

Leadership Influence in Shaping Responsive Organizational Culture in the Face of Ongoing Change

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ABSTRACT

This literature-based study investigates how leaders shape organizational cultures capable of remaining responsive to change. It synthesizes theoretical perspectives and empirical findings that highlight the mechanisms through which leadership influences adaptability, including sense-giving, behavioral modeling, symbolic communication, system alignment, and distributed authority. Drawing from relevant literature, this study identifies key leadership behaviors and structural levers that reinforce cultural flexibility. The discussion reveals that adaptive cultures do not emerge spontaneously—they are cultivated through consistent, credible, and empathetic leadership over time. The study argues that responsiveness is embedded not only in strategy or structure, but in meaning systems constructed and sustained by leaders. The findings contribute to an expanded understanding of adaptive leadership as a cultural process, offering a conceptual foundation for both academic exploration and practical application in dynamic organizational settings.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational life is subject to continual transformation. Shifting market expectations, technological developments, demographic transitions, and institutional learning shape the internal logic of organizations in increasingly unpredictable ways. Organizations cannot rely on old approaches or static patterns. In such settings, the capacity to adapt becomes essential for survival and growth. Yet, adaptation is not a spontaneous process. It requires direction, structure, and a shared sense of purpose—elements that are frequently molded by leadership and encoded within the cultural life of the organization (Boylan & Turner, 2017).

Leadership is often described as the interpretive lens through which change becomes meaningful. Leaders translate ambiguity into collective intention and drive the behaviors that sustain responsiveness. Their influence reaches beyond strategic planning or policy enactment; it informs the values, assumptions, and routines that define organizational culture. When guided effectively, this culture becomes a mechanism for adaptive resilience—aligning the workforce with external demands while preserving internal coherence (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

A culture that is responsive to change is rarely incidental. It emerges through deliberate signaling, symbolic actions, and narrative framing led by individuals occupying formal or informal leadership roles. These figures serve as institutional anchors, providing consistency during transition while inviting experimentation. According to Schein (2010), organizational culture is formed through what leaders pay attention to, reward, and model—elements that cumulatively shape how members perceive their environment and react to it.

The literature in organization theory now increasingly recognizes the importance of adaptive culture as a strategic element to deal with uncertainty and rapid change. Adaptive cultures enable organizations to learn, adjust, and respond to environmental changes in a flexible and constructive way. Yet, the mechanisms through which leaders construct such environments remain contested. Some scholars highlight charisma and vision, others emphasize structural clarity or participatory governance. Regardless of approach, the consensus is that leadership is indispensable in shaping the cultural conditions under which change can be embraced rather than resisted.

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Although the importance of the role of leadership in driving organizational adaptive capabilities has been widely recognized, the reality is that there are still many challenges in its application. One major concern involves the mismatch between leader rhetoric and organizational practice. When leaders fail to align verbal commitments with operational behavior, cynicism can undermine cultural reform. This is particularly dangerous as it can lead to passive or even active resistance to change. Instead of supporting the transformation effort, employees become reluctant to engage or even silently oppose it. Kotter and Heskett (1992) argue that adaptive cultures require long-term commitment and behavioral modeling that reinforces stated intentions. This kind of culture will only grow in an environment where commitment to change is consistently demonstrated through concrete actions, not just slogans or internal communication campaigns. Without such real commitment, cultural reforms will only be cosmetic and unable to create authentic and sustainable adaptability in the organization.

Another issue relates to power dynamics and organizational inertia. Long-established structures and systems often create entrenched interests within organizations. Entrenched interests and legacy systems may resist change, even when leadership signals the need for it. This tension can produce cultural fragmentation, where different units interpret leadership messages in contradictory ways. As a result, instead of creating a cohesive and purposeful change movement, the organization experiences cultural dissonance. Cameron and Quinn (1999) note that without a coherent framework for cultural transformation, leadership efforts may dissolve into isolated initiatives lacking systemic traction. Cultural transformation requires consistent strategic direction, effective cross-unit communication, and comprehensive involvement from all levels of the organization.

External pressures—such as regulatory shifts or competitive disruptions—can outpace internal capacity for adaptation. Regulatory change, technological disruption, economic crisis, or increased market competition can create high uncertainty that tests an organization's adaptive capacity. These pressures demand rapid changes in strategy, operations, and flexibility in organizational culture. In such cases, even committed leaders may struggle to maintain cultural coherence. The literature points to the importance of sensemaking under pressure, where leaders facilitate shared understanding amidst complexity. Empirical clarity on how this process unfolds across varying organizational types remains limited.

