadership adaptation during crises. Resilience is not only the ability to return to a previous state after disruption; it is increasingly understood as a capability to anticipate, cope with, and adapt after adversity (Duchek, 2020). This distinction is important because some crises permanently alter the conditions under which an organization operates. In such cases, recovery to the previous state may be neither possible nor desirable. Leaders must instead help the organization absorb shock, maintain core functioning, and redesign routines for a changed environment. Williams et al. (2017) similarly argue that resilience and crisis management research converge around the question of how organizations respond to adversity before, during, and after disruption. Leadership is central to this process because leaders influence the quality of anticipation, the speed of coping, and the depth of post-crisis learning.

Leadership in extreme and crisis contexts also requires psychological and relational capacities that go beyond formal authority. Hannah et al. (2009) argued that extreme contexts differ according to magnitude of consequences, threat form, probability, temporal location, and proximity. Although not all organizational crises are extreme in the same way, many contain psychological proximity because employees experience uncertainty about jobs, identity, safety, or organizational survival. In such circumstances, employees look to leaders not only for instructions but also for emotional orientation. Leadership behavior can either intensify anxiety through inconsistency and defensiveness or contain anxiety through transparency, presence, and credible action. Thus, adaptive crisis leadership includes emotional regulation and trust maintenance, not merely structural adjustment.

Existing research has identified important leadership competencies for crisis management. Wooten and James (2008) linked crisis management to leadership competencies such as sensemaking, perspective taking, communication, creativity, risk taking, and learning orientation. Heifetz et al. (2009) also distinguished adaptive challenges from technical problems, arguing that adaptive leadership requires mobilizing people to confront losses, revise values, and experiment with new ways of operating. This distinction is particularly relevant to organizational crises because crises often reveal deeper systemic weaknesses: overdependence on a few decision makers, rigid procedures, poor information flows, weak psychological safety, or cultural resistance to change. When crises are treated as merely technical breakdowns, organizations may restore surface stability without transforming the underlying vulnerabilities that produced or intensified the crisis.

Despite the richness of this literature, several gaps remain. First, much crisis leadership research focuses on competencies, phases, or outcomes, while less attention has been given to the evolutionary mechanisms through which leadership practices change during the crisis itself. Second, crisis adaptation is often described at the organizational level, but the link between leaders' situated actions and organizational-level adaptive capability remains underdeveloped. Third, many studies examine single crisis contexts, whereas multi-case analysis can reveal both recurring patterns and contextual differences across organizations. Fourth, the Tehran organizational context remains underrepresented in international crisis leadership literature, even though organizations in this setting face complex combinations of economic pressure, technological uncertainty, market turbulence, regulatory change, and human-resource challenges.

The concept of evolutionary mechanisms offers a useful way to address these gaps. In this study, "evolutionary" does not refer to biological determinism; rather, it refers to the organizational process through which leadership responses vary under pressure, are selected through practical effectiveness, and are retained when they become embedded in post-crisis routines. During crises, leaders often experiment with new communication channels, decision rights, resource combinations, and relational practices. Some responses fail,

some work temporarily, and some become institutionalized. Understanding these mechanisms can help explain how crisis leadership becomes a source of organizational adaptation rather than a short-term reaction.

Accordingly, this study investigates leadership adaptation during organizational crises through a qualitative multi-case analysis of organizations in Tehran. By examining the lived experiences of leaders and employees directly involved in crisis response, the study seeks to identify the mechanisms through which leadership practices evolve from initial disruption to post-crisis learning. The aim of this study was to develop a qualitative model of the evolutionary mechanisms of leadership adaptation during organizational crises through a multi-case analysis of organizations in Tehran.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative multi-case research design to explore the evolutionary mechanisms of leadership adaptation during organizational crises. A multi-case design was selected because the research objective required comparison across different organizational settings rather than description of a single crisis event. Case-study logic is appropriate when researchers seek to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly separable (Yin, 2018). In addition, multiple cases strengthen analytical generalization by allowing the researcher to compare convergent and divergent patterns across organizational contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989). In the present study, each organization was treated as one case, and cross-case analysis was used to identify shared leadership adaptation mechanisms.

