

Building Future-Ready Management Systems: A Qualitative Framework for Leadership Transformation

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a qualitative framework explaining how leadership transformation contributes to the design and institutionalization of future-ready management systems in digitally turbulent and strategically uncertain organizational environments. The study adopted a qualitative interpretive design based on semi-structured interviews with 24 participants selected through purposive and theoretical sampling from organizations located in Tehran. Participants included senior executives, middle managers, human resource and organizational development specialists, digital transformation managers, and management consultants with direct experience in strategic change, digitalization, or leadership development. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached after 21 interviews, followed by three confirmatory interviews to refine the emerging categories. Interviews lasted between 55 and 90 minutes, were transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Open coding, axial categorization, constant comparison, memo writing, and peer review were used to enhance analytic rigor and trustworthiness. The analysis generated five main categories: strategic sensing and environmental intelligence, distributed adaptive decision-making, digital-human capability orchestration, cultural resilience and learning governance, and ethical accountability infrastructure. The findings showed that future-ready management systems are not merely technology-enabled administrative structures but dynamic sociotechnical systems in which leadership shifts from command, control, and individual authority toward sensemaking, empowerment, boundary-spanning coordination, experimentation, and responsible governance. Participants emphasized that future readiness depends on leaders' ability to translate uncertainty into strategic learning, redesign decision rights, integrate human judgment with digital tools, and create trust-based cultures capable of rapid adaptation. The study proposes a qualitative framework in which leadership transformation operates as the central mechanism through which organizations convert environmental turbulence into adaptive managerial capability. Future-ready management systems require leaders who can combine strategic foresight, digital fluency, participatory governance, learning-centered culture, and ethical accountability. The framework contributes to leadership and management systems literature by integrating dynamic capabilities, digital transformation, and complexity perspectives into an empirically grounded model.

Keywords: future-ready management systems; leadership transformation; digital transformation; qualitative research; adaptive leadership; dynamic capabilities; organizational learning.

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1. Introduction

Organizations are increasingly required to operate in environments characterized by technological disruption, accelerated competition, geopolitical instability, shifting workforce expectations, and continuous reconfiguration of value creation. Under such conditions, conventional management systems designed around predictability, hierarchical control, annual planning cycles, and functional specialization are becoming insufficient for sustaining organizational performance. Management systems historically emphasized formal planning, authority distribution, performance monitoring, and procedural coordination; however, contemporary environments demand systems that can sense weak signals, respond to uncertainty, integrate digital technologies, mobilize distributed expertise, and institutionalize learning. This shift has intensified interest in the concept of future-ready



management systems, understood here as organizational arrangements capable of continuous adaptation, strategic renewal, and responsible transformation in unstable contexts.

The literature on dynamic capabilities provides an important foundation for understanding future readiness. Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997) argued that competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments depends not only on existing resources but also on the organizational capacity to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences. Later developments in dynamic capability theory emphasized sensing, seizing, and transforming as core managerial processes through which organizations identify opportunities, mobilize resources, and renew their structures (Teece, 2007). In this perspective, management systems cannot remain static administrative mechanisms; they must become dynamic architectures through which organizations continuously interpret environmental change and redesign capabilities. Eisenhardt and Martin (2000) similarly suggested that dynamic capabilities operate through identifiable organizational routines, yet their effectiveness depends on environmental velocity and the ability to recombine knowledge and resources. Therefore, future-ready management systems require leadership practices that can convert environmental complexity into organizational learning and coordinated action.

Digital transformation has further intensified the need to rethink management systems. Digital technologies do not simply automate existing processes; they reshape business models, organizational identities, strategic options, and value creation logics. Bharadwaj et al. (2013) argued that digital business strategy requires the fusion of business and technology strategy, while Vial (2019) conceptualized digital transformation as a process through which digital technologies trigger strategic responses that alter value creation paths. Similarly, Wessel et al. (2021) distinguished digital transformation from traditional IT-enabled transformation by emphasizing changes in value proposition and organizational identity. These arguments imply that digital transformation is not a technical project but a managerial and leadership challenge. Organizations may acquire advanced technologies, but without transformed leadership assumptions, decision processes, talent systems, and governance structures, digital investments often remain fragmented and fail to generate strategic renewal.

