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Adaptive leadership Competencies for hybrid work teams in the South African banking sector

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Purpose: Since the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid work has increased dramatically, with organisations still experimenting with different hybrid work models. This study aimed to explore the leadership competencies and practices needed to facilitate the successful transition to the new hybrid work context, using adaptive leadership theory as the overarching research framework.

Design/methodology/approach: A cross-sectional, qualitative design was adopted. Data were gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with a sample of 20 executives and senior managers drawn from 5 leading South African banks.

Findings/results: The adaptation processes and leadership competencies adopted by participants were mostly aligned to adaptive leadership theory. However, participants needed to strengthen their skills in communication, listening and empathy, as well as enhance leadership characteristics such as authenticity, humility, trust and transparency.

Practical implications: The study could inform the redesign of job specifications for leaders and managers in charge of hybrid work teams, particularly if they are in the early stages of the transition. More strategically, the study could facilitate the creation of adaptive workspaces and lay the foundation for more effective leadership in hybrid working environments.

Originality/value: Whereas previous studies have explored flexible and or hybrid working arrangements from employees' perspectives, little research has been conducted on managers and leaders perspectives in this regard, which was the focus of this study. An important finding was that while participants were comfortable making the technical transition to hybrid work (using more technology), they saw the social demands of a hybrid work environment as more challenging.

Keywords: leadership competencies; hybrid work teams; adaptive leadership; e-leadership skills; core self-evaluation.

Introduction

As organisations sought to ensure business continuity in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid working arrangements increased to unprecedented levels, ultimately igniting a worldwide hybrid work experiment (Kniffin et al., 2021). This provided the impetus for various digital transformation journeys within organisations, reinforcing the importance of adopting innovative technologies to develop more adaptable, efficient and effective business operations (Chatterjee et al., 2022; Foster, 2021). With the reopening of economies after a series of pandemic-induced lockdowns, many organisations have maintained the hybrid work model in a bid to retain talent, ensure employee satisfaction, and remain competitive. A hybrid work model combines a physical presence in the office with work-from-home (WFH) flexibility, to which many employees have grown accustomed to (Mitchell & Brewer, 2021).

However, as the hybrid work model becomes more prevalent, managers are faced with new challenges (Mitchell & Brewer, 2021). For example, hybrid work applies to the whole workforce whereas, in the past, flexible work arrangements were granted at the discretion of line managers (Park & Cho, 2022; Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). The fact that the hybrid work model has become enforceable across the board in organisations has complicated the role of leaders because they now find themselves leading the transition from a traditional office environment supported by moderate digital applications to an environment characterised by the rapid uptake of new, performance-enhancing technologies (Chamakiotis et al., 2021).

The transition to the hybrid working model has put pressure on emerging and established leaders alike to demonstrate that they have the necessary competencies to lead teams in a new and more challenging context (Chaudhary et al., 2022). However, there is a dearth of literature on how the digital era, especially developments in the information and communication technology (ICT) sphere, has affected leaders' engagements with their teams (Van Wart et al., 2019). Although the literature suggests that the leadership competencies required in a conventional working environment are similar to those required in a digitally advanced environment, they are not identical.

Organisations that have chosen the hybrid work model rely on their managers to ensure that it is successfully implemented. Understanding the leadership competencies and practices required to be effective in this context is therefore vital (Park & Cho, 2022; Van Wart et al., 2016). Most studies have examined the effectiveness of hybrid working arrangements from the perspective of employees; less attention has been paid to managers' perspectives in this regard (Park & Cho, 2022).

This study sought to understand what leadership competencies and practices are needed to manage teams in a hybrid work context – specifically how to counter the challenges and maximise the benefits of more flexible working arrangements (Mitchell & Brewer, 2021). As managers invariably need to adapt their traditional leadership style in such circumstances, adaptive leadership theory was selected (Heifetz et al., 2009) as the lens through which to study leadership competencies and practices.

The banking sector in South Africa has long been acclaimed as well-developed, robust, and characterised by sufficient capital levels and substantial liquidity buffers to handle periods of financial shocks effectively (Naidoo, 2023). In addition, the sector has made strides in accelerating digitalisation to enhance customer experience through self-service options and cut down traditional branches. However, the daily operations and supervision remained face-to-face as all employees worked from a central office (Naidoo, 2023). Therefore, the industry was under enormous pressure to adapt in the face of the disruption caused by COVID-19 as it had to remain functional during the lockdown periods because it was categorised as an essential service sector. Banks therefore, had to swiftly revise their strategies to enable their employees to work from home during the hard lockdown periods and adopted hybrid work model thereafter without adequate preparation of what this would mean for leaders (Naidoo, 2023).

This study drew a sample of managers from five of the leading banks in South Africa to gain insights into the leadership approaches they adopted to successfully pivot to a hybrid work model. The study makes an important contribution to a new (though growing) body of literature on adaptable leadership in a hybrid working environment while also demonstrating how adaptive leadership theory can be applied to hybrid work teams.

Literature review
Evolution of hybrid work

The concept of 'hybrid work' is not new; it has been a topic of scholarly interest in the management literature since the early days of ICT development (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). The concept was given prominence by Jack Nilles in 1973 who, at the time, defined it as *telecommuting*. It was regarded as an activity that 'includes all work-related substitutions of telecommunications and related information technologies for travel' (Collins, 2005, p. 115).

The literature presents various terms to describe flexible working arrangements. However, the hybrid work concept is used as the basis of this study. The definition offered by Allen et al. (2015) was adopted for the study as it closely aligns with the current hybrid work context under discussion. They define telecommuting as a:

> [W]ork practice that involves members of an organisation substituting a portion of their typical work hours (ranging from a few hours per week to nearly full-time) to work away from a central workplace – typically principally from home – using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work tasks. (p. 44)

Adaptive leadership theory in a hybrid work team context

Flexibility and adaptive leadership are required when unexpected events disrupt work or create an immediate problem that requires the leader's attention (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). For example, the abrupt shift to an unfamiliar hybrid work context with the advent of COVID-19 triggered much uncertainty among leaders. This required different ways of thinking and leading (Mitchell & Brewer, 2021).

