

Agile Leadership Research: A Bibliometric Review and Development of an Integrated Conceptual Model

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Abstract

This study aimed to map the intellectual structure of agile leadership research and develop an integrated conceptual model explaining how agile leaders enable organizational adaptability, learning, and resilience in dynamic business environments. The study was designed as a qualitative, bibliometric-informed model-development research. First, the agile leadership literature was reviewed to identify dominant themes, conceptual clusters, and theoretical gaps. Then, empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 senior managers, middle managers, agile coaches, digital transformation specialists, and human resource development experts working in Tehran-based organizations. Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis in NVivo software. Initial codes were compared, merged, and organized into first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate categories. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer review, and maintaining an audit trail. The findings revealed four main categories of agile leadership: adaptive sensemaking, distributed decision authority, iterative learning governance, and human-centered digital coordination. These categories show that agile leadership is not limited to flexibility or rapid decision-making, but represents an integrated leadership capability through which leaders scan environmental changes, decentralize authority, support experimentation, and create psychologically safe conditions for digital collaboration. The proposed conceptual model positions agile leadership as a dynamic capability that links environmental turbulence and digital transformation to organizational agility, innovation, and resilience. Agile leadership research has evolved from agile software development and team-level responsiveness toward a broader organizational leadership paradigm. The integrated model developed in this study contributes to leadership theory by explaining agile leadership as a multi-level capability that combines strategic sensing, participatory governance, iterative learning, and human-centered digital enablement.

Keywords: Agile leadership; bibliometric review; organizational agility; dynamic capabilities; digital transformation; qualitative research; conceptual model.

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1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly operate in environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. Competitive advantage is no longer determined solely by formal planning, hierarchical control, or accumulated resources; rather, it depends on the capacity to sense change, reconfigure capabilities, and mobilize people rapidly around emerging opportunities. This shift has intensified scholarly interest in agility as a strategic and organizational capability. Early work on agility emphasized manufacturing flexibility and rapid market responsiveness, showing that firms must combine speed, adaptability, and customer-centered value creation in order to survive turbulent environments (Sharifi & Zhang, 1999; Yusuf et al., 1999). In information systems and strategic management, agility later became associated with digital options, IT-enabled responsiveness, and dynamic capabilities through which firms detect, seize, and transform opportunities (Sambamurthy et al., 2003; Overby et al., 2006; Teece, 2007; Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011). However, as digital transformation has moved agility



from project teams to entire organizations, scholars have increasingly recognized that agility is not merely a process design or technological issue; it is also a leadership issue.

Agile leadership has emerged as a response to this transformation. The concept is rooted partly in agile software development, where cross-functional collaboration, short feedback cycles, iterative delivery, customer involvement, and self-organizing teams were emphasized as alternatives to rigid, sequential project management (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001; Dybå & Dingsøyr, 2008; Conboy, 2009). Yet agile leadership has gradually moved beyond software development. In contemporary organizations, agile leaders are expected to create conditions for distributed decision-making, psychological safety, rapid learning, experimentation, and continuous adaptation. This differs from traditional command-and-control leadership because the leader's role is not simply to issue instructions, monitor compliance, and preserve stability. Instead, the agile leader enables teams to interpret complexity, coordinate across boundaries, experiment with new solutions, and adjust priorities as conditions change (Horney et al., 2010; Rigby et al., 2016; Denning, 2018).

The theoretical roots of agile leadership are multidisciplinary. From the dynamic capabilities perspective, agile leadership can be understood as a managerial capability that supports sensing, seizing, and transforming processes (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 2016). Leaders contribute to agility when they detect weak signals in the environment, allocate resources toward emerging opportunities, and reconfigure organizational routines before existing competencies become obsolete. From complexity leadership theory, agile leadership can be interpreted as the facilitation of adaptive interaction in complex systems. In this view, leadership is not limited to formal authority but emerges through relational processes, distributed intelligence, and the interaction between administrative, adaptive, and enabling leadership functions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). From strategic agility research, agile leadership involves the ability to maintain strategic sensitivity, leadership unity, and resource fluidity while facing discontinuous change (Doz & Kosonen, 2010). Therefore, agile leadership is best understood as a multi-level phenomenon that links individual leader mindsets, team autonomy, organizational routines, and strategic renewal.

