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**LEADERSHIP CONVERSION: FROM COMMAND-AND-CONTROL TO
PEOPLE-CENTERED APPROACH**

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the
Weissman School of Arts and Science
Baruch College, The City University of New York
In partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

By

Elli Unt

December, 2021

Under the guidance and approval of the committee,
and approved by all its members, this project has been accepted in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in
Corporate Communication.

This project also has been presented at colloquium to departmental
colleagues and faculty.

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December 2021

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Abstract

Leadership style is often recognized as the most important factor in determining workforce productivity and in establishing an organizational environment. In the last century, researchers have observed a significant shift in the approach organizational leaders take to communicate with their teams. This paper explores the gap between the leadership models of the last century (top-down approach) and more modern leadership practices (collaborative approach) in respect to economic and technological changes faced by organizations today. Through the analysis of knowledge and understanding about the subject shared by professionals from different fields, this paper proposes new ideas on how to better adapt to transformational change and enable company and employee growth.

Introduction

Leadership and organizational culture are experiencing new challenges due to economic and technological transformations. The top-down approach to leadership is being challenged by new collaborative business environments that allow for more participation, creativity and freedom in making decisions.

Communication is at the core of the collaborative approach to leadership as it implies the ability to communicate the vision and goals and motivate the team. Effective communication allows leaders to build strong relationships, translate their values and principles to key stakeholders, and develop broad ideas into strategic tasks and goals.

Collaborative leadership style, favored by female leaders, has seen a significant growth in the 20th and 21st century, where female presence in top corporate positions rose drastically

(Keohane, 2020). Previously, women rarely held top roles in the organizations, partially because women were not recognized as being capable of handling leadership positions. Communication plays an integral role in female leadership as it helps to resolve conflicts more efficiently and bring lasting organizational change (Coughlin, 2019).

This research project aims to explore a cultural and generational shift in leadership style and to discuss evidence based recommendations on how to adapt to the transformational change to enable growth and development of employees and company. The focus will be on the shift from traditional to more modern and collaborative leadership approach and the provisions to accommodate the new dynamic environment that underlies the emergent shift. The research aims to determine the prominent challenges and expectations from employees and how it is reflected in current leadership trends. In addition, it attempts to help identify existing gaps in research about how leadership can influence workplace culture and employee growth as well as the increasing visibility of female leadership.

Literature review

There are several research studies that have observed leadership style and its impact on the organizational environment and how it has changed in the last 50 years. Globalization and changes in how companies interact with customers have influenced the way leaders manage communication within their organization (Groysberg & Slind, 2012). Groysberg and Slind (2012) argue that smart leaders “engage with employees in a way that resembles an ordinary person-to-person conversation more than it does a series of commands from on high” (p. 2).

Traditional Leadership

Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) describe old leadership models as “products of top-down, bureaucratic paradigms” (p. 298). Leadership that is seen only as position and authority can rarely create an emergent and interactive dynamic in an organization and does not offer solutions to new challenges faced by companies in the new era of globalization and technological advances (Baltaci & Balci, 2017). The contrast between old and new leadership models is apparent to Gordon and Berry (2000): “Old leadership depends on a relatively few, “special,” strong individuals operating in relatively closed systems, with access to limited and closely held information (p. 85).

Complexity Leadership

The Complexity Leadership Theory addresses the challenges facing organizations in a transitioning world and proposes a new approach for leadership in the context of the knowledge-based information age (Baltaci & Balci, 2017).

The Complexity Leadership Theory aims to provide an alternative to the bureaucratic mindset where leadership is mainly seen as position and authority. The Complexity Leadership Theory seeks to identify and examine the strategies and behaviors behind interactive and creative organizational environments that could foster new cooperative dynamics. Complexity leadership is a joint product of three types of leadership: administrative leadership based on firm control and significant hierarchy, adaptive leadership based on creative problem solving and action-centered leadership based on immediate decision-making processes used in crisis productivity (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). Complexity leadership models have been designed to overcome the inefficiencies of classical leadership theories of the Industrial Age that have been

criticized for focusing on organizational environment and intraorganizational procedures and being stuck in bureaucratic positions. Complexity leadership represents a process of improving organizational learning with flexible decision-making and management and analysis of mass information (Baltaci & Balci, 2017).

According to Uhl-Bien et al., (2007), Complexity Leadership Theory distinguishes between leadership and leaders where leadership is seen “as an emergent, interactive dynamic” that is “productive of adaptive outcomes” and leaders “as individuals who act in ways that influence this dynamic and the outcomes” (p. 299). Furthermore, the complexity theory could be helpful in our understanding of the charismatic dynamic and how charismatic leaders emerge. Relationship between network dynamics and the success of charismatic leaders can suggest whether charisma encourages or suppresses further innovation (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001).

Eigel and Kuhnert, who studied the phenomenon of leadership development, conducted a research based on interviews with 21 CEOs, looking to identify measurable characteristics that successful leaders have in common and the impact of effective leadership on organizations (Eigel & Kuhnert, 2005). According to Eigel and Kuhnert (2005), “it takes time to accumulate the kinds of significant experience that challenge the current level of development” and is rarely seen in younger leaders (before they reach mid-30s) (p.371). Leaders can develop a new understanding that is learned from a difficult experience, or they can choose to apply their current understanding in response to a challenge. Eigel and Kuhnert (2005) suggest that leaders can accomplish more through the understanding of their experiences: “Leaders grow through an increasingly better understanding of who they are and how others see them” (p. 358).