Heifetz et al. (2009) define adaptive leadership as 'the practice of mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and thrive' using a process approach in which they 'observe', 'interpret' and 'intervene' (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14) and abandon the conventional hierarchical leadership principles and attributes (DeRue, 2011). Adaptive leadership is regarded as a participatory activity that is not limited to an officially appointed leader (Northouse, 2019). Rather, it involves a set of interconnected actions of leading and following (DeRue, 2011). These require adaptive responses that leverage the collective intelligence of groups and networks (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017).

Invariably, what is required in a hybrid work context is what Avolio et al. (2014) call 'e-leadership', which they define as a 'social influence process embedded in proximal and distal contexts mediated by advanced information technology that produces a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behaviour, and performance' (Avolio et al., 2014, p. 107). Van Wart et al.

(2019) provide a less abstractive definition which is, 'the effective use and blending of electronic and traditional methods of communication'.

Avolio et al.'s (2014) definition views e-leadership as a social process mediated by ICT, while Van Wart et al.'s (2019) definition focusses on the role of ICT in leadership communication. E-leadership also aims to develop a universal digital environment that leads to high productivity, minimal turnover, high morale, and enhanced effectiveness in virtual and proximal work contexts (Roman et al., 2019). Thus, the requisite skills are not just technical; they need to include social and relational skills. The use of ICTs for e-leadership purposes must be approached with caution as ICTs need to address emerging demands – not simply be used as a substitute for face-to-face interactions and interventions (Kulshreshtha & Sharma, 2021).

Heifetz et al.'s (2009) adaptive leadership framework comprises three components: situational challenges, leader behaviours and adaptive work (see Figure 1).

Situational challenges

The first component of the adaptive leadership process requires the leader to handle three types of situational challenges, as defined by Heifetz et al. (2009). Firstly, there are well-defined technical challenges that call for well-known solutions. Secondly, there are technical and adaptive challenges that are well defined but need more distinct solutions, and the leader and the follower must share the responsibility for arriving at such solutions. Thirdly, there are adaptive challenges that are difficult to identify and address, and the solutions are often resisted when implemented by managers (Heifetz et al., 2009). These cannot be managed by leaders alone; they require leaders to mobilise others to identify problems and develop the right solutions (Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2019). Baker et al. (2020) recommend that people should develop situational awareness and a clear contextual understanding to accurately diagnose the challenges that confront them, including distinguishing between technical and adaptive challenges. Situational awareness and contextual understanding start with self-awareness which involves a process of self-reflection and self-evaluation (Goleman 2001). These have to do with the application of cognitive and behavioural strategies which

are key components of self-leadership. Recent literature has found that this is made possible by core-self-evaluation, which is a complex disposition comprising qualities of self-efficacy, self-esteem, locus of control, and emotional stability that is responsible for the judgement and decision-making about self, other individuals, and the external environment (Cristofaro & Giardino, 2020, p. 2).

In the context of hybrid work teams during a crisis (notably, the COVID-19 pandemic), the adaptive challenges related to the application of both technical and social skills of working in 'distal and proximal' situations. These would include being technically competent to cope with the ICT mode of work and to adapt to working from home/remotely as well as evaluating and reviewing the social skills to manage social engagements and performance in such a context.

The literature posits that the rapid growth of new technologies poses additional challenges to (particularly older) leaders (Colbert et al., 2016; Van Wart et al., 2019). This is consistent with a study by Liu et al. (2020) in which leaders achieved low scores for e-technological skills. Furthermore, Liu et al.'s (2020) study confirmed the results of an earlier study by Purvanova and Bono (2009) who discovered that transformational leadership was more suited to virtual teams than transactional leadership. Therefore, to optimise the gains from e-leadership, the emphasis should be on improvements in the transformational leadership domain rather than in the transactional leadership domain (Liu et al., 2020).

Leader behaviours

With reference to the second component of the adaptive leadership process, the leader needs to take a step back from the complex problem and 'observe events and patterns' by adopting a strategic position of 'getting off the dance floor and onto the balcony' (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 32) to recognise that change is needed (Corazzini et al., 2015). The leader should then interpret whether the change in the hybrid work context presents technical or adaptive challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). Flexibility is required when leading adaptive change. It is also crucial to remind team members of the broader, collective purpose behind a significant intervention (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Adaptive challenges call for change, although the change process often causes anxiety and uncertainty among individuals (Northouse, 2019). To maintain productive stress levels, the leader must provide direction, help the team not to feel overwhelmed by change, orient team members to their new responsibilities, handle disagreements and regulate emotional distress.

Moreover, the leader needs to 'regulate distress' by communicating effectively. In a hybrid work context, e-communication skills are needed to achieve this (Van Wart et al., 2019). E-communication is defined as the ability of a leader to communicate through ICTs in a clear, well-organised
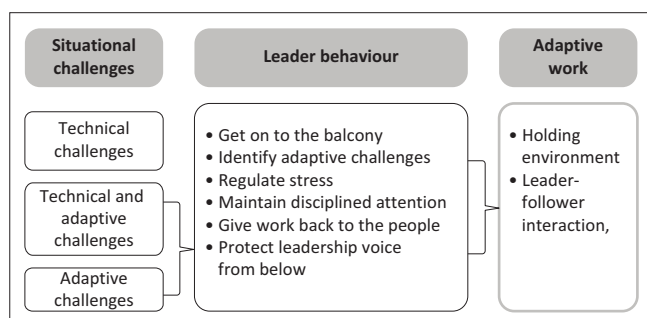
Source: Northouse, P.G. (2019). *Leadership: Theory and practice* (8th ed.). SAGE.
FIGURE 1: Adaptive leadership framework.

way that eliminates mistakes and encourages input to prevent misunderstanding and erroneous assumptions (Van Wart et al., 2019).

With the growth in the different types and the general ease of communication, there is often a risk of communication overload (Avolio et al., 2014). To be effective, communication needs to be sufficient to ensure team synergy and information sharing (Bernstein et al., 2019). In particular, leaders should avoid or minimise the risk of misinterpretations arising from the use of digital media, such as emails, chats and voice calls, which could result in negative employee engagement and morale, and hamper productivity (Dhawan & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2018). How they do this remains a challenge as hybrid teams, by nature, have been shown to create a paradoxical work climate (Cousins et al., 2007).

