

Adapting Leadership Paradigms to Non-Traditional Threats: Leadership and Governance in the Era of Remote Work During the Global Disruption

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, a non-traditional threat, has profoundly disrupted local government operations, compelling leaders to rapidly adapt to remote work environments. This study investigates how local government leaders adjusted their leadership paradigms to address the unique challenges of maintaining governance and service delivery during this global disruption. Using a qualitative approach, the research analyzed secondary data from academic literature, government reports, and case studies, employing thematic analysis to identify essential leadership competencies, including agility, emotional intelligence, and effective communication. The findings underscore the pivotal role of adaptive leadership in ensuring the continuity of public services, while also highlighting the importance of investing in leadership development and reevaluating governance models to support remote work. By focusing on the specific challenges faced by local government leaders during the pandemic, this study contributes novel insights into crisis management and offers practical implications for enhancing leadership resilience in future crises.

Keywords: *Leadership Development, Remote Work, Public Sector Governance, Crisis Management, Organizational Adaptation*

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a global and unprecedented shift to remote work as governments sought to limit the virus's spread. While remote work itself is not a new concept, dating back to the emergence of "teleworking" in the 1970s as a flexible work arrangement (Stoker et al., 2021), the pandemic's scale and speed of adoption were unparalleled. Prior to this disruption, only 7.9% of the global workforce—approximately 260 million workers—were engaged in remote work on a permanent basis (Raghuram, 2021). By the second quarter of 2020, this figure had surged to 557 million workers, encompassing 17.4% of the global workforce (International Labour Organization, 2021). This abrupt shift presented unique challenges for local government organizations, which were generally less prepared for remote work compared to the private sector (Duncan, 2023).

Unlike the private sector, where telecommuting has been an established practice, local governments have traditionally adhered to in-office work models. As a result, the transition to remote work required significant adaptation to address issues such as maintaining communication, managing virtual teams, ensuring equitable access to technology, and sustaining public trust in governance (Vinchesi, 2020). These challenges underscore the need for effective leadership capable of navigating the complexities of governance during times of crisis.

While the literature on remote work is extensive, it predominantly focuses on the private sector, emphasizing its benefits and challenges for businesses (Stoker et al., 2022; Rigg et al., 2020). Studies examining leadership in public sector organizations remain limited, particularly regarding the unique competencies required for leading remote teams during crises. This gap is critical, as local governments operate under distinct constraints, including regulatory responsibilities, resource limitations, and the imperative to maintain public trust. Furthermore, while leadership theories such as Transformational and Situational Leadership have been widely

studied in traditional contexts (Day, 2001; Dandalt, 2021), their application in remote public sector governance remains underexplored.

This research addresses these gaps by investigating how local government leaders adapted their leadership paradigms to manage remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it explores the following research questions:

1. What leadership competencies are essential for local government leaders during remote work transitions?
2. How do local government leaders build trust and ensure effective governance amidst crisis circumstances?

To answer these questions, the study analyzes key leadership models, including Transformational Leadership, which emphasizes inspiring teams with a shared vision, and Situational Leadership, which highlights the need to adapt leadership styles based on team maturity and situational demands. Additionally, the research examines the role of Servant Leadership in addressing employee well-being and Distributed Leadership in fostering organizational agility and responsiveness.

The findings aim to provide actionable insights into the leadership competencies necessary for navigating the challenges of remote work in the public sector. By focusing on the intersection of leadership, governance, and crisis management, this study contributes to the broader discourse on public sector resilience and offers practical recommendations for enhancing leadership practices in future crises. In doing so, it seeks to fill the existing research gaps, offering a novel perspective on the role of leadership in addressing non-traditional threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the rapid transition to remote work in local governments, focusing on leadership adaptations and governance models during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative methods are particularly well-suited for exploring complex phenomena, as they provide a framework for understanding meanings, perceptions, and experiences within their specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The research relies exclusively on secondary data, which offers a comprehensive basis for analyzing leadership adaptations and governance challenges. Academic literature serves as a primary source, providing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings on leadership paradigms and remote work dynamics. This is complemented by government reports, which include policy evaluations and official documentation of responses from local governments during the pandemic. Additionally, case studies provide detailed accounts of leadership strategies and governance adaptations, showcasing both challenges and successful practices in managing remote work. Relevant publications, such as industry reports and white papers, contribute further insights, particularly regarding technological and organizational innovations. Together, these data sources provide a diverse and credible foundation for qualitative analysis, capturing the multifaceted aspects of leadership and governance during the COVID-19 crisis.