Despite the rapid expansion of agile leadership research, the field remains conceptually fragmented. Some studies use agile leadership to describe leadership behavior in agile teams, especially in software development and project management. Others define it as a broader organizational capability for digital transformation, innovation, and strategic renewal. Some authors associate agile leadership with servant leadership, transformational leadership, shared leadership, or digital leadership, whereas others position it as a distinct leadership paradigm. This conceptual overlap has created ambiguity concerning what agile leadership means, how it differs from adjacent leadership constructs, and which mechanisms connect agile leadership to organizational outcomes. Recent studies suggest that agile leadership may influence organizational performance, employee engagement, innovation, digital transformation, and value creation, but the explanatory mechanisms remain underdeveloped (Kaya, 2023; Porkodi, 2024; Rialti & Filieri, 2024).

A bibliometric perspective is useful for clarifying this fragmented field because it enables researchers to identify dominant knowledge clusters, influential themes, co-citation structures, and emerging research fronts. Bibliometric review methods have become common in management and organization studies because they combine systematic search transparency with quantitative mapping of scientific production (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; van Eck & Waltman, 2010). In agile leadership research, a bibliometric approach can show whether the field is primarily shaped by software development, project management, digital transformation, dynamic

capabilities, organizational agility, or leadership studies. However, bibliometric mapping alone cannot fully explain how practitioners experience agile leadership in real organizational contexts. Science mapping identifies intellectual structures, but qualitative inquiry is needed to understand the meanings, tensions, and practical mechanisms through which agile leadership is enacted.

For this reason, the present study combines a bibliometric-informed review logic with qualitative model development. The bibliometric review component provides the conceptual background for identifying the major streams of agile leadership research, while the qualitative component develops an integrated conceptual model based on semi-structured interviews with managers, agile coaches, digital transformation specialists, and HR development experts in Tehran-based organizations. This design is particularly appropriate because agile leadership is still an evolving construct whose boundaries, dimensions, and outcomes require deeper conceptual clarification. Qualitative research can capture how leaders interpret agility, how they redistribute authority, how they balance speed with coordination, and how they preserve human-centered values in digitally mediated work systems (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gioia et al., 2013).

The Iranian and Tehran-based organizational context also provides a meaningful setting for agile leadership research. Organizations in Tehran operate under technological, economic, institutional, and competitive pressures that require rapid adaptation. At the same time, many organizations retain hierarchical decision structures, centralized authority, and formalized managerial routines. This creates a productive tension between the need for agility and the persistence of traditional control systems. Studying agile leadership in this context can reveal how leaders translate agility into practice when cultural norms, bureaucratic structures, digital transformation pressures, and market uncertainty intersect. Such a context is valuable for developing a conceptual model that is not limited to Western digital firms or software teams, but is relevant to broader organizational settings.

Accordingly, the present study addresses three interrelated gaps. First, it responds to the conceptual fragmentation of agile leadership research by integrating insights from organizational agility, dynamic capabilities, digital transformation, and leadership studies. Second, it extends bibliometric review logic by connecting mapped research themes with qualitative interview evidence. Third, it develops a conceptual model that explains agile leadership as a dynamic, relational, and human-centered capability rather than a narrow set of managerial techniques. Therefore, the aim of this study was to conduct a bibliometric-informed qualitative review of agile leadership research and develop an integrated conceptual model explaining how agile leadership enables organizational adaptability, learning, and resilience in dynamic environments.

2. Methods and Materials

This study employed a qualitative, bibliometric-informed model-development design. The bibliometric component was used to structure the conceptual background of the study and identify the major thematic streams in agile leadership research. The empirical component was qualitative and relied exclusively on semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the qualitative phase was to develop an integrated conceptual model of agile leadership based on the experiences of organizational actors involved in digital transformation, agile work systems, project-based management, and organizational development. The qualitative design was appropriate because agile leadership is an emergent and context-dependent phenomenon, and its mechanisms cannot be adequately captured through predefined survey variables alone.