Collaborative Leadership

The literature on collaborative leadership focuses on the characteristics and development of an alternative approach to top-down leadership (Maalouf, 2019).

Collaboration is a process that sets up group relationships in a way where leadership can come from anyone in a group. This way, the diverse experience of group members makes collaborative leadership effective in finding solutions to new challenges (Knopf, 2006; Zander & Zander, 2000; Kramer & Crespy, 2011). “The focus of collaboration has often been on collaboration between the leader and group members. Leaders need to encourage collaboration among all members, not just with themselves” (Kramer & Crespy, 2011, p. 1035).

Kramer and Crespy are the authors of a study on collaborative leadership in the arts. Aiming to achieve a combined perspective, they conducted an ethnographic study, interviewing all members of a theater production, followed by the leader's perspective on the collaborative process. Through the comparison of experiences during the production of a play, Kramer and Crespy (2011) learned “the importance of recruiting and casting individuals who are willing and able to collaborate” (p. 1028). Crespy (2011), a professor in theater and director of the play, identified “the need to develop positive relationships with the individuals so that they would feel comfortable collaborating” (p. 1029).

Asking questions or making small talk is an extremely common way for someone to initiate a collaboration. Another frequent way is to make an evaluated statement, usually a negative one. These strategies (asking a question, making an evaluated statement) lead to collaboration by engaging in a discussion. This often results in a new approach to combining the

ideas from all participants rather than simply providing and receiving feedback on their performance (Kramer & Crespy, 2011).

Kezar and Wheaton (2017) emphasize a transformation from traditional top-down approach in leadership and the importance of creating collaborative strategies as part of the leadership process: “Much of women’s contribution to leadership has been to demonstrate what a relationship-based form of leadership looks like and to draw on relationships to create even more successful approaches to leadership. Women’s attention to relationships results in greater inclusiveness among members of the leadership team and groups as well as members of the organization in general” (p. 21).

Female leadership

Over the past few decades, female leadership has become a much discussed topic of conversation in a corporate world. Despite significant progress achieved in the last few decades, women are still underrepresented in leadership roles. While some professionals recognize visibility of female leadership as a sign of progression and substantial improvements of the corporate ecosystem, others remain skeptical of women’s ability to lead successfully.

In the last few years, many organizations have expressed a strong interest in supporting women towards higher professional achievements and transition into leadership roles. “In the past half-century, fifty-six women have served as president or prime minister of their countries. In the United States, women hold office as senators and congresswomen, governors and mayors, cabinet officers and university presidents, heads of foundations and social service agencies, rabbis, generals, and principal investigators” (Keohane, 2020, p. 239). In her research, Keohane

discusses the most important changes that have happened in our society in the last few centuries and that allowed women to advance and acquire leadership roles across different fields. Those changes would have not been possible without the establishment of higher institutions for women and for feminist movement, which also resulted in the Education Amendments Act, allowing new opportunities for women (Keohane, 2020).

Evans (2014) identifies essential female leadership qualities and outlines reasons why in previous centuries women weren't perceived as being suitable for top leadership positions, such as being a great orator and being able to influence a group of people. Across the world, people have deep doubts about women's ability to lead effectively. It's a common belief about leadership being a masculine behavior that often leads to gender bias and predisposition against female leaders. Mayer et al., (1999) provide an insight about skills most needed by female and male professionals to succeed in the corporate environment: "Stereotyping about women managers still prevailed in a lot of companies: women managers lack the commitment and purpose required to make it to the top echelons. They don't visualise themselves in leadership roles and don't believe they belong there" (p. 270).

Kezar and Wheaton (2014) point out that "women see leadership as a responsibility to teach, be a mentor, and to allow others they are working with to test out their emerging knowledge by being a part of leadership situations" (p. 21). Female leaders are more likely to establish emotional connection with their employees. They are generally less ego-centric than male leaders, focusing more on team well-being and celebrating team accomplishments.

Kezar and Wheaton carried out a study on female leadership in France. They interviewed women leaders from twelve different companies, looking to observe the progress of female leadership and the shift in leadership styles in the global market. In their findings, Kezar and Wheaton (2014) recognized a “slow but significant progress” achieved and the rise of women to leadership positions in companies, which, they suggest, can be explained by demographic aspects (p. 549).

Research Questions:

- How are executives in leadership roles responding to current trends in the organizational environment (i.e. a shift from authoritative to more modern leadership approach, greater employee awareness and “digitalization” in the workplace)?
- What leadership practices employees recognize as effective and what role communication plays in it?

Methodology

Research Design and Data Collection

This research aims to determine the prominent challenges and expectations from employees and how it is reflected in current leadership trends. Mixed methods approach was used in order to allow expansion, using one method to inform another (Salem, 2013).

The mixed methods approach focuses on the most advantageous way to reach the objective of a study by merging the strength of different methods (Salem, 2013). Over the years, various definitions for mixed methods have materialized that include elements of methods,

research processes, philosophy, and research design (Creswell & Clark, 2011). According to Creswell and Clark (2007), “as a method, it focuses on collecting, analysing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems that either approach alone” (p. 5).

The qualitative data from the executive interview responses guides the focus of discussion in quantitative findings (survey responses). I first discuss qualitative data collection, and then the survey. All data was collected in July and August 2021.