The leader also needs to exhibit empathy and build trust within the team, thereby creating a safe 'holding environment' in which individuals can address complex challenges and establish guidelines and structures to enable groups to work safely (Northouse, 2019, p. 405). In a virtual setting, 'e-trustworthiness' inspires confidence in a leader's honesty, consistency, follow-through ability, fairness and overall integrity (Van Wart et al., 2019). Several studies conducted on the hybrid work context before the pandemic revealed that one of the primary obstacles to hybrid work deployment is managers' lack of trust, attributable to factors such as weaker control over workers while not in the office. This may have a detrimental effect on organisational performance (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Kaplan et al., 2018; Lee & Hong, 2011).

There has been an increase in employer readiness to allow telework (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016), suggesting that leaders' lack of trust and need for control over virtual employees could be on the decline. This may indeed be the case because prior to COVID-19, hybrid work was accessible to only a select few – at managers' discretion. Managers would have chosen or allowed employees whom they already trusted to work without direct supervision (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Park & Cho, 2022). In the case of hybrid work, which came about as a result of the pandemic and was mandatory, managers did not have the luxury of making these choices. It is therefore important to understand how managers navigate the issues of trust and control in the new context (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016). Another important element to bear in mind about trust is that, while organisations can develop hybrid work policies, trust is not something that can be regulated by organisational policies (Kaplan et al., 2018).

In addition, employees wish to participate actively in problem solving, even though they expect the leader to provide direction and structure (Heifetz et al., 2009). The leader must therefore have the ability to reduce their own influence and 'give the work back to the people' (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 161). This can be done by learning e-social skills (Van Wart et al., 2019). E-social skills refer to the use of appropriate virtual communication channels, such as video conferencing and other rich online media, to foster a healthy working atmosphere and inclusive work engagements, and to enhance communication and teamwork (Van Wart et al., 2019).

In their review, Kulshreshtha and Sharma (2021) noted that face-to-face human connection could not be replaced by periodic meetings and interactions using a video mode, but may be beneficial in maintaining peer relationships within the team. In contrast, earlier research conducted by Fiol and O'Connor (2005) suggested that occasional face-to-face contact is less effective in encouraging group identification than subgroup identification among team members who happen to be in the office more frequently. Fiol and O'Connor (2005) regarded group identification in hybrid teams as a significant challenge which could harm team performance. However, their study was based on team members who had never met prior to the formation of the hybrid team. It was therefore essential to explore the situation with leaders who manage teams that had already established trust among themselves before the formation of the hybrid team.

Related to the e-social skills are e-team building skills, which leaders need to possess in a hybrid work context (Van Wart et al., 2019). Roman et al. (2019) posit that the leader must be able to develop, inspire and reward team members. This involves ensuring team authenticity and a sense of purpose and holding team members accountable for their performance and contribution. Furthermore, the leader should ensure that virtual team members get the same level of recognition and opportunities to grow as team members operating in a face-to-face environment (Van Wart et al., 2019).

An exploratory study conducted by Van Wart et al. (2016) found that when leaders engaged with their followers through ICTs, they were most at ease with the operational functions and essential participation tools, which suggests a transactional leadership style. Leaders considered the more abstract parts of leadership, such as motivating, goal setting and strategic planning, to be more challenging; yet followers perceived them as more important (Van Wart et al., 2016).

Finally, adaptive leaders are required to be mindful: to listen and be receptive to the views of marginalised or minority team members, to ensure that they feel represented by 'protecting leadership voices from below' (Northouse, 2019, p. 408) and by 'listening from the heart' (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 264).

The leader must 'maintain disciplined attention' by urging individuals to focus on challenging tasks and ensuring that they are able to face change. To this end, the leader can foster open and honest dialogue and mobilise individuals to lower their defences and honestly confront their concerns (Northouse, 2019, p. 406). The leader adopts an e-change management approach by pre-planning transitions, reviewing implementation and improving technological practice,

through experience (Van Wart et al., 2019). In a study conducted by Liu et al. (2020), it was found that e-change management was among the least-implemented e-competency skills. Notably, insufficient time was invested in pre-planning the transition to the new hybrid work context. For example, leaders need to ensure that employees are appropriately equipped with internet connectivity and other digital work applications to perform their functions from home (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

Adaptive work

The third component of the adaptive leadership process requires the leader to focus on the purpose of change or adaptation (Heifetz et al., 2009). When adaptive processes are implemented, employees may feel anxious and unsafe, and may even resist the changes required. Leaders should therefore put a significant amount of effort into creating an environment in which individuals will feel safe while also addressing potential changes in their roles, objectives and values. This is often achieved through leader–follower exchanges that involve less authoritative interaction (Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2019), effective management of multiple stakeholders, and patience and perseverance (Heifetz et al., 2009).

The South African banking sector context

The banking industry in South Africa has long been accredited as well-developed, robust, and heavily regulated, and characterised by sufficient capital levels and substantial liquidity buffers to handle periods of financial shocks effectively (Naidoo, 2023). For over a decade, the South African banking industry has made strides in accelerating digitalisation to enhance customer experience and self-service platforms and cut down traditional branches. However, the daily operations and supervision remained face-to-face as all employees worked from a central office (Naidoo, 2023).

In the study conducted by Naidoo (2023) to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the South African financial services sector, it was noted that the abrupt transition to remote work gave rise to notable operational, technological risk, and compliance concerns. Notably, within the domains of supervision and risk management, remote work limited the ability of managers to maintain the same level of daily monitoring and contact with personnel which is often required in financial services. However, the successful execution of operational tasks within specified timeframes with little supervision necessitated a strong dependence on and trust in the workforce (Naidoo, 2023). The conventional practices of performance management proved inadequate in the new work setting, as managers encountered challenges in effectively monitoring and supervising employees' actions in the physical realm. While there were flexible working hours policies, these were not comprehensive enough to deal with the challenges of

the pandemic. This meant that the banking sector had to frequently specify human and operational policies in response to the pandemic conditions (Naidoo, 2023).

The cyber resilience measures, traditionally in place when all employees operated from the central office were not explicitly designed to mitigate the challenges posed by the increased strain on organisation networks and the widespread adoption of remote digital workspaces (Naidoo, 2023). This view aligns with the view shared in a study conducted by Soga et al. (2022), where the results noted that an increase in digital platform usage outside the central office networks with a dispensed workforce threatens employers and employees in maintaining data security privacy and defending against cybercrimes that accelerated during the pandemic. In a sector such as banking, this becomes critical because of the sensitivity and confidentiality of customer information. Consequently, this expansion created several vulnerabilities that potential attackers could exploit (Chigada & Madzinga, 2021; Naidoo, 2023). However, adopting third-party outsourcing, particularly Cloud service providers, has enhanced the operational resilience of banks (Naidoo, 2023).