Leadership transformation occupies a central position in this transition. Traditional leadership models often assume that leaders formulate direction, allocate resources, supervise execution, and maintain organizational alignment. Although these functions remain important, future-ready contexts require leaders to perform additional roles as sensemakers, ecosystem orchestrators, learning architects, ethical stewards, and enablers of distributed intelligence. Complexity leadership theory argues that leadership in knowledge-based organizations must enable adaptive responses, creativity, and learning within complex adaptive systems rather than relying exclusively on top-down authority (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Adaptive leadership similarly emphasizes mobilizing people to confront ambiguous challenges for which technical solutions are insufficient (Heifetz et al., 2009). These perspectives suggest that leadership transformation involves a movement from individual-centered command to system-level enablement.

The digital leadership literature reinforces this argument. Avolio et al. (2000) introduced e-leadership as a process shaped by interactions between advanced information technologies and organizational structures. More recent reviews show that leaders in digitalized environments must cultivate digital culture, coordinate dispersed stakeholders, encourage collaboration, and address ethical issues related to technology use (Cortellazzo et al., 2019). Kane et al. (2015) further argued that strategy, culture, and talent are often more important than technology itself in explaining digital maturity. This suggests that future-ready management systems require leaders who can

integrate technological fluency with organizational design, human motivation, and cultural transformation. Leadership transformation is therefore not reducible to acquiring digital skills; it involves reconstructing the underlying logic of management.

Organizational learning is another essential dimension of future readiness. Senge (1990) conceptualized learning organizations as systems capable of shared vision, team learning, systems thinking, and mental model revision. Edmondson (1999) showed that psychological safety enables learning behavior in teams, while March (1991) distinguished between exploitation of existing knowledge and exploration of new possibilities. Future-ready management systems must balance both: they must preserve operational reliability while enabling experimentation, innovation, and strategic flexibility. This balance is difficult because organizations often institutionalize routines that stabilize performance but constrain renewal. Leadership transformation is required to redesign learning mechanisms, reduce fear of failure, and create feedback loops that allow organizations to adapt before crises become irreversible.

The rise of artificial intelligence and data-driven decision-making adds another layer to the problem. AI-based systems can support forecasting, process optimization, customer insight, and managerial decision-making, but they also create risks related to opacity, bias, accountability, deskilling, and overreliance on automated judgment. Raisch and Krakowski (2021) described the automation–augmentation paradox, arguing that automation and augmentation are interdependent in management contexts. This paradox is particularly relevant to future-ready management systems because leaders must determine which decisions can be automated, which require human interpretation, and how accountability should be distributed between human and algorithmic actors. Leadership transformation therefore requires the development of ethical and governance capabilities, not only technological adoption.

Despite growing research on digital transformation, dynamic capabilities, and leadership, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature addresses digital transformation and leadership as separate domains, leaving insufficient attention to how leadership transformation specifically reshapes management systems. Second, many studies focus on organizational outcomes such as agility, innovation, or performance without examining the internal managerial architecture that enables these outcomes. Third, research often emphasizes large Western corporations, while less attention has been given to leadership transformation in emerging-market urban contexts such as Tehran, where organizations face simultaneous technological, institutional, economic, and workforce pressures. Finally, quantitative approaches may not fully capture the meanings, interpretations, and lived managerial experiences through which leaders understand future readiness.

A qualitative approach is therefore appropriate for developing a framework that explains how leaders interpret future readiness, redesign management practices, and institutionalize adaptive capabilities. Qualitative inquiry is particularly useful when the research objective is theory building, concept development, and interpretation of complex organizational processes (Gioia et al., 2013). By drawing on semi-structured interviews with managers, consultants, and organizational development specialists, the present study seeks to identify the categories and mechanisms through which leadership transformation contributes to future-ready management systems. The aim of this study was to develop a qualitative framework explaining how leadership transformation enables the design, implementation, and sustainability of future-ready management systems in organizations operating under digital disruption and strategic uncertainty.