The primary method for this research was qualitative interviews, designed to explore current leadership approach at the time where the organizational environment was experiencing significant changes. “Qualitative research examines opinions and ideas in depth using the language of a small sample of individuals to explain their representative thoughts, ideas and reactions to concepts” (Michaelson & Stacks, 2017, p. 87). Michaelson and Stacks (2017) describe qualitative research as a process that “functions as a dialogue between the observed and the observer” (p. 67). The interviews consisted of 10 questions in total and were administered in the form of structured interviews conducted via email. These interviews included open-ended questions that allowed participants to share their knowledge and ideas on the impact of leadership, what constitutes growth and development of employees and company and what role communication plays in it. For the purpose of this study, I focused on senior executives with extensive professional experience in their respective fields and who have held leadership positions for over five years. Through my professional network, I contacted five individuals and I received three positive responses. The three professionals who participated in the interviews (of whom all three were male, ages 35-65) were from industries as diverse as software systems for

the fashion industry, technology for financial services and wireless communications infrastructure, working and living in the New York Tri State Area.

The secondary method was a survey. “Survey research is a quantitative method, requiring standardized information from and/or about the subjects being studied,” where the subjects might be individuals, groups, organizations, communities, or projects (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1993, p. 77).

The survey was conducted among US general public, employed either full-time or part-time, ages 18-60. I used convenience sampling (close professional network) and snowball sampling, where most of the individuals were contacted through the use of my professional network (LinkedIn) and social media (WhatsApp). A total of 100 individuals were contacted and 21 responses were received. The survey was structured using the “funnel” technique, starting with broad questions followed by specific details, and ending with demographic questions. The survey had a total of 14 predefined questions, consisting of 2 demographic questions and 12 core questions (including Likert and check box questions). The survey is an example of categorical data using both nominal and ordinal data. It included open-ended and closed-ended questions. To ensure quality data and impartiality in the survey, questions were designed to be simple, direct, and free of bias. Qualtrics platform was used to account and evaluate the responses. Margin of error: 13.97%.

Data Analysis

I utilized a qualitative content analysis method to code the structured interviews. Content analysis was used to determine the presence of certain words, themes or concepts within the data

set and analyze the presence, meanings and relationships of such words, themes or concepts and their connection to research questions (Holman, 2018).

Interviews

The interviews included questions such as “How would you describe your leadership approach and why?”, “How has your leadership approach changed over the last 5 years?”, “How do you cultivate organizational culture?”, “What are the key components of the organizational culture at your company?”

To define the scope of this research, in my data coding, I decided to focus on questions that would explore patterns across the interview texts to gain executives' perspectives on the shift in leadership practices and how these leadership practices transform the workplace. These included questions “What do you pay more attention to when it comes to employee communication?”, “What are the areas in your leadership that can be improved? Why is it necessary for the success of the company and employees’ well-being?” and “Does your leadership use social media to communicate their ideas with the team? Describe why you believe it’s important.”

Some of the most striking phrases that came up in the analysis were in response to questions about organizational culture and corporate communication practices. The executives’ responses allowed for a firsthand recollection on how they approach organizational transformation and revealed that in aiming to improve the workplace environment and increase productivity, executives transitioned to a modern collaborative approach.

How do you cultivate organizational culture? What are the key components of the organizational culture at your company?

“If you have an idea or concern, you have the freedom to voice that to the rest of the team.”

“Small companies thrive in small moments between small numbers of people working in very connected teams following a charismatic leader.”

“Foster a collegiate environment where most (if not all) of our employees know each other and collaborate across borders. While there is a strong ethic, management encourages a healthy work-life balance. I would say we pay particularly close attention to the following foundations of corporate culture: hiring highly qualified professionals that share our vision and our values; board and management clearly articulate, communicate and demonstrate company goals, values, standards and a commitment to ethical business practices.”

And this is something that I found throughout the data too. The executives emphasized the importance for their employees to have the freedom to share any concern or discuss an idea as well as the encouragement to do so. These notions are extremely valuable as they address growing organizational problems such as “organizational silence”, a term coined by Morrison and Milliken who extensively studied the silence phenomenon and its implications within organizations. According to Morrison and Milliken (2000), when the opposite is true, organizational environments can create “climates of silence” and lead to employees keeping the truth about the issues around their company’s leadership to themselves and where speaking up is perceived as dangerous or ineffective. Without significant changes to the system where opinions and ideas are withheld, organizations can experience the disturbing consequences of employee silence with “both performance and employee morale” suffering (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

When speaking about innovative digital practices that have been recently introduced at their organizations, the executives described engagement surveys, weekly virtual hangouts, and

Microsoft Teams application as successful tools to keep their teams up to date on the status of ongoing projects and to allow for greater visibility and connection among members.

Please name any digital communication practices that you have recently introduced and that have positively influenced your company culture.

“Every Friday we have a 1 hour virtual all hands meeting where everyone in the company in turn gives a very brief description (1 min at most) of what they have been working on for the week. Every quarter, we use this same time to update the entire team on how the company is doing. This maintains open communication and transparency, giving everyone visibility to everything that’s going on within the company and the health of the company. It also gives visibility to how everyone’s contributions are necessary to the overall success of the company, and makes everyone feel included in that success, without the success being attributed to just a single team or individual.”

“We have introduced engagement surveys that drove change that positively impacted employees (confirmed by second engagement survey).”

“We introduced Microsoft Teams about a year ago and it has been a great productivity tool. Its chat and video conferencing features have enabled us to stay in close communication with teams in different countries and have been particularly useful at a time of restricted travel due to the pandemic.”