The research setting consisted of five organizations located in Tehran. The cases were selected from information technology services, private healthcare, banking and financial services, manufacturing, and logistics-based retail. These sectors were selected because each had experienced a significant organizational crisis during the previous three years, including operational disruption, financial pressure, digital-system failure, supply-chain disturbance, or market shock. The inclusion criteria for organizations were: documented experience of a major organizational crisis, direct involvement of leadership teams in crisis response, willingness to allow interviews with multiple organizational members, and variation in sector and organizational size. The inclusion criteria for participants were: at least three years of organizational experience, direct involvement in crisis response or crisis-related decision implementation, and willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, followed by snowball referrals to identify individuals who had direct knowledge of leadership decisions during the crisis. The final sample included 26 participants: 7 senior managers, 8 middle managers, 5 crisis-response or project coordinators, and 6 experienced employees who had participated in crisis-response processes. Theoretical saturation was achieved after the twenty-third interview, when no substantially new categories emerged; three additional interviews were conducted to confirm category stability and refine the relationships among themes. Saturation was assessed through continuous comparison of codes, memo writing, and review of category density, consistent with qualitative saturation logic discussed by Guest et al. (2006).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was selected because it allowed participants to describe their lived experiences of crisis leadership while enabling the researcher to probe specific issues related to adaptation, decision-making, communication, trust, improvisation, and learning. The interview

protocol included open-ended questions such as: “How did leaders first interpret the crisis?”, “What leadership behaviors changed during the crisis?”, “How were decisions made when information was incomplete?”, “How did leaders maintain employee trust?”, “What practices emerged during the crisis that remained afterward?”, and “What distinguished effective from ineffective leadership responses?”

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and were conducted in a private setting or through secure online communication, depending on participant availability. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written immediately after each interview to capture contextual observations, emotional tone, and preliminary analytical insights. Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, organizational and participant names were anonymized, and participants were assured that they could withdraw at any stage without consequence.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis followed the six-phase logic of thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, transcripts were read repeatedly to obtain an overall understanding of each case. Second, initial codes were assigned to meaningful segments of text. Examples of initial codes included “rapid information filtering,” “temporary decentralization,” “leader visibility,” “emotional reassurance,” “resource substitution,” “post-crisis routine change,” and “frontline decision autonomy.” Third, codes were grouped into preliminary categories. Fourth, within-case analysis was conducted to understand adaptation patterns in each organization. Fifth, cross-case analysis was performed to compare recurring mechanisms across all five cases.

NVivo was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare cases, and retrieve representative quotations. To improve trustworthiness, the study used member checking with selected participants, peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts, and an audit trail documenting coding decisions and category development. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with transcripts and comparison of leadership accounts with employee accounts. Dependability was supported by maintaining a structured coding log. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive memos that documented the researcher’s assumptions and interpretive decisions. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed description of the organizational context, participants, and crisis conditions.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that the study included a diverse group of organizational actors with direct experience of crisis response. Of the 26 participants, 17 were male and 9 were female. In terms of organizational position, 7 participants were senior managers, 8 were middle managers, 5 were crisis-response or project coordinators, and 6 were experienced employees involved in implementing crisis-response decisions. Regarding age, 5 participants were between 30 and 35 years old, 9 were between 36 and 40 years old, 8 were between 41 and 45 years old, and 4 were older than 45 years. In terms of educational background, 6 participants held bachelor’s degrees, 15 held master’s degrees, and 5 held doctoral degrees. Organizational experience ranged from 4 to 22 years, with most participants having more than 10 years of professional experience. Sectoral distribution included 6 participants from information technology services, 5 from private healthcare, 5 from banking and financial services, 5 from manufacturing, and 5 from logistics-based retail.

The thematic analysis generated five main categories that explain the evolutionary mechanisms of leadership adaptation during organizational crises: rapid sensemaking and signal recomposition, redistribution of decision authority, improvisational resource recombination, relational containment and trust preservation, and post-crisis learning with routine transformation.

The first main category was rapid sensemaking and signal recomposition. Participants explained that the earliest phase of crisis was marked by informational disorder, contradictory signals, rumors, and uncertainty about the scale of threat. Effective leaders adapted by creating mechanisms for rapid interpretation rather than waiting for complete information. They gathered fragmented signals from customers, employees, technical teams, financial indicators, and external stakeholders, then recomposed these signals into a practical crisis narrative. This narrative did not eliminate uncertainty, but it gave members a shared frame for action. One senior manager stated, “At the beginning, everyone had a different story about what was happening. The turning point was when the leadership team said, ‘We do not know everything, but this is what we know, this is what we must protect, and this is what we will review every day.’” Another participant noted, “The leader’s role was not to have all the answers. The role was to reduce confusion enough so that people could move.” Across cases, leaders who engaged in transparent sensemaking reduced paralysis, while leaders who delayed interpretation intensified anxiety and fragmented action.