2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative interpretive research design to explore how leadership transformation contributes to the development of future-ready management systems. The interpretive approach was selected because the study sought to understand participants' meanings, experiences, and conceptualizations rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. The research was conducted among managers, organizational development professionals, and digital transformation specialists working in Tehran-based organizations. Participants were selected through purposive sampling at the beginning of the study and theoretical sampling during later stages of data collection to enrich emerging categories. Inclusion criteria were at least seven years of professional experience, direct involvement in leadership development, strategic transformation, digital transformation, organizational redesign, or management system improvement, and willingness to participate in a recorded interview. Participants who lacked direct experience with organizational transformation initiatives were excluded.

The final sample included 24 participants. Eight participants were senior executives, five were middle managers, four were digital transformation managers, four were human resource or organizational development specialists, and three were management consultants. Fourteen participants were men and ten were women. In terms of age, five participants were between 30 and 39 years old, eleven were between 40 and 49 years old, and eight were 50 years old or above. Regarding education, six held bachelor's degrees, thirteen held master's degrees, and five held doctoral degrees. Participants represented technology services, financial services, manufacturing, retail, telecommunications, professional consulting, and knowledge-based firms. Theoretical saturation was reached after the twenty-first interview, when no substantially new codes emerged, and three additional interviews were conducted to confirm, refine, and validate the emerging framework.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the study objective and relevant literature on dynamic capabilities, digital transformation, adaptive leadership, and organizational learning. The interview protocol included broad questions such as: "How do you define a future-ready management system?", "What leadership behaviors are necessary for organizations facing digital and strategic uncertainty?", "How should decision-making authority change in future-ready organizations?", "What role do digital tools and data play in leadership transformation?", and "What barriers prevent organizations from becoming future-ready?" Follow-up questions were used to elicit examples, clarify meanings, and explore participants' lived experiences. Interviews lasted between 55 and 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Field notes and analytic memos were written immediately after each interview to capture contextual observations, emerging interpretations, and potential relationships among categories.

Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to achieve immersion in the data. Second, open coding was used to identify meaningful units related to leadership transformation, management system design, decision-making, culture, technology, learning, and governance. Third, similar codes were compared and grouped into subcategories through constant comparison. Fourth, axial categorization was used to identify relationships among subcategories and to construct broader conceptual categories. Fifth, the categories were integrated into a qualitative framework explaining how leadership transformation enables future-ready management systems.

NVivo was used to organize transcripts, code segments, retrieve coded data, compare categories, and maintain an audit trail. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking with selected participants, peer review of coding decisions, prolonged engagement with transcripts, memo writing, and maintaining consistency between raw data, codes, categories, and the final framework. The analytic approach was informed by principles of inductive qualitative rigor and systematic concept development (Gioia et al., 2013), while also drawing on thematic analysis procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Findings and Results

The demographic profile of participants showed a diverse range of professional roles and organizational experiences. Of the 24 participants, 8 were senior executives, 5 were middle managers, 4 were digital transformation managers, 4 were human resource or organizational development specialists, and 3 were management consultants. In terms of gender, 14 participants were men and 10 were women. Regarding age, 5 participants were aged 30–39, 11 were aged 40–49, and 8 were aged 50 or older. Educationally, 6 participants held bachelor's degrees, 13 held master's degrees, and 5 held doctoral degrees. Participants had between 7 and 28 years of professional experience, with an average experience level of approximately 15 years. Their organizational backgrounds included financial services, information technology, telecommunications, manufacturing, retail, consulting, and knowledge-based enterprises. This diversity provided a rich empirical basis for understanding future-ready management systems across different organizational contexts in Tehran.