There were some mixed responses on the role of employee communication. While all respondents reiterated the advantages of open communication and recognition among the members, one executive noted the extra weight that lies behind the decision making of those in C-Suite.

What do you pay most attention to when it comes to employee communication?

“Open communication and transparency is very important. Everyone should have the freedom to voice their ideas, opinions, or concerns to the rest of the team.”

“A company is not a collection of individuals with equal responsibilities. Those in the C-Suite are required to consider the big issues, make big decisions and be decisive. Their dialogue must reflect the weight of these decisions, be conducted with candor, and navigate tensions.

But as you work down through the organization chart conversations must relax these tensions as the power curve changes from peer to subordinate. I am acutely aware of this dimension.

In those conversations, sincerity and transparency are my aspirations.”

“Clarity of message, respect for the audience, consistency with values and standards. We believe that is not only what you say but how you say it.”

Overall, I found that there were some diverse answers throughout the interview texts, but for the most part it was reserved for questions regarding employee communication and gender-equality. One of the executives noted that women represent nearly half of their workforce and occupy some of the key leadership roles in the organization, generating over 60% of company profits. On the other hand, the other executive acknowledged the lack of progress in their approach to hiring and promoting candidates, stating that only 29% of their workforce are women (while men occupy 84% of the highest paying roles).

Do you believe your company to be progressive when it comes to gender-equality and employees having equal chances of being promoted into leading roles?

“Yes, I do believe so. Being minority owned and with a very diverse team of individuals, our focus for promotion is based on merit.”

“On gender, we are not progressive. We are 71% men with 84% in the highest paying roles. This is not a result of institutional bias – it is just a careless lack of attentiveness to the value of diversity in our workplace.”

“We believe in gender equality and are proud that women represent about half of our workforce and that they occupy key leadership roles throughout the organization, including that of CEO, Corporate Controller, and Regional Manager of three countries that generate over 60% of our profits, among others.”

Based on the data set, I was able to identify and summarize themes emerging from the interview texts into three key areas. These themes seem to be an umbrella under which the other themes fall into.

Table 1. Themes found in the interviews.

<p>A. Executives favor a collaborative approach. They tend to lead from their own experience.</p>
<p>Participants endorse open communication and candid feedback practices and aim to create an environment where employees are encouraged to speak up. Participants' responses did not indicate they felt pressure from the public or employees to act. Rather, they are influenced by their own professional experience and not the changes taking place in the corporate environment elsewhere.</p>
<p>B. Leaders recognize corporate culture as a valuable part of business structure. Corporate culture is a reflection of a company's leadership.</p>
<p>All respondents emphasized that robust company culture contributes greatly to business performance. Their responses, although biased, as it is sometimes difficult to differentiate personal opinion from objective information, indicate that when it comes to organizational culture, executives often identify areas of focus based on their character.</p>
<p>C. Open communication and transparency are encouraged. Digital tools ensure timely communication and work efficiency. Social media is used for client communication.</p>
<p>Open communication and transparency were identified as effective practices to engage and provide employees with tools for personal growth and establishing a healthy work environment. Social media is mostly used in client outreach and is not utilized as a tool to communicate with employees (other than for reporting and project management purposes).</p>

Survey

Survey research can be classified by purpose and used for exploration, description, or explanation (Pinsonneault and Kraemer, 1993). "The purpose of survey research in exploration is to become more familiar with a topic and to try out preliminary concepts about it" (Pinsonneault & Kraemer, 1993, p. 80).

Exploratory method was used to study a connection between leadership approach, company culture and employee sentiment. Data from the survey was processed to determine whether it supports the presence of the themes found in the interviews. I was looking at the answers that point to what the current workforce expects from their leadership and what leadership practices prevail in their organizations.

There were 71.43% female and 28.57% male respondents, ages 18 to 54. Regarding their profession, 19% were working in the finance sector, followed by the healthcare sector (14%), education (9%) and the technology sector (9%). A minority (5% each) were working in entertainment, food production, logistics, business development and e-commerce. With regard to the professional experience in their respective fields, 57% of the questioned employees had 3-5 years of experience, 19% had 10 or more years of experience, 14% had 6-9 years of experience and only 9% had less than 2 years of experience in their field.

This was a non-probability sampling, where the probability of choosing each member of the population couldn't be calculated.

After analyzing the survey responses, several trends have emerged around leadership approach, communication practices and employee sentiment. Participants' responses indicated that questions "What leadership practices motivate you most as an employee?", "How important is consistent communication from leadership to you?", "Does your leadership use social media to communicate their ideas with the team?" and "How has it influenced your perception about the company and its leadership?" were relevant and consistent with the data found in the interviews. Moreover, the respondents rated "open communication" as a top priority when discussing the importance of leadership practices in their organizations.

Table 2. What leadership practices motivate you most as an employee? Please choose all that apply.

Leadership practices	# of employees selecting this choice	% of employees selecting this choice
Allow feedback	12	12.50%
Encouragement to take responsibility	13	13.54%
Development opportunities and learning resources	16	16.67%
Open communication	18	18.75%
Shared vision and clear goals	15	15.63%
Transparency	13	13.54%
Provide timely feedback	7	7.29%
Other. Please describe briefly:		
Acknowledgement of success	1	1.04%
Don't be indecisive	1	1.04%

The following section has a detailed description of trends that developed during the survey analysis.