The banking sector is also known for adhering to stringent regulations and following established protocols, however, it was confronted with many uncertainties during the pandemic, making it challenging to plan ahead of time. Organisations prioritised providing necessary resources such as laptops, Wi-Fi connectivity and increased internet bandwidth to enable personnel to sustain their work infrastructure remotely. However, in developing and maintaining workforce resilience, an urgency to take proactive measures to address employees' physical, emotional well-being, financial and social aspects intensified (Atiku et al., 2020; Naidoo, 2023).

Reflecting on the banking sector context and three components of the adaptive leadership framework, this study therefore, sought to understand types of competencies (knowledge, skills and attributes) required to lead hybrid teams as well as specific forms of organisational support to lead throughout the various phases of change or adaptation.

The research questions posed in this study were:

1. What are the leadership competencies required to manage hybrid work teams during and post a crisis?
2. What organisational support is required to enable managers to effectively lead hybrid work teams?

Methodology

An interpretivism philosophy was adopted, which allowed for the development of a deep understanding of leaders' lived experiences and how they navigated their leadership responsibilities in a hybrid context, which was previously unfamiliar to them (Parry et al., 2014). A qualitative, exploratory inquiry was the preferred methodology as the study was aimed at gaining an in-depth appreciation of the hybrid work context from leaders' perspectives and uncovering profound insights pertaining to the research problem (Bansal et al., 2018).

Research participants and sampling method

A non-probability purposive sampling method was used to extract a sample of 20 managers from five leading banks in South Africa. The deliberate selection of participants ensured that insights were gathered from tenured leaders who were willing to participate in the research and could offer in-depth insights. For variability (Levitt, 2021), a minimum of three managers were selected from each of the five banks, ensuring that diverse business functions in the banking sector were represented, from operations to frontline. Variability in terms of gender, tenure and number of rapporteurs was also considered. Table 1 provides a profile of the participants in the study where 50% is senior management, 30% were executives, and 20% are middle managers. While the study is not meant to generalise the findings, we can position the study as a top management study as they make 80%.

Data collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews using online platforms (either Zoom or Teams) after consent was received from the participants. On average, the interviews ranged from 45 min to 60 min. The services of a professional transcriber were used to convert the recordings to transcripts. The transcripts were then validated through a process of reading and listening to the original audios to check for accuracy and credibility of the process. Once verified, the transcripts were assigned labels to anonymise the participants and then uploaded onto the ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. (2021). ATLAS.ti windows (version 9) [Qualitative data analysis software]. https://atlasti.com.

Data analysis

The data analysis followed a three-stage process which used primarily inductive content analysis (Saldaña, 2021). The first phase involved developing first level or primary codes inductively by reading the transcripts. This was a reiterative process that generated 204 codes. A spreadsheet was used to track new codes per transcript after the first transcript, and saturation was reached at the 14th transcript, where no new codes were recorded (Saunders et al., 2018).

The second phase involved a reiterative and rigorous analysis of the 204 primary codes and categorisations. This process involved checking for similar meanings and generating categories, merging, splitting and dropping some initial categories (Grodal et al., 2021; Pratt et al., 2020). This led to 25 second-level categories that were relevant to the research question.

A third iteration of analysis was conducted which involved looking at the categories and sequencing some of them in line with adaptive theory to arrive at a meaningful thematic selection (Grodal et al., 2021; Pratt et al., 2020). This process yielded three relevant themes which are presented in the findings section of this article.

Ethical considerations

The research proposal was presented to the Ethics Committee of the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) at the University of Pretoria. The committee approved the proposal and granted permission for the study to proceed once all the ethical clearance requirements had been met. Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria (No. 19386533 [student number]).

Results

This study set out to explore adaptive leadership competencies and organisational support needed to lead hybrid teams. From the data analysis, three main themes emerged. These are: (1) Leadership self-evaluation as an

TABLE 1: Profile of participants.

Participant	Management level	Job title	Gender	Bank	Tenure (years)	Direct reports
P1	Senior Manager	Head: Credit Sectors in Business Banking Credit	Male	Bank 1	13	8
P2	Executive	National Head: Debt Capital Markets	Male	Bank 3	12	11
P3	Executive	Group Executive Banking South Africa	Male	Bank 2	17	20
P4	Executive	Chief Analytics Officer South Africa	Male	Bank 5	12	9
P5	Executive	Managing Director: Africa Corridors in Corporate Bank	Male	Bank 1	13	7
P6	Senior Manager	Senior Credit Team Lead	Female	Bank 2	15	14
P7	Senior Manager	Senior Regional Manager Gauteng	Male	Bank 3	6	16
P8	Senior Manager	IT Manager: Platform Owner	Female	Bank 2	6	7
P9	Middle Manager	Wealth and Investment Relationship Manager	Female	Bank 3	7	10
P10	Middle Manager	People and Organisation Lead: Human Resources	Female	Bank 2	8	4
P11	Middle Manager	Sales Manager	Male	Bank 1	5	16
P12	Senior Manager	Head: Lending for Businesses	Male	Bank 2	14	4
P13	Senior Manager	Head: Well-Being	Human Resources	Female	Bank 4	6	8
P14	Senior Manager	Head: Client Acquisition Banking	Female	Bank 2	12	7
P15	Middle Manager	Manager: Reporting and Governance Policy	Female	Bank 1	3	9
P16	Senior Manager	Head: Chief Information Security Officer	Male	Bank 5	14	5
P17	Senior Manager	Senior Manager: Non-Financial Risk Management	Male	Bank 3	9	3
P18	Executive	National Head: Fiduciary Philanthropy Centre	Male	Bank 5	13	10
P19	Executive	Managing Director, Group Head: Trade and Working Capital	Male	Bank 1	18	10
P20	Senior Manager	Gauteng Regional Head for Institutional Banking	Male	Bank 2	7	20

adaptive strategy to deal with situational challenges; (2) Adaptive leadership competencies or behaviour needed for leading hybrid teams; and (3) Organisational support needed to adapt management practice.

