

**Exploring how adaptive leadership is enacted and experienced in the South
African Aviation Industry, and how it Influences Employee Adaptive
Performance in a Complex and Evolving Operational Context**

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i. **Abstract**

This study explored the experience and implementation of adaptive leadership in South African aviation organisations, a sector characterised by regulatory complexity, technological upheaval, and strict safety standards. The research aimed to understand the interaction between leadership behaviours, organisational conditions, and employee adaptation in maintaining performance amid a changing environment. Using an interpretivist worldview and a phenomenological approach, the study employed qualitative methods, including 16 semi-structured interviews with leaders and employees from various aviation organisations. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning within participants' lived experiences.

The findings show that adaptive leadership in aviation is marked by evidence-based decision-making, empowerment, and the creation of psychological safety. Organisational structures and cultures either support or hinder adaptation, with decentralised decision-making and alignment of policies and practices identified as key enablers. Resilience, learning agility, proactivity, emotional intelligence, and especially spiritual grounding all enhance an employee's capacity to adapt. The research suggests that adaptive leadership and adaptive performance are interconnected processes fostered by a culture that emphasises learning within the organisation. The study introduces an improved conceptual framework that integrates leadership, organisational, and individual elements of adaptability, offering practical guidance for developing adaptable capabilities in safety-critical environments.

ii. **Keywords**

Adaptive Leadership: A values-based approach that mobilises individuals to navigate regulatory complexity and technological upheaval through evidence-based decision-making and empowerment.

Adaptive Performance: The capacity of employees to maintain operational standards during change, supported by resilience, learning agility, proactivity, and emotional intelligence.

Psychological Safety: An organisational condition established by leadership that enables interpersonal risk-taking and learning, allowing employees to adapt without fear of retribution in safety-critical environments.

iii. **Declaration**

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Philosophy in Change Leadership at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

23 November 2025

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1. Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research Problem

1.1. Introduction

The aviation industry works in one of the world's most complicated and tightly controlled environments. It is an ecosystem that is constantly changing due to new technologies, new rules, and safety needs. In a setting like this, traditional leadership styles that rely on hierarchy and control often don't work well for the unpredictable, interconnected problems that arise. This has made it necessary for leaders and organisations to learn, adapt, and lead in times of uncertainty.

This chapter introduces the research problem, clarifies its business and theoretical rationale, and outlines the study's objectives. It begins by contextualising the aviation sector's complexity, then defines the research problem and formulates the key research questions. The chapter concludes by signalling how subsequent chapters will build upon this foundation.

1.2. Background and Business Context

The aviation industry is transforming in unprecedented ways due to new technologies, evolving regulations, and the increasing complexity of global air transport systems (ICAO, 2024). Aviation is among the most safety-critical industries worldwide. To stay connected globally while ensuring safety and efficiency, it must continually adapt to new standards, technologies, and business practices.

Baldwin (2016) highlights the strict, complex regulations governing the industry. The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) manages a comprehensive set of rules internationally, including over 12,000 Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) across 19 Annexes, as well as Procedures for Air Navigation Services (PANS). These frameworks are regularly updated to include emerging technologies and practices, reflecting the rapid industry changes (Baldwin, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic and other global events have further complicated aviation operations, making it harder to maintain smooth operations. ICAO, (2020) assessment of the pandemic's impact indicates that civil aviation was among the hardest-hit industries due to widespread travel bans, border closures, and operational uncertainties. These disruptions highlight the need for adaptive leadership that can manage uncertainty, respond quickly to change, and maintain operations during crises.

Technological advancements have also accelerated the pace of change in aviation. According to ICAO's Future of Aviation paper (2019), the industry has evolved significantly since the early days of experimental flights. Today, over 100,000 commercial flights operate daily worldwide, averaging about 400 departures each hour. As this growth continues, automation, digitalisation, and data analytics have advanced substantially. Therefore, aviation companies and leaders must be adaptable, forward-thinking, and prepared for ongoing change.

These global shifts bring new leadership challenges for aviation organisations. Leaders constantly balance control and innovation, striving to uphold safety while adjusting to regulatory and industry changes. As Sott and Bender (2025) argue, the traditional command-and-control leadership model increasingly falls short in managing the complex, adaptive challenges of modern organisations. Effective aviation leadership now requires flexibility, a focus on learning, and skills in stakeholder engagement amid uncertainty.

Heifetz,(1994) introduced the concept of adaptive leadership, a valuable framework for understanding these challenges. It emphasises mobilising individuals to address issues lacking clear technical solutions, prioritising learning, collaboration, and adaptability over hierarchical authority (Grashow et al., 2009). This leadership approach has proven effective in high-stakes fields such as public health, education, and disaster response, where uncertainty, interdependence, and systemic risk are common (Hubbard et al., 2025; Sundowo et al., 2024).

Such leadership skills are especially vital in aviation. Nuur and Ariyanto (2024) emphasise that effective aviation leadership requires extensive technical expertise and the ability to adapt to ongoing changes driven by technological, regulatory, and operational complexities. Despite this, there remains a limited understanding of how adaptive leadership manifests within the aviation industry.

This research aims to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of leaders and employees within aviation organisations. By examining how adaptive leadership is understood and practised in this high-stakes regulatory environment, the research aims to shed light on how adaptability is developed, tested, and applied, key elements in maintaining safety and fostering progress in an industry where stability and change must be carefully balanced.

1.3. Theoretical Background and Research Gap

The concept of adaptability has gained increased attention in modern leadership and organisational research, reflecting the growing complexity and instability of today's work environments. In this discussion, two key constructs, namely, Adaptive Leadership (AL) and Adaptive Performance (AP), have become essential for understanding how organisations and individuals navigate uncertainty, continuous change, and disruption.

1.3.1. Adaptive Leadership (AL)

Heifetz (1994) introduced adaptive leadership, which concerns how well leaders can get employees and systems to work together to solve problems that lack precise or technical solutions. Adaptive leadership differs from conventional leadership models based on authority, stability, or technical proficiency; it prioritises learning, experimentation, and collaboration as vital for organisational survival in intricate environments. Grashow et al. (2009) they characterise adaptive leadership as the practice of empowering individuals to confront challenging realities, recalibrate values, and devise innovative responses to evolving situations.

Over the last 20 years, adaptive leadership has evolved from a theoretical framework into a practical leadership model used across many fields, including education, healthcare, and public administration. Researchers such as Côté (2022) and Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) have strengthened its theoretical basis by identifying empowerment, emotional intelligence, and shared problem-solving as its main behavioural dimensions. Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) propose a conceptual framework that connects adaptive leadership with systems thinking to manage VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environments. This framework is especially relevant to aviation, where leaders need to balance safety, regulation, and innovation.

Sott and Bender (2025) note in their systematic review of the adaptive leadership literature that most empirical studies focus on Western contexts, particularly the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Spain. There is not much research in developing countries such as South Africa. Additionally, their review indicates that adaptive leadership research is overly concentrated in fields such as healthcare and education, resulting in a notable deficiency in high-stakes, heavily regulated industries such as aviation (Sott & Bender, 2025). The absence of context-specific research limits our understanding of how adaptive leadership operates in environments characterised by rigorous oversight, technological reliance, and safety-critical operations; conditions prevalent in the aviation industry.

1.3.2. Adaptive Performance (AP)

According to Park and Park (2020), Adaptive Performance is the ability of an employee to adapt to new tasks, situations, and environmental demands. It goes beyond just doing your job well to include learning quickly, bouncing back from setbacks, and solving problems before they happen (Setiyadi, 2024; Bednall & Hendricks, 2021). At the organisational level, adaptive performance indicates the effectiveness with which individuals and teams respond to technological disruption, regulatory changes, and operational ambiguity, all of which are intrinsic to aviation environments.

Studies on adaptive performance indicate that adaptability at the employee level is not solely an individual characteristic but a result influenced by leadership style, organisational culture, and contextual factors (Bonini et al., 2024). Research by Bednall and Hendricks (2021) and Yang et al. (2020) underscores the importance of managerial interventions, including employee selection, training, and job design, as essential facilitators of adaptive performance. Research on adaptive performance, like adaptive leadership, is predominantly industry-specific and geographically biased, with insufficient examination of how these dynamics manifest in highly specialised, safety-critical fields such as aviation.

1.3.3. Closing the Gap

The convergence of adaptive leadership and adaptive performance forms a promising yet underexplored theoretical area. Existing studies confirm that adaptive leadership can enhance individual and team adaptability (Côté, 2022; Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023); however, there is limited understanding of how this relationship functions in industries that demand precision, compliance, and real-time decision-making. The aviation industry, especially in the South African context, offers a unique environment for examining this connection, given its complex mix of technical systems, regulatory frameworks, and human factors.

1.4. Research aim, Objectives and Questions

This research aims to enhance both theoretical and practical understanding by investigating the experience and implementation of adaptive leadership within a complex aviation regulatory framework and its impact on employee adaptive performance. By situating the research within the South African aviation context, the research fills a significant void in the literature, answering Sott and Bender's (2025) call for greater geographical and industrial diversity in adaptive leadership research. In doing so, it hopes to improve the world's understanding of adaptability as a multi-level phenomenon that includes leadership behaviour, employee experience, and organisational capability.

This research aims to investigate the experience, comprehension, and implementation of adaptive leadership within the South African aviation industry, as well as its impact on employee adaptive performance. In an environment characterised by regulatory complexity, safety-sensitive operations, and rapid technological change, understanding how leaders and employees adapt provides essential insights into the leadership skills and organisational dynamics crucial for long-term performance.

This research fundamentally aims to investigate the correlation between leadership and employee adaptability, acknowledging that in intricate and dynamic systems like aviation, adaptability transcends individual characteristics and represents a collective and systemic competence. The research is based on a qualitative interpretivist framework, enabling an exploration of the lived experiences of leaders and employees within aviation organisations (Saunders et al, 2022).

1.4.1. Objective of the Research

To explore the lived experiences of adaptive leadership and its effect on employee adaptive performance in the South African aviation industry.

1.4.2. The Main Research Question

How is adaptive leadership enacted and experienced, and how does it influence employee adaptive performance in a complex and evolving operational context?

1.4.3. Sub-Questions

RQ1: How do leaders in the South African aviation industry demonstrate behaviours that support AL in complex and evolving conditions?

RQ2: How do employees experience and respond to these leadership behaviours in terms of their own ability to adapt and perform in complex and evolving conditions?

RQ3: What organisational and contextual factors enable or constrain AL and employee AP within the aviation industry?

1.4.4. Research Scope

This research highlights the understanding of adaptive leadership and its effect on employee adaptive performance in the South African aviation industry. The research examines how leaders and employees perceive and interpret adaptability in their everyday work, decision-making, and organisational interactions.

The empirical setting includes specific aviation organisations operating within the South African civil aviation system. These consist of regulatory agencies, air navigation service providers, airlines, and other aviation organisations that work to ensure safety, compliance, and operational continuity. Including various types of organisations helps us better understand how adaptive leadership functions in different aviation environments, while maintaining consistency within a single, safety-critical industry.

Following the interpretivist qualitative approach, the research employs a semi-structured interview technique to capture participants' lived experiences (Saunders et al, 2022). Data were collected from both leaders and employees, allowing for an examination of different perspectives within the leadership–follower relationship. This dual-level focus enhances the research's ability to identify the relational and behavioural factors that support adaptive leadership and adaptive performance.

The geographical scope is limited to South Africa, requiring that findings be understood within this socio-economic and regulatory context. The aviation industry in South Africa is governed by both international frameworks, such as ICAO standards, and domestic legislation, like the Civil Aviation Act of 2009, which influence leadership practices and organisational culture. The research offers valuable insights into adaptive leadership within a safety-regulated environment; however, its findings might not be directly applicable to non-regulated industries or aviation settings in other countries.

1.4.5. Research Report's Structure

This research report has seven chapters, each of which builds on the one before and helps readers understand the research's purpose, theoretical foundations, methodological approach, findings, and conclusions. The structure ensures that the research process makes sense, from identifying the problem to interpreting the results and providing helpful advice (Levitt et al., 2018). Figure 1 below indicates how the report is structured.

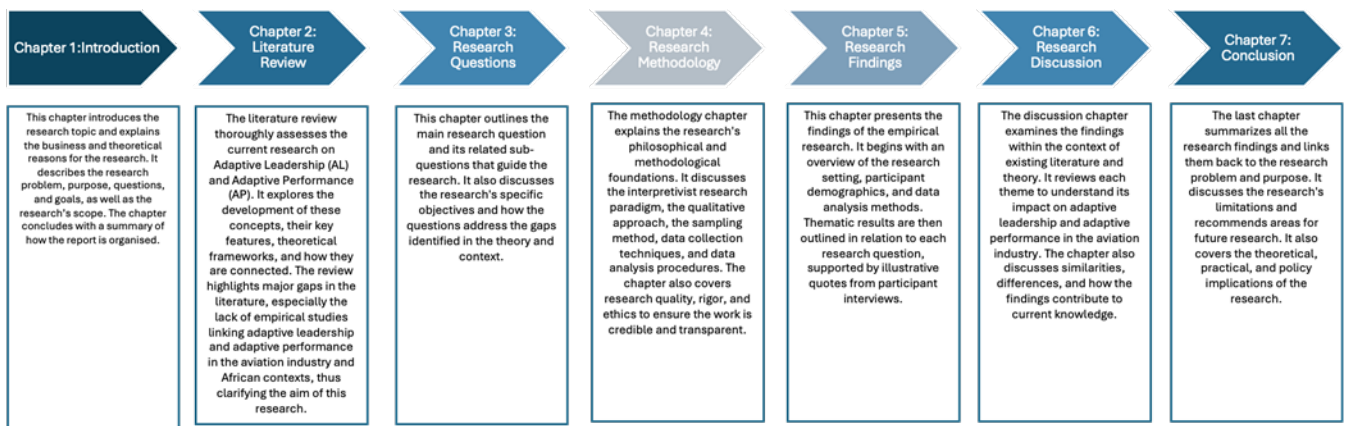


Figure 1: Research Report Structure. Author's Analysis

1.5. Chapter Summary

After outlining the business relevance, theoretical underpinnings, research topic, questions, and goals, the next chapter provides a thorough overview of the literature on this topic. This literature review will critically examine the development and application of adaptive leadership theory, the features of adaptive leadership in complex systems, the role of followers in adaptive processes, the difference between technical and adaptive challenges, and the increasing gaps in integrating leadership approaches. Through this synthesis, the chapter will establish the theoretical basis and identify the research gap that guides and justifies the present investigation.

2. Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter offers a comprehensive review of the literature that supports and frames this research. The goal of the literature review is to analyse the theoretical and empirical foundations of adaptive leadership (AL) and adaptive performance (AP), and to clarify how these two concepts interact within complex organisational settings, such as aviation. The literature review aims to establish a conceptual framework and analytical perspective for interpreting the empirical findings related to the research goal: to examine the experience of adaptive leadership in a complex and dynamic aviation environment and its effect on employee adaptive performance.

The chapter is divided into two main parts that demonstrate the research's two primary objectives. The first part discusses Adaptive Leadership (AL), according to Heifetz et al. (2009), a framework introduced by Heifetz in 1994 that scholars like Linsky (2017), Côté (2022), and Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) have expanded on. This section examines how adaptive leadership theory has evolved and how it has been applied through a series of related subtopics.

The second section examines Adaptive Performance (AP) from employees' perspectives. This concept expands the research to explore how individuals and teams respond to and apply adaptability within organisational systems, going beyond leadership behaviour.

Together, these two bodies of literature establish the theoretical foundation for this research. Adaptive leadership explains how leaders promote learning and adaptability in complex environments, while adaptive performance shows how individuals and teams apply adaptability in their routine tasks.

Figure 2 below serves as a visual guide for the reader, showing the two main ideas, Adaptive Leadership and Adaptive Performance, and their subthemes.

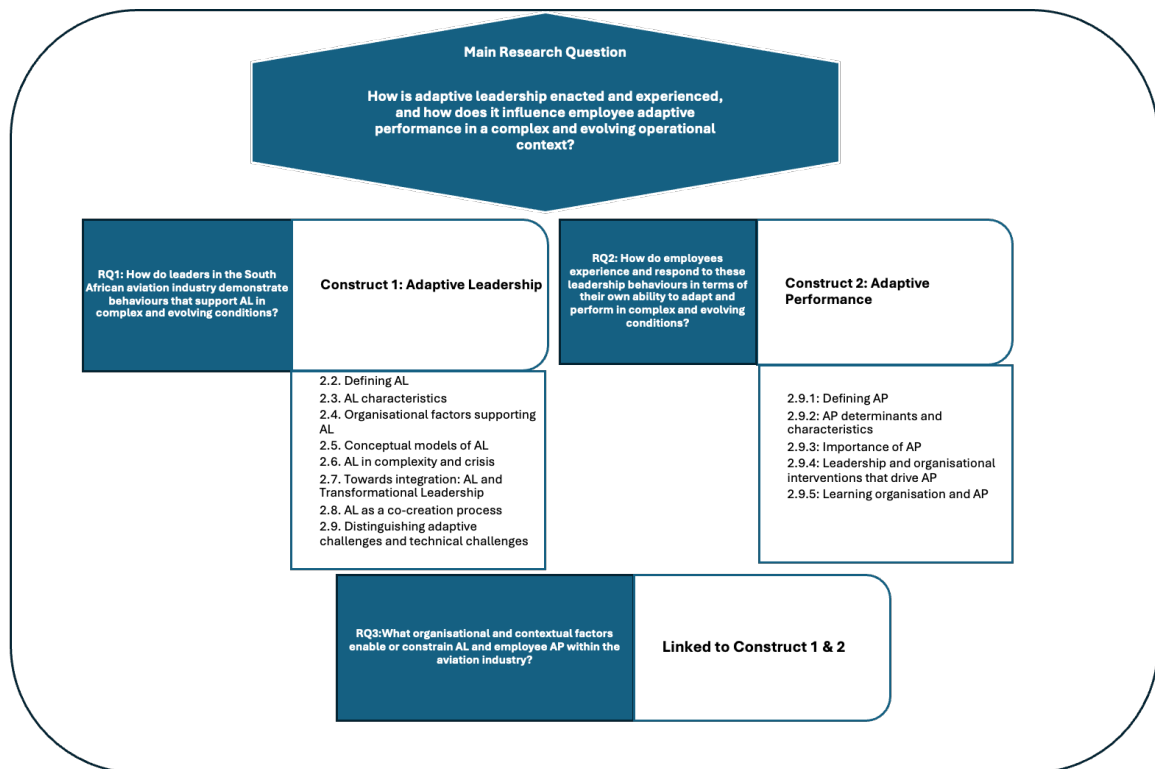


Figure 2: Literature Review Roadmap

Adaptive Leadership Literature Review

2.2. Defining Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is a dynamic, values-based approach that enables individuals and organisations to respond to complex, uncertain, and rapidly changing environments. According to Sott and Bender (2025), in light of change, adaptive leadership helps managers recognise and meet the particular requirements of their teams, promote cooperation and creativity, and create a strong, flexible workplace. Their definition further indicates that this kind of leadership reflects a worldview that regards flexibility and adaptability as fundamental ideas (Sott & Bender, 2025).

The literature suggests that corporate leaders today must confront challenging issues and concerns that require leadership capable of devising and implementing creative, timely, collaborative solutions (Randall & Coakley, 2007). As Cote (2022) notes, in reaction to an unforeseen event, leaders must respond quickly and make judgments. These actions could react to an urgent crisis or opportunity, but they might also arise in an unanticipated non-immediate scenario that leaders believe calls for a quick response (Cote, 2022).

In the face of rapid technological progress, evolving regulatory environments, and new challenges within the aviation industry, the development of leadership effectiveness remains a key topic among aviation companies worldwide (Nuur & Ariyanto, 2024). Adaptive leadership is particularly well-suited for aviation organisations, where compliance and agility are crucial.

Literature often describes adaptive leadership as the ability to identify and overcome obstacles. Authors like Sott & Bender (2025) and London (2023) highlight that adaptive leaders foresee problems and take proactive steps, not just during crises. In contrast, some authors, such as Hubbard et al. (2025), take a more limited view, defining adaptive leadership as the ability to respond effectively to unexpected challenges and changing conditions. The views of Sott & Bender (2025) and London (2023) seem particularly relevant to the aviation industry as organizations work to navigate financial constraints, recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, and adapt to ongoing demands for innovation in control systems.

Notably, a common theme among the authors is the idea of adaptive leadership as a process. For example, Cote (2022) defines adaptive leadership as a multifaceted process encompassing several elements, such as recognising technical and adaptive obstacles, executing essential leadership behaviours, and assisting followers in resolving their complicated concerns. Similarly, Randall and Coakley (2007) as well as Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) define adaptive leadership as a process that necessitates innovation and contributions from all relevant stakeholders.

Adaptive leadership is defined in this paper as a multifarious and context-responsive process that helps actors to interact with complexity, permit learning, and propel systematic change across organisational levels. This knowledge is derived from the writings of Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023), who see adaptive leadership in the framework of Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous (VUCA) situations as involving linked aspects at individual, team, and organisational levels. Their viewpoint goes beyond personal characteristics to incorporate structural and cultural dynamics, a factor of great relevance for highly regulated, safety-critical industries like aviation.

Since it allows the interaction among leadership behaviours, organisational enablers, and follower experiences, all fundamental to understanding how adaptive leadership is implemented within the aviation industry, this systems-informed concept provides an acceptable basis for the current research (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023).

2.3. Adaptive Leader Characteristics

The concept of adaptive leadership is complex, with various writers proposing different qualities or characteristics. According to the literature, Sott and Bender (2025) and other authors emphasise traits including empathy, long-term vision, resilience (Sott & Bender, 2025b), self-balance, emotional intelligence (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023a), employee empowerment (Dunn, 2020), and problem-solving (Bagwell, 2020). Notably, Cote (2022) takes a process-oriented approach, emphasising six adaptive leadership traits that facilitate the handling of difficult situations.

Cote's (2022) behaviour approach offers a more sophisticated view of the adaptive process, even though traits like empathy and dependability are essential for adaptive leadership. Given the nature of the South African aviation industry operating in a VUCA environment that requires both strategic foresight and cross-functional coordination, this research adopts Cote's (2022) six adaptive leadership traits as a guiding set of behavioural markers to help identify and interpret how adaptive South African aviation leaders and employees experience leadership.

2.4. Organisational Factors Supporting Adaptive Leadership

Much of the research on adaptive leadership focuses on individual qualities; however, fewer studies examine the organisational context needed for it to flourish. For instance, Sott & Bender (2025) emphasise the need for organisational elements to support adaptive leadership. They argue that creating an atmosphere where adaptive leadership can flourish mostly depends on organisational culture, structure, and procedures (Sott & Bender, 2025).

Similarly, Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) highlight an agile and resilient culture as one of the organisational factors supporting adaptive leadership. London (2023) also, highlights how rapidly leaders act is probably influenced by how empowered and trusted they are by their boards, team members, and other stakeholders, both inside and outside of their organisations.

Adding a team-level perspective, Dunn (2020) highlights that cohesive teams are necessary for organisational and operational flexibility. In his paper, he explores adaptive leadership as one possible approach for school leaders and argues that teams that can demonstrate critical thinking, are at ease with ambiguity and decentralisation, are ready to take calculated risks, and can quickly adapt in response to ongoing situational assessments (Dunn, 2020).

These research findings collectively suggest that adaptive leadership is activated and maintained by supportive organisational processes rather than being solely a personal trait. Recognizing the organisational factors that facilitate adaptive leadership is crucial within the context of the South African aviation industry, where regulatory compliance interacts with complex operational challenges.

2.5. Conceptual Models of Adaptive Leadership

Recent literature has shifted some academics toward conceptualising adaptive leadership through integrated frameworks or models, particularly in high-stakes or dynamic situations. For instance, Abukalusa & Oosthuizen (2023) created a systems-based adaptive leadership approach, stressing how individual, team, and organisational elements interact to negotiate VUCA settings. Their model synthesised both literature and practitioner interviews and was built using a systems thinking technique.

Similarly, in their research, Sott and Bender (2025) explored the essential traits required for adaptive leadership and primary organisational elements that support its growth. They proposed a conceptual model that links the traits of adaptive leadership with organisational elements and suggests that if well-coordinated, this could lead to long-term competitive advantage and sustainable development (Sott & Bender,2025).