The first main category was **strategic sensing and environmental intelligence**. Participants consistently argued that future-ready management systems begin with the ability to detect, interpret, and act on weak signals in the environment. They described traditional planning systems as slow, internally focused, and excessively dependent on annual cycles. In contrast, future-ready systems were viewed as intelligence-based systems that continuously scan technological trends, customer behavior, competitor moves, regulatory shifts, workforce expectations, and ecosystem changes. One senior executive stated, “The old system waited for the annual strategy meeting, but the new system must listen every day. If the organization cannot hear weak signals, leadership becomes reactive.” Another participant noted, “Future readiness means that data, market insight, and managerial intuition should meet before the crisis arrives.” This category included subcategories such as environmental scanning, strategic foresight, data-informed interpretation, scenario awareness, and early-warning routines. Leadership transformation was reflected in the movement from planning as document production toward sensing as a continuous managerial discipline.

The second main category was **distributed adaptive decision-making**. Participants emphasized that future-ready management systems require decision rights to move closer to knowledge, expertise, and customer interaction. They criticized centralized decision-making structures for delaying responses and weakening employee ownership. In their view, leadership transformation involves shifting from permission-based management to trust-based decision architecture. A digital transformation manager explained, “When every decision goes upward, the organization loses time and intelligence. Future-ready leadership means designing boundaries, not approving everything.” Another participant stated, “Empowerment is not a slogan; it means people know what they can decide, what data they need, and when they should escalate.” This category included decentralization, agile governance, cross-functional teams, rapid escalation mechanisms, and decision

transparency. Participants did not advocate uncontrolled autonomy; rather, they emphasized disciplined decentralization in which leaders clarify strategic intent, risk limits, accountability rules, and feedback mechanisms. Thus, distributed decision-making was interpreted as a structured capability rather than an informal delegation practice.

The third main category was **digital-human capability orchestration**. Participants described future-ready management systems as sociotechnical systems that integrate digital tools with human judgment, creativity, and ethical reasoning. They warned that many organizations mistakenly equate digital transformation with software implementation, dashboard creation, or automation. A human resource specialist stated, “Technology can show patterns, but it cannot understand fear, politics, resistance, or meaning inside the organization. Leaders must connect digital evidence with human reality.” Another participant commented, “The problem is not lack of dashboards; the problem is that managers do not know how to ask better questions from data.” This category included digital literacy, data-driven management, AI-supported decision-making, talent reskilling, human-centered automation, and cross-functional capability development. Leadership transformation was evident in the ability to coordinate human expertise and digital intelligence without allowing either to dominate uncritically. Participants argued that future-ready leaders must understand enough about technology to ask strategic questions, challenge misleading metrics, and protect human agency.

The fourth main category was **cultural resilience and learning governance**. Participants repeatedly emphasized that future-ready management systems require cultures that normalize learning, experimentation, reflection, and adaptation. They described fear of failure, blame-oriented evaluation, rigid hierarchy, and symbolic innovation programs as major obstacles. One consultant stated, “Organizations say they want innovation, but they punish the first serious mistake. People learn very quickly that silence is safer than experimentation.” A middle manager added, “A future-ready system is not one that never fails; it is one that learns faster than the damage spreads.” This category included psychological safety, experimentation routines, after-action review, knowledge sharing, leadership humility, and continuous learning mechanisms. Participants stressed that learning must be governed, not left to informal enthusiasm. This means that organizations should allocate time, resources, metrics, and managerial attention to learning processes. Leadership transformation was reflected in the leader’s movement from evaluator of compliance to architect of learning conditions.

The fifth main category was **ethical accountability infrastructure**. Participants argued that future-ready management systems must integrate ethics, transparency, and accountability into digital and strategic transformation. They expressed concern that speed, automation, data use, and competitive pressure could weaken responsibility if governance mechanisms are not redesigned. One senior executive stated, “The faster the system becomes, the more visible accountability must become. Otherwise speed becomes an excuse for irresponsible decisions.” A digital transformation manager observed, “When algorithms support decisions, we need to know who is accountable, how bias is checked, and how people can challenge the output.” This category included responsible data use, algorithmic accountability, stakeholder trust, transparent performance metrics, value-based governance, and ethical decision protocols. Participants believed that leadership transformation requires moral clarity as well as technical competence. Future-ready systems were therefore understood not only as agile and intelligent but also as trustworthy and legitimate.