These problems highlight a broader scholarly gap: the need to systematically examine how leadership behaviors, structures, and symbols contribute to the development of responsive cultures. Despite extensive theoretical discussion, few integrative frameworks explain how leadership functions as a sustained force for adaptive cultural alignment. Many leadership models are still partial, focusing on one dimension only without connecting it to the dynamics of the culture as a whole. This deficiency limits both theoretical refinement and practical application. In an increasingly fast-changing world of work, the need for a more thorough and contextualized understanding of the role of leadership in shaping adaptive cultures is becoming increasingly urgent.

Studying how leaders contribute to organizational responsiveness is especially important in environments marked by volatility, uncertainty, and change. As organizations confront unfamiliar challenges, the demand for cultural agility becomes more pronounced. Leadership, in this sense, is not simply about navigating crises—it is about preparing the organization to grow through disruption. In a constantly transforming world, the study of leadership's contribution to cultural responsiveness is no longer just an academic topic, but a strategic necessity for the long-term survival and growth of organizations.

This study aims to explore the mechanisms through which leadership shapes organizational culture in ways that support responsiveness to change. Through a critical review of established literature, the study seeks to identify theoretical models, practical approaches, and behavioral patterns that facilitate cultural alignment with dynamic environments. The findings will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of adaptive leadership as a cultural force within complex organizational systems.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative literature review approach, focusing on existing theoretical and empirical scholarship concerning leadership and organizational culture in the context of change. The method was selected to synthesize diverse perspectives across organizational studies, leadership theory, and cultural analysis. Following the structured procedure suggested by Jesson et al. (2001), the process involved systematic identification, selection, and evaluation of relevant sources. Emphasis was placed on peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, and landmark studies that provide insight into how leaders influence cultural responsiveness across different sectors.

Thematic analysis was applied to categorize findings into key dimensions: leader behavior and signaling, symbolic action, communication, reinforcement mechanisms, and contextual adaptation. Each of these dimensions was examined through interpretive analysis grounded in the work of established theorists. Sources were drawn from databases such as ProQuest, ScienceDirect, and Wiley Online Library, with inclusion criteria based on publication credibility, conceptual clarity, and relevance to the research question. The synthesis reflects a comparative interpretive strategy as outlined by Hart (1998), seeking to clarify conceptual overlaps and distinctions across theoretical frameworks. This method supports the construction of a coherent narrative regarding how leadership fosters an adaptive organizational culture.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Organizational landscapes rarely remain static. Market fluctuations, technological evolution, and evolving stakeholder expectations continuously reshape how institutions must operate. In these fluctuating environments, leadership becomes more than a matter of directing operations—it becomes a means of shaping how people interpret shifting realities. When turbulence arises, individuals look to those in authority for clarity, stability, and coherence in understanding what change entails (Mohamad & Hauer, 2017).

At the heart of leadership lies the capacity to interpret and translate complexity into purpose. Those who lead effectively construct meaning that resonates beyond operational logic. They articulate direction not only through policies or procedures but through compelling narratives that infuse decisions with emotional and cognitive relevance. This function enables people within the organization to attach significance to emerging priorities and transitions (Bezler, 2019).

Leaders who succeed in change-prone environments understand that language is a strategic tool. Language serves as a strategic instrument to shape collective perceptions, emotions and meanings. Through intentional framing, they influence how uncertainty is perceived and how collective identity is renegotiated. The framing done by leaders is critical in determining how individuals and groups understand the crisis, opportunity, and identity of the organization. Rather than impose direction unilaterally, they craft stories that draw connections between the past, present, and envisioned future. These narratives serve as scaffolding, allowing individuals to make sense of their place within evolving structures (Mehta et al., 2014).

Communication that fosters alignment is seldom accidental. It involves deliberate effort to repeat key themes, embody consistent messages, and maintain transparency about what is known and unknown. Such communication becomes a cultural resource—a shared vocabulary through which organizations discuss challenges and articulate response strategies. It is this shared lens that facilitates coordinated adaptation and trust in the face of disruption (Comfort & Resodihardjo, 2013). This communication cohesion allows the organization to act quickly and in unison, avoiding information fragmentation and interpretation conflicts.