The study employs Creswell's (2016) qualitative data analysis framework to systematically process and interpret the secondary data. The analysis began with organizing and preparing the collected materials by categorizing them into types, such as academic literature, government reports, and case studies, ensuring a structured approach. A thorough reading of these materials followed, allowing the researcher to familiarize themselves with the content and identify key sections relevant to the study's focus.

Descriptive coding was applied to label sections of text with terms that summarized their content. For example, passages discussing leadership actions to maintain team cohesion were coded as "virtual team leadership," while sections on ensuring transparency with the public were coded as "trust-building." These codes were then grouped into broader categories that reflected critical aspects of leadership adaptation, such as "communication strategies," "leadership competencies," and "governance challenges."

Patterns and relationships among these categories were analyzed to develop insights into leadership practices and their impact on governance during the pandemic. For instance, the relationship between trust-building and public service delivery highlighted the importance of empathetic leadership in maintaining public confidence. Finally, the findings were represented in a coherent narrative that integrates key themes and their implications, emphasizing the practical and theoretical contributions of the study.

While this study provides valuable insights, its reliance on secondary data introduces certain limitations. The absence of firsthand accounts, such as interviews or focus groups, may exclude nuanced perspectives on leadership experiences during the pandemic. Additionally, the quality and scope of the original sources influence the interpretation of findings, potentially limiting the depth of analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study analyzes secondary data to explore leadership adaptations during the rapid transition to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal key themes that highlight how local government leaders navigated governance challenges and developed strategies to maintain public trust, service delivery, and team cohesion. These findings are organized into five categories: leadership competencies for remote work, communication and trust-building, equity and access to technology, maintaining public trust and service delivery, and leadership development and long-term adaptation. By understanding these themes, we gain critical insights into how leadership in local governments can evolve to meet future crises.

1. Leadership Competencies for Remote Work in the Public Sector

The transition to remote work required leaders to adapt swiftly, displaying agility, emotional intelligence, and technological fluency. According to Dzigbede et al. (2020), leaders in local governments used Situational Leadership to respond to the varying technological readiness of their teams. For example, in areas with high technological competence, a delegating leadership style allowed employees to operate autonomously. Conversely, leaders in regions with limited remote work experience adopted directive approaches, including intensive training and close supervision.

Challenges included reduced visibility of employees, as noted by Dzigbede et al. (2020), which impacted engagement and motivation. These challenges underscore the importance of fostering leadership competencies to maintain both employee morale and operational efficiency in a remote work context.

2. Communication and Trust-Building

Effective communication and trust emerged as central challenges in remote leadership. The absence of face-to-face interactions highlighted the necessity of mastering digital communication tools, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, to maintain team cohesion. Leaders employing Transformational Leadership were particularly successful, inspiring their teams with a shared vision and consistent updates. However, as the International Labour Organization (2021) notes, technology alone was insufficient to foster trust.

Building trust required Servant Leadership practices, such as empathy and proactive engagement with employees’ challenges. Leaders who demonstrated genuine care for their teams built relationships grounded in mutual respect, which were instrumental for maintaining productivity and morale during the crisis.

3. Equity and Access to Technology

The pandemic exposed and exacerbated inequities in access to technology, particularly between urban and rural areas. For instance, the International Labour Organization (2021) found that while 94% of urban workers had access to the necessary technology, only 65% of rural workers did. This digital divide hindered local governments, especially in smaller municipalities, from maintaining effective operations.

Distributed Leadership proved critical in addressing these inequities. Empowered leaders at various levels identified gaps and initiated solutions, such as providing employees with devices and securing internet access. Vinchesi (2020) highlights how some municipalities overcame outdated infrastructure through resourceful and decentralized approaches, enabling more inclusive and equitable participation in remote work.

