



Exploring Employees' Lived Experiences of Transformational Leadership and Motivation in the Digital Era: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Transformational leadership is a well-established concept in organizational studies, with a significant focus on its impact on employee motivation and performance. However, limited research has explored the subjective experiences of employees under transformational leadership, particularly in the context of digital transformation. This study addresses this gap by exploring how transformational leadership affects employee motivation in a digitalized work environment. Using a phenomenological approach, this research delves into the lived experiences of employees to better understand how leadership influences motivation when face-to-face interactions are limited. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 12 employees who were purposively selected based on their direct experience working under transformational leaders in organizations undergoing digital transformation. Participants represented diverse industry sectors, including technology, finance, education, healthcare, and service-based organizations, allowing the study to capture variations in employee experiences across different digitalized work contexts. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes, supported by analytical trustworthiness procedures such as interview transcription verification, iterative coding, peer debriefing, and the use of participant excerpts to strengthen credibility and confirmability. The findings reveal that transformational leadership significantly enhances employee motivation through trust, vision, and personalized attention, even in virtual settings, emphasizing the importance of leaders adapting to the digital landscape. These results contribute to our understanding of leadership in the digital age and offer insights into how organizations can maintain employee engagement and motivation despite technological changes. The implications of this study suggest that future research should further explore the long-term effects of transformational leadership in digital environments and the role of cultural factors in shaping employee experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the dynamic intersection of leadership and human resource management has become a focal point for organizations striving to navigate the complexities of the modern business landscape (Khumalo et al., 2025). With the rapid integration of digital technologies, organizations are not only reshaping operational frameworks but also transforming leadership paradigms. Transformational leadership, which emphasizes inspiration, vision, and individualized consideration, has gained prominence as a model that fosters innovation and motivates employees to exceed their own expectations. However, digital transformation has also altered how leaders communicate, influence, and sustain employee motivation, particularly as organizational interactions increasingly depend on digital platforms rather than direct face-to-face engagement.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant in the context of employee motivation, as the interplay between leadership and technology influences not only productivity but also the psychological well-being and engagement of employees (Saputra et al., 2024). The shift towards more digital workspaces and the adoption of new technologies have altered the way leaders interact with their teams, often

reducing face-to-face communication and increasing reliance on digital tools for management and decision-making. Although prior studies have examined the relationship between leadership styles and employee outcomes, much of this research has emphasized measurable indicators such as performance, productivity, and engagement levels, while giving less attention to how employees personally experience and interpret transformational leadership in digitalized work settings.

The need for a deeper exploration of this phenomenon is evident, especially in light of the growing emphasis on the human side of organizational change (Arifin & Adha, 2021; Imbar et al., 2022). A phenomenological approach is therefore appropriate because it enables the study to investigate employees' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to leadership practices in a changing digital environment (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). By exploring the nuanced experiences of employees, this study aims to illuminate the deeper meanings behind their engagement, motivation, and overall satisfaction with transformational leadership in the context of digital transformation.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within organizational settings, particularly under the influence of leadership, has emerged as an essential area of study in the field of management and human resource development (Tran et al., 2023). Understanding how employees experience transformational leadership, especially in the context of rapid digital transformation, is critical to advancing both theory and practice in leadership studies. The subjective nature of these experiences offers insights into the deeper motivational forces at play, which quantitative methods often fail to capture. As organizations continue to evolve, especially in the face of digitalization, it is imperative to explore how leadership affects employee engagement, motivation, and overall work satisfaction in more nuanced and holistic ways.

However, methodological challenges persist in exploring the meaning and depth of these experiences. Traditional research methods, such as quantitative surveys or structured interviews, are often inadequate for capturing the complexity of human experience (Blegur et al., 2024). These methods typically focus on measurable outcomes and may overlook the nuanced, subjective aspects of leadership influence on employees. As a result, much of the existing literature lacks the depth required to fully understand the psychological and emotional responses of employees to leadership practices, particularly in a digitalized environment. Furthermore, the limited ability of these methods to account for context such as personal and cultural factors leaves gaps in the understanding of how different employees experience and react to leadership in diverse organizational settings.