Another research by London (2023) sought to comprehend the organisational and interpersonal elements that affect leaders' capacity to respond swiftly to unforeseen circumstances, crises or opportunities. He employed a model that suggests leaders will bring about change when they are aware of input, focused on higher-level objectives, biased toward action, empowered, and unhindered by route dependencies. Commonly underlined in these models are the requirements of feedback loops, distributed decision-making, and ongoing learning systems (Sott & Bender,2025;Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023).

This study will utilize these conceptual frameworks to guide the research and shape the analysis, not to develop a new model. Specifically, the systemic perspective proposed by Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) offers a relevant lens for evaluating how adaptive leadership is perceived within the diverse, multi-level operational environment of the South African aviation industry.

2.6. Adaptive Leadership in Complexity and Crisis: Twofold function

Adaptive leadership's dual ability in crisis response and proactive navigation of complexity and ambiguity is becoming more well-known.

Crisis management (Reactive role): Research that was compiled by Sundowo et al. (2024) investigated the changing nature of leadership in view of fast technological progress and socioeconomic changes. The authors discovered that although models for adaptive leadership have developed in response to environmental unpredictability, they usually prioritise short-term crisis management over long-term organisational change (Sundowo et al., 2024).

Complexity (Proactive role): Conversely, Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) offer a fresh viewpoint on integrating systems thinking with leadership techniques to develop an adaptive leadership framework that can navigate the volatile, uncertain, and complex (VUCA) environment. These authors reinforce the goal of adaptive leadership in empowering followers to tackle adaptive difficulties and adjust to a constantly changing environment, they perceive adaptive leadership as an ongoing strategy alignment and systems thinking rather than merely a reactive approach (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023).

Studies addressing reactive and proactive roles: The following studies, including Sott & Bender (2025), London (2023), Cote (2022), and Dunn (2020), rather than isolating crisis from complexity, let adaptive leadership be a fluid practice spanning both. These academics contend that companies must be "adaptive by design," capable of reacting to crises and growing in anticipation of future upheaval.

Not only is this difference theoretical, but it is also highly pertinent to this research. The distinction lies between the reactive function of adaptive leadership—responding to crises, and its proactive role, navigating ongoing complexity. Both quick, high-stakes events (e.g., safety breaches or legislative changes) and longer-term systemic developments (e.g., digital transformation, drone integration, or policy reform) define regulatory organisations such as SACAA (Nuur & Ariyanto, 2024). Knowing how adaptive leadership is experienced in each of these fields helps one to see leadership in action from a more holistic standpoint.

Incorporating this two-fold viewpoint will help the research to surface the behaviours, organisational supports, and tensions resulting from both kinds of difficulties, as well as to capture the whole spectrum of adaptive demands imposed on leaders and employees. This difference will also inform the construction of the theme framework for data analysis and the development of the interview guide.

2.7. Towards Integration: Adaptive and Transformational Leadership

Although transformational and adaptive leadership are sometimes seen as separate strategies, new research shows an increasing possibility to combine their ideas, especially

in contexts demanding both system-level responsiveness and significant change (Sundowo et al., 2024). Matafwali et al. (2024) define transformational leaders as those who inspire and motivate employees to exceed expectations and embrace change.

Matafwali et al. (2024) and Sundowo et al. (2024) in their studies explicitly argue for a synthesis of adaptive and transformational leadership. Matafwali et al. (2024), in the research examining the connection between organisational performance and leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa, one of their key findings shows that effective organisational performance in a variety of industries is strongly correlated with transformational and adaptive leadership styles. Similarly, with Sundowo et al. (2024) in their research, examining how leadership is changing in the face of swift socioeconomic and technological change, one of their findings indicated that leaders may better manage technology advancements, encourage creativity, and strengthen organisational resilience by fusing transformational vision with adaptive tactics.

Supporting the ideas for the studies mentioned above, Huang et al. (2023) and Heifetz & Linsky (2017) criticise the limits of transformative leadership, particularly in uncertain or complex environments. Heifetz and Linsky (2017) argue in their book that, as a framework for leadership, transformation on its own is a problem. They highlight the following two issues, “first, [transformation] encourages self-referential grandiosity, [because] I have a transformational vision... I am going to sell it to you.” Leadership seen in this light too readily becomes about “me and my vision” rather than the collective work to be done” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017, p. xii). Moreover, they argue that:

“...by itself, the transformational mindset tends to be ahistorical. It tends to start with the change idea, perhaps a best practice with little respect for the soil in which it must take root” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017, p. xii-xiii).

Furthermore, Huang et al. (2023) highlight that transformational leadership is a type of self-centred leadership that does not concentrate on any diagnostic procedure to understand the conflict between ideals and novel circumstances before developing a course of action.

This research is based on adaptive leadership theory, although the literature suggests integrating adaptive and transformational leadership. This research does not directly compare or integrate leadership theories, but it accepts this discourse as a theoretical backdrop and remains open to uncovering convergence points organically through participants' experiences.

2.8. Adaptive Leadership as a Co-Created Process Between Leaders and Followers

More often, traditional leadership styles place employees or followers as obliging beneficiaries of leadership power. Emerging studies, however, show that followers of adaptive leadership actively participate in the process.

Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) and Huang et al. (2023) investigate how employees could experience adaptive change emotionally. According to their research, employees frequently feel more confused amid adaptive difficulties, experience role ambiguity, and are stressed (Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023; Huang et al., 2023). They contend that adaptive leaders must demonstrate presence, compassion, emotional intelligence, and the ability for deep listening to allow employees to navigate change without disengagement or resistance.

More broadly, London (2023) addresses how adaptive leadership helps employees adaptive performance, that is, the capacity of employees to modify their behaviour, acquire new abilities, and react dynamically to changing needs.

Including a key dimension, Cote (2022) and Hubbard et al. (2025) present the concept of co-creation in adaptive leadership. These studies argue that, rather than being a leader-driven process, adaptive leadership is a follower-centric phenomenon where leaders and employees collaboratively identify problems, share responsibility for change, and develop creative solutions together. Beyond leader-centricity, the employee-centered approach highlights the shared agency necessary for negotiating complexity (Cote, 2022; Hubbard, et al., 2025).

Understanding employee experiences and contributions is vital because of the aviation organisation's collaborative and risk-aware work environment. Aviation employees and leaders must collaborate to uphold safety and security standards while adjusting to industry changes.

2.9. Distinguishing Adaptive Challenges from Technical Challenges

One important contribution of adaptive leadership theory is its differentiation between technical and adaptive challenges. On the one hand Heifetz and Linsky (2017) explain technological difficulties as clearly defined problems with known answers that can be carried out by professionals applying current knowledge and processes. On the other hand, adaptive challenges are ill-defined and complex, requiring stakeholders to engage in learning, experimentation, and often the transformation of identities (Cote, 2022; Dunn,

2020;Randall & Coakley, 2007). Technical knowledge alone cannot address these difficulties.

Furthermore, Randall and Coakley (2007) stress that no single viewpoint provides the whole answer, and adaptive difficulties often require the engagement of several stakeholders. Thus, key elements of adaptive leadership practice are co-creation processes, where leaders and subordinates jointly define challenges and provide answers.

This distinction between technical and adaptive challenges is vital in the complex, ever-evolving aviation industry, where some issues are technical and others are adaptive. Exploring how aviation organisations' leaders and employees recognise and respond to these challenges can improve understanding of how adaptive leadership is perceived and experienced within these organisations.

Adaptive Performance Literature Review

2.9.1. Defining Adaptive Performance (AP)

As workplaces grow more dynamic, technology-driven, and unpredictable, Adaptive Performance (AP) has become a more important topic in studies on organisations and leadership. In general, AP is the capacity of people and groups to adapt well to new conditions and changes (Park & Park, 2020).

Hesketh and Neal (1999) were the first to propose a framework to describe the cognitive and behavioural skills that enable workers to adjust to shifting job demands. Since then, definitions in the literature have shown both similarities and little differences. Most researchers agree that AP shows how well a person or organisation can adjust to changing work conditions, new technology, or unanticipated problems. Setiyadi (2024) and Park and Park (2020) characterise adaptability as the ability to adjust successfully and swiftly to novel situations, establishing it as a fundamental behavioural talent. Kim (2020) broadens this viewpoint to the organisational level, emphasising how collective flexibility facilitates rapid organisational responses to external changes.

Recent studies continue to highlight the behavioural characteristics of adaptive performance. Bonini et al. (2024) characterise adaptive performance (AP) as a collection of behaviours exhibited by employees in response to or in the management of change, encompassing the adaptation to new tasks, procedures, or technology. Likewise, researchers including Jundt and Shoss (2023), Kaltiainen and Hakanen (2020), Viteroulie et al. (2024), Cheng and Dong (2024), Xu and Zhang (2024), and Nandini et al. (2020)

assert that adaptive performance is not a fixed characteristic, but a manifestation of observable behaviours exhibited in dynamic work environments. Some, like Setiyadi (2024), separate adaptation into three levels: individual, team, and organisational. This shows that adaptability in complex systems is multi-layered.

In general, the scholars agree that adaptable performance is a behavioural skill that helps people and organisations work well as things change. This emphasis on behaviour is highly relevant to the study's environment because aviation professionals must continuously adapt to technological, legal, and operational changes, rendering adaptable performance an essential result of adaptive leadership.

2.9.2. Determinants and characteristics of Adaptive Performance

Researchers believe that adaptive performance (AP) is influenced by a mix of individual, team, and organisational characteristics that help workers perform well in circumstances that are constantly changing and often unclear. Understanding these variables is crucial for organisations aiming to improve workforce adaptation and resilience (Setiyadi et al., 2024).

Setiyadi et al. (2024) delineate adaptability, resilience, and learning agility as essential human traits that facilitate adaptive behaviour at the individual level. Likewise, Bonini et al. (2024) characterise high-performing adaptable personnel as those proficient in rapid skill acquisition and critical problem-solving, attributes that enable them to adapt swiftly to changing demands.

Cognitive and personality characteristics are also quite important. Bednall and Hendricks (2021) discovered that cognitive flexibility and certain facets of the Big Five personality characteristics, including openness to experience and conscientiousness, are positively correlated with adaptive performance. In addition, the work of Hanschild and Konrad, which is highlighted in Bednall and Hendricks (2021), emphasises self-regulation and self-leadership as essential factors influencing adaptation, connecting these internal processes to behavioural constancy in the face of change.

Numerous writers have examined these traits in greater depth. A recent study has highlighted resilience and adaptability as significant themes. Setiyadi (2024) and Park and Park (2020) define agility as the capacity to endure, recover, and evolve from challenges—an essential quality in high-stakes environments such as aviation. Park and Park (2020) interestingly build on this idea, suggesting that emotional intelligence and spirituality at work could be new signs of adaptation, though there isn't much research to

back this up yet. The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of resilience, as staff had to maintain productivity amid profound uncertainty (Luathia, 2021).

Other psychological factors have also been demonstrated to affect adaptive ability. Bednall and Hendricks (2021) illustrate a favourable correlation between self-leadership and academic performance, defining self-leadership as including goal setting, self-reward, self-observation, self-cueing, and constructive self-talk. In a similar vein, Xi and Zhang (2020) identified self-regulation, the capacity to oversee and modify one's emotional and behavioural responses, as a crucial factor in facilitating adaptive behaviour. A similar body of work by Bednall and Hendricks (2022), Chen and Dong (2024), and Zhang et al. (2020) centres on self-efficacy, which is defined as an individual's conviction in their capacity to perform activities effectively. These authors assert that interventions, including motivational coaching and social persuasion, can elevate self-efficacy, hence reinforcing adaptive performance.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that adaptive performance is supported by a set of interconnected traits, resilience, agility, learning orientation, self-leadership, and self-efficacy, all of which influence employees' ability to respond to and flourish in dynamic environments effectively. Setiyadi et al. (2024) assert that understanding these variables equips organisations with practical insights into allocating developmental initiatives to enhance adaptive capacity at both individual and organisational levels.

2.9.3. Importance of Adaptive Performance

Adaptive Performance (AP) is now a key factor in how well and how long an organisation can last, especially in high-risk and fast-changing fields like aviation. As organisational environments become more complex, the capacity of people and teams to adapt to change promptly and effectively is crucial not only for competitiveness but also for safety and long-term viability.

The risks of not adapting underscore the importance of AP. Niesen and Lang (2020) warn that sticking to old ways of doing things or following legacy processes can have major adverse effects, such as making safety outcomes worse in high-reliability fields like aviation. This corresponds with extensive research indicating that flexibility is not only a developmental characteristic but also an essential operational necessity. Kim (2020) and Park et al. (2020) contend that globalisation, technological progress, and an ageing workforce have heightened the necessity for organisations to have adaptive capability to maintain agility, resilience, and responsiveness.

The significance of adaptive performance was accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as seen by Bednall and Hendricks (2021) and Luathia (2021). These authors emphasise that organisations with higher adaptive capacity were better at maintaining performance, ensuring employee welfare, and facilitating recovery from disruptions. Setiyadi (2024), Chen and Dong (2024), and Krijgsheld (2020) all say that adaptable performance is closely related to career success, productivity, and job efficiency. Employees who exhibit adaptive behaviours are more inclined to innovate, manage stress effectively, and align with the organisation's changing objectives.

Overall, the research repeatedly emphasises the diverse significance of adaptive performance at the individual, team, and organisational levels. In high-risk industries like aviation, being able to adapt is not only a good thing; it is a matter of safety. These observations bolster the justification for this study by emphasising the critical role of adaptive leadership in fostering adaptive performance, essential to maintaining operational excellence in a context of complexity and ongoing transformation.

2.9.4. Leadership and organisational interventions driving adaptive performance.

Leadership is a key factor in creating the environment that allows or limits AP in organisations. Individual characteristics and talents play a role in adaptation, but leaders' actions and habits mainly determine whether that potential is used. Leadership affects AP in two ways: the way leaders lead and the changes they make to the organisation, including as job design, performance management, and culture, that they support and maintain.

Recent studies emphasise that adaptation cannot be enforced through inflexible or hierarchical leadership frameworks. Bonini et al. (2024), in their extensive meta-analysis of leadership styles and adaptive performance, contend that transactional leadership, although it may encourage conformity and order, provides restricted autonomy, thus hindering adaptive behaviour. They observe that transformational leadership is the most thoroughly examined approach concerning AP, since it promotes motivation, creativity, and proactive involvement.

Emerging leadership styles, including servant, inclusive, humble, and empowered leadership, have shown potential to foster adaptability; however, research on these styles is still in its nascent stages. Bonini et al. (2024) emphasise that shared leadership is more successful in flatter organisational structures characterised by flexible positions and transferable abilities, characteristics that resemble adaptive team cultures. The lack of

research explicitly investigating adaptive leadership in connection to AP highlights a significant gap in the literature and emphasises the need of this study.

In addition to leadership style, other scholars have investigated management and organisational solutions that improve adaptive performance. Bednall and Hendricks (2021) outline several interventions through which leaders might indirectly affect adaptation. They emphasise employee selection and recruiting methods that incorporate assessments of adaptive capability, an approach endorsed by Yang et al. (2020), who advise for pre-employment screening to identify applicants with learning agility and resilience. Second, training and performance management systems can be critical, but the authors warn that AP cannot be “trained” in a strict sense. Instead, organisations may make their workers more adaptable by helping them learn more about their jobs, control their behaviour, and reflect on what they know. Adding adaptive behaviours to performance assessment systems can also make them more central to the organisation's culture.

Third, work design becomes a significant tool because it allows workers to have freedom, choice, and variety in their jobs can boost their creativity and adaptability (Chen & Dong, 2024). Finally, efforts at the organisational level, such as promoting a culture of learning, encouraging innovation, and keeping structures natural, make it easier for people to adapt. These studies together indicate that leadership transcends individual impact; it includes the capacity to create systems, institutions, and environments that facilitate ongoing adaptation.

The research consistently demonstrates that leadership and organisational structures are fundamentally interconnected in facilitating adaptive performance. Transformational, empowering, and sharing leadership styles, together with support for organisational policies, establish the framework for adaptation and thriving. The limited examination of adaptive leadership as a separate concept in relation to AP underscores a significant gap. In aviation, leadership and organisational design work together to affect safety, performance, and the ability to deal with continuous complexity.

2.9.5. Learning organisations and adaptive performance

Increasing research acknowledges that AP is not a single phenomenon but is significantly shaped by an organisation's learning orientation. The idea of a learning organisation provides employees with a structural and cultural foundation that enables them to keep learning, share what they know, and adapt to changing needs.

In this context, Kim (2020) investigated the convergence of learning organisation principles and adaptive practices, emphasising that organisational learning mechanisms directly improve adaptation at both individual and collective levels. His research indicated that organisations characterised by open communication, feedback mechanisms, and ongoing learning processes are more inclined to exhibit greater adaptive potential. Kim's (2020) research presents AP as an integral aspect of organisational success, framing it as a result of efficient learning processes. In the same way, Park and Park (2020) define learning agility, which is a key trait of adaptable workers, as the capacity and desire to learn new skills and use them well when under pressure. This reflects the dynamic relationship between learning and performance, suggesting that the ability to learn quickly is integral to sustaining adaptability in complex environments.

Viteroulie et al. (2024) further substantiated this perspective by demonstrating that a robust learning culture, defined by ongoing learning, proactive information sharing, and collaboration, fosters an environment conducive to adaptive performance. In these kinds of workplaces, workers are encouraged to try new things, reflect on what they've learned, and apply what they've learned in their everyday work. This helps both the employee and the company become stronger. These findings highlight that adaptive performance is a behavioural and cultural phenomenon; it arises from human traits such as resilience and self-leadership, as well as from organisational processes that foster learning and collaborative problem-solving.

Overall, the research constantly emphasises that learning organisations act as catalysts for adaptive performance by integrating agility, collaboration, and continuous improvement into their culture. Consequently, cultivating a learning-oriented atmosphere is not only a developmental objective but a strategic need for organisations functioning in volatile and high-risk industries, such as aviation. This link between learning culture and adaptability underscores the importance of adaptive leadership, which creates the right conditions for learning, reflection, and adaptation at all levels of an organisation.

2.10. Literature Review Conclusion and Synthesis

This chapter critically examined the two core concepts of this study, Adaptive Leadership and Adaptive Performance, to outline their theoretical foundations, overlaps, and significance within complex organisational settings, particularly in aviation. The literature collectively shows that adaptability has shifted from being an optional trait for leaders or employees to a strategic and behavioural necessity for organisations operating in dynamic, high-stakes environments.

2.10.1. Synthesis of Adaptive Leadership Literature

The analysis of adaptive leadership describes it as a complex and evolving concept that emphasises learning, cooperation, and adaptability in facing challenges that lack clear-cut solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009; Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023). Adaptive leadership is both reactive and proactive; it enables leaders to manage crises while also creating an environment where employees can continuously learn and experiment (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017; Côté, 2022). Evidence highlights that adaptive leadership operates at multiple levels—individual, relational, and organisational, where leaders engage followers, promote empowerment, and cultivate a culture of shared responsibility and psychological safety (Scott & Bender, 2025; Dunn, 2020).

Nonetheless, significant theoretical and empirical gaps remain. Most research on adaptable leadership originates in the West and focuses on specialised areas such as healthcare and education. There has been little research on adaptive leadership in Africa or within the aviation regulatory field (Sott & Bender, 2025). Additionally, while frameworks like Abukalusa and Oosthuizen's (2023) systems-thinking model offer conceptual clarity, there is a lack of empirical studies exploring the shared experience of adaptive leadership among both leaders and employees. This study, therefore, adds to the literature by examining adaptable leadership within a highly regulated, safety-critical industry, focusing not only on leadership behaviours but also on the relational and contextual factors that support adaptation.

2.10.2. Synthesis of Adaptive Performance Literature

The study of adaptive performance is based on the idea that employees' ability to adapt to new situations, technologies, and expectations is vital for an organisation to survive in unstable environments (Park & Park, 2020; Bednall & Hendricks, 2021). The research describes adaptive performance as a behavioural skill that involves resilience, learning agility, and problem-solving in the face of changing demands (Bonini et al., 2024). Researchers have explored what drives adaptive performance at the individual, team, and organisational levels, identifying self-leadership, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility as key facilitators (Setiyadi et al., 2024; Nandini et al., 2020).

At the organisational level, the literature highlights leadership style, structural design, and learning culture as key factors influencing adaptive performance (Kim, 2020; Viteroulie et al., 2024). However, despite its growing importance, empirical research on adaptive performance remains fragmented—particularly regarding how leadership affects the development and expression of adaptive behaviours. While studies acknowledge the role of transformational, servant, and inclusive leadership styles in promoting adaptive

outcomes, the influence of adaptive leadership in this area has been little explored. This gap underscores the need for research linking leadership adaptability to employee adaptive performance in complex, high-reliability systems such as aviation.

2.10.3. Integrative Theoretical Synthesis

Combining these two research areas shows that leadership adaptability and employees' adaptable performance are connected concepts. Adaptive leadership creates the conditions—through empowerment, trust, psychological safety, and co-creation—that enable employees to exhibit adaptive performance behaviours. Conversely, employees' adaptive performance helps the organisation learn and become more resilient, forming a feedback loop that increases the group's overall adaptability. This synergy between AL and AP is still not well understood or supported by evidence, especially in fields with strict rules, operational risks, and technical changes.

This study deepens understanding of how leadership and employee behaviours interact to shape organisational adaptation by framing adaptive leadership and adaptive performance as mutually reinforcing concepts. It also responds to the need for research that considers the realities of non-Western, emerging, and safety-critical fields like aviation.

In summary, the research highlights that adaptability in both leadership and performance is essential for maintaining organisational success in unpredictable environments. Although there is some conceptual overlap between adaptive leadership and adaptable performance, limited empirical research exists on how these two concepts integrate in real-world scenarios, especially in aviation. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the experience of adaptable leadership and its effect on employee adaptive performance within the South African aviation industry. The collection of existing research forms the theoretical and conceptual foundation for the study's research questions, inquiries, and methodological approach outlined in the following chapters.

2.11. Conceptual Framework

Building on the literature on adaptive leadership and adaptive performance, this study proposes an integrative conceptual framework in Figure 3 that illustrates how leadership adaptability fosters the behavioural and organisational conditions for sustained adaptability in aviation.

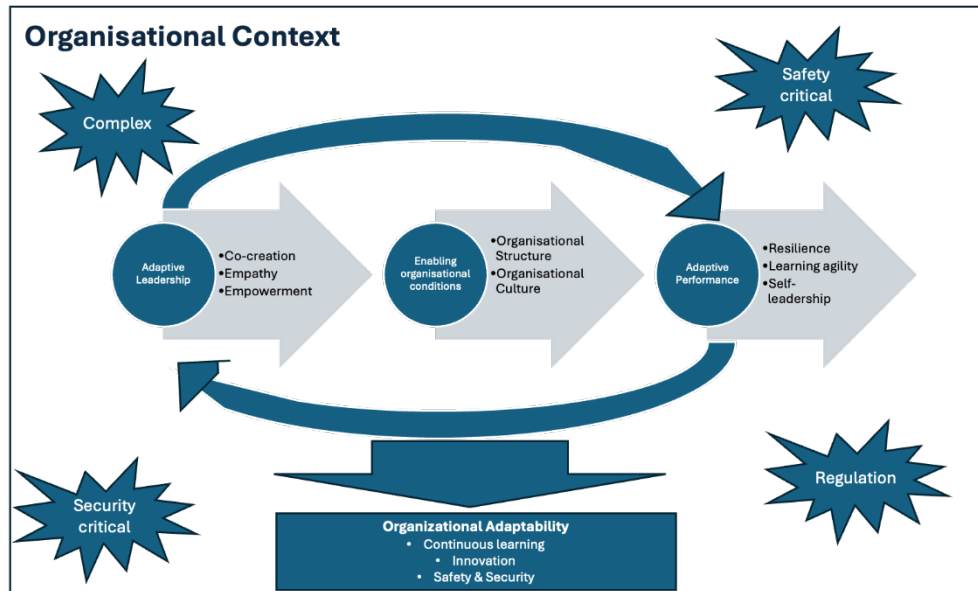


Figure 3: Literature review conceptual framework. Source Author's Analysis

2.12. Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided a critical synthesis of the theoretical landscapes surrounding Adaptive Leadership and Adaptive Performance. By juxtaposing these two constructs, the review highlighted a pivotal shift in organisational theory: adaptability is no longer merely a leadership trait but a systemic and behavioural necessity, particularly within the volatile and safety-critical context of the aviation industry. The literature revealed that while Adaptive Leadership provides the relational and strategic scaffolding for managing complexity, it is the reciprocal nature of Adaptive Performance, fuelled by resilience, learning agility, and psychological safety, that ultimately sustains operational excellence. Importantly, the review identified a significant empirical gap regarding how these dynamics intersect within highly regulated, non-Western environments. Having established a conceptual framework to navigate this intersection, the following chapter, Chapter 3, articulates the specific research questions that will guide this enquiry into the lived experiences of South African aviation professionals.