4. Maintaining Public Trust and Service Delivery

Maintaining public trust while delivering essential services was a core challenge. Leaders used transparency, inclusivity, and frequent communication to address citizens' concerns. Digital platforms facilitated regular updates and community engagement through town halls and surveys, as noted by Vinchesi (2020), helping to involve citizens in decision-making processes.

Leaders who practiced Servant Leadership excelled in this area by prioritizing the needs of diverse communities and fostering a sense of inclusivity. Distributed Leadership further enhanced this effort by involving multiple organizational levels, ensuring a participatory approach that strengthened both internal and external trust.

5. Leadership Development and Long-Term Adaptation

The pandemic accelerated the need for leadership development, particularly in crisis management and remote work strategies. Dzigbede et al. (2020) emphasize the critical role of ongoing training to equip leaders with skills for managing digital communications and navigating complex, rapidly evolving situations.

Many local governments have already begun investing in leadership development initiatives aimed at cultivating adaptive leaders. These efforts suggest a recognition of the long-term benefits of proactive leadership training in ensuring resilience against future disruptions. The following table summarizes the five categories of findings:

Table 1.

Five Categories of Research’s Key Themes

Category	Key Themes
Leadership	Agility, emotional intelligence, technological
Competencies	fluency, Situational Leadership
Communication and Trust-Building	Digital tools, Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership
Equity and Access to Technology	Digital divide, Distributed Leadership, resourceful solutions
Public Trust and Service Delivery	Transparency, inclusivity, participatory decision-making
Leadership Development	Crisis management, remote work strategies, proactive training

Source: Processed by the researcher

Discussion

This study contributes valuable insights into how leadership and governance evolved during the unprecedented transition to remote work triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings underscore the accelerated demand for agility, adaptability, and innovation within public sector organizations, as leaders were forced to pivot rapidly to digital operations while maintaining public trust and service delivery. The themes that emerged—communication, trust-building, leadership adaptation, and governance challenges—offer a comprehensive view of the strategies leaders employed to navigate the complexities of remote work.

Leadership Paradigm Shifts and Adaptation

The transition to remote work highlighted a critical need for local government leaders to rethink traditional leadership paradigms. Day's (2001) framework of leadership development, which emphasizes the interplay between individual competencies and organizational collaboration, offers a useful lens to analyze these shifts. Leaders were compelled to move beyond hierarchical approaches, adopting Transformational Leadership to inspire teams through shared visions and adaptability.

This approach was particularly relevant as leaders engaged with geographically dispersed teams. Duncan (2023) observed that Transformational Leadership strategies—such as promoting innovation and leveraging digital platforms—enabled leaders to maintain employee motivation despite the challenges of remote work. Complementing this, the Situational Leadership model allowed leaders to tailor their approaches based on team readiness and technological expertise, ensuring targeted support for employees with varying levels of digital proficiency.

Communication and Trust-Building in Virtual Settings

Effective communication and trust-building emerged as linchpins of successful leadership during the pandemic. As the study findings reveal, the absence of physical interactions created barriers to collaboration and clarity. Leaders overcame these challenges by mastering virtual communication tools like Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Slack, bridging geographical distances to maintain a steady flow of information.

However, technological proficiency alone was insufficient. Leaders needed to exhibit Digital Leadership—leveraging technology to enhance team engagement and alignment with organizational objectives. This included fostering virtual environments for both work and informal interactions, which were essential for maintaining morale and cohesion.

Servant Leadership also played a significant role, as leaders prioritized employee well-being through flexible work arrangements, regular check-ins, and emotional support. These actions not only addressed immediate challenges but also fostered trust and loyalty, laying the foundation for a resilient organizational culture.

Leadership Competencies and Agility

The findings underscore the critical role of agility and emotional intelligence in navigating the remote work landscape. Adaptive leaders demonstrated the ability to respond swiftly to dynamic circumstances, while emotional intelligence allowed them to address employee concerns empathetically. Vinchesi (2020) argued that these traits are indispensable for public sector leaders managing crises.

