

Embracing Agility: Examining Agile Leadership in Effective Digital Transformation Initiatives

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Abstract

Digital transformation is crucial for organizations aiming to stay competitive in today's fast-paced business environment. The integration of digital technologies has proven essential for improving business performance. However, there is limited understanding of how different leadership styles influence the outcomes of digital transformation processes. To address this gap, this study builds on the practice-based view (PBV) to explore how managers in the banking sector can effectively lead these transformative processes. The interviews were conducted with 20 leaders from the banking sector in Saudi to gather valuable insights into this phenomenon.

The findings reveal how agile leaders drive successful digital transformation by promoting fast decision-making cycles, maintaining continuous involvement in digital transformation initiatives, and employing both evolutionary and revolutionary practices that make the organization leaner and more efficient. The deployment of agile leadership in these banks made employees feel more involved in the decision-making process, fostering a greater sense of ownership. This shift significantly boosted employee morale, as they began to feel more connected to the future direction of their organization. Therefore, agile leadership proves to be an effective approach for engaging employees in digital transformation efforts, ensuring a more cohesive and motivated workforce.

Keywords: Agile Leadership, digital transformation, Saudi, Organizations

1. Introduction

In an age characterized by digital transformation, market instability, and significant organizational changes, conventional leadership models frequently fall short (Rigby, Sutherland & Takeuchi 2016; Kotter 2012). Traditional leadership approaches, often rooted in hierarchical structures and static decision-making processes, struggle to adapt to the rapid pace of innovation and the need for flexibility in today's dynamic business environment. Digital transformation is defined as a comprehensive initiative within organizations aimed at adopting digital technologies to enhance processes for all stakeholders (Feliciano-Cestero et al., 2023; Gong & Ribiere, 2021). In the wake of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it has become essential for contemporary businesses to evolve in order to maintain their competitive edge (Marrucci et al., 2022; Secundo et al., 2021).

Currently, a substantial portion of companies' financial investments in digital transformation is directed towards material procurement (Statista, 2022b). This includes software for big data analysis powered by artificial intelligence (AI), hardware like computers, servers, and

networking, as well as advanced production technologies such as 3D printers, robotics, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, and automation systems, which dominate investment allocations (Frank et al., 2019).

These models typically emphasize long-term planning and stability, which can be at odds with the need for rapid response and iterative progress that modern organizations require (Rigby, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016). The limitations of conventional leadership are particularly evident in scenarios where organizations must navigate complex, fast-changing environments. For instance, in the face of digital transformation and technological advancements, leaders adhering to traditional models may find themselves overwhelmed by the speed at which new technologies emerge and disrupt established practices (Kotter, 2012). Traditional leadership often prioritizes control and predictability, which can hinder an organization's ability to innovate and respond swiftly to new opportunities or threats (Rigby, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016).

Leaders in digital transformation must articulate a vision that inspires employees to embrace change, outline a clear path for all participants, and create an environment conducive to technology acceptance (Tabrizi et al., 2019). They serve as the catalysts for recognizing environmental changes and steering the organization to adapt (Swift & Lange, 2018). By setting a positive example for technology adoption, leaders can influence all employees (Guinan et al., 2019; Secundo et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, the understanding of leaders' roles in digital transformation remains limited, primarily relying on reports and professional literature (Hansen et al., 2011; Smaje & Zimmel, 2022). There is a notable lack of research on which leadership styles are most effective for driving digital transformation and the specific actions leaders should undertake to facilitate a smooth transition.

To address these gaps in the literature, this study investigates the role of agile leadership (Rigby et al., 2018) in digital transformation projects. Agile leadership is rooted in the 12 principles of agile project management (Denning, 2016), emphasizing rapid decision-making and continuous feedback during the various phases of digital transformation. This leadership style promotes full participation in technological solutions throughout the organization, distinguishing itself from traditional leadership approaches. Thus, the aim of this research is to explore how agile leadership fits within the broader spectrum of leadership styles relevant to digital transformation (i.e., digital leadership; Secundo et al., 2022). the research question seeks to clarify this relationship.

- How does agile leadership facilitate digital transformation?

To address this research question, the study has utilized an interpretive approach, conducting in-depth interviews with leaders from the banking sector in Saudi. This methodology allows for a comprehensive understanding of how agile leadership impacts digital transformation within the organization. By gathering insights directly from those in leadership positions, the

research aims to reveal the specific contributions and practices that facilitate effective transformation processes.