In high-change settings, the power of metaphor becomes evident. Leaders use symbolic language to shift mindsets, break through resistance, and reframe what was once seen as risk into opportunity. Through symbolic language, leaders can reframe reality, especially in times of uncertainty. These symbols and metaphors are not superficial—they influence the emotional logic of collective decision-making, anchoring shifts in behavior to deeper layers of meaning. As such, influence becomes rooted less in hierarchy than in narrative coherence (Darcy & Kleiner, 2013). Leaders who are able to craft a coherent and meaningful story are more likely to gain widespread support, even from those who are initially resistant to change. Narrative leadership becomes a key instrument for shaping a resilient and responsive culture.

The act of leading through meaning construction is especially critical when organizations face ambiguous threats or unprecedented opportunities. Rather than offering technical solutions alone, effective leaders facilitate dialogue, foster reflection, and engage their teams in building a shared sense of what change requires. This approach builds a stronger emotional and cognitive foundation in the face of uncertainty. It is in this interpretive work—carefully shaping how transitions are understood—that culture becomes primed for adaptive response (Norris, 2017). A culture that is open to dialog, reflection and reinterpretation will be better equipped to deal with change because it does not rely on certainty, but on the flexibility of evolving meanings.

The influence of leadership on shaping a culture responsive to change begins with the leader's ability to articulate meaning. Leaders are not only strategic planners but also narrative constructors. Through stories, metaphors, and consistent communication, they establish the interpretive lens through which change is understood. According to Fairhurst and Sarr (1996), this sense-giving role is foundational in aligning collective perception with adaptive imperatives, especially in times of uncertainty.

Leadership fosters cultural adaptability through visible behaviors that convey commitment to learning and flexibility. Organizations tend to mirror the attitudes and priorities modeled by those at the top. When leaders demonstrate curiosity, openness to feedback, and comfort with ambiguity, they foster an environment where experimentation is valued. Yukl (2002) notes that such behavior enhances psychological safety, allowing employees to engage in creative problem-solving without fear of reprisal.

Symbolic leadership practices reinforce the cultural significance of change. Rituals, ceremonies, and recognitions linked to adaptation signal that responsiveness is not merely tactical but a shared value. These symbols embed the desired norms into the everyday experience of organizational members. Through symbolic actions, leaders affirm that adaptation is not a momentary response, but part of the organization's collective values and identity. Trice and Beyer (1993) argue that symbolic action bridges the gap between abstract values and practical routines, ensuring that responsiveness is lived rather than spoken.

Effective leaders also structure incentives and accountability systems that reward adaptability. When promotion, recognition, and resource allocation are tied to adaptive behavior, cultural change is more likely to take root. Leaders can create performance indicators that assess the extent to which a person contributes to the transformation process, based not only on the end result, but also on the learning process, cross-functional cooperation, or the courage to take measurable risks. According to Kotter (2007), systems alignment is critical in sustaining transformation; without structural reinforcement, cultural shifts often remain superficial and revert under pressure.

Leadership communication plays a central role in framing change as opportunity rather than threat. Through carefully chosen language and framing devices, leaders can influence how uncertainty is perceived. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) emphasize that successful change initiatives begin with sensemaking, where leaders reinterpret organizational identity in light of new realities. This process builds coherence and motivation across hierarchical levels.

Decentralization of decision-making is another mechanism that strengthens cultural responsiveness. Leaders who distribute authority empower teams to act in real-time, fostering agility. Spreitzer (1996) describes this empowerment as a psychological state wherein individuals feel a sense of meaning, competence, autonomy, and impact. When these conditions are met, adaptation becomes intrinsic rather than reactive.

Credibility is a key foundation in leadership that successfully drives cultural change in organizations. Employees assess alignment between stated intentions and enacted behavior. Discrepancies generate cynicism and resistance. Credibility is not just a personal attribute of the leader, but a mechanism for driving collective commitment and participation. Brown and Treviño (2006) assert that ethical leadership—defined by consistency, fairness, and integrity—builds the moral foundation for cultural transformation. Leaders who are perceived as trustworthy create the conditions necessary for collective commitment to change. This creates a work environment where the organization's values are not regarded as mere rhetoric, but rather as principles that guide actions.

In organizations with entrenched cultural norms, change requires not only leadership presence but persistence. Resistance often stems from uncertainty or attachment to familiar processes. Leaders must act as cultural architects, redesigning physical space, language, and routines to reinforce new values. Armenakis and Bedeian (1999) suggest that successful change involves unfreezing existing schemas, introducing new frames, and refreezing them through reinforcement and stabilization.