3. Chapter 3: Research Questions

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed current knowledge of Adaptive Leadership (AL) and Adaptive Performance (AP), highlighting both theoretical connections and existing research gaps. The review showed that although adaptive leadership is widely recognised as an important approach to managing complexity and change, there has been limited research on its relationship with adaptive performance, especially in high-risk, tightly controlled settings such as aviation. This gap highlights the need to better understand how adaptive leadership is experienced and practised, and how it influences the development of individual and organisational adaptability.

Building on these insights, the current research is guided by the following research question and three sub-questions. Together, they aim to explore the dynamic interactions among leadership behaviours, employee experiences, and organisational factors that influence adaptive performance in the South African aviation industry.

3.2. Main Research Question

How is adaptive leadership experienced within the context of a complex and evolving aviation industry, and how does it influence employee adaptive performance?

This central question reflects the research's main goal: to examine how leaders and employees understand and implement adaptive leadership behaviours, and how these behaviours influence adaptability and performance in fast-changing aviation settings.

3.3. Sub-Questions

To operationalise the main research question, three sub-questions were formulated to guide data collection and analysis:

3.3.1. What leadership traits support or constrain adaptive leadership within the aviation industry?

This question examines the behavioural and emotional traits of leaders that facilitate or impede adaptability, including empowerment, decisiveness, collaboration, and support.

3.3.2. How do employees experience and respond to adaptive leadership behaviours in a changing operational environment?

This question aims to explore the lived experiences of employees under adaptive leadership, investigating how leadership affects psychological safety, engagement, and adaptive performance in real-world settings.

3.3.3. What organisational and contextual factors enable or constrain adaptive leadership and employee adaptive performance within the aviation industry?

This question explores how organisational structures, systems, and cultures impact the effectiveness of adaptive leadership and employees' ability to adapt, learn, and perform amid ongoing change.

3.4. Research Purpose and Contribution

This research aims to deepen understanding of how adaptive leadership operates in practice within a complex, safety-critical industry, and how it fosters the development of adaptive performance among employees. By examining these relationships qualitatively, the study aims to make three key contributions:

- **Theoretical:** by enriching the limited body of research that connects adaptive leadership and adaptive performance, particularly in the aviation industry.
- **Empirical:** by providing evidence-based insights into how leaders and employees experience adaptation in real-world contexts; and
- **Practical:** by providing actionable insights for leadership development, organisational design, and change management practices in high-reliability organisations.

3.5. Chapter Summary

This chapter summarised the main and sub-research questions that guide the study, based on the conceptual and empirical gaps identified in the literature. The next chapter, Chapter 4, details the research methodology and design used to answer these questions, including the philosophical assumptions, data collection methods, and analytical approaches that support the research.

4. Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the research strategy and methods that were used in the study. The chapter's purpose is to explain the philosophical stance, research methodology, and the particular techniques employed to achieve the study's aims. As delineated in Chapters 1 and 2, this study aimed to investigate the experience and expression of adaptive leadership within the intricate and dynamic aviation sector, as well as its impact on employee adaptive performance in safety-critical contexts.

As previously noted, factors such as the research problem, literature review, research questions, research goals, and expected outcomes significantly influenced the methodological decisions and the overall study design (Urcia, 2021). Figure 4 below shows the structure of the research methodology chapter.



Figure 4: Methodology chapter structure. Source: Author's Analysis

4.2. Research philosophy, approach and design

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory methodology grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, suitable for elucidating how individuals derive meaning from their lived experiences (Saunders et al., 2022). The interpretivist perspective posits that reality is socially constructed and subjective, influenced by individual interactions and contextual factors. Urcia (2021) suggests that novice researchers should ascertain their worldview of reality and choose a paradigm that most effectively aligns with their perspective to maintain methodological coherence. Consequently, the interpretivist paradigm was chosen for this study because of its subjectivist epistemology, which asserts that truth and meaning are co-created and contextually situated, and its relativist ontology, which recognises multiple realities (Urcia, 2021).

This study utilised a phenomenological research approach, selected for its emphasis on investigating and comprehending the essence of lived experiences. Phenomenology enables the researcher to investigate how participants interpret intricate social phenomena, specifically, adaptive leadership and adaptive performance, through their

distinct perspectives and experiences (Urcia, 2021). This method is especially good at finding the deep, often unspoken parts of leadership behaviour, sensemaking, and organisational adaptability that are hard to measure.

The research design is exploratory, aiming to produce comprehensive, contextual insights rather than to validate hypotheses. Adaptive leadership is inherently context-dependent, socially constructed, and frequently manifests in situations characterised by uncertainty and change. Consequently, this study sought to gather comprehensive qualitative data to elucidate the experiences and expressions of adaptive leadership among both leaders and employees within intricate aviation contexts (Saunders et al., 2022; Mishra & Alok, 2017).

Aguzzoli et al. (2024) stress that qualitative research is inherently actor-centred, which allows for the study of phenomena that are subjective, contingent, and dynamic. This philosophical and methodological framework facilitated the comprehensive capture of the intricate and diverse experiences of participants from various aviation organisations, thereby enhancing the understanding of adaptability as a lived process at both organisational and individual levels.

4.3. Research Setting and Population

This study was carried out in the South African aviation sector, involving various organisations that function throughout the aviation value chain. The aviation industry is a great place to study adaptive leadership and adaptive performance because it is responsible for safety, faces changing oversight strategies, and navigates leadership challenges in a complex, evolving environment.

Saunders et al. (2022) emphasise that qualitative research is fundamentally naturalistic, necessitating the researcher's interaction with participants in their authentic environments to cultivate trust, foster rapport, and obtain significant, contextually relevant insights. The aviation environment exemplifies a dynamic system influenced by rapid technological progress, evolving regulatory structures, and changing safety requirements, making it an optimal context for examining how leaders and employees navigate and respond to adaptive challenges.

The participants in this study were professionals from various aviation organisations, such as regulatory authorities, air navigation service providers, and airline operators. The participants included people in both leadership and employee roles, which ensured that both strategic and operational points of view were represented. This diversity facilitated a

comprehensive understanding of the manifestation of adaptive leadership within intricate systems and its influence on employee adaptability within organisational contexts.

Following the guidance of Hossan et al. (2023), the research differentiates between the unit of analysis and the unit of observation. The units of analysis consist of leaders (executives, senior managers, and managers) and employees who collectively exemplify adaptive leadership and adaptive performance within aviation organisations. The observation units consist of employees who offer firsthand accounts of leadership behaviours and organisational dynamics within their workplaces.

This dual perspective enhances the investigation by incorporating both self-reported leadership experiences and observed leadership behaviours. Hossan et al. (2023) assert that qualitative research frequently exhibits this overlap, especially when individuals articulate or interpret leadership characteristics within their experiential contexts. The inclusion of both leaders and employees facilitates a thorough analysis of adaptive leadership as it is experienced, implemented, and perceived within the aviation industry.

In summary, the research population comprised leaders and employees from various aviation organisations, all involved in roles essential for safety oversight, operational efficiency, and strategic transformation. This yielded a sufficiently varied yet contextually unified population from which the study's sample was extracted, as elaborated in the subsequent section.

4.3.1. Sampling strategy

Dzwigol (2022) and Hossan et al. (2023) emphasise that one of the most significant methodological choices in research design is the selection of participants. The selection of a sampling strategy influences the relevance and richness of the data, as well as the accuracy and depth of the study's findings. For this study, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants with direct experience in leadership or adaptive change processes within aviation organisations (Urcia, 2021; Saunders et al., 2022; Hossan et al., 2023; Mishra & Alok, 2017).

Purposive sampling, a type of nonprobability sampling, allows the researcher to select participants who can provide detailed, relevant, and contextually rich information about the phenomenon they are studying. Hossan et al. (2023) assert that purposive sampling, especially when used within a heterogeneous sampling framework, aims to encompass a range of participant characteristics to ensure representation of multiple perspectives. This

diversity improves the validity and applicability of qualitative results (Saunders et al., 2022). Three main criteria were used to choose the participants:

- **At least 12 months of service with the organisation:** This criterion ensured that participants had sufficient experience with the culture, leadership dynamics, and adaptive processes of their organisation. Individuals with at least 1 year of tenure were considered competent to provide substantive reflections on institutional norms, leadership behaviours, and organisational responses to change, all of which are essential to understanding adaptive leadership in practice.
- **Participation in operational, leadership, or transformation initiatives:** Since the study aimed to investigate adaptive leadership in times of change and complexity, it was crucial to include participants actively involved in such initiatives. This ensured that the data included experiences of both leading and responding to adaptive challenges, a key part of this research.
- **Variety in division, level, and job function:** To investigate adaptive leadership within aviation organisations' internal systems, participants were selected from across divisions, hierarchical levels, and job functions. This diversity facilitated triangulation of perspectives and offered a comprehensive understanding of adaptive leadership across organisational boundaries.

4.3.2. Sample Size

There were 16 semi-structured interviews in all. This number was considered sufficient to reach thematic saturation, the point at which no new ideas or viewpoints emerged (Urcia, 2021). The sample included eight leaders (executives, senior managers, and managers) and eight employees, which is a good mix of people from different levels of the hierarchy. This composition enabled the researcher to juxtapose leadership and employee perspectives on adaptive leadership and adaptive performance, thereby enhancing the study's interpretive depth and analytical rigour.

4.4. Data Collection Strategy

4.4.1. Research Instrument

Data for this research were gathered through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol formulated from the principal themes and constructs delineated in the literature review. As Saunders et al. (2020) observed, semi-structured interviews are particularly effective for exploratory research, as they provide a balance between structure

and flexibility, enabling the researcher to steer the conversation while delving deeper into emerging topics. This methodology corresponds with the study's interpretivist and phenomenological framework, emphasising participants' lived experiences and cognitive processes.

In professional settings like aviation, where participants are often senior leaders or technical experts, semi-structured interviews are also useful because they are more likely to agree to an interactive discussion than to fill out a questionnaire. This kind of involvement can lead to more detailed and complex data (Saunders et al., 2022).

Creating an Interview Protocol: The Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework, as suggested by Shoozan and Mohamad (2024), was used to develop the interview protocol. This framework gives a clear, four-phase process that can help make qualitative interview tools more valid, aligned, and clear. Figure 5 below clearly shows the four-phase process:

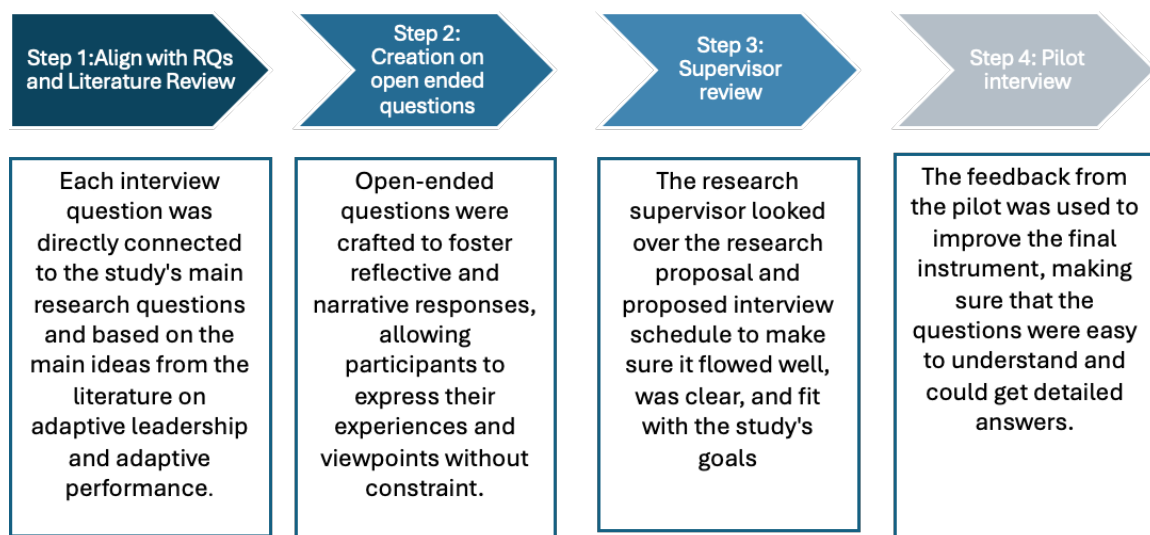


Figure 5: IPR Framework used to develop the interview questionnaire. Source: Author's Analysis

This methodical approach ensured that the interview protocol was both methodologically sound and relevant to the situation, thereby improving the reliability and depth of the collected data.

4.4.2. Data Collection Process

Participants were asked to take part in semi-structured interviews lasting 30 to 45 minutes, which could be conducted in person or via Microsoft Teams. This dual-mode approach

accounted for the everyday lives of aviation professionals, especially those in technical or inspection roles who often work off-site.

Saunders et al. (2022) assert that virtual interviews may constrain the researcher's capacity to perceive non-verbal cues and cultivate rapport; however, they also emphasise that online platforms enhance accessibility and participation, particularly among participants who are geographically dispersed. To address potential limitations, face-to-face interviews were prioritised whenever possible, as they facilitate natural rapport-building, the observation of verbal and visual cues, and a deeper exploration of meanings through active listening and dialogue.

Before taking part, all respondents got a participant information sheet that explained the study's purpose, ethical protections, and ways to keep data private. Each participant gave their written informed consent. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure the precision and thoroughness of the analysis.

The research process strictly adhered to the rules for protecting data privacy. To protect the privacy of the participants, transcripts were made anonymous, and any information that could identify them was taken out. All data were securely stored in compliance with ethical research standards and institutional protocols (Kamal, 2024).

4.5. Data Analysis Approach

This research employed an interpretivist paradigm and thematic analysis to elucidate the lived experiences of aviation professionals, including both leaders and employees. This analytical approach is consistent with the study's philosophical foundations, as it aimed to elucidate how individuals interpret intricate organisational realities and adaptive leadership dynamics in a swiftly evolving industry (Urcia, 2021).

Braun and Clarke (2022) assert that thematic analysis provides a versatile yet stringent framework for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. It is especially appropriate for exploratory studies that prioritise meaning, perception, and interpretation as fundamental research objectives. This methodology enabled the researcher to systematically analyse participants' narratives, investigating their comprehension and implementation of adaptive leadership within their organisational and environmental frameworks.

Saunders et al. (2022) and Kamal (2024) assert that thematic analysis is both systematic and flexible, allowing researchers to organise the analytical process logically while

maintaining the creative autonomy necessary for interpretive research. This balance between structure and interpretive freedom yields deep, nuanced insights into human experience, especially in research that examines lived realities and how employees make sense of them. The next chapter, Chapter 5, details the process for conducting the thematic analysis, including data familiarisation, coding, theme development, and refinement, along with the complete analytical steps and results.

4.6. Research quality and rigour

To ensure methodological integrity and enhance the overall trustworthiness of this qualitative inquiry, multiple techniques were employed, consistent with the interpretivist paradigm. These techniques align with the principles of credibility, authenticity, dependability, transferability, and confirmability supported by Saunders et al. (2022). Ensuring rigour in qualitative research is not a single event but a continuous process woven throughout design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Dzwigol, 2022).

4.6.1. Pilot Interview

As advised by Dzwigol (2022) and Saunders et al. (2022), a pilot interview was conducted before the commencement of full-scale data collection. The purpose of the pilot was to test the clarity, relevance, and logical flow of the interview guide, allowing for refining questions and identifying potential issues in advance. Conducting this preliminary step enhanced the instrument's reliability and improved the researcher's confidence and fluency during the main interviews.

4.6.2. Researcher Reflexivity and the Principle of “Unknowing”

In alignment with Urcia's (2021) notion of “*unknowing*,” the researcher actively engaged in a process of reflexivity to reduce potential bias and projection during data collection and interpretation. This process involved maintaining a reflective journal throughout the research journey to document pre-existing assumptions, personal beliefs, and professional experiences related to adaptive leadership within the aviation industry. By consciously “decentring” personal perspectives, the researcher cultivated openness to participants' lived experiences, promoting transparency and authenticity in meaning-making (Urcia, 2021).

4.6.3. Triangulation

Triangulation is an essential strategy to enhance the credibility and reliability of qualitative research (Fusch et al., 2018). This study employed data and theory triangulation to enhance its methodological rigour.

- **Data triangulation:** involved capturing perspectives from multiple sources—leaders and employees drawn from various divisions across several aviation organisations. This diversity enabled comparisons and the convergence of experiences, strengthening the validity and depth of insights into adaptive leadership (Fusch et al., 2018).
- **Theory triangulation:** was achieved by interpreting findings through complementary theoretical perspectives. While Adaptive Leadership Theory (Heifetz et al., 2009) served as the core conceptual framework, supporting lenses from systems thinking, complexity theory, and follower-centred leadership were incorporated to enrich interpretation and reduce theoretical bias. Engaging multiple theoretical lenses enhanced the conceptual robustness of the analysis and allowed for a nuanced understanding of leadership adaptability in complex organisational systems (Fusch et al., 2018).

4.6.4. Participant checking

In accordance with Urcia (2021) and Saunders et al. (2022), participant checking (or member validation) was undertaken to confirm the authenticity and accuracy of the interpreted data. Selected participants were provided with a summary of the preliminary findings and invited to verify whether these reflected their experiences accurately. This process not only validated the themes but also fostered transparency and trust between the researcher and participants.

Taken together, these techniques ensured that the research upheld the highest standards of methodological integrity. By combining reflexivity, triangulation, member validation, and transparent documentation, the study generated findings that are credible, dependable, and contextually grounded, thereby enhancing the scholarly contribution of this investigation to the adaptive leadership and performance literature.

4.7. Limitations of the Research Design

Like any qualitative study, this one has some methodological limits that need to be recognised. As indicated by Urcia (2021), qualitative research often involves small,

purposive samples aimed at uncovering rich, contextualised insights rather than quantitatively generalisable conclusions. Consequently, the findings of this study are context-bound and should be viewed as giving an in-depth understanding of adaptive leadership and adaptive performance within aviation organisations, rather than general conclusions.

4.7.1. Access to participants

One of the major obstacles identified during the study was reaching participants across numerous aviation companies. The research initially sought participation from many entities within the aviation ecosystem, including regulatory bodies, operational entities, and service providers; however, participant involvement proved more complex than expected.

Despite substantial efforts to protect confidentiality and to emphasise that the study was conducted independently and self-funded, some potential participants appeared unwilling to participate, presumably because of the researcher's position within a regulatory organisation. This reticence may have been motivated by perceived sensitivities around leadership-related discussions in a safety-critical, highly regulated sector. Interestingly, interaction inside the researcher's own organisation (AO1) was more forthcoming, whereas participation from external organisations was slower, revealing an underlying relationship dynamic between the regulator and the larger aviation sector.

In retrospect, using a separate communication channel, such as a personal email account, might have reduced this issue by emphasising the researcher's autonomy. Nevertheless, participants provided unique insights that greatly enhanced the study's legitimacy and depth.

4.7.2. Limitations on Data Collection

Another problem was that it was hard to find participants to interview and set up the interviews. Although face-to-face contacts were desired to create deeper rapport and richer contextual insights, most interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams due to participants' hectic schedules and operational travel obligations. While online interviews provided access to geographically scattered participants, they hindered the monitoring of non-verbal cues, which may have lowered the depth of interaction and interpretative richness (Saunders et al., 2022).

4.7.3. Data saturation – two lenses on one shared phenomenon

Although data saturation was attained, the progression toward saturation was less linear than in research focusing on a single participant group. This tendency was expected due to the research methodology, which involved both leaders and employees as co-constructors of meaning.

Including both groups in this research was a deliberate methodological choice, aligning with the study's goal to clarify the shared and differing lived experiences of adaptive leadership across organisational levels. Although combining multiple perspectives delayed reaching saturation, it ultimately strengthened the credibility and depth of the thematic framework.

4.7.4. Researcher subjectivity

The interpretivist approach of this study unavoidably entails the researcher's subjectivity. The researcher actively engages in meaning-making through interpretation, which raises the possibility for bias. However, according to Urcia's (2021) theory of "unknowing," active reflexive practices such as journaling, maintaining a reflective diary, and self-awareness of assumptions were employed to limit excessive effect on data interpretation. These methods enhanced openness and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

4.7.5. Scope of generalisation

Finally, as with most qualitative investigations, the scope of generalisation is limited. The study's conclusions are based on the unique setting of the South African aviation sector, and while they give useful insights for comparable complex, safety-critical businesses, they cannot be assumed to reflect all organisational situations. Nonetheless, the study's emphasis on transferability, through extensive contextual descriptions and engaging participant narratives, enables readers and practitioners to assess the relevance of findings to their own situations.

In summary, while the study encountered significant methodological and contextual constraints, most notably in participant access and data-collection logistics, these issues were addressed through methodological transparency, reflexivity, and a commitment to qualitative rigour. These constraints, far from diminishing the study, increase its legitimacy by revealing the realities and complexities of conducting qualitative research within the aviation sector.

4.8. Chapter Summary

In conclusion, this chapter has detailed the methodological framework underpinning the study, confirming that an interpretivist, phenomenological approach was best suited to explore the nuanced dynamics of adaptive leadership within the South African aviation sector. By prioritising the lived realities of both leaders and employees, the research design successfully navigated the complexities of a safety-critical environment to gather rich, qualitative data. Despite the acknowledged limitations regarding participant access and generalisability, the rigorous application of data triangulation, reflexivity, and the IPR framework ensures that the ensuing insights are both credible and robust. Having established how the data was gathered and analysed, the following chapter, Chapter 5, proceeds to present the empirical findings, detailing the themes that emerged regarding the enactment of adaptive leadership and its influence on employee performance.

5. Chapter: 5 Findings

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the research findings on how adaptive leadership is experienced in the rapidly evolving, increasingly complex South African aviation sector. The study aimed to understand how leaders and employees within diverse aviation organisations assess, implement, and respond to adaptive leadership behaviours amid ongoing change and uncertainty.

It also explored the leadership traits, employee experiences, and organisational factors that either support or hinder adaptive leadership in this dynamic industry. By examining perspectives from both leaders and employees, the chapter offers a comprehensive view of how adaptive leadership is practically applied and its effects on performance and resilience within aviation organisations.

The chapter begins with an overview of the demographics and research setting, including the participating aviation organisations (AOs) and the demographics of their leaders and employees. Next, it describes the study setting, outlining the objectives and the observations made during data collection. The subsequent section details the data analysis process, including the methods used to prepare, code, and identify themes within the qualitative data. The findings are then presented more descriptively in the next section, aligned with the three research questions and the six major themes identified in the data. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings, setting the stage for the interpretive discussion in Chapter 6.

5.2. Demographics and Research Setting

The research aimed to explore the implementation and experiences of adaptive leadership across several aviation organisations in South Africa. The final sample included 16 participants from five aviation organisations, covering both regulatory and operational sectors of the industry. There were eight leaders and eight employees, providing a balanced range of perspectives from both groups.

The participants came from various organisations that together represent the diversity of South Africa's aviation ecosystem, such as regulatory agencies, air navigation services, airport management, and commercial aviation companies. This diversity improved the study's ability to explain the complex characteristics of adaptive leadership within the sector's intricate and dynamic environment. The involvement of both leaders and

employees meant that opinions on leadership methods and employee adaptable performance were analysed from complementary yet diverse viewpoints.

Table 1 below summarises how participants were distributed among organisations and roles. It shows the overall representation of leaders and employees from each organisation. The data also indicates the number of participants from various aviation groups. However, Aviation Organisation 1 (AO1) had slightly more participants because they were easier to contact and more available, given the researcher's consulting work with AO1.