The second main category was redistribution of decision authority. In all five cases, participants reported that crisis conditions exposed the limitations of routine hierarchical decision-making. Normal approval chains were too slow for rapidly changing conditions, and frontline employees often had more immediate information than senior executives. Adaptive leaders responded by temporarily redistributing decision rights to those closest to the problem while maintaining strategic oversight at the top. This redistribution did not mean abandoning hierarchy; rather, it involved creating bounded autonomy. One middle manager explained, “Before the crisis, every decision needed two or three signatures. During the crisis, leaders told us: ‘If the decision protects the customer and does not create legal risk, make it and report it.’ That sentence changed everything.” Another participant said, “The CEO stopped controlling every detail and started asking, ‘What decision should be made at your level?’ It gave us speed.” This category shows that leadership adaptation involved a shift from command-centered authority to distributed responsiveness, especially when speed and local knowledge were critical.

The third main category was improvisational resource recombination. Participants emphasized that crises created shortages of time, budget, personnel, technology, or external support. Leaders therefore had to recombine existing resources creatively rather than rely on formal resource-allocation procedures. In the manufacturing case, this involved reallocating technical staff across production lines. In the healthcare case, it involved rapid redesign of patient-flow procedures. In the IT services case, it involved combining customer-support, engineering, and cybersecurity teams into temporary response cells. A crisis coordinator stated, “We did not have a perfect team or a perfect budget. The leader asked what we already had that could be used differently. That question opened many solutions.” Another participant observed, “The crisis forced us to break departmental ownership of resources. People, data, and tools moved faster than before.” The findings indicate that adaptive crisis leadership depends on the ability to loosen rigid resource boundaries and create temporary configurations that match emerging threats.

The fourth main category was relational containment and trust preservation. Participants repeatedly stated that employees judged leaders not only by the technical quality of decisions but also by their emotional presence,

honesty, and fairness. In crisis situations, fear and uncertainty spread quickly, especially when employees believed that leaders were hiding information or protecting themselves. Adaptive leaders preserved trust by communicating frequently, acknowledging uncertainty, explaining priorities, and showing visible commitment. One employee said, “When the director came to the operational floor and listened to people, the atmosphere changed. We still had problems, but we felt we were not abandoned.” Another participant stated, “The most important thing was honesty. When leaders said, ‘This part is unclear, but we will update you tomorrow,’ people trusted them more than when they pretended everything was under control.” This category suggests that emotional containment is not a soft or secondary leadership behavior; it is a functional mechanism that preserves coordination, reduces defensive behavior, and sustains collective effort.

The fifth main category was post-crisis learning and routine transformation. Participants explained that the most adaptive organizations did not treat the end of the crisis as a return to normal. Instead, leaders reviewed which improvised practices had worked and transformed selected practices into new routines. These included crisis dashboards, shorter decision cycles, cross-functional response teams, scenario-planning meetings, direct employee feedback channels, and more flexible delegation rules. One senior manager noted, “After the crisis, we asked which emergency practices should not disappear. Some of them were better than our old routines.” Another participant stated, “The crisis became a test. It showed which rules were useful and which rules only slowed us down.” This category demonstrates the retention phase of leadership adaptation: crisis-driven variations became organizational learning only when leaders deliberately institutionalized effective practices. Without post-crisis reflection, adaptation remained temporary; with reflection, it became part of organizational capability.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to develop a qualitative model of the evolutionary mechanisms of leadership adaptation during organizational crises through a multi-case analysis of organizations in Tehran. The findings showed that leadership adaptation emerged through five interrelated mechanisms: rapid sensemaking and signal recomposition, redistribution of decision authority, improvisational resource recombination, relational containment and trust preservation, and post-crisis learning with routine transformation. These mechanisms suggest that crisis leadership is not a linear process in which leaders diagnose a problem, select a solution, and implement it through formal authority. Rather, it is an evolutionary process in which leaders generate interpretive and behavioral variation, select practices that prove effective under pressure, and retain them when they contribute to organizational resilience.

The first finding showed that leadership adaptation begins with rapid sensemaking and signal recomposition. This finding is consistent with Weick’s (1995) sensemaking theory, which argues that organizations construct meaning in conditions of ambiguity through social interpretation. During crisis, leaders cannot wait for perfect information; they must create provisional clarity from incomplete signals. The results also align with Boin et al. (2005), who identify meaning-making as one of the central tasks of crisis leadership. In the present study, leaders who openly acknowledged uncertainty while clarifying priorities helped employees move from confusion to coordinated action. This supports the argument that crisis leadership requires cognitive framing rather than only operational command. The finding also extends previous literature by showing that sensemaking functions as an

evolutionary mechanism: leaders create multiple interpretations, test them against unfolding events, and revise the organizational crisis narrative as new information emerges.