The participants consisted of 24 experts from Tehran-based organizations. They included 8 senior managers, 7 middle managers and project leaders, 5 human resource and organizational development specialists, and 4 agile coaches or digital transformation consultants. The sample included 15 men and 9 women. In terms of age, 5 participants were between 30 and 35 years old, 8 were between 36 and 40 years old, 7 were between 41 and 45 years old, and 4 were older than 45 years. Regarding work experience, 6 participants had 5–10 years of managerial or professional experience, 10 had 11–15 years, and 8 had more than 15 years. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because they had direct experience with leadership, agile transformation, project management, digital work systems, or organizational change. Snowball sampling was also used, as initial participants introduced other knowledgeable experts. Inclusion criteria were at least five years of professional experience, direct involvement in leadership or transformation activities, familiarity with agile or adaptive management practices, and willingness to participate in an interview. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Saturation was achieved after the twenty-second interview, when no substantially new codes emerged, and two additional interviews were conducted to confirm the stability of the categories.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was developed based on the agile leadership, organizational agility, dynamic capabilities, and digital transformation literature. The main interview questions focused on participants' understanding of agile leadership, the behavioral characteristics of agile leaders, the organizational conditions that enable or constrain agile leadership, the role of digital technologies in agile coordination, and the outcomes of agile leadership for learning, innovation, and resilience. Examples of guiding questions included: "How do you define agile leadership in your organization?", "What behaviors distinguish agile leaders from traditional managers?", "How do agile leaders make decisions under uncertainty?", "How is authority distributed in agile teams?", and "What organizational barriers prevent agile leadership from being practiced effectively?"

Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Persian, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim. The researcher also wrote field notes immediately after each interview to record contextual observations, non-verbal cues, and initial analytical impressions. Participants were assured that their identities and organizational affiliations would remain confidential. Codes such as P01, P02, and P03 were used to report quotations anonymously. Ethical principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, were observed throughout the research process.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with support from NVivo software. The analysis followed an inductive–deductive logic. In the first stage, the transcripts were read several times to achieve immersion in the data. In the second stage, open coding was conducted line by line, and meaningful statements related to agile leadership behaviors, processes, mechanisms, barriers, and outcomes were coded. In the third stage, similar codes were merged into first-order concepts. In the fourth stage, first-order concepts were grouped into second-order themes based on conceptual similarity and theoretical relevance. In the final stage, second-order themes were abstracted into aggregate categories that formed the integrated conceptual model.

Several strategies were used to enhance trustworthiness. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, in which selected participants reviewed summaries of the extracted themes. Peer debriefing was used to reduce researcher bias and refine category definitions. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions, interview notes, and category revisions. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive

memo-writing during the analysis. Transferability was addressed by providing a detailed description of the participants, organizational context, and analytical procedures.

3. Findings and Results

The final sample consisted of 24 participants from Tehran-based organizations. Among them, 15 participants were male and 9 were female. Regarding organizational role, 8 participants were senior managers, 7 were middle managers or project leaders, 5 were human resource and organizational development specialists, and 4 were agile coaches or digital transformation consultants. In terms of age distribution, 5 participants were aged 30–35 years, 8 were aged 36–40 years, 7 were aged 41–45 years, and 4 were older than 45 years. With respect to professional experience, 6 participants had 5–10 years of experience, 10 had 11–15 years of experience, and 8 had more than 15 years of experience. The diversity of participants allowed the study to capture agile leadership from strategic, operational, human resource, and transformation-oriented perspectives.

The first main category was adaptive sensemaking and strategic responsiveness. Participants emphasized that agile leadership begins with the ability to interpret environmental signals before they become formal crises. Agile leaders were described as individuals who continuously scan market, technological, customer, and employee-related changes and translate them into actionable priorities. This category included codes such as environmental scanning, rapid interpretation, strategic sensitivity, opportunity recognition, and flexible prioritization. One senior manager stated, “For me, an agile leader is not someone who only reacts fast; it is someone who understands earlier than others that the rules of the game are changing” (P04). Another participant explained, “In our organization, the agile manager is the person who can connect weak signals from customers, technology, and employees and then change direction without creating panic” (P11). The findings suggest that agile leadership depends on a cognitive capability to make sense of complexity, but this capability must be connected to practical responsiveness. Participants repeatedly argued that sensing without action leads to analysis paralysis, while action without sensemaking produces instability. Therefore, agile leadership requires a balance between interpretation and movement.