Participants	Employees	Leaders	Aviation Organisation (AO)
MPhil Thesis Interview Leader PP_AO 1.docx		1	AO 1
MPhil Thesis Interview Employee JK_AO 1.docx	1		AO 1
MPhil Thesis Interview Employee CdB_AO 2.docx	1		AO 2
MPhil Thesis Interview Leader SH AO 2.docx		1	AO 2
MPhil Thesis Interview Leader BN_AO 1.docx		1	AO 1
MPhil Thesis Interview Leader HK_AO 3.docx		1	AO 3
MPhil Research Interview Leader TM_AO 1.docx		1	AO 1
MPhil Research Interview Employee SM_AO 1.docx	1		AO 1
MPhil Thesis Interview Leader BM_AO 4.docx		1	AO 4
MPhil Thesis Interview Employee PM_AO 1.docx	1		AO 1
MPhil Thesis Interview Employee TM_AO 1.docx	1		AO 1
MPhil Thesis Interview Employee DM_AO 1.docx	1		AO 1
MPhil Thesis Interview Leader SM_AO 1.docx		1	AO 1
MPhil Thesis Interview Employee BM_AO 1.docx	1		AO 1
MPhil Thesis Interview Leader SM_AO 2.docx		1	AO 2
MPhil Thesis Interview Employee BC_AO 5.docx	1		AO 5
Total	8	8	5 AOs

Table 1: Summary of how participants were distributed among organisations. Source Atlas.ti

This composition demonstrates a purposeful sampling method aimed at obtaining information-rich cases relevant to the topic under review. Even if the distribution was not perfectly balanced among organisations, qualitative research emphasises depth of

understanding over numerical uniformity. Including various organisational contexts helped develop both convergent and divergent themes related to adaptive leadership and employee adaptation.

5.2.1. Research Setting

The research was conducted in the South African aviation industry, which is known for its numerous regulations, safety-critical activities, and constantly evolving technology and procedures. Data collection took place in September and included semi-structured interviews conducted either in person or online, depending on participants' availability and logistical constraints. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes, which was enough time for participants to discuss in depth their experiences with leadership, change, and adaptability in their work environments.

The researcher is professionally connected to one of the involved organisations (AO1); however, the study was conducted solely in an independent and personal capacity. The Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) provided ethical approval, and all participants gave their informed consent before participating in the study. To protect privacy and ensure participants felt safe, they were informed that their organisations would not receive any information that could identify them or be used to judge them.

There were several interesting points about the data collection process. First, even though the researcher was already familiar with the aviation industry, it was more difficult than expected to recruit participants for the study. It was relatively easy to reach AO1 participants, but those from outside organisations were less willing to join. This seems to be due to time constraints in busy work environments and, in some cases, a perceived connection between the researcher's role and AO1's regulatory duties. It was natural for them to be hesitant, as aviation organisations tend to be strict about following rules and often cautious of outside suggestions.

Secondly, even within professional networks, the responses varied greatly. For instance, one potential participant, who was an aviation professional and a peer in the researcher's MPhil cohort, did not respond to the invitation to participate. This emphasised a fundamental aspect of qualitative research in professional domains: the desire to engage is shaped by factors such as trust, perceived advantage, and organisational culture, rather than solely by awareness of the research's academic significance.

Finally, these experiences demonstrated how vital it is to be persistent, attentive to others, and flexible when gathering qualitative data. Over time, trust was established through

follow-ups and clear explanations of the study's independence and ethical standards. This resulted in active participation from a diverse group of aviation experts.

Overall, the participant group offers a comprehensive, industry-wide view of the South African aviation sector, including perspectives from leadership and employees across various organisations. Although initially challenging, the data collection process yielded valuable insights into the studied phenomena and the realities of conducting qualitative research within a highly regulated and time-sensitive industry. These insights lay the foundation for the upcoming sections of this chapter, which outline and analyse the emerging themes from the data analysis.

5.2.2. Data Analysis Process

The data analysis for this study used the criteria of theme analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2022). This approach was chosen for its flexibility and structured process, which helps in identifying, analysing, and understanding patterns of meaning within qualitative data. Thematic analysis was particularly appropriate for this research because it aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, emphasising the lived experiences of participants within their organisational settings. Following Braun and Clarke's (2022) five-step approach, the analytical process included: Figure 1 below illustrates Braun and Clarke's five-step approach. Subsequently followed by a description of how each of these processes was applied in this study.

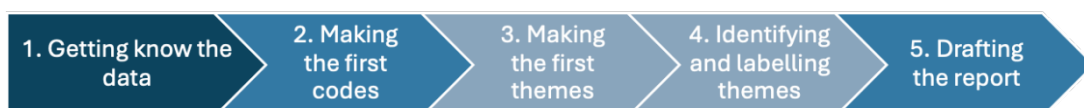


Figure 6: Braun and Clarke's (2022) five-step approach

Step 1: Getting to Know the Data

The first step was to read the interview transcripts multiple times to get a feel for the data. The researcher chose not to outsource transcription cleaning deliberately, as it provided a valuable opportunity to understand the substance and nuances of the participants' answers. As the researcher went through this process, the researcher noted initial thoughts, recurring concepts, and patterns that emerged in the interviews. This step laid the foundation for meaningful coding by helping the researcher understand both the explicit and implicit meanings in the stories.

Atlas.ti software was used as the qualitative data analysis program to manage, process, and analyse the data, store it and organise all transcripts. This ensured the analytical

method was systematic and traceable, while also allowing the researcher to explore the data both digitally and manually.

Step 2: Making the First Codes

After cleaning the data and importing it into Atlas.ti, software the researcher began the coding process. Based on Saldana's (2016) advice, the researcher viewed coding as an interpretive effort, meaning assigning meaning to parts of the text to group them into conceptual categories. Saldana states that codification is the systematic organisation of facts into a larger classification system.

Saldana (2016) suggested several coding strategies for the first cycle of coding, such as in vivo coding (using the participants' own words), initial coding, emotion coding, and value coding. This blended approach ensured that both the participants' genuine voices and deeper meanings were captured. The researcher followed Saldana's idea of coding as a "lumper" rather than a "splitter." Instead of breaking the data into too many small groups, the researcher aimed to group similar concepts under broader conceptual categories.

Initially, this method generated 347 codes across all transcripts. The researcher then exported these codes from Atlas.ti software to Excel for manual review, shown in Figure 2 below. The researcher conducted a thorough consolidation process by printing the

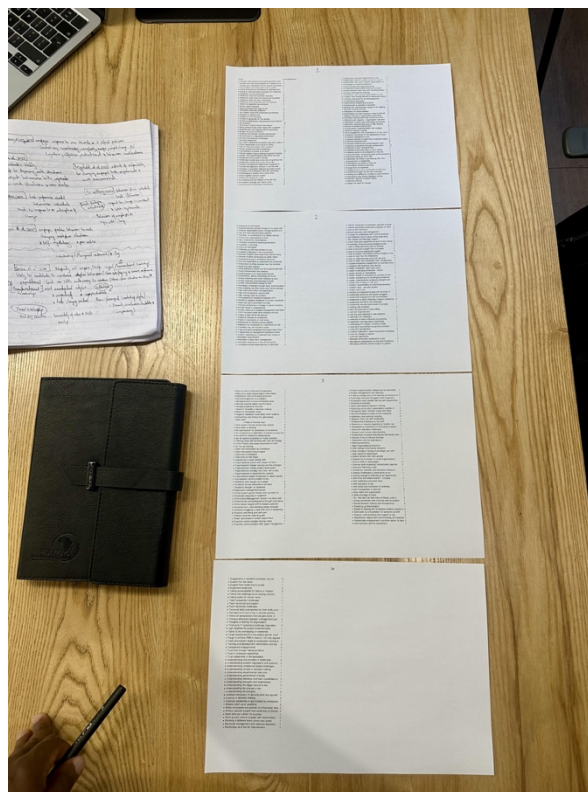


Figure 7: Initial exported codes printed for manual cleaning

codes, reviewing them line by line, merging identical codes, and removing duplicates. After several rounds of this process, the number of codes was reduced to 143, then to 87, which best represented the essence of the material.

Step 3: Making and Reviewing Themes

The next step was to identify connections between codes and group them into early themes. Throughout this process, the researcher consistently reviewed both the data and the research questions to ensure alignment and conceptual coherence. The development of themes was both inductive and iterative, based on participants' experiences and existing literature. The assessment and enhancement of themes required continuous movement between the dataset, the coded extracts, and the broader context of the study (Braun & Clark, 2022). This approach ensured that each subject was both clear and distinct from the others. The researcher also examined how new patterns aligned with ideas from the literature review. This ensured that the analysis remained grounded in theory while allowing new ideas to emerge naturally from the data.

Step 4: Naming and Defining Themes

After reviewing and organising the themes, the researcher fully explained and labelled each, ensuring that it captured its main significance and how it helped the researcher understand adaptive leadership in aviation. During this stage, it was crucial to consider how each topic aligned with the study's goals and how the themes collectively addressed the research questions. The process of identifying themes was iterative, meaning that the researcher continually thought about and refined them until the thematic framework was clear and understandable.

Step 5: Writing the Report

The final step was to assemble the analysis into a clear narrative that included the participants' voices, the identified themes, and relevant literature (in Chapter 6). The analysis was constantly evolving and reflective, with repeated interactions with the data, methodological notes, and literature. Using both Atlas.ti software and manual approaches together balanced systematic rigour and interpretative depth. This resulted in the discovery of rich, authentic themes rooted in participants' real-life experiences.

In summary, the data analysis approach was both systematic and iterative, illustrating the flexibility of theme analysis, as Braun and Clarke (2022) noted. The findings were reliable and valid because they employed structured coding, reflective interpretation, and methodological triangulation. The following section presents the main themes that

emerged from this study. These themes offer essential insights into how adaptive leadership is utilised and experienced in the South African aviation industry.

5.2.3. Themes Emanating from Findings

The findings in this chapter are presented illustratively, focusing on participants' statements and how their experiences and meanings relate to the study questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The focus is on creating stories from data, with examples that illustrate the analytical assertions. Chapter 6 will then expand on these findings by placing them in a more theoretical and interpretive context and connecting them to the broader body of research and ideas on adaptive leadership and employee adaptable performance (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The findings revealed six key themes, each representing a vital aspect of understanding and experiencing adaptive leadership in the South African aviation sector. The conceptual diagram in Figure 8 below visually illustrates these themes, showing how they relate to each other and to the main research questions.

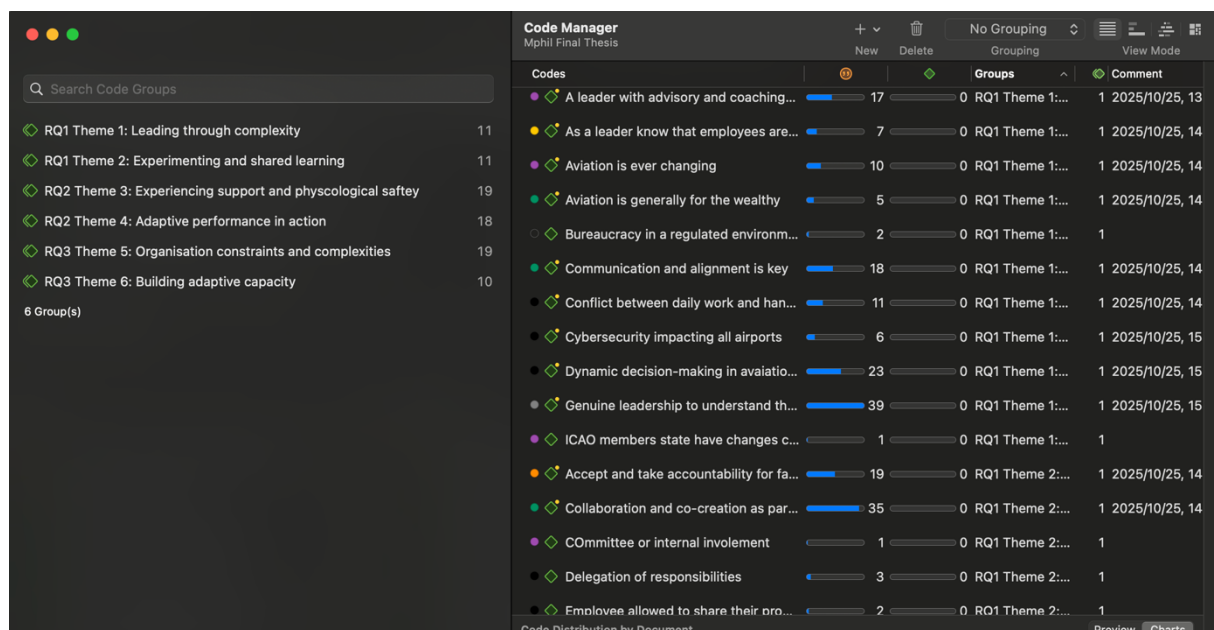


Figure 8: Six themes revealing aspects of understanding and experiencing adaptive leadership

Each theme was analysed in relation to the relevant research question, using a consistent analytical framework designed to ensure clarity, coherence, and alignment with the study's objectives. Figure 4 below summarises the framework used to present each theme:

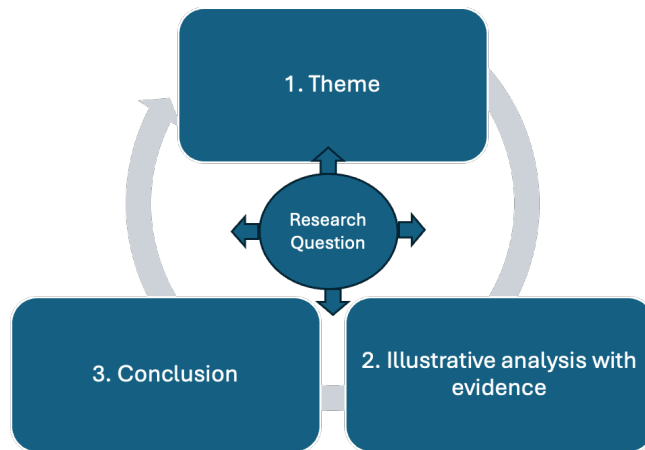


Figure 9: Summary of the framework used to present the themes. Source: Author's Analysis

Thematic Presentation

The six themes illustrate adaptive leadership in complex, uncertain aviation scenarios and its influence on both organisational and individual experiences. Each theme addressed this study's three main research questions and set the stage for the analytical discussion in the next chapter. Table 2 below summarises the research questions and themes.

Overarching Research Question: How adaptive leadership is enacted and experienced in South African Aviation industry, and how it influences employee adaptive performance in a complex and evolving operational context?		
	Theme	Characteristics
RQ 1: How do leaders in the South African aviation industry demonstrate behaviours that support adaptive leadership in complex and evolving conditions?	Theme 1: Leading through complexity	Leader behaviours and practices
	Theme 2: Experimentation and shared learning	
RQ 2: How do employees experience and respond to these leadership behaviours in terms of their own ability to adapt and perform in a changing operational environment?	Theme 3: Experiencing support and psychological Safety	Employee perceptions and adaptive performance
	Theme 4: Adaptive Performance in action	
RQ 3 What organisational and contextual factors enable or constrain adaptive leadership and employee adaptive performance within the aviation industry?	Theme 5: Organisational constraints and complexity	Organisational culture, systems, enablers/barriers
	Theme 6: Building adaptive capacity	

Table 2: Research questions and themes summary table. Source: Author's Analysis

Extract Use and Analytical Precision

Visualising excerpts adheres to the qualitative reporting guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2022). To showcase participants' diverse voices, the researcher chose samples from across the dataset. This ensured that no single individual or group could dominate the report. Each excerpt was selected for its explicit and compelling confirmation of the analytic claim.

Short and lengthy extracts were used depending on the analysis. Smaller extracts highlighted specific topics, while longer ones gave context or showed how people process information. To make reading easier while keeping the original meaning, passages were edited to remove repetition and irrelevant parts (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

This method aimed to provide a balanced review that respected participants' viewpoints while offering a comprehensive analytical overview of the facts. Hence, each theme incorporates participant experience, contextual understanding, and analytical depth.

5.2.4. Findings for Research Question 1

This section discusses the results of the first study question, which examined the specific leadership qualities that help or hinder adaptive leadership in the aviation industry. The data analysis process revealed two principal themes: Theme 1, leading through complexity, and Theme 2, experimentation and shared learning. Each theme is substantiated by evidence from participant narratives and further elaborated through sub-themes, which are later encapsulated in a synthesis table.

RQ1: Theme 1: Leading through Complexity

Theme definition: This theme examined how leaders manage a constantly evolving and complex aviation environment.

A prominent characteristic that emerged from the data was the recognition of aviation as a dynamic, ever-changing sector. For example, in the excerpt from the leader PP in AO1, he highlights that aviation is a dynamic, ever-changing space.

*"[...]so, aviation it's an ever-changing environment and you are forced to adapt to the changes because the changes are not going to come from you, only it's a. It's a. It's a global phenomenon. [...] we are forced to change because changes are not coming from you [...] as ICAO member state, state changes are coming from every direction." **Leader PP A01***

Employee SM in A01 also shares these feelings. She highlights the fast-paced nature of the environment and how changes happen, requiring employees to stay adaptable.

“You literally have to be constantly on your toes because things are forever changing. There is always a request from an external from one of the important external stakeholders that needs to be taken care of now. So, which means you stop whatever you're doing, and you just need to take care of that. So, for me I can say change is not a shock if I can put it like that because it's constantly in the environment.” **Employee TM A01**

Leaders and employees alike said that the industry needs people who can adapt and stay strong at all times. Participants noted that changes in technology, rules, and safety standards occur so quickly that both leaders and employees must be able to think on their feet and adapt swiftly to new needs. As clearly highlighted by Employee SM AO1 below:

“So, what [the case for change] helps me to adapt and to keep on changing is that I always want to make life easier. It's about making things better, easier and with technology advancing so fast. If you are staying where you are currently, you're going to get left behind.” **Employee SM AO1**

Sub-Theme: Empowerment and Supportive Leadership

A sub-theme identified indicated that supportive and empowering leadership behaviours are essential for adaptive leadership practice. In interviews, participants clearly distinguished between managing and leading. For instance, employee JK in AO1, who was permitted to act in a leadership role for two years, emphasised the following:

“[...] For me in my mind when you want to manage me, it's because I'm incapable of doing, you know. But when you're lead me, you are [...] treating me as a you [as capable leader]. [...] You are treating me like I'm your equal, you know. And I'm allowing you to be LED. [...] So, I'm missing that man from my leaders. I really feel like, oh, I don't have leaders. I've got people now trying to manage me.” **Employee JK AO1**

Several participants indicated that empowerment is a key trait of authentic and adaptable leadership. Employees said that leaders who promote involvement, give direction, and make room for innovation help their teams feel like they own their work and are responsible for it. This is highlighted by the employee BC A05 and SM AO1 below:

“My manager has been very pivotal in my career progression at AO 5, and I think the support that I've gotten from her, I think it's also been a trust relationship. So, I came into the business when she was also transitioning from a specialist to a manager, and I came in and I sort of supported her. So, we've established this good work relationship that she's mentioned my name in boardrooms.” **Employee BC AO5**

“I [...] had access to information that guided me into more sort of management functions, and what you know was kind of lucky to work with Bheki quite closely and the team quite closely in order to be exposed to different sorts of audits or external audits that were taking place within the AO1 and within our division.” **Employee SM AO1**

Employee SM further demonstrates the importance of leadership support and empowerment as she explains below when she was allowed to lead a key strategic project under her division:

“He supports the change, he supports the development, but he doesn't know as much, and he was quite open and honest. He doesn't know as much about the system as the guys on the floor would. So, what he then did was delegate the functions to me and he said, OK, SM [run] with [it].” **Employee SM AO1**

Some employees talked about places where they felt free to make choices and learn from their mistakes. Participants thought that these kinds of environments were essential for developing adaptive capacity because they encourage trust, teamwork, and psychological safety, all of which help people deal with change. As highlighted below by employee PM AO1 and employee DM AO1:

“But I think also most importantly, is to have your principal's support and the team support. Most importantly, how does it make you feel you can tell them and to have that conversation and to realise they are also going through the same things. So, we are all in this together [...]” **Employee PM AO1**

“So that's one thing I appreciate because I remember when I joined, I struggled with a lot of things. [...] And I think we've been fortunate to have an understanding executive that you can come back and say, OK, actually this was [...] an oversight or maybe I didn't understand. [...] but the having supportive and understanding the willingness to from executives has helped us to navigate the environment much better.” **Employee DM AO1**

Additionally, leaders saw empowerment as a way to boost confidence and promote team cohesion, especially when things were unclear. Many leaders talked about how they tried to motivate and inspire their staff by being straightforward, encouraging, and persevering. As highlighted by the leaders below:

“You influence them. You let them run with it, and then you just provide support and guidance. You see. So that’s the type of leadership that I subscribe to.” **Leader BN AO1**

“But then I had to dig deep. I remembered. I lived with kindness. That’s me. I lived with kindness. I will not come and [scream at] you and be aggressive. And then I show you this. I think that’s why I did leadership instead of MBA. I’m more of a leader. [...] I’ll make sure that when we [...] usually have our sectional meetings every month, I say, oh, colleagues, I really apologise, [...] I know sometimes I do come as hard [or as tough].” **Leader TM AO1**

Leader HK in AO3, responsible for the AO3 graduate development program, highlights how she uses inspiration, storytelling, and a bigger-picture approach to motivate graduates.

“Like the airline is 92 years old, someone I always say to my team someone 90 years ago had a vision and now we are reaping the fruits. And what? What are we? What are we planting for the next 90 years for people who will never know? [...] I had a big interest in business because everything is not about how we were paying dividends. And I looked at how they monitor things and how they can look at the global picture of total South Africa and be able to look at maybe revenue in Africa and the cost all over countries and be able to do specific interventions to zoom as to what is happening.” **Leader HK AO3**

Sub-Theme: Decisiveness and Transparent Decision-Making

A sub-theme of decisiveness and transparency in decision-making emerged under theme 2, which was consistently seen as a vital trait for adaptive leaders. Participants recognised that aviation is a precision-driven environment where delays or indecision can have serious operational and safety consequences. Therefore, leaders are expected to act decisively while maintaining collaboration and transparency. Leader PP in AO1 highlights a scenario where an independent function or organisation was brought into AO1 as part of a Minister of Transport directive:

“However, you realise that they've given privileges that they are not qualified for, and you cannot wait for tomorrow. You withdraw the privileges. [...] make a decision that is sound, and you tell them why you're making this decision and why it is best for because sometimes people don't understand that and I always say to my team there is right, there is wrong. [...] When you make a decision that is based on facts and reasons, although there might be other different view, you explain why you're taking it, why this is the best decision for that time.” **Leader PP AO1**

Leader SM from AO2 also emphasises the importance of a leader's decisiveness in decision-making.

“I'm employed to find solutions, not necessarily solve problems, but to find solutions in a sense what? I mean, I'm always scanning the environment as to what is currently happening at a macro level and what is happening also at a micro level as to whatever is happening outside, how does it impact me? You need to make decisions and so that you can be able to give directions to your team. So, once you are assigned as a project lead, you need to make those decisions. You don't have to consult with me at every corner. I think what is nice about the organisation as leadership, we are pretty much empowered to make decisions”. **Leader SM AO2**

In contrast, employees did not feel empowered to make decisions, unlike the leader's sentiments. This is highlighted below:

When employee CbB from AO2 gave an example of a decision made to allow employees to return to work post-COVID pandemic.

“The CEO sent out an email and we were all told to come back and everything. But some departments are still working from home for argument's sake [...]”. **Employee CbB AO2**

Employee BM also echoes these sentiments in AO1 below:

“I think the organisation is a bit on the rigid side in terms of when it has been decided to which this is. The change that is coming, it is so, and it doesn't really matter whether you have inputs because most of the time let me not say most of the time at times when you bring in maybe suggestions, maybe for improvement or not that you want to change their own.” **Employee BM AO1**

Whilst employee PM from AO1 highlights the negative impact of indecisiveness:

“So, we are an organisation that plan, but it's very easy for us to interrupt our plans. And change so we chop and change a lot even when we have planned, especially in my area”. **Employee PM AO1**

Participants also cautioned that decisiveness must be exercised responsibly, with attention to detail and awareness of potential consequences, given the industry's safety-critical nature.

“[...] We were going to pay close to 2 million and once the 2,000,000 is out of the AO1 account, if it had gone to the wrong bank account, there was no way we could have recovered it. You literally have to be constantly on your toes because things are forever changing.” **Employee TM AO1**

“Because risk says you have to go deeper in understanding your environment, so that you don't just choose something and cut and paste. But you need to say I put this to mitigate this because my context is this way.” **Employee DM AO1**

RQ1: Theme 2: Experimenting and Shared Learning

Theme definition: This theme examined the iterative process of testing ideas, reflecting on outcomes, and collaboratively sharing insights to foster collective knowledge and understanding.