Leadership self-evaluation as an adaptative strategy

The first significant finding from the study was that leaders had to go through a process of self-evaluation and reflection to make sense of what was happening and to adjust their leadership styles and management practices (both at a technical and a people level) to ensure business continuity. According to Zell et al. (2020), self-evaluation is the process through which an individual judges their capabilities, character, performance, and decision-making based on some criterion; however, this criterion may not necessarily be based on objective measures. The self-evaluation process included both technical aspects and the social elements of the adaptative challenges. Table 2 outlines the various aspects that the managers had to grapple with.

The first part of the self-evaluation was about acknowledging the 'crisis' context which seemed to have raised *self-awareness* that their leadership styles needed to change for them to effectively lead. From a technical perspective, all of the participants expressed that adapting to the use of technology was easier as their institutions already had online platforms such as Teams and Zoom that were somewhat 'underutilised'. Participants acknowledged the efficiencies created by adopting technology that enabled them to access cross-border talent to improve their competitive advantage and, when setting up meetings, to reach a global audience in a cost- and time-effective manner.

This exposure to working and connecting with people online facilitated reflection around viewing employees not only as professionals but as having personal lives. A total of 55% of the participants reported that they experienced having to engage with the human aspects of their team members as they were given access to each other's homes during online meetings, which allowed them to take off the 'professional mask' as one respondent articulated:

'I'm more involved in people's families because people were at home, so now you like aware of their families, which for me previously it was quite a professional thing like you didn't bring your family to work, you left your family at home. We know a lot more about each other. So, we almost more joint than we were before COVID.' (P6)

While participants evaluated themselves positively in terms of their self-awareness and the technical aspects of adapting to the hybrid work context, they seemed to have grappled with a sense of feeling incompetent in some of their leadership areas expected of them. Almost half of them expressed challenges of adapting to conducting on-the-job training and the tacit knowledge transfer that normally occurs daily in an office setting to online training as well as doubting their efficacy of orientating new employees (imparting 'culture' and 'work ethic') online. They shared their frustration over attempts to conduct 'normal training' online. They had a concern that there is a risk of messages being misinterpreted as there is little opportunity to assess whether online participants understand a message in the way it was intended, because a person's full body language is not visible.

'Where I've had a new joiner, so being able to connect and to on-board them and to sort of get them to feel you know the temperature and the tempo that the team works in has been a bit of a challenge.' (P17)

'[…I]t's quite difficult to transition a person who comes from a totally different culture and work environment, into what is sort of established within the people in my team.' (P1)

The sense of self-doubt in their capabilities in some of them was expressed by statements like employees could 'lose their voice' during online meetings as some employees attending meetings in person tended to dominate the discussion. About 45% of the participants highlighted the problem of not being able to see all those present in meetings, which made them feel 'disempowered'. Other participants noted that when individuals did not put their cameras on, they found it very hard to engage with them meaning that they still relied more on visibility to feel confident about leading a team meeting.

To some managers, the awareness process extended to a heightened awareness of others (team members), and how the situation was impacting on them. A few managers (15%) remarked that sometimes they needed to intervene when

TABLE 2: Adapting to situational challenges through self-evaluation.

Participants	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18	P19	P20	Total	%
Acknowledgement/accepting the crisis context	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	20	100
Awareness that own leadership styles need to change	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	20	100
Adapting to technological challenges	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	20	100
Being more open to employee integration of personal responsibilities and work life	X	-	-	-	X	X	-	X	X	-	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	-	-	-	11	55
Distress about conducting normal training online	X	X	X	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	X	X	X	X	-	1	10	50
Hindrance to see all participants in online meetings	-	-	X	-	-	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	-	-	X	-	-	-	X	-	9	45
Guilt that came with not being seen, therefore worked harder	-	X	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	X	X	-	X	-	X	X	8	40

TABLE 3: Adaptive leadership competencies.

Participants	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12	P13	P14	P15	P16	P17	P18	P19	P20	Total	%
Communication	X	X	-	X	X	X	-	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	17	85
Listening and giving feedback	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	X	X	16	80
Building 'authentic' relationship with employees	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	18	90
Empathy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	18	90
Trusting and Transparency	X	X	-	-	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	15	75
Humility	-	X	-	X	-	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	X	14	70
Concern about employee wellbeing	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	-	X	-	X	X	X	X	15	75
Creating an inclusive and safe environment for both in office and virtual staff	X	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	-	X	-	-	X	-	X	-	X	X	-	-	10	50

some team members were working long hours from home and finding it difficult to disconnect from their work obligations. Others (45%) spoke about the guilt they felt at 'not being seen', which prompted them to work even harder. While on the other hand, leaders had to deal with a pushback from those team members who did not want to increase their office presence after the hard lockdown.

> 'People were struggling to find that balance because life had moved on from two and half years ago. People stopped paying for after care, and that sort of stuff. Some people have sold cars, like actual cases in the team.' (P8)

Despite the uncertainty and some of the frustrations experienced, it was clear that participants had a willingness to navigate the change and help employees remain focussed, identify new ways to adapt and be nimble in their approach. Invariably, they needed to be more accommodative of individual differences and needs of team members.

Adaptive leadership competencies needed to lead hybrid work teams

The second main finding from the study was that participants recognised that the context required them to enhance specific skills, such as *communication, listening and feedback, empathy, building authentic relationships.* While these are common skills that are expected of each leader, the hybrid working environment called for enhanced and more nuanced versions of these skills or, where they were in short supply, the relevant skills needed to be developed.

With regard to communication, the majority of participants (85%) found that they needed to strengthen this skill by being more 'succinct', 'concise' and 'consistent' when giving direction to ensure alignment with organisational objectives.

When it came to listening and giving feedback, about 80% of the participants found that they needed to focus more on 'what is not said' and not only on what they hear or see. They concluded that they needed to practise 'speaking less' to ascertain how to support individuals in navigating their respective journeys. Listening also involved giving

'immediate' feedback to employees, with nine of the participants feeling that this reflected authenticity.

> 'What I wanna do as a leader is make sure people understand that I'm fair, I have integrity, and so they can respect that.' (P12)

The overwhelming majority of participants (90%) emphasised the importance of building 'authentic' personal relationships with each team member to get a 'lens into their world' beyond daily work-based tasks. For example, they highlighted the need to create a space for 'social' stakeholder engagements to strengthen team ties, socialise new employees to the 'ecosystem' and ensure stakeholder buy-in to the team's vision and goals.