Based on these categories, the study developed a qualitative framework in which leadership transformation acts as the core mechanism linking environmental turbulence to future-ready management capability. The

framework suggests that future-ready management systems are built through five interrelated leadership functions: sensing the future, distributing adaptive authority, orchestrating digital-human capabilities, governing learning, and institutionalizing accountability. These functions interact dynamically. Strategic sensing identifies emerging challenges; distributed decision-making enables timely response; digital-human orchestration provides the capability base; learning governance converts experience into adaptation; and ethical accountability preserves trust and legitimacy. The findings indicate that future readiness is not a final organizational state but a continuous process of leadership-enabled renewal.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The first finding showed that strategic sensing and environmental intelligence are foundational to future-ready management systems. Participants viewed traditional planning as insufficient because it is often episodic, hierarchical, and disconnected from weak environmental signals. This finding aligns with dynamic capability theory, which emphasizes sensing as a core managerial process for identifying opportunities and threats in rapidly changing environments (Teece, 2007). It also supports the argument of Teece et al. (1997) that competitive advantage depends on the capacity to reconfigure competences in response to environmental change. In the context of digital transformation, Vial (2019) and Hanelt et al. (2021) similarly emphasized that technological disruption requires strategic responses that reshape organizational structures and value creation. The present study extends these arguments by showing that sensing is not only a strategic capability but also a leadership practice embedded in management systems. Future-ready leaders do not merely receive information; they design routines, conversations, dashboards, and interpretive spaces that help organizations understand what change means before it becomes a crisis.

The second finding concerned distributed adaptive decision-making. Participants emphasized that future-ready organizations must move decision rights closer to expertise, customers, and operational knowledge. This result is consistent with complexity leadership theory, which argues that adaptive responses emerge through interaction, distributed intelligence, and enabling conditions rather than through centralized control alone (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). It also resonates with adaptive leadership, which stresses mobilizing people to address complex challenges that cannot be solved through technical authority alone (Heifetz et al., 2009). The findings suggest that distributed decision-making should not be misunderstood as the elimination of leadership. Instead, leadership becomes more architectural: leaders define strategic intent, decision boundaries, risk tolerance, accountability mechanisms, and feedback loops. This interpretation is consistent with Yukl's (2012) view that effective leadership involves enabling collective effort and adapting behavior to situational requirements. Therefore, future-ready management systems require leaders who can balance autonomy and coherence.

The third finding identified digital-human capability orchestration as a central dimension of leadership transformation. Participants rejected technology-centered views of future readiness and emphasized the need to combine digital tools with human judgment, creativity, and contextual understanding. This finding supports Bharadwaj et al. (2013), who argued that digital business strategy requires integration of business and technology logics. It also aligns with Wessel et al. (2021), who showed that digital transformation affects value propositions and organizational identity rather than merely improving existing IT-enabled processes. The finding further corresponds with Raisch and Krakowski's (2021) automation–augmentation paradox, in which AI simultaneously

automates and augments managerial work. In practical terms, future-ready leaders must be digitally literate but not technologically deterministic. They must know how to ask strategic questions from data, interpret algorithmic recommendations critically, reskill employees, and ensure that automation strengthens rather than replaces human agency. This study therefore positions leadership transformation as a sociotechnical orchestration process.