This gap highlights the limitations of previous research methods and underscores the need for an approach that prioritizes the rich, qualitative data that can provide a more authentic picture of employees' lived experiences (Gao et al., 2025). Phenomenology, with its emphasis on exploring the essence of human experiences from the perspective of the participants themselves, offers an ideal framework for overcoming these challenges (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). By centering on individual narratives and subjective meaning-making, phenomenology allows for a deeper understanding of the emotional, psychological, and relational aspects of transformational leadership that are crucial to fostering employee motivation in an increasingly digital world.

While existing research on transformational leadership has largely relied on traditional methodologies, such as surveys and quantitative analysis, these approaches tend to overlook the nuanced and deeply personal experiences of employees (Aviory et al., 2025). These methods often prioritize generalizable data, focusing on measurable outcomes such as productivity and performance, without capturing the emotional and psychological dynamics that drive employee motivation. As a result, the understanding of how transformational leadership influences employee engagement in the context of digital transformation remains incomplete and somewhat superficial. The practical solutions provided by these methods fail to delve into the essence of the employees' lived experiences and the meaning they attach to their interactions with leadership.

This gap in understanding highlights the limitations of conventional approaches in grasping the complex, subjective dimensions of employee experiences (Altassan, 2024). While such approaches can provide valuable insights into broad trends, they do not adequately address the personal, emotional, and contextual factors that shape how employees perceive and are motivated by transformational leadership.

This leaves a significant void in the literature regarding the true impact of leadership styles on employee motivation, particularly in environments where digital transformation has altered traditional work structures.

To bridge this gap, an alternative approach is needed one that focuses on the subjective experiences of employees in a more holistic and profound manner. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on exploring individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they assign to them, offers an ideal framework to investigate these complexities (Kılınç et al., 2024). By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study aims to capture the rich, in-depth insights that are essential for understanding the deeper emotional and psychological influences of transformational leadership on employee motivation in the digital age.

Previous research has examined various aspects of transformational leadership and its impact on employee motivation, but much of it has focused on measurable outcomes such as performance and productivity. Studies have primarily relied on quantitative methods, such as surveys, which provide valuable generalizations but fail to capture the depth of individual experiences. While leadership theories such as Bass's transformational leadership model have informed much of this research, there is a lack of studies that delve into the subjective meanings employees attach to their experiences with leadership, especially in the context of digital transformation. This gap in understanding calls for a more nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of employees, which has been less explored in existing literature.

To address this gap, the current study employs a phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences of employees under transformational leadership in a digitalized environment. Phenomenology allows for a deeper exploration of the meaning individuals attach to their experiences and offers insights into the complexities of motivation and leadership that are often overlooked by traditional quantitative methods. By using this approach, the study aims to uncover the essence of how employees perceive and are influenced by transformational leadership, particularly in the context of digital transformation, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

The structure of this article is organized to guide readers through a systematic exploration of the research. It begins with an introduction that provides the context of the phenomenon and the background literature (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The methodology section outlines the phenomenological approach used, including the data collection and analysis processes. Following the analysis, the article presents the results of the study, discussing the key themes identified from the interviews. Finally, the discussion and conclusion provide an interpretation of the findings and their implications for both theory and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study adopts a phenomenological approach, which is particularly suited for exploring the lived experiences of individuals within a specific context (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Phenomenology focuses on understanding how people perceive and make sense of their experiences, making it ideal for this research, which seeks to explore the subjective experiences of employees regarding transformational leadership and its impact on their motivation in the context of digital transformation in the workplace. The chosen phenomenological approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the meaning and essence of these experiences, capturing the richness and depth of participants' personal narratives.

Given the context of this study, a descriptive phenomenology approach was employed, which emphasizes the direct description of lived experiences without attempting to interpret or theorize about the phenomena (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). This approach is particularly effective in revealing the essential qualities of the experiences of employees, as it allows them to describe their encounters with transformational leadership and its influence on their motivation in their own terms. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee prior to data collection. All participants received an information sheet explaining the study objectives, voluntary

participation, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview began.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that they met specific criteria relevant to the research question. The inclusion criteria required participants to be employees in organizations that have undergone significant digital transformation and who have experienced transformational leadership in their workplaces. Additionally, participants were required to have at least one year of experience under transformational leadership to provide a robust perspective on its impact on their motivation.