The second main category was distributed decision authority and team autonomy. Participants noted that agile leadership becomes visible when leaders transfer meaningful decision rights to teams rather than merely delegating tasks. This category included empowerment, decentralized authority, trust-based control, team accountability, and cross-functional collaboration. Participants distinguished between symbolic empowerment and real empowerment. Symbolic empowerment occurs when leaders use the language of agility but continue to approve every decision. Real empowerment occurs when teams have authority to make operational decisions, test solutions, and interact with customers or internal stakeholders without excessive hierarchical delay. One agile coach stated, “Many managers say they support agile teams, but they still want every small decision to come back to their desk. That is not agility; that is bureaucracy with agile words” (P17). A project leader explained, “When our manager gave the team authority to prioritize the backlog directly with the business unit, our speed increased, but more importantly our sense of ownership increased” (P09). The findings show that agile leadership requires a shift from control through supervision to control through shared purpose, transparency, and feedback.

The third main category was iterative learning governance and experimentation. Participants described agile leaders as leaders who create organizational routines for experimentation, feedback, and continuous improvement.

This category included short learning cycles, safe-to-fail experiments, retrospective meetings, evidence-based adjustment, and learning from failure. The participants argued that agility is not the absence of structure; rather, it is a different type of structure based on iteration and feedback. One digital transformation consultant observed, “Agility is sometimes misunderstood as doing everything quickly. In practice, it means creating short cycles where the organization learns before the cost of mistake becomes too high” (P21). Another participant stated, “The best agile leader I worked with did not punish failed experiments. He asked what we learned, what evidence we had, and what we should change in the next cycle” (P03). The findings suggest that agile leadership converts uncertainty into manageable learning cycles. Instead of demanding perfect plans, agile leaders design governance mechanisms that allow teams to test assumptions, receive feedback, and revise direction continuously.

The fourth main category was human-centered digital coordination and resilience. Participants emphasized that agile leadership in digital organizations requires more than technological adoption. Digital tools can accelerate communication, transparency, and collaboration, but they can also increase overload, surveillance, and fragmentation if they are not guided by human-centered leadership. This category included digital collaboration, psychological safety, emotional resilience, transparent communication, and human-centered technology use. One HR specialist stated, “Digital dashboards helped us see work faster, but people became anxious when every activity was visible. The agile leader had to explain that transparency is for learning, not blaming” (P14). Another participant noted, “In remote and hybrid teams, the leader must be more intentional about trust. Technology connects people technically, but leadership connects them psychologically” (P06). The findings indicate that agile leadership links digital coordination with human resilience. Agile leaders use digital tools to improve visibility and alignment, but they also protect the social and emotional conditions necessary for creativity, commitment, and adaptation.

The integrated conceptual model developed from the findings positions agile leadership as a dynamic leadership capability consisting of four interdependent dimensions: adaptive sensemaking, distributed authority, iterative learning governance, and human-centered digital coordination. The model proposes that environmental turbulence, digital transformation pressure, customer volatility, and organizational complexity act as antecedents that increase the need for agile leadership. Agile leadership then operates through four mechanisms: sensing and interpreting change, decentralizing decision authority, institutionalizing experimentation, and sustaining psychological safety in digitally mediated work. These mechanisms generate intermediate outcomes, including faster response cycles, higher team ownership, improved cross-functional collaboration, and stronger learning capacity. At the organizational level, these intermediate outcomes contribute to organizational agility, innovation capability, resilience, and value creation. The model also suggests that the effectiveness of agile leadership is moderated by organizational culture, top management support, digital infrastructure, trust, and maturity of agile practices.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine agile leadership research through a bibliometric-informed qualitative lens and develop an integrated conceptual model. The findings revealed four main categories: adaptive sensemaking and strategic responsiveness, distributed decision authority and team autonomy, iterative learning governance and experimentation, and human-centered digital coordination and resilience. Together, these

categories show that agile leadership should not be reduced to speed, flexibility, or the adoption of agile methods. Rather, agile leadership is a multi-dimensional capability that enables organizations to interpret change, redistribute authority, learn iteratively, and preserve human-centered collaboration in digital and uncertain environments.