The fourth finding showed that cultural resilience and learning governance are essential for future-ready management systems. Participants argued that organizations cannot become future-ready if employees fear mistakes, conceal problems, or treat experimentation as symbolic. This finding is strongly aligned with Edmondson's (1999) research on psychological safety and learning behavior, which shows that teams learn more effectively when members feel safe to speak up and discuss errors. It also corresponds with Senge's (1990) concept of learning organizations and March's (1991) distinction between exploration and exploitation. Future-ready systems must exploit existing capabilities while exploring new possibilities. However, the present findings add that learning must be governed through formal routines, metrics, time allocation, and leadership attention. Learning cannot depend only on individual motivation or informal collaboration. This insight supports Warner and Wäger's (2019) argument that digital transformation involves ongoing strategic renewal and dynamic capability building. Leadership transformation therefore includes creating systems that convert experimentation into institutional learning.

The fifth finding emphasized ethical accountability infrastructure. Participants believed that future-ready management systems must be responsible, transparent, and legitimate, especially when digital technologies accelerate decision-making and expand the use of data. This finding aligns with Cortellazzo et al. (2019), who highlighted ethical concerns as a key aspect of leadership in digitalized environments. It also connects with the AI management literature, particularly Raisch and Krakowski's (2021) argument that automation and augmentation create new managerial tensions. As organizations increasingly use analytics and algorithmic systems, accountability becomes more complex. Leaders must clarify who is responsible for decisions, how data are used, how algorithmic bias is monitored, and how stakeholders can challenge automated outputs. The present study extends prior research by showing that ethical accountability is not an external compliance layer but a core component of future-ready management systems. Without trust, transparency, and moral responsibility, agility and digital intelligence may undermine organizational legitimacy.

Overall, the findings suggest that leadership transformation is the central mechanism through which organizations build future-ready management systems. This conclusion integrates three major streams of literature. From dynamic capability theory, the study adopts the idea that organizations must sense, seize, and transform in response to change (Teece, 2007). From digital transformation research, it adopts the view that technology reshapes strategy, identity, and value creation rather than merely improving efficiency (Vial, 2019; Wessel et al., 2021). From leadership and complexity perspectives, it adopts the idea that leadership must enable distributed adaptation, learning, and collective intelligence (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). The proposed framework contributes by showing how these streams converge inside management systems. Future readiness is not achieved through isolated leadership competencies, digital tools, or structural reforms. It emerges when leadership practices redesign the organization's sensing routines, decision architecture, capability base, learning culture, and accountability mechanisms.

The study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on a qualitative sample of 24 participants from Tehran, which limits statistical generalizability. Although the sample was diverse in terms of roles and sectors,

the results reflect the experiences and interpretations of participants operating within a specific urban, institutional, and economic context. Second, the study relied on interview data, which may be influenced by retrospective interpretation, social desirability, and participants' personal assumptions about leadership and transformation. Third, the proposed framework is conceptual and qualitative; it identifies categories and relationships but does not statistically test causal effects among them. Fourth, the use of model quotations in the present draft should be replaced with actual verbatim quotations from the final dataset before journal submission.

Future research should examine the proposed framework in different national, cultural, and industrial contexts to determine which dimensions are universal and which are context dependent. Quantitative studies could develop and validate measurement scales for future-ready management systems and leadership transformation. Longitudinal research would be especially valuable for examining how leadership transformation unfolds over time and how organizations move from traditional management systems toward adaptive, digital, and learning-oriented systems. Comparative studies could also investigate differences between mature digital organizations and traditional firms undergoing transformation. Future research may further explore the role of artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, and human-machine collaboration in reshaping leadership responsibilities.

From a practical perspective, organizations should treat future readiness as a management system redesign challenge rather than as a technology acquisition project. Senior leaders should institutionalize environmental sensing routines, clarify distributed decision rights, invest in digital and human capability development, create psychologically safe learning environments, and establish transparent accountability mechanisms for data and AI-supported decisions. Leadership development programs should move beyond individual traits and focus on systems thinking, adaptive governance, digital fluency, ethical judgment, and learning facilitation. Organizations should also redesign performance indicators so that managers are evaluated not only on short-term efficiency but also on learning quality, adaptability, collaboration, responsible innovation, and capability renewal.

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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