Sub-theme: Collaboration as Strategic and Structural

Leaders often describe collaboration as a formal, strategic process, involving work groups and structured engagements. For example, Leader PP in AO1 mentions starting a work group with industry stakeholders and creating regulations together after a transfer of a function to AO1:

“[...] start a work group with the industry stakeholders. You explain the reason why you are withdrawing. [You] are engaging them to for them to come up with ways in which we can designate a new examiner. However, with limitations that are specific to their area. It was a huge challenge [...]we've created regulations together with them here so much [they] feel part of that process and they give it their all and they don't want to the process to fail”. **Leader PP AO1**

Leader SH in AO2 also emphasises the importance of collaboration, even during project execution, when they were struggling to find answers about the project delays from the

assessment office. They decided to engage with the IT division and collaborated to find a solution and the way forward.

"[...] But the capabilities are, you know, so we went to the guys, we spoke to them to try and understand where the bottlenecks, what is happening, but also to try and explain to them from our side the requirement to say this is the kind of requirement that needs to be met.

*I think I spent the day with the guys going through the step-by-step process, which they say they taught the assessment office how to load an assessment. But we went through it, we loaded the time assessment [...]. We loaded [and] the loading was successful. We prepared the assessment we got [...] two delegates, we got them to take the assessment. They took it, we could draw the feedback results, and everything [was] confirmed OK. The system works like they've been saying throughout, but we also identify that where there are problems is there's miscommunication, gaps between the IT guys who are responsible on this is for the system and the assessment office." **Leader SM AO2***

Sub-Theme: Co-creation as Empowerment and Ownership

Leaders observe that when employees feel involved in the process, they are more committed and less likely to cause the process to fail. Leader TM emphasises this in AO1, who manages a team of engineers.

*"[...]before they decide to cancel, we do sit down with my team, and then we can go through together. So, we are always aware that although the decision is for them, but they we always sit down to say I'm thinking this is not compliant, can we have a meeting and I'm saying OK guys. But what do you think? [how] about we tried this. Can we try this? [...] Because I've seen that when people are involved, there's less resistance to change." **Leader TM AO1***

Leader SM in AO1 further supports the points mentioned above by highlighting the following:

"But I don't think what they must do or how things could happen. I said to them, let's work together. I'll listen to you. You advise me? I'll you also listen to me. I'll advise you. Let's make for the talk this time. I'll call all the managers first because [...] I'm going to the meeting; we have this meeting like this that is with the executive and so

*forth and so forth. This is an agenda. What do you think? And then I'll hear what they say.” **Leader SM A01***

There is a focus on helping teams predict future challenges and create solutions, not just fix immediate issues. Leader SM mentions this in AO2, who has a team of three Managers overseeing key departments in his Division.

*“It's always to say I do not have to solve the problems today. I need to anticipate what will come in the next 5 or 10 years and how do I plan.^{[[1]]} For that, so that the team below me by the time we get to that stage, I've empowered them with the tools to implement, but not only to try and find a solution or solve a problem, then so I'm very much critical in how I analyse things[...].” **Leader SM A02***

While employees discuss collaboration using more practical, everyday language, such as sitting down with teams to talk about compliance, providing feedback, and working together to solve challenges, as highlighted by employee PM, employee SM, and employee DM below.

*“I think they also just providing that direction. [These] are the steps that we need to take having regular check-ins with them [...]” **Employee PM A01***

*“We were fortunate because we had Mr BN, and he's very pro-development and pro-change. So, with having a leader like that, he called us in, and he says, OK guys, this is the system.” **Employee SM A01***

*“[...] So, it's an ongoing thing, but one thing to make sure that by the collaboration building the culture, which is very, it's very much foundational in particular from cyber security[perspective], because although you can protect things, there's a human factor element. So, making sure that there is coordination, collaboration and you build [trust].” **Employee DM A01***

There is a lot of emphasis on maintaining healthy working relationships, respecting each other, and open communication. Employees prefer leaders who give them space to discuss their issues and encourage them to embrace change. Employee BM mentions the following about her leader in AO1:

“Sometimes it's things that we are uncomfortable with. So, she gives us that space to vent in terms of we're not comfortable with this. We don't like this. We like that.

But one thing that she will say would she, that's where the organisation is moving. Let's embrace the change.” Employee BM AO1

Sub-Theme: Shared Accountability and Team Trust

Leaders and employees discuss occasions when they had to make decisions, sometimes without being entirely sure, and then reflect on what happened afterwards. Leader TM, for example, talks about how they enforced a procedure without doing their homework, which failed. They then discussed this with the team to emphasise the importance of following the rules and working together. Being willing to admit mistakes and learn from them is a key part of shared learning.

“Initially, I did enforce one of our manufacturing inspectors and guess what? We didn't do due diligence myself and my team member said we lost [the appeal] and I felt so down. I went back to the team. I said team, look at this, we enforced this, I was involved, we lost it. But it's not [about] Win and lose. Remember [why] we are here. Why are we here? Compliance. I'll make sure that when we have usually had our sectional meetings every month, I say, oh, colleagues, [...] I really apologise. I did not comply”. Leader TM AO1

There is a strong emphasis on trusting and supporting the team, even when disagreements arise. Leaders understand that success is not solely individual but relies on collective effort and support. This is illustrated by Leader PP below:

“In other words, you need to trust your team and you need to support your team. It doesn't necessarily mean that you will agree with everything that they do [...]. [...]next coming months, you're on fire and you have to accept that, and you have to realise that indeed, I mean [made a mistake], it doesn't matter whether you are their superior.” Leader PP AO1

The excerpts below from leaders BN and BM show that experimenting and learning together can trigger strong emotions, such as frustration or defensiveness, especially when mistakes are made, or change is forced. Leaders described situations in which open discussions about team issues led to emotional reactions, but these moments also served as catalysts for deeper reflection and possible growth.

“[...] these are the issues within our teams then that was a touch the nerve for one of the managers because they obviously had been issues like seriously. So, from there on things just went south because then she started crying. She started saying

how dare I bring this. What? What what? What? So that is the situation that I found.”

Leader BN AO1

“Going to receive the change as well and different personalities. Some people whatever change you bring there will start from a place of defensiveness. They will start from that place. Oh, we don't want this. Why don't you do this? Why don't you?”

Leader BM AO1

Summary of the Research Question 1 Findings

The results from Research Question 1 indicate that successful adaptive leadership in the aviation industry relies on leaders' capacity to manage complexity while cultivating settings that promote experimentation and collective learning. There was a solid agreement among both leaders and employees that aviation is naturally dynamic, which means that leaders need to be flexible, calm, and able to adapt to changes all the time.

The first topic, Leading Through Complexity, focused on the importance of empowerment and supportive leadership for dealing with unpredictability and keeping performance high in a tough operating environment. Equally crucial was making quick, well-informed decisions, where leaders are required to act quickly yet carefully, using reliable information and working together.

The second topic, Experimentation and Shared Learning, stressed how important it is to work together, create things together, and share responsibility in order to be adaptable. Leaders and workers alike talked about how team trust and inclusive involvement generate a culture of continual learning and openness to new ideas.

Overall, the results show that adaptive leadership in aviation is shown by a balance of decisiveness and empowerment, which is supported by collaborative learning and mutual trust. These are important skills for staying effective in a changing and complicated environment.

5.2.5. Findings for Research Question 2

This section discusses what the research found about employees' perceptions of adaptive leadership and how it affects their capacity to adapt, succeed, and prosper in changing aviation environments. Two main themes came up: Theme 3, experiencing support and psychological safety and Theme 4, Adaptive Performance in Action. Sub-themes are identified within each theme.

RQ2: Theme 3: Experiencing support and Psychological Safety

Theme definition: This theme captured employees' perceptions of safety, trust, and openness fostered by leadership.

Sub-Theme: Barriers to Open Expression

Participants frequently described environments where expressing concerns or challenges was discouraged. Attempts to raise issues were often met with resistance or outright dismissal, with managers or executives pushing back and indicating that specific topics could not be addressed in those settings. This is highlighted by employee JK in AO1 as follows:

"[...] we all together and I mean assuming your managers then executive and say look this is the challenge I'm having and I'm experiencing, and they'll be pushed back to say but you can't address this here. Why didn't you[address outside this forum]? You can't talk about people here but there has never been an opportunity to say hey JK by the way." **Employee JK AO1**

Employee JK continues to highlight that voicing dissent led to being labelled a "problematic" ("the black sheep"). This created a climate where the employee feared being ostracised for speaking up.

"That will just be the instruction, and when you dispute it, i it's like you are the black sheep, you are the problematic one who's on the side. Concerns, but instead of my concerns being heard and listened to, I was vilified for that, and I was told that means I'm sabotaging." **Employee JK AO1**

Sub-Theme: Impact on Staff Well-Being and Retention

Unresolved issues and a lack of psychological safety contributed to staff turnover, with some inspectors leaving their positions due to unresolved conflicts and unsafe environments. Leader BN highlights this in AO1:

"Without any clear resolution of the matter to a point where two of the inspectors from were reporting to this manager have left, they've moved over to [another department]." **Leader BN AO1**

There is also perceived unfair treatment and lack of transparency (e.g., differences in resource allocation) that lead to frustration and feelings of inequity among staff. Employee SM in AO1 highlights this below:

“If you look at the inspectors, they'll say I want a [organisation branded] bag and they'll be like, no, it's for industry. But then [department A] is walking with these bags, so it's and it's a stupid example, but it's [important]. These are the things that the staff are looking at. So why are they getting treated differently in [department A]”.

Employee SM AO1

Sub-theme: Positive Leadership Practices

Some leaders made intentional efforts to respect boundaries, such as avoiding after-hours communication and being considerate of employees' family time. Leader TM demonstrates this in the excerpt below:

“Now, because he doesn't know, [...] He can wait [until] tomorrow, I saw it was on the e-mail trail by phone. [...] So, I try to give them the time [with] their families and especially when you have done wrong. I will not call you [...]. Like the way my senior manager wants me.” **Leader TM AO1**

Sub-Theme: Need for Psychological Safety

Participants highlighted the importance of psychological safety, describing it as the ability to be open without fearing negative consequences. The lack of such safety was associated with frustration, especially during times of change when employees felt unable to voice their concerns. This is illustrated by employee BM below.

“Psychological safety, yes. ^[1]~~See~~To be open. Yeah, because there's nothing as frustrating as hearing about a change [and] you can't vent.” **Employee BM AO1**

“[our leader] She would communicate first and foremost that there's this coming. This is how it might affect us. So, I think about communication and providing us with a safe space to vent in terms of how we feel about the change.” **Employee BM AO1**

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of open conversations about feelings and challenges within their teams. This transparency allows individuals to share vulnerabilities and personal experiences, which helps build psychological safety. For example, employee PM in AO1 mentioned that discussing emotions with colleagues and leaders helps everyone realise they are not alone in their struggles, creating a more supportive environment.

“I think as women as well, we at least allow ourselves to have conversations about how we feel. So, my senior manager and my executive we do have, when we do get

a moment, where we sit around, and we chat. Most importantly, how does it make you feel you can tell them and to have that conversation and to realise they are also going through the same things. So, we are all in this together [...]" **Employee PM AO1**

Also, trust within teams grows stronger when members learn about each other's strengths and weaknesses through shared experiences. This familiarity fosters closer relationships and a deeper understanding among team members, which is crucial for psychological safety. Leader BM emphasises this point in AO4.

"How everybody just is so close is because we've grown to know each other and to know each other's weaknesses and each other's strengths[...]" **Leader BM AO4**

Additionally, having honest, heart-to-heart conversations with team members was identified as a key strategy for addressing fears and concerns. This method helps individuals feel heard and supported, further improving psychological safety. Leader SM emphasises this in AO1 below:

"But I don't think [for them] what they must do or how things could happen. I said to them, let's work together. I'll listen to you. You advise me? I'll also listen to me. I'll advise you. Let's make the talk this time. Respect me. I'll respect you.[...]. That's how I do things. Then also I'll make sure that I bring them into play. Inform them all the time." **Leader SM AO1**

Lastly, participants with prior experience in relationship-building, such as those from HR backgrounds, found it easier to build trust and psychological safety. Existing relationships across departments made conversations smoother and reduced conflict, which helped support and integrate new team members. Employee BC shows this in AO5.

"So, I built these relationships in the different departments. So, it kind of made it a little bit easier because the relationship is there. So, when I go to them to have a conversation, we're not fighting. They know the kind of person that I am. We have an understanding and it's like, okay, blessings, I hear what you're saying. And I'm like, just, you know, this is the approach we're taking. We want to absorb these learners." **Employee BC AO5**

Sub-Theme: Empowerment through Delegation and Trust

Employees are given autonomy to make decisions and are trusted to handle tasks independently, with leaders available for support if needed. This approach fosters a sense

of ownership and confidence among team members. Leader PP highlights this in AO1 below:

"[...] your subordinates empower them, empower them in whatever possible, and all those three builds up to, I think a successful story." **Leader PP AO1**

From an employee's point of view, employee SM in AO1 recalls a time when she was delegated a function to her, and she felt empowered by her leader:

"He was very pro. Anything that we needed to change on the system, he was as part of it, and he then delegated it. So, when he delegated the function to me, he did not micromanage at all. He said go for it. If there's a problem, come to me."
Employee SM AO1

Participants also emphasised the importance of encouraging employees to make decisions without fear. Leaders support their teams by reassuring them that making mistakes is part of the process and that they can always seek guidance when challenges arise. This reduces anxiety about decision-making and fosters psychological safety. Leader TM and employee DM highlight this below:

"I mean support. Let's go through this and then and I'm always encouraging them not to be afraid to make decisions of enforcement and also for them to know that appeals, it's not about that you are right. But it's a process that needs to be exercised [...]" **Leader TM AO1**

"[...]So, you can make mistake and come back and rectify it". **Employee DM AO1**

Leaders emphasised granting employees full authority to manage projects or activities while maintaining accountability through regular check-ins. This balance ensures that employees feel supported but also responsible for their outcomes, reinforcing both empowerment and a safety net for learning and growth. Leader SM, who has three managers reporting to him, highlights this below:

"I'm always a person who say I will give you the full authority to run with the project or with the activity. The only thing that you will have to do now and then, I will check accountability in terms of what we have agreed on and how far we are, what kind of support do you need from me? [...] You need to make decisions and so that you can be able to give directions to your team. So, once you are assigned as a project

*lead, you need to make those decisions. You don't have to consult with me at every corner.” **Leader SM A02***

Employees expressed confidence in their leaders' support, knowing they will be backed in their decisions. Trust is built over time through ethical conduct and consistent delivery of quality results, which further strengthens the psychological safety within the team. Employee BC highlights this in AO5:

*“And I think that trust is also built with its built by individuals with ethic. So, I pride myself in what I do, and I do it with excellence. So, my output and my results have also helped her to trust me more. [...] So, whatever I do, I have the confidence to know that she's going to back me. And if I need to make a certain decision, I go and I speak to her about it, but a lot of the time when I go to her, she'll say, but you already have the answer”. **Employee BC A05***

RQ2: Theme 4: Adaptive performance in action

Theme definition: This theme illustrates how employees and leaders stay flexible, take the lead, and act proactively as their companies' needs and challenges change.

Sub-Theme: Being Proactive and Going Above and Beyond

Participants made it clear that being proactive rather than reactive was important. One leader said it simply: "You must not be reactive." This shows an attitude of readiness and expectation. Another participant said how important it is to look for knowledge and answers: "Don't be afraid to research, ask, consult, or benchmark." These stories show a culture that encourages workers to take charge and think beyond their current tasks. This is highlighted clearly by the excerpts from both the leaders and employees:

*“To get more from them. Lastly, you must always get ready. You must not be reactive. [...] Do not be afraid to research, to ask, to consult, to benchmark”. **Leader PP A01***

*“I try as much as I can to be proactive, which I think that one is, it's not hard. You look at a position problem or challenge, think of what can be done and in thinking of what can be done, I tend to think beyond just my role or my department”. **Leader SM A02***

*“You literally have to be constantly on your toes because things are forever changing”. **Employee TM A01***

Employee BM said that their adaptive actions were due to personal attributes, including being inherently proactive or creative.

“The first thing really is to empower myself in terms of understanding. [...]Yeah, I think I'm naturally proactive. I think it comes with being a first born. So yeah, I'm very proactive and I'm an innovator and I'm a starter. I like starting things. I'm very proactive, so perhaps it's just my personality in terms of just thinking out of the box as well.” **Employee BM AO1**

While leader SM indicated he understood that his role as leader required him not only to look at operational issues, but also to scan the macro environment for potential threats:

“I'm employed to find solutions, not necessarily solve problems, but to find solutions in a sense what? I mean, I'm always scanning the environment as to what is currently happening at a macro level and what is happening also at a micro level as to whatever is happening outside, how does it impact me?” **Leader SM AO2**

It's always to say I do not have to solve the problems today. I need to anticipate what will come in the next 5 or 10 years and how do I plan. For that, so that the team below me by the time we get to that stage, I've empowered them with the tools to implement, but not only to try and find a solution or solve a problem, then so I'm very much critical in how I analyse things, and I pretty much believe. **Leader SM AO2**

Employee SM and TM in AO1, further highlights the importance of work ethic and going the extra mile below:

“And I looked at it and I said to myself, there's no way. There's gotta be efficiency and efficiency means I'm not looking. For a report through a paper-based pile, because that happened in the 1960s, we need to move forward. So, we started scanning all those documents. We've got interns to assist, we've labelled them. We've put them onto SharePoint, we've made them electronic”. **Employee SM AO1**

“[...] having a good work ethic goes a long way because it is never dependent on what another person does or doesn't do it's always about what the end goal that we are trying to meet and how do we make sure that we get there.” **Employee TM AO1**

Participants regularly underscored the need for self-leadership and academic preparedness to acclimate to new responsibilities and demands. Leader PP in AO1 reflects on this as follows:

"[...] you've got an engineering diploma. I've got a licence. What is it that you want to do? What is it that you want to do? And I said, let me go to school. Let me go to school and prepare myself. I have the experience so as a result of that preparation, academically as a result of my research and interest in new trends. [...] prepare yourself academically." **Leader PP AO1**

These kinds of remarks demonstrate a proactive attitude, where individuals take responsibility for their own growth and recognise that adapting involves planning ahead and continuously learning new things.

Sub-Theme: Spirituality as a Foundation for Adaptation

Participants consistently described their spiritual beliefs as foundational to their ability to adapt and thrive in dynamic environments. Furthermore, rather than attributing achievements solely to personal effort, several participants emphasised the role of divine intervention in their professional journeys. Spiritual practices such as prayer and reflection were described as practical tools for adaptation. The following participants articulated this connection by stating:

"[...] let me also just thank God because I believe that he listens to us, even if we're not praying and we talk about him. I mean, I don't take my growth likely[...]. I honestly don't. I am humbled by what God has done in my 6th year in the organisation. I was the acting senior manager. [It] doesn't happen. [...] I'm grateful to God. I appreciate what God has done. I don't want to talk about the hard work that I put because it's not about me, but I'm looking at all the processes that happens for one to be successful and to manage." **Leader PP AO1**

"I'm really gonna thank God, because from a very young age, I was always exposed. So, I would be a nobody. [My leader] put me in strategy sessions. Take me everywhere. Sometimes I was young. I didn't even know anything. You just take me to meetings to sit everywhere. What they're doing and at the time, I think I was not even. I was quite young to do my first job, and I thank God for it." **Leader HK AO3**

"I think my spiritual base is the essence of it all, because obviously it does affect you. There's no question about it. [...] I'm a believer in Jesus, the God, so church and praying and also just reflecting back and asking God, what does this mean [...] I think when you have a source that you like, please explain this. That's happening in my life because I don't know what this looks like. I don't know how to handle this. And I think solutions also it helps you to be in a space where you can now start thinking seeing once you have hope and, you are now in a positive space, you can start thinking of solutions. [...] God just gives you that wisdom." **Employee PM A01**

Sub-Theme: Navigating Emotional Dynamics

Participants described the importance of emotional intelligence in discerning when and how to communicate sensitive information. Leader PP in AO 1 highlighted the need to tailor communication based on the recipient's disposition:

"[...] emotional intelligence and where to say what? Who can I say this? That comes with knowing. OK, this is Jazzman. He's a lively character. He won't take offence in these and those are very important." **Leader PP A01**

Another leader echoed the importance of accountability and reconciliation:

"I will reflect and be accountable and also go back to the person and talk to them and apologise and just be down to and apologise, make sure that we are [on the same page]." **Leader SM A01**

Finally, adaptive performance was linked to creating an approachable atmosphere, as highlighted by employee BM:

"I mean I think I'm Approachable. Bring a little bit of humour so people are just comfortable to come to you and say able me we hear you but listen this and listen this." **Employee BM A01**

Summary of Research Question 2 Findings

The results for Research Question 2 illustrate how workers perceive and react to adaptive leadership behaviours inside their organisations. Two main themes emerged: experiencing support, psychological safety, and adaptive performance in action.

Under the first theme, participants stressed the importance of psychological safety. Employees discussed how limitations on open expression make it harder to generate new

ideas and solve problems. They also said that a lack of psychological safety hurts well-being and can lead to disengagement or even quitting. Leaders and workers alike knew that leaders are very important in creating places where people feel secure enough to speak up and take chances without worrying about what might happen to them.

The second theme, adaptive performance in action, showed that employees are adaptable when they take the initiative, are always looking for ways to improve, and are prepared to go above and beyond expectations. Three important sub-themes came up: proactivity and self-driven growth, where people take the lead in learning new skills and doing their jobs well; spirituality as an internal anchor, which shows that participants believe that faith and purpose help them get through tough times; and emotional intelligence, which allows workers to deal with complicated interpersonal and operational situations with care and awareness.

5.2.6. Findings for Research Question 3

The last research question examined the broader organisational and contextual factors that affect adaptive leadership and the adaptability of employees in the aviation industry. This encompasses the examination of the facilitating systems, structures, and cultural factors that promote or obstruct adaptive behaviour within various aviation organisations. This analysis revealed two principal themes: Theme 5, organisational constraints and complexity, and Theme 6, building adaptive capacity. Below, each theme is explained in more detail.