2. Agile leadership

Agile leadership is rooted in principles from agile methodologies initially created for software development, emphasizing iterative progress, collaborative teamwork, and a strong focus on customer value. This leadership style expands these concepts into broader organizational settings, highlighting the necessity for leaders to cultivate an environment where change is welcomed and innovation is a constant pursuit (Denning, 2018; Rigby, Sutherland, & Takeuchi, 2016).

One key advantage of agile leadership is its capacity to enhance organizational performance by improving adaptability and responsiveness. Organizations that implement agile practices are better prepared to manage market fluctuations, technological disruptions, and changing customer demands (Dingsøyr, Nerur, Balijepally, & Moe, 2012). This flexible approach promotes continuous feedback, iterative enhancements, and a collaborative culture, significantly boosting operational efficiency and employee engagement.

Research indicates that businesses employing agile leadership strategies are more likely to increase their innovation efficiency (Chen, Tee, & Chang, 2022b), enhance employee performance (Ahmed & Elali, 2021), and improve team effectiveness (Akkaya & Bagieńska, 2022). Additionally, agile leaders who demonstrate strategic flexibility are crucial for the success of digital transformation initiatives (Fachrunnisa, Adhiatma, Lukman, & Ab Majid, 2020). Agile leadership positively influences organizational performance (Akkaya & Sever, 2022), business resilience (Indiarti & Lantu, 2022), and sustainability (Anggadwita, Suganda, Azis, & Profitoyo, 2021). Moreover, Akkaya and Üstgörl (2020) found that contemporary leadership models often see women displaying more agile leadership traits. However, agile leaders must also be capable of making quick decisions during crises, even when information is scarce and risks are high, and they should integrate other leadership styles depending on the organization and the leaders' roles (Foote, 2013; Grzesik & Piwower-Sulej, 2018).

3. Digital transformation

Digital transformation is a complex phenomenon that significantly alters operational processes through disruptive technologies (Tekic & Koroteev, 2019). It also necessitates that organizations enhance their workforce's skills to achieve ongoing success (Ostmeier & Strobel, 2022). Thus, transformation efforts must engage individuals at every level of the organization, from entry-level employees to senior executives.

The outcomes of digital transformation can vary widely, with key benefits including improved operational efficiency, enhanced innovation capabilities, shorter product lead times, increased profitability, and overall competitive advantage (Fragapane et al., 2022; Raguseo et al., 2021). Successful transformations often result in heightened consumer focus, facilitated by new tools

for gathering consumer data and refined communication strategies (Del Vecchio et al., 2018; Hu et al., 2023).

Digital transformation is closely tied to organizational change, leading academic research to examine internal processes and identify why some organizations succeed more than others in their digital initiatives (Smith & Jones, 2023). The alignment between a company's existing resources and the new technologies it adopts is crucial (Doe et al., 2012). Resources such as advanced technological capabilities, financial strength, and IT expertise can facilitate the smooth integration of new technologies within the organization (Brown et al., 2020).

Furthermore, companies that possess organization-wide dynamic capabilities tend to have a higher success rate in achieving digital transformation (Taylor & Green, 2018). For instance, capabilities related to recognizing, interpreting, adapting, and reconfiguring IT resources can foster the flexibility and adaptability necessary for transformation (Lee et al., 2019; Johnson & Roberts, 2016). Research also highlights that specific skills related to technology among employees are critical for driving change (Miller & Smith, 2021). In this context, Carter et al. (2023, p. 45) emphasized that for successful digital transformation, organizations must incorporate "new actors, structures, practices, values, arrangements, and beliefs."

4. Agile leadership and digital transformation

Agile emerged in 2001 as a methodology for managing software development projects (Johnson et al., 2021). The key principles of agile leadership include (a) dividing work into small, manageable teams, (b) fostering a network-oriented approach with partners, and (c) prioritizing customer needs (Roberts, 2017). Agile leadership has been effectively utilized in various settings due to its capacity to facilitate quick, customer-focused, and digitally-driven product development or organizational change through active internal engagement (Miller et al., 2023).

Agile is closely associated with design thinking and lean methodologies. It enhances design thinking during the development and implementation phases while incorporating lean principles such as team collaboration, organizational learning, and immediate performance measurement. The Agile Manifesto outlines 12 essential principles and four core values that guide managers in implementing this approach within their organizations, focusing on achieving customer-centricity and fostering innovation through collaborative efforts. To effectively employ agile leadership, project teams engage in iterative decision-making cycles known as sprints, which consist of design, build, test, and review stages. During each sprint phase, team members discuss potential improvements to their outcomes.

