International Journal of Research in Finance and Management

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Leadership development for disruptive change: How to prepare middle managers for digital transformation

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DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26175754.2025.v8.i2j.628

Abstract
Digital disruption has made middle manager leadership critical to organizational adaptation. However, little attention has been given to how middle managers are developed to lead digital transformation. This study examines which leadership development strategies prepare middle managers to lead digital transformation. Secondary data were used to collect peer-reviewed literature, academic journals, conference proceedings, industry reports and policy documents on leadership development for middle managers in digital transformation. This study synthesizes the current body of knowledge on how to develop middle managers to lead disruptive change. The findings demonstrate that developing middle managers who are able to adapt quickly to new situations, are digitally literate, emotionally intelligent and have a change-oriented mindset will help them successfully lead digital transformation. The study provides recommendations for both policy and organizational leadership development.

Keyword: Leadership development, middle managers, disruptive change, digital transformation, agile leadership, change management

1. Introduction
The emergence of digital transformation has changed the nature of organizational leadership (Kane *et al*., 2019) [14]. The application of emerging digital technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, Big Data Analytics and Automation require a form of leadership that is adaptable to continuous change and ambiguity (Westerman *et al*., 2014) [23]. The middle manager position plays an important role in the translation of corporate vision into operational reality (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997) [9].

Despite the significance of middle management in leading digital transformation, there is substantial evidence to indicate that many organizations do not develop their middle managers to address the needs of digital transformation (Petrie, 2014; Van Velsor & Leslie, 2020) [19, 22]. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate what leadership development strategies will prepare middle managers to lead disruptive change using the literature and reports from organizations.

Objectives
1. Identify the competencies and mindsets of middle managers to be successful in leading disruptive change.
2. Examine the leadership development practices relevant to the digital transformation context.
3. Provide recommendations to policymakers and strategists for the incorporation of adaptive leadership development frameworks.

2. Literature Review
2.1. The Characteristics of Disruptive Change
Disruptive change refers to the transformation of a company's structure, model of operation and/or the way people perform their jobs (Christensen *et al*., 2015) [6]. The increased use of digital technologies, globalization, and changing consumer expectations have increased the speed and impact of disruptions (Binns *et al*., 2014) [4]. Leaders must deal with technological challenges and cultural barriers as well as adapting their workforce to the changes in the business (Kotter, 2012) [15].

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2.2. The Function of Middle Managers

Middle managers function as change agents — they translate strategic directions into operational realities of digital transformation (Balogun, 2003) [3]. Their ability to think critically and manage their emotions during change processes can positively affect the success of the change process (Agote *et al*., 2016) [1]. They are typically without the authority or resources to implement new ways of doing things (Wooldridge *et al*., 2008) [24].

2.3. Leadership Development in the Digital Age

Recent scholarly research has highlighted the need for developing leadership skills such as learning agility, digital competence, and systemic thinking (DeRue *et al*., 2012; Petrie, 2019) [7, 20]. Traditional classroom-based training is being replaced by experiential, technology-enabled, and collaborative approaches (Horney *et al*., 2010) [13]. According to Avolio *et al*. (2001) [2], e-leadership — enabled by digital tools — requires competencies in virtual collaboration, trust-building, and data-driven decision making. Developing continuous learning cultures also develops the capacity for resilience during times of disruption (Garvin *et al*., 2008) [10].

2.4. Limitations of Present Leadership Development Approaches

Most organizations continue to utilize outdated competency frameworks that focus on maintaining stability rather than adaptability (McChrystal *et al*., 2015) [17]. There is limited knowledge about how middle managers assimilate and apply the principles of disruptive leadership (Horney *et al*., 2010) [13]. Consequently, research should emphasize practice-based learning models that simulate the complexity of dynamic environments.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology utilizing secondary data — namely, journal articles, books, professional reports and organizational documents — published between 2010-2024. Sources were identified through Scopus, Google Scholar, and industry white papers addressing topics of leadership, change management and digital transformation.

Thematic Synthesis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [5] was utilized to analyze the data and identify common themes and frameworks associated with the leadership development for disruptive change. Coding was conducted inductively to categorize the emergent themes of digital literacy, adaptability, psychological safety and cross-boundary collaboration.

4. Results and Discussion
4.1. Main Competences for Leading Disruptive Change
1. **Learning Agility:** The capacity to learn, unlearn, and relearn is fundamental (DeRue *et al*., 2012) [7].
2. **Digital Fluency:** Managers must be able to comprehend new technologies enough to lead teams (Kane *et al*., 2019) [14].
3. **Emotional Intelligence:** Managers' empathy and self-regulation enhance employee engagement and willingness to accept change (Goleman, 2017) [11].
4. **Collaborative Leadership:** Cross-functional teamwork minimizes resistance due to departmentalization (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018) [21].

4.2. Leadership Development Strategies
*   **Action Learning Projects:** Integrating learning in real-time into the change process increases learning transfer (Marquardt, 2011) [16].
*   **Coaching and Mentoring:** Personalized feedback facilitates the growth of the adaptive mindset (Grant, 2019) [12].
*   **Digital Learning Ecosystems:** Combining blended and microlearning methods allows for ongoing learning and development (Noe *et al*., 2017) [18].
*   **Psychological Safety Programs:** Trust-based leadership models increase the adaptability of teams (Edmondson, 2019) [8].

4.3. Implications for Organizations
Organizations should embed leadership development into their business transformation strategies. Implementing adaptive leadership academies, 360-degree learning feedback systems, and cross-industry partnerships will increase organizational preparedness for disruptive change.

5. Recommendations for Policy and Practice
*   **Institutionalize Learning Agility Frameworks:** Include in performance metrics.
*   **Incorporate Digital Literacy as Core Training:** Not just IT, but organizational digital strategy.
*   **Adopt a Culture of Experimentation:** Support prototype leadership initiatives.
*   **Government and HR Policy Alignment:** National leadership development programs should support private-public sector knowledge sharing on digital leadership.
*   **Develop Inclusive Leadership Pathways:** Diversity of perspectives leads to diverse problem-solving options.

6. Conclusion
Middle managers are critical to the success or failure of efforts to digitally transform organizations. For middle managers to successfully lead disruptive change, they must have an adaptable mindset, digital literacy, and emotional intelligence. Leadership development strategies that include experiential learning, coaching and digital integration are the best means of preparing middle managers for the demands of disruptive change. The study contributes to the field of study by relating the competencies and mindsets of middle management to the institutional mechanisms of leadership development in dynamic contexts.

Future studies should include longitudinal studies of middle-management leadership development across various industries to better understand the development of adaptive growth frameworks.

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