RQ3: Theme 5: Organisational Constraints and Complexities

Theme definition: The theme highlights structural and cultural barriers to adaptation,

Sub-Theme: Stretching Human Capital

Leaders indicated that employees are required to take on additional tasks due to staff shortages, sometimes without adequate support or training. This leads to role changes and expansion beyond original job descriptions. This is highlighted below by the leaders:

"[...] Now the two people have left, and she's left with two people. So that's so the team is gutted. It's halved into two it's 50% left of the manpower and [...] nothing is done." **Leader BM AO1**

Leader SM in AO2 further highlights this constraint:

*“But the challenge that we are sitting with, I do not have adequate instructors to be able to cover that. And so yes, the demand, so the clinical change that we had to do now[...] Given the resources that we have at our disposal, then how do we ensure that we still meet this demand because the issue that we are confronted it if we are unable to push the pipeline, chances are the ripple effect of it, it will end up having to close some of the sectors in the operation.” **Leader SM AO2***

Sub-Theme: Structural and Resource Constraints

The structure remains unchanged despite increased workload, leading to inefficiencies and stress. HR initiatives are present but may not address core resource issues. This is highlighted by Employee JK, SM and PM in AO1 and Employee CdB in AO2 below:

*“When you say JK must handle the [...] whole bursary programme. There's not a view of what is JK doing that can then be shifted to allow her to take on that role. And also, is it a wise decision to give?” **Employee JK AO1***

*“[...]I'm employed to do licensing. So now what we had was we had four administrative ladies at OR, and one resigned, and the company decided not to replace her. So, we had we had to incorporate that into the other three ladies. So, we all divided the work, and I ended up with memos and instructions. So, at times when I'm meant to be monitoring my licences, the memos and instructions become a bit [lot].” **Employees CdB AO2***

*“It had a lot to do with the culture of the organisation, the number of resources in place, the amount of workload that was being placed, because your core in AO1 should actually be technical stuff, right.” **Employee SM AO1***

*“The work has tripled, but the structure has remained the same. So, and it takes, it looks like priorities are not given on they are capacitating human resources. And not just from our area, but from also an area that supports us, which is the supply chain, they are very stretched, and these are the people who so on top of processes that have become lengthier.” **Employee PM AO1***

Sub-Theme: Leadership Gaps

Lack of clear leadership and direction leaves employees feeling unsupported. Executives may disengage once their own objectives are met, leaving teams to manage complex situations independently. This is highlighted by the employees below:

“The thing is the expectation was always there. The support, not necessarily you do get the odd manager that’ll assist you, but I’m very old school, so the job has to get done regardless of how it gets done.” **Employee CdB AO2**

“I’m allowing you to lead me. I So I’m missing that I’m missing their leadership. I’m missing their direction. And from an executive’s perspective, [s]he left the situation as it is. She didn’t touch it. She just forgot about it. And she moved on because she was happy, and her boxes were ticked.” **Employee JK AO1**

Sub-Theme: Resistance to Change

Some employees push back against additional responsibilities, citing job descriptions and perceived interference. This resistance can hinder organisational progress and innovation. As highlighted by leader SH from AO2:

“But some people tend to push back because they feel you’re interfering or you’re exposing the deficiencies that maybe they don’t want to be. [...] people are getting into that space of zoning into this is my JD. This is outside my JD step back.” **Leader SH AO2**

Sub-Theme: Expertise as Organisational Backbone

There is a strong emphasis on hiring “very good” and “well-qualified” people, with expertise seen as the foundation of organisational success and trust. Leader BM in AO4, who operates in the complex space of drones and employee BC, who works for a low-cost airline, highlight this very well below:

“[...] I just need to make sure that [they are] highly skilled. We have our logbooks, so I’ll then go through the last three months, 90 days of their logbooks to see how well they’ve been doing. How many incidents or accidents they’ve had within the last three months and then yeah, so those kind of factors in taking in terms of, I mean the equipment safety is their safety, their own safety. I look at those things and how many hours they have, obviously because that’ll determine their experience because aviation is so highly regulated. I just make sure that person knows what they’re doing ‘cause I mean these days, honestly, you find people that have a lot of hours, but they still don’t know [how to perform the tasks].” **Leader BM AO4**

Leader BM continues to emphasise this point by making an example with their internal accounting resource:

“Educated as well. So, there's that trust, you know, and everybody is highly skilled within the organisation. So, we have, for instance, we've got a guy that's doing accounting, he's we know that he's got an extensive background, and we can trust [him] we can always trust.” **Leader BM AO4**

Employee BC also highlights the importance of having skilled employees and balancing budgetary constraints for a low-cost airline:

“[...] But the challenge now that we have is, yes, we're getting these graduates, but, you know, with the shift in skills that are required within the business, we are now looking for industrial engineers because of where the business is going and you know, IT is very it's a very predominant space and getting graduates in that space has been a challenge [...] we pride ourselves as a low-c airline, right? So, everything is low-cost for. But to get that skill, you need to be able to spend your right? The skill is needed. The business doesn't want to spend, and I'm putting the situation where the manager says, I want these learners. But the finance part says, Okay, we're not going to be able to pay for the skill.” **Employee BC AO5**

Sub-Theme: Global Skill Shortages and Migration

The organisation faces a global shortage of critical skills, with many employees leaving for opportunities abroad, necessitating increased recruitment efforts and consideration of international talent pools. This is highlighted by the leaders below:

“[...] the challenge that I'm sitting with currently of which is a very much problem I don't know how that do it because even the country cover the operators are struggling Helicopter pilot. Only available people, retired white male [...]” **Leader SM AO2**

“Now, with the recent global shortage, I think South Africa, we have suffered the most, where we have lost a lot of critical skills to have the Middle East and some of them, they've gone to Australia and all of that and then that what that does it means that then we need to increase the pipeline of the new intakes of.” **Leader SM AO2**

Leader SM in AO1, also highlights this challenge below:

“[...] So, we had that challenge of the AO 1 where we need to monitor them[Airline], and then we need, we need to have people who are experienced within the AO1

*that [understands] the system. Because they know the global [shortage of skills] problem, they say as long as you have an inspector with A 737 a bigger aircraft then that is that inspector can do oversight on smaller than those ones.” **Leader SM AO1***

Sub-Theme: Centralisation and Power Dynamics

Several participants highlight that decision-making is concentrated in certain departments or among senior managers, leading to frustration and a sense of exclusion among other staff. This centralisation is seen as a barrier to effective engagement and utilisation of specialist expertise. This is highlighted by Leader PP and employee SM below:

*“[...] the difficult aspects, yes, it's [the] centralisation of power.[...] It is centralised to a certain department [...].” **Leader PP AO1***

*“[...]So, at an organisational level, there's a lot of silos, to be honest with you.” **Employee SM AO1***

Sub-Theme: Organisational Rigidity

Employees feel that once a decision is made, there is little room for negotiation or adaptation, which stifles initiative and responsiveness. Employee BM in AO1 highlights this below:

*“I think the organisation is a bit on the rigid side in terms of when it has been decided to which this is the change that is coming, [...] and it doesn't really matter whether you have inputs[...]. If there are changes, you just get on with what has been changed, and I don't really think that there's an appetite to listen. I think if certain things are decided and ^[SEP]it's OK to decide to do certain things, but I don't think that's sort of flexibility in terms of being given the way with how do we get to the end goal [...]” **Employee BM AO1***

Sub-Theme: Autonomy and Empowerment

In contrast, some leaders report feeling empowered to make decisions and innovate within their departments, suggesting that experiences of autonomy may vary depending on role or level within the organisation, as highlighted by Leader SM in AO2:

“I think what is nice about the organisation as leadership, we are pretty much empowered to make decisions. We are very much empowered to bring in innovative solutions, especially on how we run our departments obviously guided by the

principles of the organisation but today is that element of flexibility and allowing people that then to be to be innovative. And I think we have mapped out our processes quite clear. There's no ambiguity in terms of our processes.” **Leader SM AO2**

RQ3: Theme 6: Building Adaptive Capacity

Theme definition: which reflects the organisational practices and conditions that promote flexibility, learning, and collaboration

Sub-Theme: Policies as Formal Structures and Guides

Participants acknowledge that organisations have well-documented policies and procedures, often developed with good intentions and clarity. These policies are seen as providing structure and guidance for behaviour and decision-making. This is highlighted by the participants below:

“There are policies everybody must follow. [...] So, the reason I'm where I am is because of the policies of these organisations. [...] So, the policies are very good policies [are] effective and [are] implemented to a larger degree.” **Leader PP AO1**

“On paper, [policies] looks beautiful. You know? And it tells me that, OK, if you say customer centricity, it means anyone who's a customer to you really internal external if they have an issue, you prioritise that you know it looks good when you talk accountability. Accountability doesn't mean only when things are good.” **Leader SH AO2**

“I think what is critical is that the policies and procedures are there to assist us.” **Leader BN AO1**

“The policies are there and now I can see the good thing that they are doing every policy they can do a workshop, some sort of a workshop [to create more awareness].” **Leader TM AO1**

Sub-Theme: The Policy-Practice Gap

Despite positive perceptions of policy content, participants repeatedly highlight a significant gap between what is documented and what is practiced. Implementation is inconsistent, and organisational culture often undermines the intended effects of policies. This is highlighted by employee JK and employee BM below:

“How things should be done, and I'm thinking around the working from home story. I mean it does it does document how things should be done from that perspective and opportunities are also availed where those can be discussed like they'll be presented to employees will get to go through the policy. But the issue then is also with regard to the practise of it. I think the culture of the organisation sometimes doesn't really allow.” **Employee JK AO1**

“Yeah, you know, I was thinking about this, say, what's the employer of choice? Top employer. Yeah, I'm sure they look into the policies and procedures and like, This looks good. Hey, this is the company to work for, but on the implementation side, hey, I think we could do better.” **Employee BM AO1**

Sub-Theme: Communication and Stakeholder Engagement

Effective change management requires clear communication and involvement of all stakeholders. Lack of explanation and engagement can lead to resistance and misunderstanding. The participants below highlights this:

“[...] then start a work group with the industry, the other stakeholders. You explain the reason why you are withdrawing. When you make a decision that is based on facts and reasons, although there might be other different view, you explain why you're taking it, why this is the best decision for that time.” **Leader PP AO1**

Employee CdB explains how their internal change management department assist them when there are new changes introduced in the organisation

“[...] change management department and they're responsible for a lot of like notifications and bulletins and things that go out and stuff.” **Employee CdB AO2**

Employee BM highlights the role of her leader when change happens in their space, emphasising that change management is not a function of a simple unit within the organisation.

“[...] She [they leader] would communicate first and foremost that there's this coming. This is how it might affect us. So, I think about communication and providing us with a safe space to vent in terms of how we feel about the change.” **Employee BM AO1**

"[...] I would love to approach this organisation for the change management, colleagues, the systems are there, the policies are there, but not everybody reads them. So, these workshops are helping us and it's much easier." **Leader TM AO1**

Sub-Theme: Departmental Limitations

Isolating change management as a department can hinder its effectiveness, especially if those implementing change are not involved in the process. This is highlighted by Leader SH in AO2

"Yes, I know someone would say no about that change management is what should solve that. But change management also it comes with its limitations. With us, at least, my observation is that you put change management as a department, and you leave it with other people who are not even part of the process where the change is happening. So, it actually limits them in achieving the desired results as well." **Leader SH AO2**

Sub-Theme: Continuous Change and Necessity of Adaptation

Change is a constant in the organisational environment, driven by evolving legislation and business needs. Adaptation is not optional. This is demonstrated by the following participants below:

"And now we must learn a new system. And like, if you don't learn the system, the systems are here to stay. So, either you're gonna learn it and move with it, or you're gonna get left behind and work. What I find is that if you do not know, you will fear the change." **Employee SM AO1**

"So, for me I can say change is not a shock if I can put it like that because it's constantly in the environment. That's what it requires, 'cause even the accounting. [...] And the accounting legislation that we use when we are in whatever we are doing is constantly changing with the changing times. You know? So, for me, change within this environment is something constant, and what then needs to happen is that if there's a change that needs to be applied." **Employee TM AO1**

Sub-Theme: Training as a Key Intervention

Training is recognised as transformative for staff. However, there is an ongoing need for practical, role-specific training, such as knowledge testing in operational contexts. This is highlighted by the participants below:

"[...] I think one thing that I got for my employer was to send me and some of my team members to the emotional intelligence training that has really help me a lot."

Leader TM AO1

"National Treasury will then provide context sessions where we are invited and then they give [us] the crux of what has changed from what we already know what needs to be implemented when does it need to be implemented by, we all, yeah. Basically, for most of those changes they are then communicated from there." **Employee TM AO1**

Sub-Theme: Financial Constraints

Resource limitations are a significant barrier, with examples of high costs for inspections and audits. These financial burdens can impede compliance and operational efficiency. Leader SM highlights this in AO1:

"[...] I'm just going to make an example I've requested that I need to pay 2 inspectors for a 767. The money is 1.8 million [rands]. Only one account for six weeks. So, if you if I'll calculate the number of aeroplanes that we have in the country [...], that if we need to pay everyone out, AO3 wants. I think because I remember last time I calculated after FAA audit and the money was equating to, I think it was 180 million [rands] something like that." **Leader SM AO1**

Summary of Research Question 3 Findings

The results of Research Question 3 show that even if adaptive leadership and performance are important in the aviation business, how they are shown is heavily affected by the structures, processes, and real-world situations of the organisation. Two primary themes emerged: (1) Organisational Constraints and Complexities, and (2) Cultivating Adaptive Capacity.

Theme 5: Organisational constraints and complexities: Participants indicated that while aviation organisations function within highly organised settings, these very processes might hinder adaptation. A common theme in interviews was the idea that human capital is overworked. Employees often do more than what is expected of them, which makes them tired and less creative. Several participants observed that organisational structures have not adapted to evolving responsibilities, leading to structural rigidity that hinders response.

Another problem that kept recurring was a shortage of skilled employees. Participants discussed how difficult it is to retain competent employees, as opportunities abroad often draw skilled workers away from their home countries. This is known as "brain drain." This shortage of personnel puts more pressure on those already there and makes it harder for the organisation to grow.

Also, participants said that centralising authority was a major problem. It was common for top management to have all the power to make decisions, which caused delays and made employees at the operational level less likely to take the initiative. Employees said they didn't have many chances to help make decisions or change processes in their area, even when it was clear that they needed to be flexible. These limitations together exemplify organisational inertia, characterised by hierarchical frameworks and compliance-driven cultures that impede adaptive responses in an industry necessitating swift transformation.

Theme 6: Building adaptive capacity: Even with these problems, participants also identified several factors that could enhance adaptive capability. The first was strong rules and procedures for governance, which most employees said were well thought out and well communicated. But a lot of employees said there was a gap between what the policy was meant to do and how it was really done. This gap between policy and practice was recognised as an opportunity to improve. It showed that adaptive capacity depended not just on having formal procedures, but also on how well they are used.

Communication and involvement also came up as important things that help. Participants noted that change efforts work best when leaders and employees talk to one other honestly and work together across departments. Several employees said that change management responsibilities are very important but can't work alone. Everyone in the organisation, from the top down, needs to be adaptable.

Finally, training and development were seen as important but under-resourced. Participants in the aviation industry underscored the need for continuous learning to keep up with changing technology, regulations, and operating standards. This is because aviation is a very specialised field. However, budgetary limitations, such as restricted training budgets and the substantial expense of aviation-specific certifications, were identified as ongoing obstacles.

These findings reveal a complex duality: on the one hand, structural and resource constraints make it hard to adjust; on the other hand, good governance, learning mechanisms, and a desire to work together can help increase adaptive capacity. The

problem is to connect these two worlds: changing cultures that focus on following the rules into flexible, learning-oriented systems that can see change coming and adapt to it.

5.3. Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the results of the research's empirical phase, which examined how adaptive leadership is felt and demonstrated in the complex, ever-changing aviation industry. The chapter offered profound, empirical insights into the realities of leadership and adaptability within a regulated, high-stakes environment, derived from 16 semi-structured interviews with leaders and employees from five aviation organisations.

The chapter began by discussing the data sources and research setting, including the makeup of participants from both leadership and employee groups and the circumstances under which the data were gathered. These particulars delineated the framework for comprehending the varied organisational viewpoints documented in the research.

It then went into detail about how the data was analysed, using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase thematic analysis method as a guide. This part explained how interview transcripts were cleaned, coded, and grouped into themes and sub-themes over time using both manual analysis and Atlas.ti software. This iterative process ensured that the final six themes accurately reflected participants' genuine perspectives and were analytically consistent with the research's three research questions.

The findings section presented these six themes, grouped by the three research questions. Under Research Question 1, two themes, Leading Through Complexity and Experimentation and Shared Learning, illustrated how leaders and employees manage uncertainty, reconcile decisiveness with empowerment, and promote collaboration and co-creation in adaptive work. Research Question 2 yielded two additional themes, Psychological Safety and Support and Adaptive Performance in Action, emphasising the role of trust, emotional intelligence, and proactivity in fostering individual and team adaptability. The last two themes, Organisational Constraints and Complexities and Building Adaptive Capacity, answered Research Question 3. They identified the systemic factors that help or hinder adaptability, such as hierarchy, skill gaps, communication, and the organisation's culture of learning.

These findings collectively present a comprehensive understanding of adaptability in aviation as a multi-dimensional phenomenon encompassing individual behaviours, leadership practices, and organisational systems. The evidence indicates that adaptability

is not merely a singular characteristic but a relational and structural process that necessitates alignment among individuals, culture, and governance.

The chapter concluded by naming the six main themes to be used in the next stage of analysis. Chapter 6 builds on these results by looking at what they mean in light of what we already know about adaptive leadership and adaptive performance. It looks at their conceptual implications, points of convergence, and areas of divergence.

6. Chapter 6 Discussion

6.1. Introduction

This chapter builds on the empirical findings presented in Chapter 5 by interpreting and analysing them through the lens of established theories and literature on adaptive leadership and adaptive performance. The research aimed to explore experiences and expressions of adaptive leadership in South Africa's complex and dynamic aviation industry and examine their impact on employees' adaptive performance.

The main research question guiding this research is: **How is adaptive leadership experienced within the context of a complex and evolving aviation industry, and how does it influence employee adaptive performance?**

Supportive sub-questions include:

1. What leadership traits support or constrain adaptive leadership within the aviation industry?
2. How do employees experience and respond to adaptive leadership behaviours in a changing operational environment?
3. What organisational and contextual factors enable or constrain adaptive leadership and employee adaptive performance within the aviation industry?

This chapter aims to contextualise the empirical findings within the broader theoretical framework and highlight their implications for both academia and practical use. Building on the literature discussed in Chapter 2, this discussion links the themes from the data to both established and emerging ideas about adaptive leadership and performance.

The chapter is organised around the three research questions, each with its own set of themes. Research Question 1 explores the experiences of leaders and employees regarding adaptability in the dynamic aviation environment, emphasising the importance of decisiveness, empowerment, collaboration, and co-creation. Research Question 2 focuses on the interpersonal and behavioural aspects of adaptation, highlighting psychological safety, emotional intelligence, and employee proactivity as key enablers of adaptive performance. Research Question 3 investigates the organisational systems and contextual factors that influence adaptability, including structure, culture, and learning mechanisms.

6.2. Summary and Interpretation of the Key Findings

The findings indicate that adaptability in aviation is both a behavioural and systemic phenomenon, reliant on empowered leadership, secure and trusting relationships, and organisational environments that promote continuous learning and responsiveness. The results are consistent with adaptive leadership and adaptive performance theory; however, they also contribute to the literature by highlighting the policy–practice gap and introducing the notion of disciplined adaptability, the equilibrium between structure and flexibility that facilitates sustainable performance in a regulated, safety-critical industry.

The subsequent sections thoroughly examine each research question and its associated themes, integrating empirical findings with theoretical frameworks to enhance comprehension of adaptability within the aviation domain.

6.2.1. RQ 1: Theme 1 – : Leading through Complexity

Recap of the Findings

The results indicate that both leaders and employees agree that the aviation industry is inherently complex, constantly changing, and always expanding. Participants described the industry as one characterised by ongoing regulatory updates, technological innovations, and substantial operational risks, requiring agility and well-informed decision-making. Leaders emphasised the need to respond swiftly to new issues while remaining accurate and adhering to regulations, as safety is the top priority. Similarly, employees highlighted the importance of their managers giving them authority and support, stating these behaviours are essential for adapting and feeling confident in such a demanding environment.

Discussion of the findings with the literature

The literature clearly supports these results. Baldwin (2016) examines the growth of the aviation industry within a highly regulated environment, detailing how layers of scrutiny and compliance have influenced leadership decision-making. Nuur and Ariyanto (2024) assert that effective leadership in aviation requires ongoing adaptation to changing technical, regulatory, and operational demands. More broadly, researchers like Scott and Bender (2025), London (2023), Côté (2022), and Dunn (2020) argue that businesses operating in unstable environments need to be "adaptive by design," with leadership systems capable of managing crises and planning for future challenges simultaneously.

The importance of empowerment in adaptive leadership is well supported in the literature. Dunn (2020) stresses that adaptive leaders not only make quick judgments but also create a workplace where employees feel free to act, even when situations are unclear. Similarly, Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2025) highlight empowerment as a key element of adaptive leadership, arguing that enabling employees to collaborate on adaptive issues is essential for maintaining responsiveness in changing environments. The literature also emphasises decision-making agility. Côté (2022) states that leaders must be both quick and careful when making decisions in unexpected situations. This aligns with what participants said about aviation leaders who balance rapid responses with precision and strict procedures.

Explanation and interpretation of the findings

The alignment between the findings and current research highlights the crucial role of contextual intelligence in adaptive leadership within aviation. The findings demonstrate that being a good leader in this field isn't just about making quick judgments; it also involves making decisions based on facts while adhering to safety and regulatory standards. Empowerment also serves as a way to turn adaptive goals into collaborative action; by distributing authority and building confidence, leaders enable prompt team responses without compromising compliance or safety.

However, a significant conflict arises when these findings are compared with those from Theme 5 (Organisational Constraints and Complexities). Participants recognise the need for decentralised, flexible decision-making; yet they describe a reality in which decision-making remains centralised among top leaders. This structural rigidity may hinder the adaptability needed in aviation. The contrast indicates a disconnect between leadership goals and organisational structure. This suggests that even leaders who want to be flexible might be constrained by systems that make decisions hierarchically.

In conclusion, Theme 1 reveals that leading through complexity involves two key skills: making quick, fact-based judgments and empowering employees to act within defined boundaries. In aviation, adaptive leadership isn't about improvising on the spot; it's about being flexible and disciplined—responding quickly yet safely in situations where every decision has operational and human impacts.

6.2.2. RQ 1: Theme 2 – Experimentation and Shared Learning

Recap of the Findings

The results show that both leaders and employees in the aviation industry recognise that trying new things and learning from one another are important for managing the industry's complexity. Leaders described cooperation as an organised, often intentional effort, including established work groups, planned interactions, and project-focused dialogues aimed at working together to solve complex problems. They emphasised that involving employees in these processes makes them feel more responsible, reducing resistance and increasing their commitment to making change happen. On the other hand, employees spoke about collaboration using more practical, everyday language, like "sitting down with the team" or "talking through the task." This indicates they have a more grounded, operational view of co-creation. Both groups agreed that trust among team members, open communication, and everyone feeling like they are part of the team are key to sustaining learning and fostering a culture of flexibility.

Discussion of the findings with the literature

The literature on adaptive leadership strongly supports the results as a collaborative and iterative process. Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) place adaptive leadership within a systems-thinking framework, where leaders help employees address adaptive challenges by "giving the work back," allowing those closest to the issue to experiment, reflect, and develop context-specific solutions. Similarly, Côté (2022) and Hubbard et al. (2025) state that co-creation is a central element of adaptive leadership. They view it as a partnership between leaders and followers that prioritises learning over control. Randall and Coakley (2007) describe adaptive leadership as an innovative, problem-solving approach that involves various stakeholders throughout the system.

The research's focus on cooperation supports these theoretical ideas by showing that leaders who share power and encourage participation enhance the group's collective problem-solving ability. However, the difference between how leaders and employees perceive collaboration is an interesting detail. Leaders might discuss cooperation in strategic terms, but when employees talk about "talking" or "sitting together," they may be referring to working together to solve technical problems where the solutions are already known, and the tasks are straightforward. Heifetz and Linsky (2017) are well known for their distinction between technical challenges, which can be addressed with current knowledge and methods, and adaptive challenges, which require new knowledge,

experimentation, and shifts in priorities or values. This contrast clarifies why employees' understanding of cooperation might seem more transactional than transformative.

Explanation and interpretation of the findings

The results show that experimentation and collaborative learning are not only methods for solving problems but also for developing adaptive skills. In the high-stakes field of aviation, leaders who prepare teams to work together systematically foster psychological ownership and make it easier to implement plans. This illustrates what Côté (2022) describes as “distributed learning,” where leadership creates an environment conducive to community reflection and meaning making.

Nonetheless, a key interpretive insight emerges from the clear difference between leaders' and employees' views of collaboration. Leaders see co-creation as a planned, systems-focused process, while employees view it as spontaneous and operational. This suggests that collaboration's ability to adapt is limited by the extent to which employees are involved in strategic problem-solving. In other words, cooperation may occur, but it might focus only on fixing technical problems rather than on the deeper adaptive work of questioning assumptions, trying new ideas, and embracing the unknown.

This conflict also prompts us to consider an important issue raised by the data: can the iterative co-creation process align with the aviation industry's need for quick, fact-based decision-making (as stated in Theme 1). A possible solution is to adopt a two-pronged approach: use collaborative learning to prepare teams to be adaptable before problems arise, enabling them to make faster, more informed decisions when technical difficulties occur. In this way, experimentation and shared learning equip employees with the mental and emotional flexibility needed to respond swiftly in high-stakes situations.

Overall, Theme 2 demonstrates that adaptive leadership in aviation is most effective when cooperation moves beyond mere formality and evolves into a daily habit of questioning, experimenting, and sharing responsibility.

6.3. Summary of Research Question 1 Discussion

The results from Research Question 1 show that the interaction of contextual complexity and collaborative learning influences adaptive leadership in the aviation industry. Both leaders and employees agree that the aviation industry is constantly changing its rules, adopting new technology, and is difficult to predict. This complexity requires leaders who

can act quickly but thoughtfully, making fact-based decisions that prioritise safety without hindering responsiveness.

Theme 1 demonstrates that effective adaptive leaders in aviation possess knowledgeable decisiveness and supportive empowerment. They create workplaces where employees feel safe enough to work independently within certain limits. Theme 2 expands on this by illustrating how leaders and employees explore new approaches, learn from each other, and collaborate to accomplish tasks. These methods not only boost involvement but also help the organisation to develop its adaptive capacity.