The importance of a vibrant in-office culture that creates 'value for the employee' was highlighted. Team members who still operate from home for more than three days a week have maintained their social engagements in a virtual sense and occasionally meet (e.g. once a month) or during client visits. The shared sentiment was that businesses will continue with this way of work indefinitely. Participants acknowledged that, though the transition has been challenging, it has also been rewarding and has allowed them to grow and develop a better work–life balance.

Building social relationships enhanced empathy. Most participants (75%) reported that they had learnt how to manage their teams to be more empathetic by taking into account individual circumstances and by being empathetic themselves. They also said that they had quickly learnt that for a person to be 'excellent at work', they had to be 'human'.

> 'Empathy is huge for me, probably the biggest ... because people have gone through a lot. So, if you cannot put yourself in someone else's shoes and sort of journey with them, you've lost them, you know.' (P7)

In addition to the skills discussed above, the findings also revealed that to effectively lead hybrid work teams, certain leadership attributes had to be enhanced or even developed in cases where leaders fell short. These included *humility, trust and transparency*, concern for employee wellbeing and creating a safe environment for employees.

A total of 14 participants (70%) found that they needed to exercise humility to develop a deeper understanding of people and their context.

> 'Humility as a leader is important … you have to be comfortable not to know everything and not have all the answers and allow people the space to give you those things.' (P12)

Trusting one's employees was another common subtheme raised by most participants (75%). They said that working in a hybrid context requires leaders to trust employees to fulfil their work obligations and to solve problems without being closely monitored, while at the same time knowing when to 'intervene' – particularly when people are working remotely. This requires openness to different views and perspectives. The second level of trust that emerged from the data was the leader having the ability to be a 'trustworthy confidante' for employees and to treat any personal problems shared by an employee as confidential. The third level of trust was the leader driving stakeholder buy-in to the team's vision and promoting an environment that strengthens ties between the team, its individual members and other stakeholders.

> 'Without trust, you'll question every single action that's been done by your team members.' (P7)

Trust goes hand in hand with transparency, which is vital for keeping employees informed of new developments and maintaining employees' 'connectedness' to the organisation.

Most of the participants (75%) acknowledged that the hybrid work context calls for leaders to be more deliberate and engaged with their subordinates and pay attention to employee wellbeing as well as be closer to their workforce and stakeholders for their presence to be felt, both in person and virtually. In order to do this effectively, they also need to create a 'safe environment' for all employees to express their views and frustrations.

Organisational support is needed to lead hybrid work teams

As the shift to a hybrid work context was unplanned, leaders did not receive formal upskilling to prepare for the transition. However, all the participants reported a *successful adaptation of technology* in their organisations, with the skills of in-house technology specialists being leveraged where necessary.

The second most important aspect was *a shift in the way performance was managed*. This was achieved by moving from input-based indicators and measures, such as 'visibility', 'office presence' or 'task', to output-based measures of performance. A total of 14 participants (70%) emphasised the importance of establishing structures that bring about alignment and consistency, thereby helping individuals to be aware of and guided by the team's vision, goals and expectations, which are not physically bound. They also noted the importance of 'co-creating' and contracting with team members to ensure that they buy in to what 'good looks like' at the individual and team levels.

> 'Ja, I think my strength is in context setting, and just pulling people together to say I'm not solving this alone. It's not mine, I can set the tone and steer but I co-own, I co-create with you.' (P10)

To make the transition to this new way of managing performance, participants had to create a safe environment for employees, while maintaining a balance between fulfilling their duties at work and attending to personal demands. They also recognised the need for increased flexibility and autonomy for their teams, where their teams would not work the traditional 08:00 to 17:00 but would instead work 'core operating hours' based on their particular job function.

The business unit leaders decided on employees' number of days in the office on a rotational basis. A significant number of participants (55%) opted for two to three days a week. However, some participants (25%) chose to return to the office full time, with high levels of flexibility because of the maturity of the business unit in question. A few other participants (20%) said organisations should consider looking at job functions to define which roles can be performed according to a hybrid model and which are in-office roles, and then to adjust the policies accordingly.

> 'I've had to unlearn to expect to have the same expectations. I mean not everyone can make it to work at 8h00, whereas in the past that was pretty much standard.' (P11)

Participants emphasised the importance of a leader having a 'growth mindset' so that they remained open to learning from others. Instead of a hands-on management style, they recognised that they needed to pay attention to growing and developing their staff through mentorship and career pathing.

> 'You've got to set people up for success. So, I've even had to condition my direct reports to go for mentorship programmes,

TABLE 4: Organisational support.

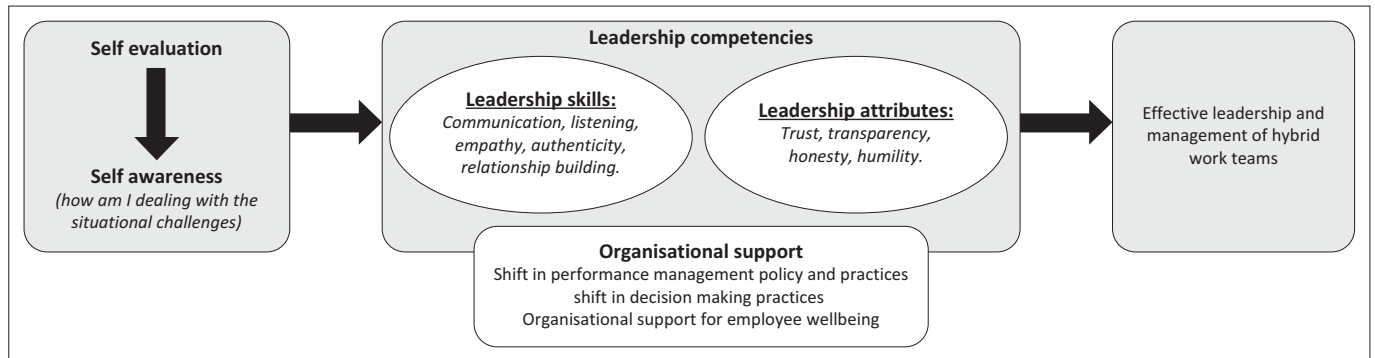| Participants	ICT as enabler	Shift performance management practice— input to output	Employee wellbeing support
P1	X	-	X
P2	X	X	-
P3	X	-	X
P4	X	-	X
P5	X	X	X
P6	X	-	-
P7	X	X	-
P8	X	X	X
P9	X	X	-
P10	X	X	X
P11	X	X	X
P12	X	X	-
P13	X	-	X
P14	X	X	-
P15	X	X	X
P16	X	X	X
P17	X	X	X
P18	X	-	X
P19	X	X	-
P20	X	X	X
Total	**20**	**14**	**13**
Percentage	**100**	**70**	**65**

ICT, information and communication technology.