The first finding showed that adaptive sensemaking and strategic responsiveness constitute a core dimension of agile leadership. Participants emphasized that agile leaders must detect weak signals, interpret environmental complexity, and translate emerging changes into revised priorities. This result is consistent with the dynamic capabilities literature, which argues that firms need sensing, seizing, and transforming capabilities to maintain competitiveness under uncertainty (Teece, 2007; Teece et al., 2016). Agile leaders contribute to these capabilities by helping organizations notice relevant change and act before environmental pressures become unmanageable. This finding also aligns with strategic agility research, especially the argument that strategic sensitivity is essential for agile organizations because leaders must remain alert to market discontinuities and emerging opportunities (Doz & Kosonen, 2010). In this sense, agile leadership is not merely behavioral flexibility but a strategic sensemaking capability. It allows organizations to avoid both rigidity and chaotic reactivity by connecting interpretation with timely action.

The second finding indicated that distributed decision authority and team autonomy are central to agile leadership. Participants argued that agile leadership requires real empowerment rather than symbolic delegation. This finding supports agile software development and organizational agility research, which emphasizes self-organizing teams, customer collaboration, and decentralized problem-solving (Highsmith & Cockburn, 2001; Dybå & Dingsøyr, 2008; Conboy, 2009). It also corresponds with complexity leadership theory, which views adaptive capacity as an emergent property of interaction rather than a function of top-down command (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). When authority is concentrated at the top, organizations may become slower because teams must wait for hierarchical approval. When authority is distributed without alignment, however, organizations may become fragmented. The present findings show that agile leadership resolves this tension by combining autonomy with shared purpose, transparency, and feedback. Thus, agile leaders do not abandon control; they redesign control through trust, visibility, and collective accountability.

The third finding showed that iterative learning governance and experimentation are necessary mechanisms of agile leadership. Participants repeatedly stated that agility does not mean improvisation without discipline. Instead, agile leaders create structured learning cycles through experimentation, retrospectives, short feedback loops, and evidence-based adjustment. This result supports the broader agile literature, which highlights iterative delivery and continuous feedback as foundations of agile practice (Rigby et al., 2016; Denning, 2018). It also aligns with organizational learning and dynamic capabilities perspectives, because experimentation allows organizations to test assumptions and reconfigure routines under conditions of uncertainty. The important implication is that agile leadership should be understood as a governance logic, not only a leadership style. Agile leaders design the conditions under which teams can learn quickly without exposing the organization to uncontrolled risk. Therefore, the leader's task is to convert uncertainty into disciplined learning.

The fourth finding identified human-centered digital coordination and resilience as a major dimension of agile leadership. Participants emphasized that digital platforms, dashboards, and collaboration tools can strengthen agility only when they are embedded in trust, psychological safety, and transparent communication. This finding is consistent with digital transformation research, which shows that technology alone does not guarantee agility;

rather, digital tools must be integrated with organizational capabilities, leadership practices, and cultural readiness (Sambamurthy et al., 2003; Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011). Recent agile leadership studies also show that agile leaders support digital transformation through fast decision loops, continuous participation, and employee involvement (Rialti & Filieri, 2024). The present study extends this argument by showing that digital visibility can create anxiety if employees experience it as surveillance. Therefore, agile leadership must humanize digital coordination by framing transparency as a learning mechanism rather than a blaming mechanism.

The integrated conceptual model developed in this study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it clarifies the conceptual boundaries of agile leadership. Existing research often overlaps agile leadership with transformational leadership, servant leadership, shared leadership, digital leadership, and adaptive leadership. The model proposed here suggests that agile leadership is distinct because it integrates strategic sensemaking, distributed authority, iterative governance, and human-centered digital coordination. Second, the model links agile leadership to dynamic capabilities. Agile leadership enables sensing through adaptive interpretation, seizing through decentralized decisions, and transforming through iterative learning and digital coordination. Third, the model contributes to bibliometric review research by connecting mapped intellectual streams with qualitative evidence from practitioners. Rather than treating bibliometric mapping and qualitative inquiry as separate approaches, this study shows that literature mapping can guide interview-based theory development.

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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