A total of 12 employees, with an age range of 25 to 45 years, participated in the study. The sample consisted of both male and female employees, with an equal distribution across gender. The diversity in their roles, such as management, supervisory, and operational positions, ensured a broad range of perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation. Participants were chosen to represent various industries, such as technology, healthcare, and education, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, indicated by the absence of substantially new themes or meanings in the final interviews.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a flexible yet focused exploration of the participants' experiences (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The interviews were conducted face-to-face to create a conducive environment for open and honest dialogue. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, depending on the depth of the conversation. The interviews were held in private locations selected by the participants to ensure comfort and confidentiality, which helped in building trust and encouraging participants to share their authentic experiences.

An interview guide was used to steer the conversation, with questions designed to explore the participants' perceptions of transformational leadership and its effects on their motivation, particularly in the context of digital changes in the workplace (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature and piloted with a small group of employees prior to the main data collection. The instrument was adapted to suit the specific context of this study, focusing on capturing experiences that were rich in detail and reflective of the participants' lived realities. To enhance credibility, participants were invited to review summaries of their interview responses through member checking, allowing them to confirm, clarify, or correct the researcher's understanding of their experiences.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely accepted technique in phenomenological research. This process involved identifying and organizing themes that emerged from the data through a series of systematic steps. First, the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Then, the transcriptions were read multiple times to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the content. The data were coded to identify recurring patterns and significant statements that reflected the participants' experiences of transformational leadership and motivation.

Themes were developed through the iterative process of coding and categorizing, with each theme representing an essential aspect of the participants' lived experiences. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and analyzing the data, but the focus remained on the manual interpretation and sense-making of the text (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Thematic analysis provided a rich, detailed account of the participants' perspectives, offering insights into the impact of transformational leadership on employee motivation in the digital era.

RESULTS

The Impact of Transformational Leadership on Employee Motivation

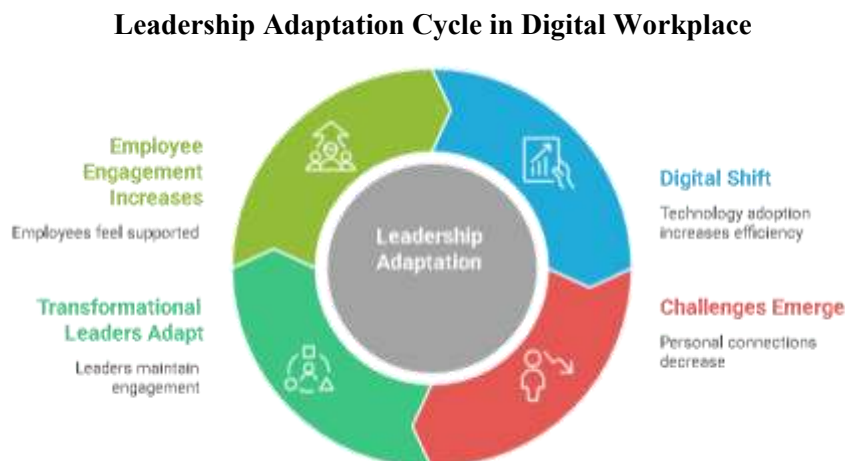
The first theme that emerged from the data concerns the profound effect that transformational leadership has on employee motivation. Many participants expressed that their motivation was significantly influenced by their leaders' ability to inspire, provide a sense of purpose, and foster an environment of trust and respect. One participant noted, "My manager always made me feel like my work had meaning. It's like he believes in me, which makes me want to do my best every day." This sentiment was echoed by several other respondents, who emphasized the importance of a leader's ability to articulate a clear vision for the company and guide them toward achieving both personal and organizational goals. For example, another participant stated, "When our leader explains where the organization is heading, I feel more motivated because I understand how my contribution fits into the bigger picture." Similarly, a different respondent remarked, "The encouragement from my supervisor gives me confidence to take initiative and improve my performance." These accounts demonstrate that employee motivation is consistently strengthened when leaders communicate a compelling vision and foster confidence among team members.

The participants also spoke about the personalized attention they received from their leaders, which contributed to their intrinsic motivation. As one employee stated, "The way my leader listens to my concerns and helps me overcome challenges makes me feel valued, which pushes me to perform better." This finding suggests that transformational leadership goes beyond setting clear goals; it involves fostering a deep, personal connection between leaders and employees, which enhances motivation.