FIGURE 2: Adaptive leadership competencies needed to lead hybrid work teams.

because we need them to mentor others as well, so that we can grow people not just from a career perspective but grow them as human beings.' (P4)

A third key component under organisational support was the recognition that one of the major forms of support that organisation gave to their employees was assistance with their mental health and wellbeing. A significant number of participants (75%) noted that wellness and mental health support had been the main focus of their organisation because of the distress caused by the pandemic. They had to engage employees more about their wellbeing to ensure that they were healthy.

'I want to say people's health, their families, that conversation became more of an important conversation where ordinarily one would talk about all the other things you know, maybe more work as a priority.' (P13)

In summary, this study sought to explore leadership competencies and organisational support required for leading hybrid work teams. Our findings point to three main themes. Firstly, that the leaders used self-evaluation strategies to evaluate the situational challenges faced during the shift to hybrid work context where in some cases they successfully adapted to the technical challenges, and in some instances, they grappled with mainly competencies that required more social engagements. Secondly, In some instances, they were able to positively shift their mindsets to adapt; particularly adaptation to the use of technology seemed to have been much easier than shifts in social competencies. Thirdly, the study also indicates a need for strong organisational support with regards to performance management and other human resource and operations policies to enable managers to shift their management practice to that of a hybrid context.

Discussion

Using the adaptive leadership framework (Heifetz et al., 2009) as a foundation, this study aimed to explore the leadership competencies and practices that the participants considered essential when setting out to adapt to the hybrid work context as well as defining support required from their organisations. The study's findings suggested that participants were cognisant of their responsibility to mobilise the workforce to transition to the hybrid work context during a

challenging period filled with uncertainty. They demonstrated the adaptive leadership qualities of flexibility and the agility required during unexpected, disruptive events, such as the abrupt shift to the hybrid work context (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010), to make sense of the technical and adaptive challenges presented by the context (Northouse, 2019). This allowed them to identify the benefits and drawbacks of the new way of working.

The findings revealed two themes relating to competencies required by leaders to manage hybrid teams as well as one theme relating to how organisations can support their managers in this context. From these themes, it was clear that there were three ways to adapt knowledge, skills and managerial practices to the new hybrid work context: (1) through leadership self-evaluation, which is a core skill needed to address situational challenges; (2) through strengthening of leadership competencies (skills and attributes), which is needed to effectively lead hybrid work teams; and (3) through support provided by organisations to allow shifts in managerial practices, which helps employees. A combination of these would then lead to effective leadership and management of hybrid work teams (see Figure 2).

Leadership self-evaluation is a core skill needed to address situational challenges

According to the study's findings, leadership self-evaluation and reflection helped the participants to understand the situational challenges that they faced by enabling them to 'observe events and patterns' by adopting a strategic position of 'getting off the dance floor and onto the balcony' (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 32) to recognise and accept that change is needed (Corazzini et al., 2015). They were able to interpret whether the change in the hybrid work context presents technical or adaptive challenges and developed interventions that allowed them to catalyse and mobilise adaptive change (Heifetz et al., 2009). They were able to do this through a mechanism of self-evaluation (Zell et al., 2020).

The process of self-evaluation enabled the participants to reflect which raised awareness of the technical challenges that they faced such as the technological adaptation, which they were able to adapt to swiftly (Heifetz et al., 2009). Contrary to the literature that posits that the rapid growth of

new technologies poses additional challenges to (particularly older) leaders (Colbert et al., 2016; Van Wart et al., 2019), the leaders were able to adapt to some functionality specifically relating to communication (holding meetings) with the help of the technical support they received from the organisation. On the other hand, the self-reflection also highlighted their lack of confidence or limitations in other aspects of using ICT such as training. As they expressed self-doubt and some were anxious about their capabilities to train or onboard new employees online thus recognising adaptive challenges that they did not have easy answers to (Van Wart et al., 2019; Northouse, 2019).

The awareness also extended to others which enabled the leaders to be accommodative of individual differences in their leadership. This is consistent with literature on adaptive leadership that requires an abandonment of conventional hierarchical leadership principles (DeRue, 2011; Northouse, 2019) and embracing collaborative intelligence to deal with complex situations (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). It is also consistent with self-leadership and emotional intelligence literature (Goleman, 2001). The implications are that to navigate situational challenges, leaders need core self-evaluation competence which is defined as a complex personality characteristic that combines self-efficacy, self-esteem, a locus of control, and emotional stability (Cristofaro & Giardino, 2020). This core competence has been found to improve their decision-making, provides clarity of focus on goals impacting positively on team performance (Arshad et al., 2021; Booth et al., 2020; Cristofaro & Giardino, 2020).

Leadership competencies needed to effectively lead hybrid work teams

It is a common understanding that prior the pandemic, when managers were employed, the competency to manage hybrid teams would not have been on recruitment and selection process of most organisations. While it may be argued that there are similar competencies for leadership, our findings highlight specific competencies needed to lead hybrid teams. Over and above the technical skills of navigating the technology, most of the competencies needed in leading in hybrid context are social or relational skills. While these findings are consistent with the literature on adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz et al., 2009), what makes the competencies unique is that these have to be implemented via a blend of ICT and face to face engagement.

Participants recognised the growing need to apply specific leadership competencies, as demanded by the hybrid work context, such as communication, listening, giving feedback, empathy, trust and transparency, humility, and building authentic relationships.