Integrating Digital Leadership into this skill set further enhanced leaders' ability to manage remote teams effectively. Leaders with a clear vision for leveraging technology ensured that employees had the necessary tools and training to maintain productivity. This holistic approach not only facilitated seamless operations during the crisis but also positioned organizations for long-term sustainability.

Governance Challenges and Distributed Leadership

The shift to remote work posed significant governance challenges, particularly in accountability and performance management. Local governments, tasked with maintaining

public trust while delivering essential services, had to innovate to address these issues. As Duncan (2023) noted, digital platforms became indispensable for tracking performance and ensuring accountability in remote settings.

The study highlights the importance of Distributed Leadership in navigating these challenges. By decentralizing decision-making, leaders empowered team members at various levels to address issues proactively. This model enhanced organizational agility, enabling quicker responses to emerging challenges while fostering a more participatory approach to governance.

Public Trust and Crisis Communication

Maintaining public trust during the pandemic was a paramount concern for local government leaders. Transparency, empathy, and clear communication were essential for addressing citizen concerns and managing public perceptions. Bhalla (2021) emphasizes the importance of effective crisis communication, a sentiment echoed by this study's findings.

Digital Leadership proved instrumental in this domain, as leaders utilized digital platforms to keep citizens informed, respond to inquiries, and demonstrate accountability. Leaders who embraced Servant Leadership principles further strengthened public trust by fostering inclusivity and engaging directly with communities through virtual town halls and social media outreach. These efforts underscored the critical role of communication in sustaining public confidence during crises.

This study's findings highlight the multifaceted challenges and opportunities presented by the transition to remote work in local governments. The pandemic catalyzed a paradigm shift in leadership practices, emphasizing the need for agility, emotional intelligence, and digital proficiency. By leveraging adaptive strategies and embracing leadership models such as Transformational, Situational, and Servant Leadership, leaders navigated a rapidly changing landscape while maintaining team cohesion and public trust.

The study also highlights the critical role of Distributed and Digital Leadership in addressing governance challenges and fostering resilience. Future leadership development initiatives should integrate these competencies, focusing on both immediate crisis management and long-term adaptability

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the pivotal role of adaptive leadership in addressing the unprecedented challenges of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. By analyzing models such as Situational, Transformational, Servant, and Distributed Leadership, we have highlighted strategies that enabled local government leaders to sustain public service delivery, foster employee engagement, and navigate organizational disruptions. These leadership approaches, each with distinct strengths, offer enduring lessons for preparing organizations to face future crises.

Situational Leadership demonstrated the importance of flexibility, enabling leaders to tailor their approaches to team readiness and capability. Transformational Leadership emphasized the power of shared vision to inspire and motivate teams, while Servant Leadership highlighted the critical role of empathy and support in promoting employee well-being. Distributed Leadership revealed the value of decentralization, fostering agility and responsiveness in decision-making. Collectively, these models provide a roadmap for leadership in times of uncertainty.

The pandemic has further highlighted the increasing necessity of Digital Leadership. Leaders must cultivate digital fluency to effectively manage remote or hybrid teams, enhance

collaboration, and drive innovation through technology. As organizations adapt to evolving work environments, Digital Leadership will become a cornerstone of effective governance and operational success.

While this study provides significant insights, it also highlights opportunities for further exploration:

1. **Long-term Leadership Development:** Future research should examine how the shift to remote and hybrid work will influence the long-term development of public sector leadership, particularly in building competencies such as digital fluency and emotional intelligence.
2. **Sustainable Hybrid Work Models:** Investigations into the implementation and impact of hybrid work models on productivity, engagement, and organizational culture are essential.
3. **Employee Well-being:** Additional studies should explore mental health challenges associated with remote work and develop strategies to support employee resilience during extended telecommuting periods.

This study contributes novel insights to the growing body of knowledge on leadership and governance during crises, emphasizing its practical implications. By leveraging these findings, local governments and organizations can proactively shape leadership strategies to ensure resilience and effectiveness in a rapidly changing global landscape.

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