Agile Leadership and Its Core Principles:

Agile leadership emerged in 2001 through the Agile Manifesto, which introduced a methodology primarily designed to manage software development projects in a way that is adaptive, customer-focused, and iterative. Over time, Agile has evolved into a broader

leadership framework applicable across various industries. The key principles of Agile leadership include breaking down work into smaller, manageable teams, fostering a network-oriented approach with partners, and prioritizing customer needs (Roberts, 2017). These principles help create a flexible and responsive organizational culture, enabling companies to adapt quickly to market or customer changes (Miller et al., 2023).

One of the hallmarks of Agile leadership is its focus on collaboration and empowerment. Leaders provide teams with the autonomy to make decisions, encourage continuous feedback, and foster a culture of innovation and learning. Agile leadership encourages cross-functional teams that have the ability to handle all aspects of a project, from design to delivery. This decentralization of decision-making promotes ownership and accountability, which in turn enhances the agility and adaptability of the organization (Roberts, 2017).

5. Agile Leadership and Its Connection to Design Thinking and Lean Methodologies:

Agile leadership is closely linked with design thinking and lean methodologies, both of which share a focus on customer-centricity, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Design thinking, which emphasizes user-centered design and empathetic problem-solving, aligns with Agile's focus on delivering customer value through iterative cycles (Brown, 2009). Agile enhances design thinking by allowing rapid prototyping, testing, and refining of ideas based on real-time customer feedback, ensuring that the final product meets the customer's needs (Brown, 2009).

On the other hand, lean methodologies focus on minimizing waste, improving efficiency, and enhancing the flow of work. Agile incorporates these lean principles by encouraging teams to focus on high-value activities, reducing unnecessary steps, and continuously iterating to improve outcomes (Womack & Jones, 2003). In an Agile environment, teams work closely together to solve problems collaboratively, constantly learning and refining their approach as they progress. Immediate performance measurement also plays a significant role in this process, allowing teams to track progress and make data-driven decisions that improve efficiency and outcomes (Miller et al., 2023).

5.1 The Agile Manifesto and Its Core Values:

The Agile Manifesto outlines four core values and twelve principles that guide Agile leadership. The four core values are:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools: This emphasizes the importance of people and collaboration over rigid processes and tools.
- Working software over comprehensive documentation: This prioritizes delivering functional products that meet customer needs, rather than focusing on exhaustive documentation.
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation: This encourages ongoing customer engagement and collaboration to ensure the product aligns with their needs.

- Responding to change over following a plan: Agile values adaptability and the ability to respond to changing circumstances over strictly adhering to predefined plans (Beck et al., 2001).

These values underscore Agile's focus on flexibility and customer-centricity, which are crucial in a fast-paced and ever-changing business environment. By prioritizing people, collaboration, and responsiveness, Agile leadership enables organizations to stay relevant and deliver value quickly.

5.2 The Iterative Nature of Agile Leadership: Sprints and Feedback Loops

Agile project teams operate within sprints, short, focused iterations that typically last from one to four weeks. Each sprint consists of several phases, including design, build, test, and review. During each sprint, team members assess progress, identify improvements, and make necessary adjustments based on feedback. This iterative approach ensures that the project evolves continuously, with feedback from every phase shaping the next set of tasks (Sutherland, 2014).

The feedback loops built into each sprint phase foster continuous improvement and collaboration, ensuring that the product or solution aligns with customer needs and organizational goals. This iterative cycle of design, build, test, and review allows organizations to remain agile and responsive to changing market demands (Schwaber & Beedle, 2002). Agile leadership encourages reflection at the end of each sprint, where teams review what worked well and what could be improved in the next cycle. This process ensures that the organization learns and adapts as it moves forward.

5.3 The Role of Agile Leadership in Driving Organizational Change:

Agile leadership is fundamentally about empowering teams, removing obstacles, and creating a culture of trust, where team members feel confident to experiment and innovate. Agile leaders act as facilitators, ensuring that teams have the resources and support they need to succeed. They focus on removing blockers and fostering collaboration across departments to create synergies and align goals (Denning, 2018). By embracing a coaching rather than controlling leadership style, Agile leaders cultivate an environment of continuous improvement and adaptability.

The role of an Agile leader is crucial in guiding the organization through transformation. Leaders must ensure that Agile principles are embedded in the culture, enabling the organization to scale and sustain its transformation over time. As such, Agile leadership is not just about managing projects but about driving organizational change through a commitment to innovation, customer satisfaction, and adaptability (Denning, 2018).

6. Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative -methods approach, to gather data on agile leadership practices. Thematic analysis used to interpret interview data and uncover insights into best practices and challenges. This study utilized a qualitative research design to investigate agile leadership practices in the banking sector of Saudi . The research was conducted using data collected from 20 leaders, comprising 11 male participants and 9 female participants and 30 employees, all of whom were employed within various banking institutions across the country.

The qualitative approach was chosen due to its ability to provide rich, contextual insights into the experiences and perceptions of the participants, making it particularly suitable for exploring leadership practices and their impact in a complex, dynamic environment such as banking. The interview was designed to capture responses on various aspects of agile leadership, including leadership styles, decision-making, adaptability, and communication effectiveness.

The use of a large, diverse sample, with a gender balance, also enabled a comprehensive analysis of how agile leadership is perceived differently by male and female employees, contributing to the robustness of the study. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study allowed for thematic analysis, helping to identify recurring themes and patterns that can inform future leadership development strategies in the sector (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2013). The data obtained from these analyses can offer deeper insights into leadership practices and their potential for fostering innovation and responsiveness in Saudi Arabian banking institutions (Patton, 2002)..

6.2 Data Analysis

20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with leaders and employees from the banking sector in Saudi, determining that this sample size was sufficient to reach theoretical saturation. No new relevant insights emerged after the 15th interview (Walsham, 1995). The interviews provided a starting point for discussions on various topics, allowing informants to freely share their perspectives (Hu et al., 2023). Insights from the interviews were cross-checked with additional data sources to ensure validity (Zollo et al., 2022). We interviewed both leaders and employees because leadership is a multifaceted process; while it is initiated by leaders, it also has a profound impact on employees. Therefore, it was important to observe both perspectives.

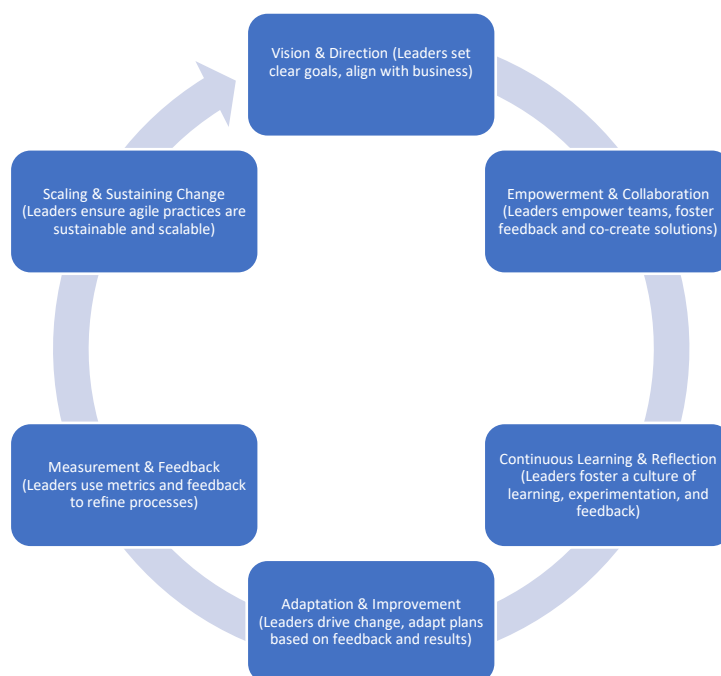
Thematic analysis revealed four core themes:

1. Evolutionary and revolutionary practices
2. Lean thinking and agile organization
3. Diffused cooperation and empowerment
4. Innovation and exploitation of new technological skills

Table 1 outlines the key principles, characteristics, and best practices of agile leadership in digital transformation initiatives.

No	Core principles	Characteristics	best practices
1	Cooperation	Supportive, collaborative	Active involvement in decision-making
2	Empowerment	Communicative, future-focused	Aligning objectives with organizational goals
3	Innovation	Inventive, open to experimentation	Encouraging a results-driven mindset
4	Urgency	Focused, determined	Prioritizing timely decision-making

Figure 1: Agile leaders and digital transformation loop



7. Discussion

In the study, a systematic approach was employed to analyze the qualitative data gathered from interviews with leaders and employees in the Saudi banking sector. This process involved maintaining a research diary, transcribing interviews, and conducting a manual thematic analysis to identify key themes and codes related to agile leadership and its influence on digital transformation. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and to facilitate a thorough examination of the data. Following transcription, a manual analysis was conducted, which involved coding the data to identify significant patterns and themes. The manual coding allows researchers to immerse themselves in the data, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives.