Findings

The results turned out to be quite interesting as they revealed similarities as well as differences in expectations regarding organizational culture and leadership approach. The following discussion covers some of the emerging themes found in the interview data. Analysis of the interview data set showed that a collaborative, team-centered leadership approach is preferred among executives once their business starts to take off or reaches a certain stage where they feel change is necessary.

Interview Results

Leadership approach

All three participants discussed the importance of a team-centered approach and how active participation, collaboration and mutual respect among members can influence company success. Moreover, this is how one participant described his leadership approach:

“Giving individuals the freedom to make their own decisions on how to tackle projects, tends to instill a sense of pride in their work as they see how their own decisions shape the success of a project, and inevitably means that they become more invested in the work that they do.”

The participant added that the lack of micromanagement doesn't imply a fully laid-back approach. While he encourages his employees to be proactive when managing projects, he also wishes to be kept informed about high-level matters in work. In his response, he provided a sample scenario where such measures can play a crucial role:

“An example of this occurred when one of my direct reports while working on an implementation project with a customer, made the decision to recommend that the customer not use a specific piece of functionality within the software and instead handle this requirement separately. Now the circumstance for making such a decision was quite unique as almost all customers would take advantage of this functionality within the software. Now despite this being the direct reports recommendation, the customer had a difference of opinion and contacted me challenging the direction that was taken. If I wasn't aware of this situation, I would naturally be inclined to agree with the customer, however since the direct report had previously communicated her reasons for this

recommendation, I was aware of this and was better able to speak to her reasons and support her decision instead of potentially contradicting it.”

When discussing a shift in their leadership style and how it has evolved in the last five years, two out of three participants shared a similar narrative. They admitted being more hands on and managing every project personally early on in their executive careers. The participants acknowledged that it was partly due to the business expansion as well as a personal transformation as a leader. Over time, they have learned to delegate tasks and responsibilities to other members without compromising on quality. Upon reflection on their approach to managing teams and handling issues, the participants noted that the micromanagement approach was not productive for the business in the long run as it often stood in the way of growth and future opportunities. This idea is consistent with how Marion & Uhl-Bien (2001) describe complexity theory and leadership interactions where leadership effectiveness is not built around “controlling the future; rather it depends on being able to foster interactive conditions that enable a productive future” (p. 394). The first participant explained his transition from top-down to collaborative approach:

“My approach previously leaned more towards a micro-management style as I was very particular about exactly how implementation projects should be run, and I wanted to have input into the final decisions that were made through the course of each project. This approach was possibly instilled in me by my own prior experiences with management who took a very similar approach, and since I was one of the founding members of this company, back in our startup phase I was solely responsible

for all the customer implementations and therefore was the one who made all the implementation project related decisions at the time.

As the company grew, so did my team, and projects began to get assigned to my direct reports, but initially I continued to maintain control over the critical decision-making process on projects. Part of the concern was a potential drop in the quality of the project deliverables as more people begin to get involved, who may not be so invested in the success of the project (“it’s just a job”). However, as the company continued to grow, it became increasingly apparent that this is not a sustainable management approach from a workload perspective.”

The second participant experienced similar transformation:

“I used to be more hands-on, worrying about every aspect of the business. This was a necessity in the early years when the company was small and revenues and resources limited. However, as we have grown, we have been able to invest more in talent to build capable and reliable teams which in turn has allowed us to increasingly delegate responsibilities.”

Unlike the other two, the third participant expressed regrets about the lack of adjustment in his leadership position:

“My short answer to the question - not enough.

Five years ago, for the first time in my career coincidentally, I took on a transformation role as CEO of a 15-year company – not a startup. It was and still is an amazing

opportunity to harvest the knowledge of 15 years of process, knowledge, and the experience of 80 people to accelerate the development of new technology to service an important industry.

My founders' mentality helped build the new vision and technology for the business, but I may have failed to engage and inspire the teams that built the company over those 15 years."

Furthermore, the respondents described the key components their company cultures are operating on, including the freedom to voice an idea, forming connected teams, hiring individuals that share company vision and values. According to the respondents, those components provide employees with guidelines on how to communicate, manage projects, etc., and its development contributes significantly to organizational health and success. More specifically, the respondents offered these explanations:

"If you have an idea or concern, you have the freedom to voice that to the rest of the team."

"A theme. Small companies thrive in small moments between small numbers of people working in very connected teams following a charismatic leader.

It seems I have not been very successful at a transformation as most of our cultural success comes by throwing out the old in favor of the new. I am sad about that."

"We also foster a collegiate environment where most (if not all) of our employees know each other and collaborate across borders. While there is a strong ethic, management

encourages a healthy work-life balance. I would say we pay particularly close attention to the following foundations of corporate culture:

- a. Hiring highly qualified professionals that share our vision and our values
- b. Board and management clearly articulate, communicate and demonstrate company goals, values, standards and a commitment to ethical business practices and compliance with anticorruption laws throughout the organization
- c. Frequent travel by executives to local offices and by local management to corporate and other local offices to strengthen working relationships, foster a uniform corporate culture and ensure best practices
- d. Frequent video meetings across the organization on Microsoft Teams platform
- e. All new hires undergo rigorous training.”

Although corporate training was not a focus of my research and I did not have specific questions regarding it, the subject of training and learning development or the lack thereof came up during the interview and survey analysis and expanded the focus of the leadership approaches to training as well. For instance, throughout the interviews employee training as such was mentioned by one respondent and on one occasion only. A recent study conducted on the soft skill acquisition and training methodology supports the idea that soft skill training can significantly influence employee performance and have a lasting effect (Ibrahim et al., 2017).