The second finding indicated that leadership adaptation requires redistribution of decision authority. This result aligns with complexity leadership theory, which emphasizes that adaptive capacity emerges when leaders enable distributed intelligence rather than relying exclusively on bureaucratic control (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In crisis conditions, the people closest to the problem often hold the most relevant real-time knowledge. Therefore, formal leaders must shift from controlling every decision to designing boundaries within which others can act quickly. This finding also resonates with Heifetz et al.'s (2009) distinction between technical and adaptive challenges. When a crisis is adaptive, no single leader has all the knowledge required for solution generation; leadership must mobilize collective problem solving. The present study contributes to this literature by showing that decentralization during crisis was not experienced as a loss of leadership but as a different form of leadership: leaders provided strategic guardrails, values, and escalation criteria while allowing operational autonomy.

The third finding concerned improvisational resource recombination. This finding is strongly consistent with the dynamic capabilities perspective, particularly the idea that organizations must reconfigure resources when environmental conditions change (Teece et al., 1997). In the studied cases, adaptive leaders did not necessarily acquire new resources during crisis; instead, they recombined existing people, technologies, information, and procedures in novel ways. This supports the view that adaptation is not only a function of resource abundance but also of resource flexibility. The finding also aligns with organizational resilience research, which conceptualizes resilience as a meta-capability involving anticipation, coping, and adaptation (Duchek, 2020). Improvisational recombination represented a coping mechanism during the crisis and became an adaptive mechanism when successful recombinations were later institutionalized. Thus, the study shows how dynamic capability is enacted through leadership behavior at the micro level.

The fourth finding showed that relational containment and trust preservation are central mechanisms of leadership adaptation. This finding supports research on leadership in extreme contexts, which emphasizes the psychological and social dimensions of leading under threat (Hannah et al., 2009). Employees in the present study did not evaluate leaders only by the technical accuracy of their decisions; they also evaluated whether leaders were visible, honest, fair, and emotionally steady. This finding is consistent with Wooten and James (2008), who argue that crisis leadership competencies include communication, perspective taking, and learning orientation. It also extends crisis management literature by showing that trust functions as an adaptive infrastructure. When trust was preserved, employees were more willing to accept temporary uncertainty, share information, and act beyond formal job descriptions. When trust was weakened, defensive behavior increased and adaptation slowed. Therefore, emotional containment should be understood as a strategic leadership mechanism, not merely an interpersonal skill.

The fifth finding demonstrated that post-crisis learning and routine transformation determine whether crisis adaptation becomes durable. This finding aligns with Boin et al. (2005), who argue that learning is a key post-crisis leadership task, and with Bundy et al. (2017), who emphasize that crisis management includes both internal response and stakeholder interpretation over time. The present study showed that some crisis-generated practices disappeared once immediate pressure declined, while others were retained as improved routines. This distinction is important because not every improvised response becomes organizational learning. Retention requires deliberate reflection, evaluation, documentation, and institutionalization. This finding also supports resilience

literature, which argues that resilient organizations do not merely bounce back but may transform through adversity (Williams et al., 2017). In the present study, leadership adaptation became evolutionary when leaders converted temporary solutions into new structures, dashboards, decision rules, and cross-functional routines.

Taken together, the findings suggest a process model of leadership adaptation during organizational crises. In the first phase, leaders confront ambiguity and engage in rapid sensemaking. In the second phase, they redistribute authority to increase response speed and access local knowledge. In the third phase, they recombine resources to create workable solutions despite constraint. In the fourth phase, they preserve trust and emotional stability to sustain collective effort. In the fifth phase, they convert selected crisis practices into post-crisis routines. These phases are analytically distinct but practically overlapping. For example, sensemaking continues throughout the crisis, trust influences the success of delegation, and resource recombination depends on decision authority. Therefore, leadership adaptation should be conceptualized as a recursive process rather than a fixed sequence.

The study also contributes to leadership theory by reframing crisis leadership as an evolutionary capability. Traditional leadership models often emphasize stable traits, styles, or competencies. Although these elements matter, the present findings show that crisis leadership depends on the capacity to modify leadership behavior as conditions change. Leaders must sometimes centralize and sometimes decentralize, sometimes provide certainty and sometimes acknowledge ambiguity, sometimes preserve routines and sometimes disrupt them. This adaptive flexibility is consistent with complexity-based views of leadership and challenges overly static approaches to leadership effectiveness. In crisis contexts, effective leadership is not defined by one universal style but by the capacity to generate context-sensitive responses and learn from their consequences.

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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