The leadership literature emphasises the importance of both traditional and virtual leaders displaying high-quality communication skills in order to build influence (Riggio & Lee, 2007; Roman et al., 2019). Scholars assert that communication skills are the medium through which almost all other high-level leadership responsibilities, including problem-solving, trust building, influencing and vision sharing, are carried out (Riggio & Lee, 2007). In the context of adaptive leadership in a hybrid environment, the competence of 'e-communication' is required, which is the ability of a leader to communicate through ICTs in a clear, well-organised way that eliminates mistakes and encourages input to prevent misunderstanding and erroneous assumptions (Van Wart et al., 2019). This competence is said to reduce anxiety and regulate stress associated with adaptive challenges (Northouse, 2019; Roman et al., 2019; Van Wart et al., 2019).

Leadership scholars also regard listening as a core leadership skill and refer to three components of successful listening: listening for content, listening for meaning *and* intent, and listening for feelings *and* values (Fischer-Lokou et al., 2016; Manzano et al., 2015). Listening for feelings and values is the most important since it allows a leader to influence and connect with stakeholders (Baker et al., 2019; Fischer-Lokou et al., 2016). In the same way, adaptive leaders are required to be mindful: to listen and be receptive to the views of virtual or minority team members, to ensure that they feel represented by 'protecting leadership voices from below' (Northouse, 2019, p. 408) and by 'listening from the heart' (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 264).

Another core skill that participants demonstrated was the ability to use appropriate virtual communication channels, such as video conferencing and other rich online media, to foster a healthy working atmosphere and inclusive work to improve social engagement and teamwork (Van Wart et al., 2019). This called for relationship-building skills, referred to as e-social and e-teambuilding skills (Van Wart et al., 2019). These skills align with Goleman's (2001) model of emotional intelligence which relates to personal competence and social competence. Personal competence refers to self-awareness skills (emotional self-awareness, accurate self-assessment and self-confidence) and self-management skills (self-control, adaptability and positive outlook). Social competence refers to social awareness (empathy and organisational awareness) and relationship-management skills (influence, conflict management, inspiration, coaching and mentoring, and teamwork skills) (Goleman, 2001).

The study's findings also suggested that trust (e-trust) was critical for building a thriving and adaptive work environment. The significance of managers trusting employees to successfully operate under hybrid working arrangements has been studied extensively in the literature (Kaplan et al., 2018; Van Wart et al., 2019; Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). This was also raised by the participants in this study, who believed it was the only way for the hybrid work model to induce the autonomy that individuals sought in an adaptive workspace.

Scholars attest to the fact that leader humility encourages a supportive and humble team environment and that humble

leaders are motivated to share power by acknowledging the strengths of others and involving them in decision-making processes. This, in turn, helps to foster a climate of empowerment, autonomy and creativity (Ou et al., 2014; Yuan et al., 2018), which aligns with the principles underpinning adaptive leadership theory.

Furthermore, the findings from this study suggested a heightened need for transparency and honesty in a hybrid work context. Leaders must, for example, leverage digital platforms to keep abreast of, and share information about, developments in their specific domain. This allows employees to feel secure and remain aligned and connected to their work, even when not operating from a centralised location (Bennis, 2013; Wei et al., 2018).

Support provided by organisations allows shifts in managerial practices, which helps employees

The finding of this study identified three key areas of support required to assist managers in leading hybrid teams. These are ICT support, a shift in performance management measures, and support for staff wellbeing. With regards to ICT, the South African banking sector has made strides in accelerating digitalisation to enhance customer experience and self-service platforms, and cut down traditional branches (Naidoo, 2023). In addition, participants mentioned that online platforms existed prior to the pandemic such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom; however, they were underutilised. The support from internal technical staff was also available in terms of using these platforms. To facilitate support to leaders who manage hybrid teams, organisations need not only provide the ICT support needed to operate, but also equip leaders in how to use the technology for complex tasks such as training or onboarding new employees online (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). This underpins the sentiment shared by many scholars that an adaptive leader must have the competency in a hybrid work context to integrate the use of various ICTs with the team's physical presence (Kulshreshtha & Sharma, 2021; Van Wart et al., 2019).

Adapting performance management practices which goes along with decision-making processes is the second component. This adaptation is also in line with the adaptive leadership literature which refers to changing the context by 'giving work to employees' (Heifetz et al., 2009; Northouse, 2019) which implies leveraging collective intelligence and moving away from traditional forms of leadership that are transactional and allows employees to contribute to solutions. The implication for organisational support is to have appropriate policies to support this shift.

The third support required from the organisation in adaptive leadership is support on employee wellbeing. Given the nature of adaptive challenges that could be experienced as employees work from home in terms of anxiety, stress and other mental wellbeing factors (Northouse, 2019; Roman et al., 2019; Van Wart et al., 2019), organisational support in this area is crucial and leaders need to be proactive in offering wellness support.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore leadership competencies and practices that leaders perceive are essential for transitioning successfully towards a hybrid work context. We used the adaptive leadership theory and framework to understand how leaders adapted their leadership competencies to pivot to leading a hybrid team. Three themes emerged which can be aligned to the adaptive leadership framework. The first being leadership self-evaluation which was found necessary to deal with situational challenges. The second was the actual e-leadership competencies which were found to be necessary for leading hybrid team. These include, e-communication, e-trust, e-social and team building skills (this encompasses building authentic relationships and empathy), as well as humility.

In comparing these competencies to the second component of the adaptive leadership framework, we found similarities which accounts for both technical and social, and relationship competencies. The main difference in hybrid team context is that these competencies are mediated by the effective use of ICT. For the South African banking sector which has a well-developed digital infrastructure for its customers (Naidoo, 2023), it would be easier to expand this to the leadership context utilising the experience they have had in transitioning their customer experience to digital platforms. However, for these competencies to flourish leaders need a solid organisational support in terms of operational and human resource management, and development policies to institutionalise new practices.

This study has therefore provided important insights on the leadership competencies and practices needed for an effective hybrid working environment. It contributes to the nascent literature on leadership in the new hybrid context. From a practical perspective, the study could inform human resource management strategies aimed at redesigning job specifications for leaders and managers who are required to work with and oversee the performance of hybrid teams. More broadly, it could facilitate the creation of adaptive workspaces and lay the foundation for more effective leaders and managers in the emerging hybrid working environment.

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Competing interests

Authors' contributions

acted as a supervisor of K.Y., contributed to and enhanced the article, and helped to update the literature review section, reanalyse the data, and enhance the results and discussion sections of the article.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings from this study are available on request.

Disclaimer

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