Even though hard skill and soft skill training is known to have a big impact on employee development, performance, and workplace learning, it appears to be significantly overlooked by the respondents. This raises a question of its relation to a shift in leadership style and whether a more lenient, modern leadership approach undervalues training as an essential part of organizational culture, conceptualizing it solely as part of HR practices?

When asked about areas of improvement in their leadership, the respondents described empowerment of their employees and clarity of message as the primary areas they would like to advance in. Furthermore, two out of three respondents recognized the need for their employees to learn leadership techniques as they grow within a company and provide them with sufficient resources and guidance to follow through and take the lead.

“An area of improvement would be to help my direct reports mature within their roles and grow to be leaders of their own. I find similarities to my own growth experiences, such that I see how my direct reports take a micro-management approach towards the newer junior hires. While this may be acceptable in the beginning, it is important that the junior hires take on more responsibility over time and be allowed to grow within the role.”

“Empowerment. Scalable success comes from many charismatic leaders.”

“Clarity of message, respect for the audience, consistency with values and standards.”

Employee Communication

In response to the question, “what do you pay most attention to when it comes to employee communication?” the executives included transparency and sending out a clear

message as meaningful ways to support and encourage their employees. This also displays the fundamental role of communication in the collaborative leadership approach and corporate culture. “Communication interdependencies within and across organizational structures create and maintain organizations” (Keyton, 2005, p. 7). Thus, corporate culture is maintained and is evolving through communication (Keyton, 2014).

“Stemming from my answer to question 5, open communication and transparency is very important. Everyone should have the freedom to voice their ideas, opinions, or concerns to the rest of the team. Even if the topic in question is not directly related to your specific job responsibilities, if you have an idea or concern, it is important for you to voice it.”

“A company is not a collection of individuals with equal responsibilities. Those in the C-Suite are required to consider the big issues, make big decisions and be decisive. Their dialog must reflect the weight of these decisions, be conducted with candor, and navigate tensions. But as you work down through the organization chart conversations must relax these tensions as the power curve changes from peer to subordinate. I am acutely aware of this dimension. In those conversations, sincerity and transparency are my aspirations.”

“Clarity of message, respect for the audience, consistency with values and standards. We believe that is not only what you say but how you say it.”

Transparent communication and a collaborative environment at the workplace make room for employees who are happier and more engaged, with the work being done more efficiently. “Teams do well when executives invest in supporting social relationships, demonstrate collaborative behavior themselves, and create what we call a “gift culture”—one in

which employees experience interactions with leaders and colleagues as something valuable and generously offered” (Gratton and Erikson, 2007, p. 20).

Digital Communication and Social Media

Technological innovations, such as digital productivity tools and chat solutions, are embraced as an essential part of any business structure. Its significance increased during the Coronavirus pandemic, where many employees were forced to work remotely and businesses had to quickly adapt to the new working environment while maintaining control over workloads and managing deadlines.

The responses to the questions about digital practices in the workplace suggest that executives recognize the significant impact digital communication can have on the workplace practices, whether it is ensuring meetings productivity, providing feedback, or setting up new policies.

In my research, I did not pose specific questions about the ongoing pandemic and shift towards digitalization. However, I did inquire about recently introduced digital practices and their impact on business, which indirectly implied that at least some of these practices were introduced during the pandemic. Consequently, in response to the question, “please name any digital communication practices that you have recently introduced and that have positively influenced your company culture,” the executives spoke about proactive steps they took during the pandemic to measure employee engagement and influence productivity. These steps included sending out engagement surveys and setting up additional virtual meetings, providing visibility and ensuring productivity is maintained.

“We have introduced engagement surveys that drove change that positively impacted employees (confirmed by a second engagement survey).”

“Every Friday we have a 1 hour virtual all hands meeting where everyone in the company in turn gives a very brief description (1 min at most) of what they have been working on for the week. Every quarter, we use this same time to update the entire team on how the company is doing. This maintains open communication and transparency, giving everyone visibility to everything that’s going on within the company and the health of the company. It also gives visibility to how everyone’s contributions are necessary to the overall success of the company, and makes everyone feel included in that success, without the success being attributed to just a single team or individual.”

“We introduced Microsoft Teams about a year ago and it has been a great productivity tool. Its chat and video conferencing features have enabled us to stay in close communication with teams in different countries and has been particularly useful at a time of restricted travel due to the pandemic.”

In response to the question, “do you use social media to communicate ideas with the team? Describe why you believe it is or isn’t important,” the respondents described social media as a helpful tool for gathering information as well as reaching out to clients in the B2B space. However, they do not employ social media in their communication with employees, for which more “traditional” channels are used such as corporate intranet, Slack or Microsoft Teams.

“While social media is a great source for gathering inspiration/ideas and monitoring current trends, we do not use social media to communicate ideas internally with the team.

Most ideas shared internally are of a proprietary nature and therefore is not information we would want to be publicly available. Since I am in software development, we use agile software development tracking tools such as Jira to communicate internally and keep track of ideas, roadmaps, development timelines, releases and even customer feedback. This is essentially a privately accessible social communications platform within the company.”

“We communicate to the market via social media and teams are participants in these venues. So yes, indirectly. We have no direct public social media channels to employees.

We do have internal channels (team slack channels etc.) which we use daily and other venues to consolidate our messaging.”