Leadership style has a significant impact on the manner and speed of cultural adaptation in an organization. Transformational leaders, for example, serve as change agents who inspire team members through a clear vision and strong personal influence. They not only set ambitious goals, but also build deep relationships with employees, encouraging them to actively contribute to the change process. By creating an environment that supports innovation and collaboration, transformational leaders can accelerate cultural adaptation by motivating employees to adopt new values and participate in initiatives that support organizational goals. Transactional leaders focus more on exchange and compliance, which can limit the potential for deeper cultural change. They tend to rely on reward and punishment systems to motivate employees, which may result in short-term compliance but does not necessarily encourage greater involvement in the change process. Bass and Avolio (2004) point out that while transactional leadership styles can be effective in certain situations, the most enduring cultural transformations often occur when transformational attributes, such as individualized attention and intellectual stimulation, are integrated into leadership practices. By combining these two approaches, leaders can create a balance that allows for more holistic and sustainable cultural adaptation.

The integration of transformational attributes in leadership not only accelerates the cultural adaptation process, but also improves the quality of employees' work lives (Susilo, 2018). When leaders provide individualized attention to team members, they create a greater sense of belonging and engagement. Intellectual stimulation, on the other hand, encourages employees to think critically and innovate, which is crucial in a constantly changing environment (Pasovska & Miceski, 2018). Thus, leaders who are able to combine transformational and transactional leadership styles not only facilitate faster cultural adaptation, but also build organizations that are more resilient and responsive to the challenges faced in the future. This suggests that effective leadership must be able to adapt to the context and needs of the organization, creating a culture that supports sustainable growth and development (Asadi, 2019).

Organizational responsiveness is enhanced when leaders prioritize diversity and inclusion. Diverse teams bring multiple perspectives that expand the organization's capacity to respond to novel conditions. Inclusive leadership, as discussed by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006), involves inviting diverse input, acknowledging differences, and making collective learning visible. Such leadership fosters a culture of voice, where adaptability becomes a shared enterprise.

Technology introduces additional complexity in shaping responsive cultures. Leaders must integrate digital tools not only operationally but culturally. Virtual collaboration, data transparency, and rapid iteration demand new norms of engagement. Avolio, Kahai, and Dodge (2001) argue that e-leadership involves redefining influence, authority, and presence in digitally mediated environments. Those who succeed set expectations around agility, digital literacy, and collaboration across platforms.

Globalization adds another dimension, requiring leaders to reconcile global coherence with local relevance. Multinational organizations face the challenge of establishing a shared cultural core while adapting to diverse regulatory, social, and market conditions. Leaders must not only manage internal changes and market dynamics, but also bridge differences in culture, laws, and social norms across multiple operational sites. Osland et al. (2006) emphasize the need for global leadership competencies—such as cultural intelligence and boundary-spanning communication—to support culturally embedded responsiveness. Making cultural differences an asset rather than an obstacle, global leaders can build an organizational structure that is inclusive, adaptive and competitive in a dynamic global era.

Ultimately, leaders shape responsive cultures through a combination of clarity, empathy, and strategic discipline. They do not simply tell organizations how to change; they create the internal conditions under which change is interpreted as legitimate, necessary, and meaningful. Their actions build trust, align systems, and sustain momentum. As Schein (2010) concludes, the essence of leadership is shaping and embedding culture—and nowhere is this more vital than in moments when change becomes existential.

CONCLUSION

The shaping of an organizational culture that remains responsive to change is fundamentally intertwined with leadership. Across a wide spectrum of literature, it becomes clear that leaders guide transformation not only through directives or strategy but through meaning-making, behavioral modeling, symbolic action, and structural alignment. Cultural adaptability emerges from trust, clarity, and coherence—elements that leaders embed over time through sustained, visible commitment. Leadership, in this regard, is less about control than cultivation—creating a space where change is not feared but embraced.

The findings suggest that leadership development programs must emphasize cultural literacy, emotional intelligence, and interpretive skill in addition to technical competence. As organizations encounter mounting complexity, the leader's ability to shape perception, frame disruption constructively, and reinforce adaptive norms becomes a strategic necessity. The study affirms that leadership is not external to culture—it is the force that guides its evolution and sustains its integrity in the midst of flux. Organizations should invest in mechanisms that allow leaders at all levels to develop the skills and awareness necessary to foster adaptive cultures. This includes not only formal training but also mentoring, feedback systems, and reflection practices. Researchers are encouraged to further investigate the intersection between leadership behavior and cultural adaptation across varied sectors and cultural settings to generate broader and more nuanced theoretical refinement.

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