The research reveals a complex contradiction between the need for quick, centralised decision-making, which is crucial in safety-sensitive operations, and the iterative, participatory nature of adaptive systems. Leaders aim to decentralise and delegate responsibility, but structural and cultural barriers, such as hierarchical authority and fear of risks, can obstruct the effectiveness of adaptive leadership. The findings suggest that the success of adaptive leadership in aviation depends on balancing discipline and flexibility, combining swift decision-making with comprehensive learning processes.

6.3.1. RQ 2: Theme 3 – Experiencing support and psychological Safety

Recap of the Findings

Theme 3 reflects participants' views on trust, safety, and transparency in aviation organisations, which are influenced by leaders' actions. Employees consistently reported situations that prevented voicing concerns or questioning established procedures, leading to a perceived deficiency in psychological safety. Some participants said that this climate not only stifled creativity but also affected well-being and led to worker turnover. On the other hand, a smaller group of employees cited leaders who actively encouraged openness by making it safe for employees to communicate problems, try new things, and disagree without fear of punishment. Both leaders and employees clearly understood that behaviours such as empathy, presence, and active listening were important for building trust and openness within teams.

Discussion of the findings with the literature

The evidence robustly endorses the correlation between adaptive leadership and the establishment of psychologically secure settings. Huang et al. (2023) assert that psychological safety is an essential result of adaptive leadership, contending that leaders who offer inspiration and emotional support empower employees to challenge

assumptions, alter views, and develop new solutions. Heifetz and Linsky (2017) contend that adaptive work necessitates that employees recalibrate their expectations and face discomfort, thereby requiring leaders to establish secure environments for debate and contemplation. They emphasise that this type of leadership demands exceptional presence, patience, and the cultivation of trust, as adaptive challenges frequently elicit resistance, anxiety, and a sense of loss of control.

Complementary viewpoints in the adaptive leadership literature underscore emotional intelligence and empathy as fundamental attributes of effective leadership. Scott and Bender (2025) underscore empathy as essential for fostering psychological safety, whereas Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) recognise emotional intelligence as fundamental to adaptive leadership within complex systems. Emotional intelligence helps leaders pick up on little social cues, control their own feelings, and respond with compassion, all of which help establish trust and openness.

Explanation and interpretation of the findings

While the adaptive leadership literature recognises psychological safety as a facilitator, research on adaptable performance (AP) rarely addresses it directly. Bednall and Hendricks (2021) suggest management strategies like fostering learning cultures and supporting innovation, elements that enhance safety, yet these interventions are procedural or "technical" rather than relational. This gap indicates that psychological safety could serve as a crucial link between leadership and adaptive performance; in its absence, employees may have the cognitive resources for adaptation but lack the emotional assurance to take risks, experiment, and facilitate learning.

From an interpretative perspective, these findings enhance the adaptive leadership paradigm by highlighting the emotional aspect of adaptation. Psychological safety is not a minor concern; it is a fundamental factor that influences employees' engagement in or withdrawal from an adaptive job. The lack of such protection may elucidate why certain personnel choose technical conformity above adaptive problem-solving.

In the world of aviation, adaptive leadership has to balance two important goals: keeping operations safe and making employees feel comfortable. Leaders who can strike this balance, being both strict about procedures and open to relationships, may encourage deeper, more lasting types of adaptive performance.

6.3.2. RQ 2: Theme 4 – Adaptive Performance in Action

Recap of the Findings

Theme 4 shows how employees who work in aviation be flexible by being proactive, having strong beliefs, and being mindful of their feelings. Participants characterised adaptability not just as a response to change but also as a catalyst for it, embracing their development, pursuing learning opportunities, and transcending their official duties to enhance performance. The data revealed three sub-themes: proactivity and self-development, spirituality as an internal anchor, and emotional intelligence.

Proactivity and self-growth were illustrated through narratives of employees who consistently pursued growth and pushed themselves to exceed expectations. Spirituality surprisingly and firmly emerged as an inner resource that helped participants maintain composure, purpose, and perspective amid uncertainty. Finally, emotional intelligence was emphasised as crucial for handling complex interpersonal and operational requirements, especially in an industry where safety and accuracy depend on composed, deliberate reactions. These sub-themes depict adaptive performance as a behavioural competence and a psychological disposition.

Discussion of the findings with the literature

The results align with the extensive literature on adaptable performance (AP), which defines it as a multidimensional construct that includes proactive, behavioural, and emotional competencies. Bednall and Hendricks (2021) ascertain that those qualities, such as openness to experience and conscientiousness, elements of the Big Five personality model, exhibit a positive correlation with AP. These characteristics indicate a person's readiness to acquire knowledge, investigate novel concepts, and endure under challenging situations, all of which were apparent in participants' narratives of taking initiative and pursuing self-betterment.

Park & Park (2020) enhance this comprehension by differentiating adaptivity from proactivity. Adaptivity entails absorbing externally imposed change, whereas proactivity signifies self-initiated endeavours to influence one's surroundings and circumstances. This contrast aligns significantly with participants' thoughts on being "self-starters," soliciting feedback, and anticipating challenges—behaviours indicative of proactive rather than just reactive adaptation.

The rise of emotional intelligence (EI) as a recurring sub-theme corresponds with established academic discourse. Viteroulie (2024) and Bednall and Hendricks (2021) argue that employees with high emotional intelligence are better at handling stress, navigating complex social situations, and maintaining performance when things get tough. This is especially important in aviation, where safety is a big concern. Emotional intelligence (EI) helps employees recognise emotional cues, manage their reactions, and communicate clearly, making it easier for them to work together and trust one another in high-stakes situations.

Nevertheless, the spirituality aspect identified in this research enhances the existing material. Park & Park (2020) observe that workplace spirituality and emotional intelligence are nascent conceptions, perhaps associated with adaptive behaviour; however, empirical investigation is yet insufficient. The results of this research offer new insights, showing that spirituality acts as a psychological stabiliser and a means for finding meaning in the context of adaptive work. Participants often credited their perseverance and calmness to faith, purpose, or trust in a higher power—factors largely absent from modern AP models.

Explanation and interpretation of the findings

The results from Theme 4 show that adaptive performance in flight is not only a behavioural reaction to environmental demands; it is a whole process that includes cognitive, emotional, and spiritual aspects. Proactivity and self-growth signify the external manifestation of adaptive performance, evident via initiative and effort, whilst emotional intelligence and spirituality embody its internal base, preserving composure and motivation in the face of uncertainty.

This multimodal viewpoint broadens the existing comprehension of adaptive performance beyond its conventional cognitive-behavioural context. It posits that adaptation in high-risk, high-regulation contexts requires both competence and awareness—the capacity to take decisive action while preserving emotional and moral integrity. Some organisational academics have called this "meaning-based resilience," meaning that spirituality, as an inner anchor, helps employees endure and adapt when their work is related to a higher purpose or belief system.

The findings indicate that adaptable performance may be fostered when organisations acknowledge and support these elements. For example, promoting self-directed learning (proactivity), developing emotionally intelligent leadership, and recognising the

importance of personal meaning or spirituality might help employees succeed during times of change.

In short, Theme 4 shows that adaptive performance in aviation is not just one talent, but a whole system of personal mastery, emotional equilibrium, and inner purpose. The data connect adaptive leadership and adaptive performance by showing that leaders who create environments of trust and openness (as discussed in Theme 3) also help employees become proactive, emotionally intelligent, and spiritually grounded, which allows them to keep performing well under pressure.

6.4. Summary of Research Question 2 Discussion

The results from Research Question 2 show how employees in the aviation industry feel about and respond to adaptive leadership behaviours, particularly regarding psychological safety, trust, and adaptable performance. Both leaders and employees agreed that psychological safety is the basis for adaptive behaviour. When employees feel supported and trusted by their leaders, they are more likely to generate new ideas, share them, and learn. However, participants also pointed out that there are still circumstances in which employees can't be transparent, and bringing up problems is discouraged. These kinds of situations make it hard to try new things and might cause personnel to lose interest or even leave.

Theme 3 emphasised that the relational attributes of adaptive leadership, empathy, emotional intelligence, and presence are crucial in fostering trust and psychological safety. Theme 4 expanded this comprehension by illustrating how employees manifest adaptability through proactivity, self-improvement, emotional intelligence, and, significantly, spirituality as an internal stabiliser. These themes demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between adaptive leadership and adaptive performance: leaders who cultivate psychologically safe environments empower employees to perform adaptively, while adaptive employees foster learning-oriented cultures that bolster adaptive leadership.

The results reveal a significant theoretical and practical deficiency. Whereas adaptive leadership literature recognises the emotional and relational underpinnings of adaptation, research on adaptive performance frequently neglects these essential yet subtle aspects. This work helps close that gap by showing that emotional and spiritual resources are essential for maintaining adaptive performance, especially in high-risk, high-regulation situations such as flight.

6.4.1. RQ 3: Theme 5 – Organisational Constraints and Complexity

Recap of the Findings

Theme 5 discusses the structural and systemic barriers that make it hard for aviation organisations to change. Participants repeatedly articulated a sense of being overstretched, taking on extra duties while organisational frameworks remained unchanged and critical roles remained vacant. This made employees feel tired, unproductive, and less motivated. Many participants also said that aviation is a highly specialised field, making it hard to retain experienced employees. Several employees discussed "brain drain" as a significant problem, as skilled employees are hired from other countries where pay and job opportunities are better.

Another big story was the concentration of power and decision-making. Employees noted that power and strategic choices were centralised at the executive level, restricting initiative and adaptability at subordinate levels. Employees thought that this hierarchical structure made it harder to respond quickly, reduced creativity, and went against the necessity for organisations to be flexible in a field that is constantly changing. These findings indicate that although individuals and teams may possess adaptive potential, organisational structures and power dynamics frequently inhibit their capacity for adaptive action.

Discussion of the Findings with the Literature

The results are similar to those of other researchers on adaptive leadership and adaptable performance, especially in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environments. Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) define adaptive leadership as a multi-faceted phenomenon that includes dynamics at the person, team, and organisational levels. At the organisational level, they stress that adaptability depends on the structure's flexibility, the distribution of power, and the culture's readiness for change. The participants' accounts of inflexible hierarchies and centralised authority demonstrate how the lack of these characteristics limits adaptive ability, despite individual leaders and employees having adaptive intentions.

Scott and Bender (2025) also note that factors beyond leaders' features influence adaptability. It is also affected by factors such as culture, the history of innovation, and an organisation's reluctance to change. This clearly connects with what the participants said about institutions that don't change and practices that are stuck. London (2023) asserts that adaptability thrives in organisations where leaders are empowered and trusted by

their boards, peers, and teams, indicating that empowerment must operate both vertically and horizontally. The results of this research suggest that in aviation, trust and empowerment are frequently concentrated at the upper echelons, hence constraining adaptive involvement across the system.

Niesen and Lang (2020) caution in the adaptive performance literature that adherence to obsolete procedures and legacy systems may adversely affect performance, particularly in safety-critical environments where innovation is crucial for sustained relevance. This warning is similar to what participants said about how aviation companies tend to prioritise compliance and continuity over innovation and renewal. Bonini et al. (2024) show that shared leadership and adaptation work best in organisations with fewer hierarchical levels, where positions are flexible, and power is distributed. Participants highlighted a contradiction: being "stretched" across several jobs might be hard, yet flexible positions should make it easier to adjust. This shows a conflict between the idea of adaptability and how it actually works.

Explanation and interpretation of the findings

The results from Theme 5 reveal a contradiction at the organisational level: aviation organisations know they need to be flexible, yet they remain constrained by outdated structures, hierarchical authority, and limited resources. This paradox illustrates a structural dissonance between the adaptable attitude promoted by leadership and the bureaucratic systems that regulate everyday operations. Heifetz and Linsky (2017) call this "adaptive stagnation," meaning the system won't evolve even when it needs to stay alive.

Theoretically, these data confirm that adaptive leadership cannot be actualised entirely without adaptive architecture, the organisational infrastructure that facilitates dispersed decision-making, variable role design, and continuous learning. The research on adaptable performance offers a significant insight: adaptability is inadequate without the backing of psychological and operational resources. Being "stretched" doesn't mean employees are adaptable; without enough support, it becomes tension. This difference is significant for aviation since going too far can put both safety and health at risk.

The conflict between centralisation and empowerment is very helpful to understand. While hierarchical control in aviation serves a necessary function in ensuring compliance and safety, excessive centralisation can erode local responsiveness and suppress initiative. This aligns with London's (2023) claim that granting employees control, grounded in trust,

at all levels is essential for making systems more flexible. So, the way to make aviation more adaptable is not to do away with hierarchy completely; it's to create what Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023) call "adaptive governance," which is a system that holds employees accountable while also allowing them to solve problems and learn on their own.

In the end, Theme 5 shows that the things that make it hard for an organisation to be flexible aren't just employees' attitudes or behaviours; they're built into the way the organisation is set up and the way employees work together. The challenge for aviation organisations is to shift from a compliance-driven rigidity to a disciplined adaptation model that maintains safety and structure while promoting agility, creativity, and collective ownership of change.

6.4.2. RQ 3: Theme 6 – Building Adaptive Capacity

Recap of the Findings

The last subject, Building Adaptive Capacity, examines how aviation companies seek to become more adaptable through internal systems and development programs. All of the participants agreed that aviation organisations had well-documented rules, processes, and governance structures. However, participants repeatedly noted a policy–practice gap; whereas policies were robust on paper, their execution was uneven or shallow. Some others said this was a "disconnect between policy and practice," where following the rules was more important than truly integrating into the culture.

Communication and stakeholder involvement were named two of the most essential factors in driving change. Both leaders and employees stressed that how effectively employees are educated, participated, and supported throughout transitions is what makes them adaptable. Participants also recognised the significance of the change management role; however, several voiced apprehensions that it is frequently regarded as a specialised or isolated job rather than a capability applicable organisation-wide. One leader said that change management should be a part of the company's culture, not just the job of one department.

Training and ongoing education become another essential part of establishing adaptable capability. Participants say aviation is a highly specialised, knowledge-based field that requires continuous learning of technical and behavioural skills. They also noted that the high cost of aviation training often makes it hard for employees to obtain the training they need due to financial constraints. Even with these limits, the participants said that training

and skill development were crucial for staying adaptable, especially as new technologies, rules, and global standards are constantly changing the industry.

Discussion of the findings with the literature

The results are quite similar to what has already been written on adaptive performance and organisational learning, but they also reveal important gaps in the current theoretical discussion.

Setiyadi et al. (2024) and Bonini et al. (2024) both argue that learning agility, or the ability to learn and apply new skills quickly, is a key component of adaptive performance. This aligns with participants' acknowledgement of the need for ongoing education to remain relevant in a complex and dynamic aviation industry. Likewise, Kim (2020), Park and Park (2020), and Viteroulie (2024) assert that organisational learning cultures, defined by feedback, reflection, and experimentation, directly improve adaptive performance. The participants' focus on continuous training and skill development supports the literature's assertion that a culture of perpetual learning sustains adaptability.

The findings also enhance existing scholarship in two crucial respects. First, the policy–practice gap recognised by participants has not been sufficiently addressed in the current literature on adaptive performance or adaptive leadership. Although research such as Bednall and Hendricks (2021) examines managerial interventions, such as training and performance management, they seldom address the organisational mismatch between formal systems (policies) and behavioural reality (practice). The participants' experiences indicate that adaptive capability is attained not solely through policy formulation but also through policy implementation, the practical application of organisational ideals and processes.

Second, although the research often examines learning and performance systems, it predominantly neglects the significance of change management and communication as structural facilitators of adaptation. Individuals included in this research perceived communication and engagement not as ancillary roles but as fundamental catalysts of adaptive behaviour. The focus on integrating change management throughout the organisation aligns with Abukalusa and Oosthuizen's (2023) overarching thesis that adaptability necessitates systemic alignment, in which structures, culture, and communication systems bolster adaptive objectives.

Bednall and Hendricks (2021) contend that although adaptive performance cannot be explicitly "trained," organisations can facilitate the development of self-regulation and

reflective ability in employees to navigate change effectively. This accords with participants' pragmatic perspective, which holds that training should encompass not just technical proficiency but also reflective learning, emotional resilience, and behavioural agility. But when the participants discussed financial constraints, they added a level of reality that isn't present in much of the literature: that creating adaptive capability requires not only purpose but also ongoing commitment.

Explanation and interpretation of the findings

The results from Theme 6 show that making aviation more adaptable is just as much a cultural and structural problem as it is a technological or procedural one. Policies, change management systems, and training programs serve as the framework for adaptation; nevertheless, in the absence of regular practice, engagement, and resource allocation, these systems remain only symbolic rather than operational.

From a theoretical standpoint, this subject highlights the relationship between adaptive leadership and adaptable performance. Adaptive leaders provide an environment conducive to learning and transformation by exemplifying adaptability, promoting conversation, and reconciling the policy–practice divide. This aligns with Cote's (2022) view that adaptive leadership empowers employees to act in uncertain situations. However, it also builds on his thesis by stressing that empowerment needs to be built into institutions. Adaptive leadership functions at both the interpersonal level and as an organisational competence manifested via systems, policies, and culture.

The policy-practice divide underscores an implementation paradox: organisations frequently have the frameworks for adaptation, yet do not convert them into daily behaviours. This aligns with Heifetz and Linsky's (2017) concept of adaptive labour, which entails bridging the divide between professed beliefs and actual actions. The participants' insights emphasise that in aviation, where precision and conformity are crucial, adaptation will flourish only when rules are viewed not as limitations but as facilitators of adaptability and creativity.

The focus on training and communication provides a practical perspective for implementation. Even if training funds may be tight, increasing adaptive capacity doesn't just depend on formal interventions. It also depends on creating an atmosphere where employees can learn from each other, obtain advice, and have reflective conversations. Instead of keeping change management concepts to one department, they could be used

throughout the whole organisation. This might turn from a project-based activity into a cultural habit that lasts.

6.5. Summary of Research Question 3 Discussion

The findings from Research Question 3 indicate that aviation organisations operate in a complex, heavily regulated industry. Their ability to develop adaptive leadership and performance is equally affected by organisational structures and individual skills. The discussion of Theme 5 (Organisational Constraints and Complexities) and Theme 6 (Building Adaptive Capacity) highlights the contrast between obstacles and enablers of adaptability, demonstrating how organisational frameworks, policies, and cultures can either hinder or promote adaptive behaviour.

At the organisational level, rigid hierarchies, skill shortages, and centralised authority emerged as key structural barriers. These factors limit both leaders' and employees' ability to adapt quickly to change, supporting the literature's view that bureaucratic rigidity hampers innovation and responsiveness (Scott & Bender, 2025; Abukalusa & Oosthuizen, 2023). Conversely, participants emphasised that strong governance structures, clear regulations, and learning-focused initiatives are essential for adaptability. However, a persistent gap between policy and practice suggests that having adaptable structures alone is not enough; real adaptation occurs only when these structures are effectively integrated into daily work routines.

6.6. Revised Conceptual Framework

The results in Chapters 5 and 6 substantiated the conceptual framework initially established in Chapter 2. After the empirical phase, the framework was refined to include additional sub-themes that emerged from the real-life experiences of aviation leaders and employees. These findings strengthen the theoretical model and make it more relevant to the South African aviation sector, which faces strict regulatory oversight, operational complexity, and safety-critical demands.

Adaptive leadership behaviours continually interact with organisational enablers to promote employee adaptation, creating a feedback loop that sustains a culture of ongoing learning and innovation. This evolving model integrates leadership, structure, and human flexibility into a cohesive framework that reflects the real-world experiences of aviation organisations.

In the updated conceptual framework illustrated by Figure 10 below, new sub-themes are highlighted in bright green to distinguish empirical contributions from those based on the literature review.

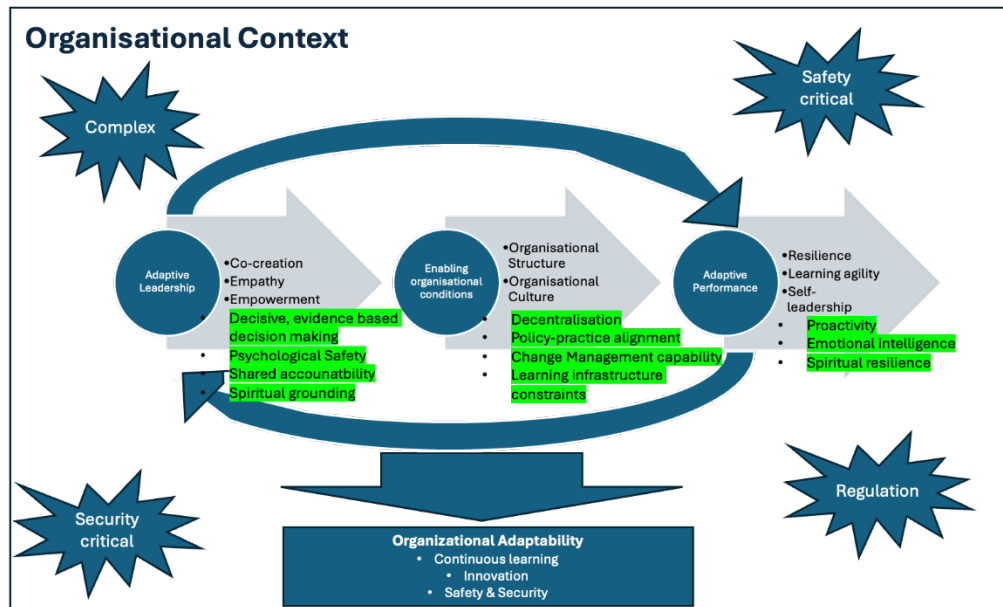


Figure 10: Revised conceptual framework

6.7. Chapter Summary

This chapter offered a critical analysis of the research's findings, synthesising empirical data from the six identified themes with the theoretical constructs of adaptive leadership and adaptive performance. Based on the findings in Chapter 5, the discussion examined how the experiences of leaders and employees in the aviation industry reflect, expand, and, in certain instances, contest established academic viewpoints on adaptability in complex environments.

The chapter began by revisiting Research Question 1. This question examined how adaptive leadership is experienced in an aviation environment that is constantly changing and full of unknowns. Two themes, Leading Through Complexity and Experimentation and Shared Learning demonstrated that aviation professionals operate in an industry that demands both rapid, evidence-based decision-making and collaborative, iterative learning. These results closely correspond with the literature on adaptive leadership, especially the studies by Côté (2022), Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023), and Heifetz and Linsky (2017), which characterise adaptive leadership as a means of enabling others to manage uncertainty. Nevertheless, the results also illuminated the tension between rapid

decision-making and collaborative creation, underscoring the delicate equilibrium leaders must sustain between decisiveness and inclusivity.

The second research question examined the social and behavioural aspects of adaptability. This led to two more themes: Psychological Safety and Support and Adaptive Performance in Action. The discussion indicated that psychological safety, despite being insufficiently examined in adaptive leadership and performance literature, is a crucial facilitator of adaptive behaviour. Leaders who foster trust-based, empathetic environments promote innovation and transparency, while employees who demonstrate proactivity, emotional intelligence, and spiritual resilience exhibit greater adaptive capacity. The conversation linked these results to the work of Bednall and Hendricks (2021), Park and Park (2020), and Huang et al. (2023), emphasising the significance of self-leadership, learning agility, and emotional awareness as factors influencing adaptive performance.

Finally, Research Question 3 examined the organisational factors that help or hinder adaptability, focusing on Organisational Constraints and Complexities and Building Adaptive Capacity. The results showed that there are systemic problems, including a lack of skilled employees, overly hierarchical power structures, and budgets too small for training. They also discussed what helps, such as structured governance, strong learning cultures, and existing change management practices. The research showed that adaptability is not just something that one person can do; it is something that the whole system needs to do, which means that policy, practice, and culture need to be in sync. This aligns with Abukalusa and Oosthuizen's (2023) systems perspective on adaptability and extends the current literature by introducing the notion of disciplined adaptability, a unique equilibrium between regulation and adaptability in aviation contexts.

The findings and interpretations in this chapter enhance both the theoretical and practical comprehension of adaptability in complex, high-stakes industries. They show that adaptive leadership and adaptive performance are closely linked processes, influenced by psychological, relational, and structural factors. Consequently, the analysis culminated in a revised conceptual framework, enriching the initial model with empirical sub-themes to better reflect the specific regulatory and operational realities of the South African aviation sector. The final chapter, Chapter 7, concludes the dissertation by summarising the main findings, discussing the research's theoretical and practical contributions, providing recommendations for aviation organisations and leaders, and suggesting directions for future research.

7. Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

This chapter summarises the research's conclusions by synthesising the empirical findings, theoretical perspectives, and practical ramifications from the earlier chapters. This research aimed to investigate the experience of adaptive leadership within the intricate and dynamic framework of the South African aviation industry and its impact on employee adaptive performance. The research employed an interpretivist qualitative design to investigate the lived experiences of 16 participants from five aviation organisations, including both leaders and employees.

The research was guided by three principal questions:

- 1. What leadership traits support or constrain adaptive leadership within the aviation industry?**
- 2. How do employees experience and respond to adaptive leadership behaviours in a changing operational environment?**
- 3. What organisational and contextual factors enable or constrain adaptive leadership and employee adaptive performance within the aviation industry?**

These questions aimed to enhance understanding of adaptive leadership and its relationship with employee responsiveness and performance in a high-stakes, safety-critical context.

This chapter builds on the thematic findings and the discussion in Chapter 6 by bringing together the most critical insights and their broader theoretical and practical implications. It starts by discussing the main theoretical implications of the research, then discusses its research contributions and who will benefit from these insights. After that, the chapter gives suggestions for how leaders in the aviation industry can improve their leadership and employee skills and ultimately their organisations. The chapter concludes by discussing the research's limitations and suggesting future studies that could build on and confirm the results presented here.

7.2. Principal theoretical conclusions

The results of this research provide various theoretical contributions to the developing discourse on adaptive leadership and adaptive performance. The research enhances existing knowledge by situating these constructs within the aviation industry's highly regulated, safety-critical, and dynamic environment—an area currently underrepresented in the literature (Sott & Bender, 2025). The research supports the existing theories proposed by Heifetz et al. (2009), Abukalusa and Oosthuizen (2023), and Park and Park (2020), while also adding to the theoretical debate by clarifying the relationship between adaptive leadership and employee adaptive performance in a setting that requires both precision and innovation.

Expanding Adaptive Leadership Theory in complex and ever-changing environments

One important finding is that both structure and flexibility characterise adaptive leadership in aviation. Participants articulated the experience of functioning within stringent regulatory frameworks while adapting to ongoing technological and operational transformations. This duality supports Heifetz et al. (2009) assertion that adaptive leadership involves balancing authority and learning, and it also expands the theory by showing that in high-reliability organisations like aviation regulators and operators, adaptability is not just about responding to change but about embedding flexibility within safety mandates. This explains how adaptive leadership works in areas where failure is unacceptable.

Merging organisational and relational aspects of adaptability

The results further develop theory by underscoring the multi-dimensional aspect of adaptive leadership. While prior research has predominantly concentrated on individual leader attributes, this research highlights the significance of organisational factors, including structure, culture, communication, and empowerment in influencing adaptive performance. This aligns with Abukalusa and Oosthuizen's (2023) systems-thinking model of adaptive leadership, but it goes further by illustrating how relationships between leaders and employees can help them collaborate to solve problems and learn. The findings support the shift from a leader-centric to a collective approach to adaptability, emphasising that leadership is spread across organisational levels.

Connecting Adaptive Leadership and Adaptive Performance

The research establishes a significant theoretical connection between leadership behaviour and employee performance by synthesising the concepts of adaptive leadership and adaptive performance. It empirically supports the assertions of Bednall

and Hendricks (2021) and Park and Park (2020), showing that adaptive leadership behaviours such as empowerment, trust-building, and psychological safety directly influence employees' ability to learn, innovate, and perform in uncertain situations. This synthesis establishes a framework for understanding the interdependence of leadership and employee adaptability, thereby advancing the theoretical alignment between leadership adaptability and individual adaptive capacity.

Psychological Safety and the human aspect of adaptability

The incorporation of psychological safety as a mediating dynamic broadens adaptive leadership theory beyond its conventional focus on problem-solving and learning. The results show that psychological safety encourages open conversation, new ideas, and group reflection, all of which are necessary for adaptive change. This insight adds to the growing body of research that combines emotional and social intelligence with adaptive leadership (Scott & Bender, 2025; Côté, 2022). It also helps us understand how employees adapt, especially when they must balance accuracy with ongoing change in high-stress situations.

Rethinking how organisations adapt and how policies and practices fit together

Finally, the research offers theoretical insights into how adaptability is operationalised within organisations. Participants acknowledged the policy-practice gap marked by strong formal systems despite inconsistent implementation as a significant issue. This finding adds to the literature on organisational adaptation by showing that formal compliance structures alone are insufficient to maintain an organisation's adaptability. Instead, ongoing learning, effective communication, and contextual leadership are essential. The research therefore supports the idea that adaptive performance is achieved not just through structural design, but through the culture and behaviours that animate those structures.

In conclusion, this research reinforces the theoretical connection between adaptive leadership and adaptive performance, contextualising their interplay within the intricate aviation ecosystem. It shows that being flexible in these situations is both a leadership role and a group process that works best when employees are empowered to learn and share responsibility.

7.3. Research contribution

This research makes significant contributions to leadership, organisational behaviour, and performance studies, encompassing both theoretical and practical dimensions. By examining adaptive leadership and adaptive performance in the South African aviation industry, the research enhances academic comprehension of leadership in intricate,

safety-sensitive systems while providing pragmatic insights for leadership development and organisational transformation.

Contributions to Theory

The research contributes theoretically by linking two constructs, adaptive leadership and adaptive performance, which have traditionally been studied separately. The findings show that adaptive leadership practices, such as empowerment, shared accountability, and psychological safety, foster the environment where employees can exhibit adaptive performance. This integration improves existing theory by presenting leadership and performance as mutually reinforcing, especially in complex environments where learning and adaptability are crucial for success. Additionally, by focusing on the relatively unexplored South African aviation industry, it adds to the global leadership conversation with empirical evidence from an innovative geographical and organisational setting. This also responds to scholars like Sott and Bender (2025), who call for more research outside Western contexts and traditional fields like health and education.

Contributions to practical and organisational matters

The findings provide significant insights for leaders, managers, and human resource professionals within the aviation industry and other safety-critical industries. The research emphasises the necessity for leadership development initiatives that foster emotional intelligence, empowerment, and collaborative problem-solving, rather than solely focusing on technical proficiency. It also shows how important it is to embed psychological safety and co-creation into an organisation's culture to make it more adaptable and resilient. The results also give us a way to measure and improve an organisation's ability to adapt, at both leadership and employee levels. These insights can help with hiring, performance management, and change management in aviation and other regulatory environments.

Contributions to society and specific fields

At a broader level, the research contributes to the body of knowledge on leadership in South Africa and Africa by situating adaptive leadership within an aviation industry that balances public accountability, operational safety, and innovation. As a key driver of economic growth and global integration, the aviation industry needs leaders who can navigate complex situations while maintaining public trust. This research provides actionable insights to facilitate the transformation and sustainability of aviation institutions, not only in South Africa but across the continent.

Furthermore, the research acts as a conduit between scholarly investigation and professional application, providing evidence-based insights that can inform leadership development programs, policy formulation, and collaborative efforts within the industry.

Who will benefit from the research?

The main stakeholders who will benefit from this research are listed in Figure 11 below:

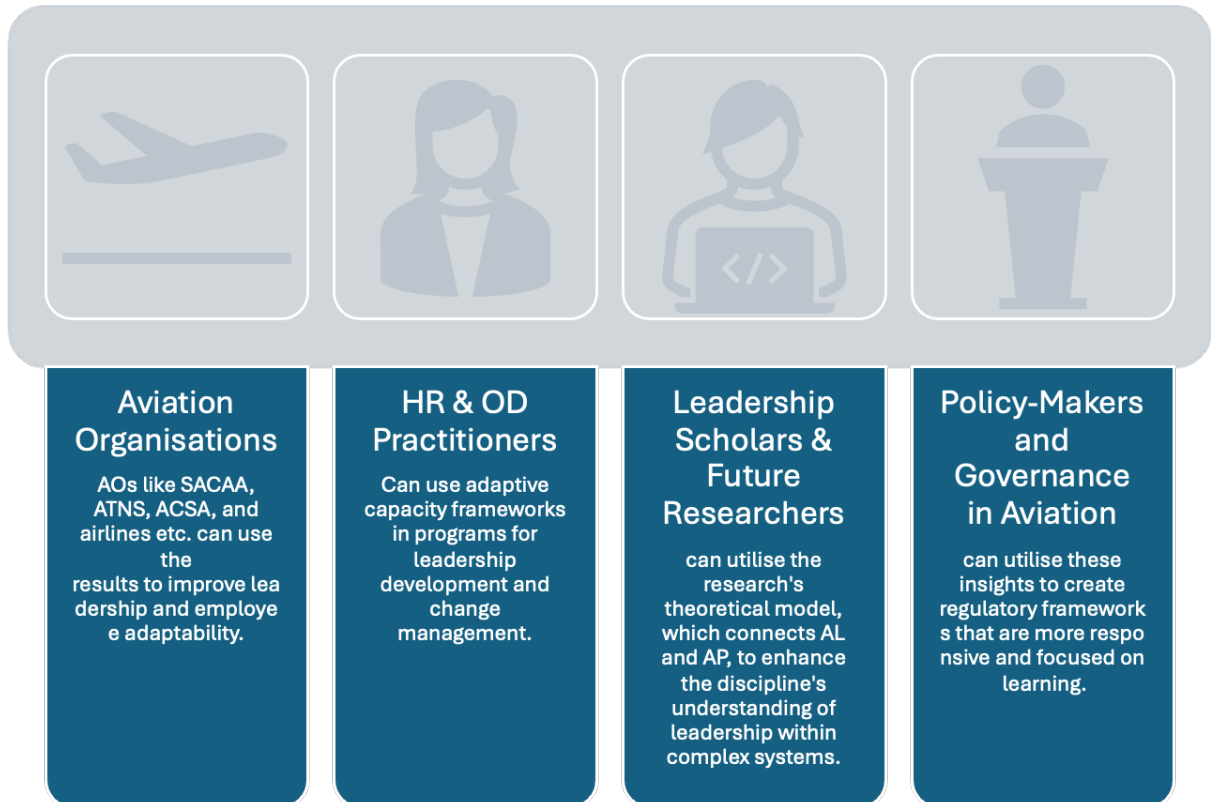


Figure 11: Main stakeholders to benefit from the research. Source: Author's Analysis

7.4. Recommendations for management and/or other stakeholders

This research provides several recommendations to improve adaptive leadership and employee adaptive performance in aviation and other complex, safety-critical environments, based on empirical evidence and theoretical insights. These recommendations apply to both leaders and organisations, aiming to translate research findings into sustainable, evidence-based approaches to enhance leadership and organisational performance.

Encourage a culture of shared responsibility and empowerment.

Leaders should actively promote practices that empower employees to share their ideas, question assumptions, and take charge of solving problems. The research showed that employees who feel trusted and empowered are more likely to demonstrate adaptive performance behaviours, such as taking initiative, generating new ideas, and bouncing

back from setbacks. To achieve this, leaders should relinquish some of their power when appropriate, clarify who is responsible for decision-making, and establish accountability methods that balance safety with fostering new ideas.

Make psychological safety a key part of leadership

A key finding from the research is the vital role of psychological safety in encouraging openness, creativity, and learning. Organisations should formalise psychological safety as a core leadership skill, assessed and strengthened through performance reviews and leadership development programs. Leaders need to develop emotional intelligence, empathy, and strong communication skills so they can create an environment where employees feel safe to share their ideas or concerns. This is especially critical in aviation, where fear of making a mistake can hinder innovation and adaptability.

Make systems for learning and adapting in organisations stronger

Research indicates that aviation organisations have strong policies and procedures, but implementation gaps often make it difficult for them to adapt. To address this, companies should establish structured learning systems that promote knowledge sharing across departments, facilitate collaboration among different teams, and ensure that lessons learned from daily operations are applied to policy improvements. Using adaptive training models, mentoring programs, and reflective practices that emphasise agility and contextual learning can help embed continuous learning into the organisational culture.

Include adaptive skills to leadership development and talent management

Leadership development programs should go beyond just teaching people how to do their jobs well and also teach them how to be flexible, think in systems, and work collaboratively. The HR and training departments should incorporate adaptive leadership and adaptive performance metrics into their hiring, selection, and succession planning. Job designs should provide employees opportunities to try new things and solve problems, with clear methods for them to receive feedback that helps them learn from both success and failure.

Build organisational capacity by addressing structural and resource constraints.

The research shows that limited resources and centralised decision-making structures often make it hard to adapt. Therefore, companies should review their structures and resource models to ensure they are flexible. This involves examining how work is divided, ensuring critical positions are filled, and exploring flexible role structures that allow employees to share knowledge without becoming overwhelmed. Additionally, investing in

leadership development at all levels, not just at the top, can help promote adaptive leadership practices throughout the organisation.

Make change management a shared responsibility for the whole organisation

Change management should not be viewed as a task for just one department, but as a leadership responsibility shared by everyone. The results indicate that leaders and employees working together to manage change are key to successful adaptation. Therefore, organisations should integrate change management principles into their daily leadership and operations. This can be achieved through effective communication, stakeholder involvement, and holding sessions after changes to reflect on what happened and how to adapt.

Encourage collaboration and sharing of knowledge between industries

Because aviation operations are so connected, government agencies and industry groups should establish places where employees can work together to share information and best practices on adaptive leadership and learning in organisations. To make the aviation industry more adaptable as a whole, these kinds of projects could include learning partnerships across the industry, leadership roundtables, and joint research projects.

7.5. Limitations of the research

This research, like any qualitative study, was conducted within certain limitations that could influence how its results are interpreted and how broadly they can be applied. The purpose of this section is not to diminish the importance of the research but to clarify its scope and assist future studies.

Contextual and industrial scope

The research was conducted within the South African aviation industry, involving participants from five aviation organisations. This environment provided a unique and valuable setting for studying adaptive leadership and adaptive performance; however, the results are primarily specific to this context. They may not easily apply to other industries or regions with different regulations, cultures, or operating conditions. Nonetheless, the deep understanding gained here offers a strong foundation for future comparative and cross-industry research.

Size of the sample and representation of the participants

The research included only 16 participants (8 leaders and 8 employees) selected through purposive sampling. This sample size aligns with qualitative research principles that emphasise depth over breadth; however, it limits the ability to generalise the results

statistically. Additionally, despite efforts to ensure representation across various aviation organisations, some sub-industries may have been underrepresented due to accessibility issues and scheduling constraints.

The Researcher's position

Since the researcher works in the aviation industry, their professional knowledge of the field might influence the results. To address this, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process, including reflective journaling and data source triangulation. However, it is acknowledged that the researcher's insider perspective could have impacted both data interpretation and participant engagement, while also aiding access and contextual understanding.

Limitations of the methodology

The research employed an interpretivist, qualitative framework, using semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method. This approach allowed for a detailed examination of lived experiences; however, it is limited by the drawbacks of self-report, such as recall and social desirability biases. The thematic analysis, while comprehensive and systematic, depends on the researcher's interpretation, thus introducing a level of subjectivity typical of qualitative research.

Recognising these limitations, it is important to emphasise that the research's goal was not to produce generalisable results but to offer contextual insights into the lived experiences of leaders and employees working within complex, adaptive systems. The methodological and contextual choices were thus consistent with the interpretivist paradigm and aligned with the research aim to explore meaning rather than measure causality.

7.6. Suggestions for future research

Based on the results and limitations of this research, several directions for future studies are proposed. These suggestions aim to improve, expand, and support the understanding of adaptive leadership and adaptive performance, especially in complex, safety-critical, and heavily regulated areas such as aviation.

Broadening the contextual framework

Future research could expand the scope of investigation to include a wider range of aviation organisations, both domestically and internationally, to enable comparative analysis. Such studies might explore the differences and similarities across cultural, regulatory, and operational frameworks, thereby improving global understanding of

adaptive leadership in aviation. Applying this research to other high-reliability industries, such as healthcare, energy, or transportation, could help identify both universal and industry-specific leadership patterns and adaptability.

Quantitative verification of qualitative results

Because this research was exploratory and interpretive, future studies might use a quantitative or mixed-methods approach to empirically examine the relationships among adaptive leadership, psychological safety, and employee adaptive performance. Developing and validating measurement tools explicitly designed for high-stakes contexts could improve theoretical understanding and provide a more universally applicable understanding of these constructs.

Longitudinal studies of adaptive performance

A longitudinal research approach could examine how adaptive leadership and adaptive performance develop over time in response to ongoing environmental changes. These studies would provide valuable insights into how leadership interventions, organisational culture shifts, and employee learning pathways promote lasting adaptability within dynamic systems, such as aviation.

Looking into the role of culture and systems in organisations

Future research should explore how organisational structures, policies, and cultures either support or hinder adaptive leadership. The findings suggest a gap between policy and practice, emphasising the need for empirical studies on how formal systems, informal leadership dynamics, and employee behaviours interact. This may include examining how change management, communication, and learning mechanisms influence adaptive capacity at both organisational and individual levels.

The Relationship between spirituality, emotional Intelligence, and adaptation

A key finding in this research was the significance of spirituality and emotional intelligence as internal stabilisers that support adaptability. Future research might explore these aspects to clarify the role of intrinsic motivators and emotional regulation in promoting adaptive behaviour within complex work environments. This line of study could strengthen the humanistic and psychological elements of adaptive leadership theory.

Studies on models for leadership development and training

Finally, further research should explore how training, mentoring, and experiential learning can support the development of adaptive leadership skills. Studies might assess the impact of leadership development programs focused on improving adaptability, resilience, and systems thinking across various organisational levels.

7.7. Chapter Summary

In the final analysis, this research underscores that the sustainability of the South African aviation industry rests not solely on technical compliance but on the cultivation of disciplined adaptability. By illuminating the human dynamics, specifically psychological safety, spirituality, and empowerment, that underpin operational resilience, this study challenges the notion that regulatory rigour and innovation are mutually exclusive. Instead, it posits that they are synergistic forces which, when aligned through adaptive leadership, create organisations capable of thriving amidst volatility. As the sector navigates an era of rapid technological and legislative change, the insights presented here offer a strategic imperative: to build aviation systems that are as agile in their culture as they are robust in their safety standards, ensuring that South Africa remains a competitive and resilient player in the global aerospace community.

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Appendix 1 – Interview protocol

Research Title: Exploring how adaptive leadership is enacted and experienced in a South African aviation industry, and how it influences employee adaptive performance in a complex and evolving operational context.

Researcher: Jazzman Simelane

Degree Programme: MPhil in Change Leadership

Institution: Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS)

Introduction Script

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. This research examines the experience of adaptive leadership within the South African aviation entities. Participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept confidential. You may decline to answer any question or stop the interview at any time.

With your permission, I would like to record the interview for transcription and analysis purposes. The recordings will be stored securely and deleted after use. Do you have any questions before we begin?

May I begin recording?

Background & Context Questions

1. Please describe your current role in your organisation.
2. How long have you worked at the organisation?
3. What significant organisational changes or challenges have you experienced in your role?

Core Thematic Questions with Probes

(A) Leaders

Theme 1: Navigating Complexity and Change

1. Can you describe a recent situation where your organisation faced unexpected challenges? How did you and your team respond?
 - Probe: What specific actions did you take? What guided your decisions?
2. What helps you lead effectively when things are uncertain or changing quickly?
 - Probe: Are there personal practices, team approaches, or organisational supports you rely on?

Theme 2: Engaging and Supporting Employees

3. How do you involve your team in tackling problems without clear solutions?
 - Probe: Can you share an example where this worked well (or not)?
4. What do you do to support employees in adapting to change?
 - Probe: What employee behaviours show you they're adapting (or struggling)?

Theme 3: Organisational Conditions

5. What aspects of your organisation make it easier or harder for you to lead effectively during change?

- Probe: Consider policies, resources, or culture.

(B) Employees

Theme 1: Experience of Change & Complexity

1. Can you describe a time when your work environment changed suddenly or became challenging? How did you handle it?

- Probe: What helped you adapt? What made it difficult?

2. How did your manager or organisation support you during that time?

- Probe: What made the biggest difference?

Theme 2: Leadership Behaviours

3. When things are uncertain, what does your manager do that helps you and your team get through it?

- Probe: Can you give a specific example?

4. Are there things you wish your manager or organisation did differently to support you during change?

Theme 3: Organisational Factors & Adaptation

5. What aspects of your organisation help you adjust to change in your role?

- Probe: Are there barriers that get in the way?

Closing Script

Thank you for sharing your experiences. Your insights are invaluable in helping us understand how leadership and employees can better adapt in South Africa's aviation industry. If you have any further thoughts after this interview, please feel free to reach out to me. I will also provide you with a summary of the findings once the study is completed.

Appendix 2 – Interview Consent Form

Informed consent for interviews

I am conducting research on how adaptive leadership is experienced within complex, evolving Aviation Entities. Our interview is expected to last 30 to 45 minutes and will help us understand the dynamics of adaptive leadership in complex, ever-changing aviation contexts.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. By signing this letter, you are indicating that you have permitted:

- The interview to be recorded.
- The recording to be transcribed by a third-party transcriber, who will be subject to a standard non-disclosure agreement.
- Verbatim quotations from the interview may be used in the report, provided they are not identified with your name or that of your organisation.
- The data to be used as part of a report that will be publicly available once the examination process has been completed; and
- All data to be reported and stored without identifiers.

If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below.

Research name	[REDACTED]		Research Supervisor name	Dr [REDACTED]
E-mail	[REDACTED]		E-mail	[REDACTED]
Phone	[REDACTED]		Phone	[REDACTED]

Signature of participant: _____
Date: _____

Signature of researcher: _____
Date: _____

Appendix 3 Code book from Atlas.ti

Code
A leader with advisory and coaching skills is key
Accept and take accountability for failure or mistakes
Acknowledge and praise good work in public
Acting or new promoted managers expectations
Adaptation to new processes
Additional tasks for few or limited Human Capital
Adhere to legislative requirements
ad hoc urgent requests
As a leader know that employees are diverse
Aviation expertise required to perform tasks
Aviation is ever changing
Aviation is generally for the wealthy
Believing in God or divine intervention or spirituality
Building trust through shared experiences
Bureaucracy in a regulated environment
Centralisation of power is an issue
Challenge due to system change
Challenges handle due to the love of growing and developing next generation professionals
Change management function and Aviation
Collaboration and co-creation as part of adaptation
Committee or internal involvement
Communication and alignment is key
Conflict between daily work and handling politics
Cost cutting measures
Cybersecurity impacting all airports
Delegation of responsibilities
Deliverables and tight timelines make it difficult for learning through attending courses
Dynamic decision-making in aviation and impact on adaptability
Early engagement with employees in a new role is key
Emotional intelligence is key
Employee allowed to share their proposed project and initiatives
Employee involvement drives adoption and ownership
Employee or team empowerment
Employee personality plays a role in facing challenges
Employees going an extra mile and being proactive
Encouraging and positive influence
Engagement on expertise
Family-like organisational culture
Flexibility in planning
Focus on end goals
Funding challenges in the organisation
Generational gap in workplace dynamics
Genuine leadership to understand the employee deeply (Leadership styles)
Group coaching recommended to build employee/manager relationship
ICAO members state have changes coming everywhere

Job rotation and Manager support
Knowledge sharing amongst leaders is key
Lack of adequate resources for training
Lack of vision and reluctance from management
Leader/employee engagement at a personal level
Learned helplessness
Learning from mistakes
Leadership is about influence not pushing employees
Leveraging off Aviation Technical Skills
Long-term commitment to service provision
Long-term perspective
Love for change is natural
Manager/employee relationship is key
Misalignment at Exco and bottom level
Networking and finding the right people
New ways of working and new ideas in aviation
Openness to feedback
Organisational culture and values not lived
Organisational Policies influencing adaptability
Organisational strategy has a key role to play
Organisations expect employees to adjust quickly
Pandemic also though us to adapt
Performance Management System not done well
Personal aspects impacting adaptability
Recognise team member inputs and ideas
Regular check-ins with employees
Relationship building as a key skill
Remuneration challenges in aviation
Respect and mutual understanding
Rigid organisational structure
Safe space for expression
Scenario Planning a tool
Seeing challenges or constraints as an opportunity to think out of the box
Self-leadership is key adaptation
Silos within the organisation
Spouse understanding and support is key
Stakeholder alignment and involving all impacted is key
Taking the challenge as an exciting moment
Team dynamics and support
The element of trust is key
Training and development interventions are key
Work ethic as a driver for success