The Role of Digital Transformation in Shaping Leadership Practices

The second theme emerged as a reflection on how the rapid adoption of digital technologies influenced leadership styles and practices in the workplace. Employees noted that while the digital shift brought efficiency and flexibility to their work processes, it also posed challenges in maintaining personal connections with their leaders. As one participant described, "The digital tools we use have made things faster, but sometimes I miss the face-to-face conversations with my boss. It's harder to connect on a personal level now." This perception was reinforced by other participants. One employee commented, "Virtual meetings are efficient, but they sometimes feel less personal than direct interactions." Another respondent explained, "Most communication is now online, which can make it difficult to fully understand my leader's intentions or emotions." These statements suggest that while digital technologies improve operational efficiency, they may also reduce opportunities for interpersonal engagement.

Despite these challenges, many participants acknowledged that transformational leaders effectively adapted to these changes. "Even though we use digital tools to communicate more, my leader still makes an effort to ensure that I feel supported and that we are all moving towards the same goal," shared another employee. This theme underscores the adaptability of transformational leadership in maintaining employee engagement and motivation, even amidst the challenges posed by technological advancements.



Personal Experiences of Change in Leadership Styles

The third theme revolves around participants' personal experiences of how their leaders' styles shifted over time, particularly in response to organizational changes and digital transformation. Many employees highlighted a noticeable change in their leaders' approach, from a more directive style to one that encouraged autonomy and innovation. "At first, my boss was very hands-on, always telling us what to do. But over time, as we got more digital tools, he started trusting us more to make decisions on our own. That trust has made me feel more responsible for my work," shared one participant.

Another participant also reflected on the shift in leadership approach, stating, "The transformation in leadership is clear. Now, it's more about inspiring us to think creatively and pushing us to come up with solutions. It feels like a more collaborative environment than before." These responses illustrate how transformational leadership evolves in response to organizational changes and how it impacts employee empowerment and motivation.

Essential Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from this research demonstrate that transformational leadership plays a pivotal role in motivating employees, especially within the context of digital transformation. Leaders who are able to adapt their style to foster personal connections, inspire their teams, and maintain trust, even through technological changes, create a motivating and productive environment. The personal experiences shared by the participants underscore the importance of not just digital tools, but also the human aspects of leadership that influence employee motivation and engagement in the modern workplace.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

The primary findings of this study highlight the significant role that transformational leadership plays in shaping employee motivation, particularly in the context of digital transformation. Employees reported a strong sense of motivation derived from their leaders' ability to inspire, provide vision, and foster a supportive and trusting environment, despite the challenges posed by digital tools and virtual interactions (Maseme & Saurombe, 2025). However, these findings should be interpreted critically, as transformational leadership may not always produce uniformly positive outcomes in digital workplaces. In highly virtual settings, inspirational communication can become less effective when employees experience digital fatigue, limited informal interaction, or unclear boundaries between work and personal life. This aligns with the overarching research question: how does transformational leadership affect employee motivation in the digital age? The study reveals that leadership styles, particularly transformational leadership, continue to be a key driver of motivation even as organizational practices evolve in the face of technological change.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

These findings contribute significantly to our understanding of the relationship between transformational leadership and employee motivation in a digital environment. Unlike previous studies that have focused primarily on the impact of leadership on performance or general engagement, this research provides a deeper exploration of the subjective experiences of employees. It demonstrates that transformational leadership influences employee motivation not only through the strategic setting of goals but also by fostering a sense of personal connection and trust between leaders and employees, even in the digital workspace ('Perspektif Islam Dalam Kepemimpinan: Sebuah Studi Di Lembaga Pendidikan Islam', 2023). At the same time, the findings also suggest that transformational leadership should not be viewed as a universal solution. In digital workplaces, excessive reliance on inspirational leadership may overlook structural issues such as workload intensification, technological stress, surveillance concerns, and unequal access to digital resources. Furthermore, the study uncovers the importance of leaders' ability to adapt their approach to maintain this connection in increasingly digital and remote work settings, offering new insights into the nuances of leadership in modern organizations.