The analysis revealed four main themes concerning agile leadership's role in digital transformation:

1-Evolutionary and Revolutionary Practices

Evolutionary Practices: these refer to gradual, continuous improvements implemented within the organization. The agile leaders promote iterative enhancements, encouraging teams to make small, incremental changes that collectively lead to significant advancements over time. In contrast, **Revolutionary Practices** involve radical, transformative changes that significantly alter organizational processes or structures. Agile leaders recognize when such bold actions are necessary to drive innovation and maintain competitiveness.

2- Lean Thinking and Agile Organisation

Lean Thinking: this principle focuses on maximizing value by eliminating waste and optimizing processes. Agile leaders implement lean methodologies to streamline operations, reduce inefficiencies, and enhance productivity. **Agile Organization:** building on lean principles, agile leaders foster an organizational culture that is flexible, responsive, and adaptable to change. This involves creating structures and processes that support quick decision-making and effective response to market dynamics.

3-Diffused Cooperation and Empowerment

Diffused Cooperation: Agile leaders encourage collaboration across all levels of the organization, breaking down silos and promoting cross-functional teamwork. This widespread cooperation ensures that diverse perspectives are considered in decision-making processes. Empowering employees is central to agile leadership when leaders delegate authority, entrust teams with decision-making responsibilities, and support autonomy, which enhances motivation and accountability.

4- Innovation and Exploitation of New Technological Skills

Innovation: Agile leaders cultivate a culture that encourages creativity and experimentation. They support initiatives that explore new ideas and approaches, fostering an environment where innovation can thrive. Moreover, recognizing the rapid pace of technological advancement, agile leaders prioritize the development and utilization of new technological competencies within their teams. This ensures the organization remains at the forefront of industry developments.

In addition to the main themes, six specific codes were identified that detail how agile leadership impacts digital transformation.

Agile leadership significantly influences digital transformation through various key practices.

- 1- **Rapid Decision-Making:** Agile leaders facilitate swift decisions to accelerate transformation initiatives. By utilizing short feedback loops and iterative processes, they empower their organizations to quickly adjust to new conditions, thereby reducing the risk of failing to respond to market fluctuations. (Ncube,L; Mahlangu,S ;Kamango,N: Ncube,N: Moyo,M; Phiri,T &Nemashakwe,P, 2024)
2. **Continuous Involvement:** Agile leaders maintain ongoing engagement in digital projects, ensuring alignment with strategic goals. This continuous involvement allows for real-time adjustments and keeps the transaction process alignment with organizational objective (Kranzen,M,2024)
3. **Employee Inclusion** Agile leaders actively involve employees in the transformation process, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment. By promoting cross-functional collaboration and powering teams, they enhance employee engagement and morale. (Ncube et al,2024)
4. **Iterative Feedback Loops:** Agile leaders implement regular feedback mechanisms to refine recesses and solutions continuously This approach allows organizations to quickly assess outcomes and adapt accordingly, promoting a mindset of "fail f learn faster." (Ncube, et al .,2024)
5. **Adaptability to Change:** Agile leaders promote a culture that embraces changes enabling the organization to pivo effectively when necessary. They create a culture that prioritizes experimentation and continuous learning, recognise that traditional planning methods may fall short in uncertain circumstances. (Kranzen,M,2024)
6. **Focus on Customer Value:** Agile leaders ensure that digital transformation effort aligned with delivering enhanced value to customers. By emphasizing customer collaboration and responsiveness to change, they prioritize customer needs and satisfaction. (Kranzen,M,2024)

These practices underscore the pivotal role agile leaders play in steering successful digital transformation initiatives.

8. Conclusion

Agile leadership is a dynamic and adaptive approach to managing teams and projects, emphasizing customer-centricity, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Rooted in the Agile Manifesto, this leadership style fosters a culture of empowerment, flexibility, and responsiveness. By integrating Agile with design thinking and lean methodologies, organizations can ensure that they are not only delivering high-quality products but also adapting to change quickly and efficiently. Agile leadership is essential for guiding organizations through ongoing transformation, ensuring that they stay competitive, innovative, and aligned with customer needs.

This research aims to contribute to the understanding of agile leadership by providing empirical evidence on its adoption, impact, and best practices. The findings will offer valuable insights for leaders and organizations seeking to navigate the complexities of modern business environments through agile methodologies.

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