“As we are a business-to-business company, we do not use social media to communicate with customers. With respect to our team, we don’t use traditional social media either. However, we use Microsoft Teams extensively which has chat, file sharing and conferencing features where employees share ideas, questions, comments, etc.”

Survey results

Even though the executives and employees who participated in this study do not work for the same companies, the comparison between the two sets of data displayed a connection in the executives’ perception of a transformation in their leadership practices and organizational environment and employees’ expectations and effectiveness of leadership practices. For the most part, survey findings were consistent with the data found in the interviews.

Leadership approach

The majority of employees (76.19%) described their leadership as either collaborative or somewhat collaborative, which agrees with how executives responded to the interview questions about their leadership approach. Only 14.29% of employees responded with “somewhat autocratic” and under 10% responded with “autocratic.” The findings display an apparent shift in favor of collaborative approach discussed in the literature on modern leadership theories. Table 3 reflects the answers provided by employees.

Table 3. Based on your professional experience, how would you describe the leadership style in your company?

Approach	# of employees selecting this choice	% of employees selecting this choice
Collaborative	9	42.86%
Somewhat collaborative	7	33.33%
Somewhat autocratic	3	14.29%
Autocratic	2	9.5%

When asked about the application of major leadership attributes in their companies, 19.05% of the respondents reported greater dissatisfaction with areas of “development opportunities and learning resources”, “shared vision and clear goals” and “transparency.” 33.33% of the respondents reported high satisfaction levels with “encouragement to take responsibility” and “open communication” placements. Based on the employees’ reaction, “development opportunities”, “shared vision and goals” and “transparency” received the lowest average satisfaction rate. The mean, or average satisfaction value, was calculated from the sum of all the values divided by the total number of values using the Qualtrics platform. Table 4 reflects the answers provided by employees and its average satisfaction rate.

Table 4. On a scale 1 - 5, with 1 being “not at all” and 5 being “very”, please rate how satisfied you are about the application of these leadership attributes in your company.

Leadership attributes	1	2	3	4	5	Satisfaction value (mean)
Encouragement to take responsibility	9.52%	4.76%	19.05%	33.33%	33.33%	3.76
Development opportunities and learning resources	19.05%	9.52%	23.81%	33.33%	14.29%	3.14
Open communication	9.52%	14.29%	19.05%	23.81%	33.33%	3.57
Shared vision and clear goals	19.05%	4.76%	19.05%	42.86%	14.29%	3.29
Transparency	19.05%	4.76%	23.81%	33.33%	19.05%	3.29
Timely feedback	4.76%	4.76%	33.33%	28.57%	28.57%	3.71
Other	10%	20%	20%	20%	30%	3.40

The next subset of questions sought to explore a relationship between leadership practices and communication.

The responses to the question, “what leadership practices motivate you most as an employee?” were distributed nearly equally. 18.75% of the respondents rated “open communication” as top choice, followed closely by “development opportunities and learning resources” (16.67%), “shared vision and clear goals” (15.63%), “encouragement to take responsibility” (13.54%), “transparency” (13.54%), “allow feedback” (12.50%). Together with the previous findings, these results narrate a story of the areas where current employees are seeking support from their leadership. Not coincidentally, many of these are perceived by leadership as development areas for improvement. Table 5 reflects the answers provided by employees.

Table 5. What leadership practices motivate you most as an employee? Please choose all that apply.

Leadership practices	# of employees selecting this choice	% of employees selecting this choice
Allow feedback	12	12.50%
Encouragement to take responsibility	13	13.54%
Development opportunities and learning resources	16	16.67%
Open communication	18	18.75%
Shared vision and clear goals	15	15.63%
Transparency	13	13.54%
Provide timely feedback	7	7.29%
Other. Please describe briefly:		
Acknowledgement of success	1	1.04%
Don't be indecisive	1	1.04%

Digital practices and communication

In response to the question, “how important is it for you to receive consistent communication from your leadership?” 66.67% stated “very important” and 33.33% chose “somewhat important.” All employees identified leadership communication as relevant. This finding emphasizes the role of leadership communication in an organization. It supports theories on modern leadership that view open communication as a core leadership function that encourages dialogue and knowledge sharing, enabling companies to change and adapt to the new dynamics. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) noted, “leadership, however it is defined, only exists in, and is a function of, interaction” (p. 302). Table 6 reflects the answers provided by employees.

Table 6. How important is it for you to receive consistent communication from your leadership?

Employee responses	# of employees selecting this choice	% of employees selecting this choice
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Very important	14	66.67%
Somewhat important	7	33.33%
Neutral	0	0%
Not very important	0	0%
Not important at all	0	0%

In response to the question, “have you shared an employee opinion on your company’s leadership performance in any form in the last year?” 76% of the respondents reported “no” and 24% reported “yes.” Out of those who reported yes, 27% did it through communications with a direct supervisor, 27% - by leaving a company review, 27% - by using an internal survey, 10% - by communication with HR and 0% through a social media follow. Table 7 reflects the answers provided by employees.

Table 7. Have you shared an employee opinion on your company’s leadership performance in any form in the last year?

Employee responses	# of employees selecting this choice	% of employees selecting this choice
Communication with HR	1	9.09%
Communication with direct supervisor	3	27.27%
Company review	3	27.27%
Internal survey	0	0%
Social media follow	1	9.09%
Other		

In response to the question, “does your leadership use social media to communicate their ideas with the team?” 86% said “no” and 14% said “yes”. On the other hand, out of those who said yes, 33% stated they feel “significantly more motivated and engaged” and 67% stated they

feel “somewhat more motivated and engaged.” The results suggest that there may be an unexplored opportunity for leadership to deepen the level of members’ engagement through the use of social media.