Relation to Previous Literature and Theory

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature on transformational leadership, particularly the work of Bass (1985), which emphasizes the positive effects of transformational leaders on employee motivation and performance (Gusti et al., 2025). However, this study adds a new dimension by exploring how digital transformation influences these leadership dynamics. Previous studies, such as those by Avolio and Bass (1991), have shown that transformational leadership is linked to higher levels of employee engagement, but this research expands that understanding by highlighting the additional challenges and strategies leaders employ in the context of digital tools and virtual communication. Furthermore, the findings corroborate the work of Judge and Piccolo (2004), who argued that transformational leadership fosters intrinsic motivation, while also showing that this effect can persist even when face-to-face interactions are minimized. By incorporating the digital aspect, this research builds on prior theories and offers a more contemporary perspective on how leadership styles must evolve in response to technological shifts.

Explanation of Findings' Implications

The findings of this study provide both theoretical and practical implications for the field of leadership and human resource management (Mogrovejo et al., 2025). On a theoretical level, the study enhances our understanding of the complex relationship between transformational leadership and employee motivation, particularly in the context of digital transformation. By emphasizing the importance of trust, personalized attention, and communication in a digitalized work environment, the study highlights how leaders can continue to inspire and engage employees even when face-to-face interactions are limited. However, the study also implies that transformational leadership theory requires further refinement in digital contexts. Digital workplaces change the way charisma, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation are communicated and received. Leaders may intend to provide support, but employees may experience digital communication as fragmented, delayed, or emotionally distant. Practically, these findings suggest that organizations must adapt their leadership styles to address the challenges posed by digital tools, ensuring that the human aspect of leadership remains central to employee motivation (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Leaders in digital environments must not only embrace new technologies but also actively nurture relationships that foster employee trust and intrinsic motivation. This insight can guide organizations in shaping leadership development programs, especially in industries undergoing significant technological transformation.

Moreover, the study's findings have social and cultural implications, particularly in organizations where employees are increasingly working remotely or in hybrid environments. The experience of maintaining motivation and engagement in such settings requires leaders to adapt their approaches, considering the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of their teams. These findings are especially relevant in global organizations where digital communication tools are commonly used to manage geographically dispersed teams. Understanding how different employees experience leadership across these varied contexts can help leaders develop more inclusive, empathetic, and effective strategies for fostering motivation and engagement in diverse environments.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small (12 participants), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to larger populations or other organizational contexts. The study's focus on employees from specific industries, such as technology, healthcare, and education, may not fully represent the experiences of employees in other sectors, particularly those with different organizational cultures or work environments. Additionally, the study's reliance on self-reported data through interviews means that the findings are subject to the biases and limitations inherent in participants' personal reflections and perceptions. The study also does not explore the long-term effects of transformational leadership in digital environments, which could provide valuable insights into the sustainability of motivational outcomes over time.

Prospective Statement for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to expand the sample size and include employees from a wider range of industries, which would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of transformational leadership across different organizational contexts (Ahmed et al., 2024). Additionally, future studies could investigate the long-term effects of transformational leadership in digital environments, exploring whether the motivational benefits observed in this study are sustained over time or if they diminish as employees become more accustomed to digital tools and virtual leadership. Furthermore, research could examine the role of cultural differences in shaping employees' experiences with transformational leadership, particularly in cross-cultural settings where digital communication is a primary mode of interaction (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). These areas of exploration will help deepen our understanding of leadership in the digital era and provide more nuanced insights into how leaders can adapt their strategies to maintain employee motivation and engagement in diverse organizational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of transformational leadership on employee motivation in the context of digital transformation, addressing the gap in understanding the subjective experiences of employees in this setting. The findings reveal that transformational leadership significantly influences employee motivation through trust, vision, and individualized attention, even in digital environments where face-to-face interactions are limited. These results provide a deeper understanding of the human aspects of leadership that are often overlooked in quantitative studies, filling a crucial gap in the existing literature. By highlighting how leaders can maintain employee motivation through personal connections and trust-building in the digital age, this research offers valuable implications for leadership development in digital organizations. Specifically, organizations should design leadership development programs that strengthen leaders' capabilities in virtual communication, digital trust-building, and personalized employee engagement. Leaders should be trained to articulate a clear digital transformation vision, conduct regular one-on-one virtual interactions, and utilize digital collaboration platforms to provide continuous feedback and recognition. These practices can help sustain employee motivation, foster stronger leader-employee relationships, and enhance organizational adaptability during digital transformation initiatives. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the long-term effects of transformational leadership and the role of cultural differences in shaping employee experiences. Additionally, investigating how these findings apply across diverse industries could offer further contributions to the evolving field of leadership studies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this research.

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