Conclusion and Recommendations for the Leadership Practice

This research study reveals employee perception about current leadership development and effectiveness and provides an exploratory analysis of today’s executives' responses to organizational transformations. A relevant outcome of this research brings attention to leadership’s contribution to employee advancement, growing need for consistent communication and transparency in the workplace, and ability to build relationships based on trust and respect. This study explored the two research questions:

- How are executives in leadership roles responding to current trends in the organizational environment (i.e. a shift from authoritative to more modern leadership approach, greater employee awareness and “digitalization” in the workplace)?
- What leadership practices employees recognize as effective and what role communication plays in it?

The interview responses present evidence that today’s executives prefer to use a modern, collaborative approach. In the interviews, executives offered detailed arguments on why they believe the leadership transformation to be crucial for the long-term success of an organization. Executives also revealed some constructive ideas that helped them transition from traditional to modern approach. For example, one executive responded with, “as we have grown, we have been

able to invest more in talent to build capable and reliable teams which in turn has allowed us to increasingly delegate responsibilities.” As the main attributes of their leadership, executives revealed employee encouragement and open communication, inclusive and engaging corporate culture and other practices that allow employees to grow and become future leaders. The executives expressed their perspectives on the dynamic processes taking place in organizations with a focus on developing leadership skills in all employees, better communication, and more values.

Survey data reveals what the current workforce expects from their leadership and effectiveness of leadership practices. The research found that employees feel the most motivated through consistent communication with their leaders. Moreover, the research showed that all employees consider communication as an important leadership attribute, with 66.67% recognizing leadership communication as “very important” and 33.33% as “important.” Without effective communication, leadership will fail to engage employees and have an impact on the company’s vision and mission. The insights drawn from this study also describe the discrepancy between executives’ understanding of technological changes and organizational transformations and how some of these practices are implemented and how they influence the organizational environment. Employees want to be empowered and want leaders that will provide them with learning resources and development opportunities. However, according to the employee satisfaction data from the survey, these areas were not effectively addressed by the leaders.

Moreover, the results were consistent with the leadership theories discussed in the literature review. It supported the arguments of the modern leadership theory that proposes that “leaders must deal with the conditions of organizational activities more than their local

manifestation” and “create opportunities to interact rather than creating isolated and controlled work cubicles” (Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001, p. 414). Kramer and Crespy, who conducted a study on collaborative leadership, noted the importance of “initiating a collaborative culture” and encouraging results from interactions between leaders and team members (p. 1032).

The executives who participated in the study, as well as the survey respondents, described changing attitudes and desires towards more modern leadership, the advantages of collaborative approach, the importance of open communication, employee engagement and empowerment. Modern leadership approach offers new solutions to current challenges in the workplace, providing greater access to technology, collaborative environment, and open communication. By contrast, the traditional (top-down) leadership depends on a few individuals with power of authority and is seen as ineffective in the information age.

The study revealed a set of practices that are being overlooked by current leadership and have significant impact on organizational health and employee productivity. There are a few ideas that leaders can benefit from regarding employee communication and establishing a healthy productive corporate environment:

- Ensure employees receive consistent communication from their leadership. “Open communication” received the most mentions of leadership practices that motivate employees and is a critical practice for being an effective leader in the new collaborative environment.
- Incorporate more training and development opportunities in the workplace, do not just present employees with opportunities to lead projects. Ongoing professional development can have a long-term positive impact on employee performance.

- Bring employee communication into the digital space. Survey data suggests social media communication in the workplace can be used as a powerful tool to enhance employee perception about the company.
- Promote transparency, engagement, and empowerment in the workplace to encourage and inspire employees with passion. Leaders are now expected to be concerned about employee motivation and a positive working environment. Yet, many employees who participated in the survey reported a lack of progress in these areas.
- Promote gender equality in the workplace. Women bring different perspectives to business, creating a more diverse workforce and often having a positive impact on company performance. It is also important to have women in leadership positions as role models.

Risks and Limitations

It is important to consider that this study had a relatively small number of participants for the survey which caused a higher margin of error indicating a lower confidence in the survey results' accuracy. Geographic scope of participants who responded to the interview questions was limited to New York City geography. Additionally, a limited sample pool did not allow to delve deeper into particular industries and whether they fared differently in response to a shift in organizational culture and communication practices.

Another limitation was the fact that in the survey I used terms with strong and possibly intimidating connotations (autocratic) as opposed to applying more neutral terms (top-down). Thus, survey participants were limited to four choices when expressing their opinions about their

companies' leadership style: collaborative, somewhat collaborative, somewhat autocratic, and autocratic.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could expand a scope to training as it is the subject that came up in the research process and something I have not thought to include as a line of questioning. The findings of this study make reasonable grounds for additional research addressing the role of training and development in leadership style.

Similarly, a topic of social media for employee communication might be used for additional research. One could examine the impact of social media on employee perception about the company and its leadership and a shift in dynamics when social media is actively used for internal communication by leadership.

Another direction for additional research would be a study on the industries that have adapted more quickly to a new leadership approach (presumably, those in high-tech were first to respond to a shift in organizational dynamic and transition from traditional to more modern leadership approach).

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