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Adaptive Leadership for Successful Project Management in a Cape Town ICT Institution

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Abstract

Orientation: Rapid digital transformation, socio-economic volatility, and institutional uncertainty have amplified the need for leadership models that promote flexibility, collaboration, and contextual responsiveness. Adaptive leadership offers a dynamic framework to manage such complexity within project-based environments.

Research purpose: This study explored how adaptive leadership supports successful project management within a Cape Town information and communication technology (ICT) training institution.

Motivation for the study: Although adaptive leadership has been widely theorised, limited empirical research has examined its application in South African higher education or ICT-based contexts. Understanding how adaptive leadership principles translate into project success can enhance leadership development and organisational resilience in this sector.

Research design, approach and method: Anchored in the constructivist paradigm, the study adopted a qualitative case study design. Data were collected through a focus group discussion with seven project leaders and analysed thematically using a hybrid inductive–deductive approach to identify dominant patterns and relationships.

Main findings: The results revealed four interconnected pillars of adaptive leadership that enhance project success: (1) talent acquisition grounded in character and emotional intelligence, (2) continuous leadership development supported by knowledge management, (3) organisational justice reinforced by motivation and recognition, and (4) technological enablement for predictive foresight. These pillars collectively form a synergistic framework that strengthens institutional resilience and project outcomes in dynamic environments.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings offer practical guidance for higher education and ICT-based organisations on embedding adaptive leadership into recruitment, training, motivation, and technological systems to ensure sustainable project delivery.

Contribution/value-add: This study contributes to leadership and higher education literature by demonstrating how adaptive leadership can be systematically integrated into ICT institutions to enhance adaptability, innovation, and organisational competitiveness in an increasingly uncertain environment.

Keywords: Leadership, Adaptive Leadership, Project Management, Organisational Competitiveness, ICT Training Institution

Introduction

Leadership remains one of the most critical determinants of organisational success, shaping how institutions navigate uncertainty and pursue strategic objectives. Over the past two decades, leadership research has evolved from classical trait and behavioural models towards approaches that emphasise flexibility, collaboration, and contextual responsiveness. In an era

characterised by globalisation, digital transformation, and socio-economic volatility, the ability to lead adaptively has become a defining competence for institutions in both the private and educational sectors (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Chughtai *et al.*, 2024) ^[6, 1]. In the South African context, higher education and vocational training institutions increasingly adopt project-based models to deliver technology-driven learning, infrastructure development, and community training initiatives. These projects frequently encounter unpredictable disruptions such as policy reforms, technological shifts, or funding constraints. Consequently, the application of adaptive leadership which is a model that emphasises flexibility, problem-solving, and collaborative learning has become vital for sustaining project success (Mahlangu, 2023; London, 2022 ^[10]).

Adaptive leadership, originally conceptualised by Heifetz and Linsky (2002–2009), redefines leadership as a dynamic process that mobilises people to tackle complex challenges rather than relying solely on authority or expertise. Within ICT-based institutions, project leaders are expected not only to deliver outcomes within budget and time constraints but also to cultivate resilience, manage innovation, and respond to emergent changes. The growing complexity of ICT projects in South Africa therefore presents fertile ground for exploring how adaptive leadership principles can improve project outcomes in educational contexts.

Research Problem

Despite the acknowledged importance of leadership in project management, many ICT-related projects in South African higher education and training institutions continue to experience failure or underperformance. These challenges often arise from rigid leadership styles that prioritise compliance and control over learning and adaptation (Kaufmann & Kock, 2022; Cote, 2022) ^[9, 2]. Existing research has seldom examined how adaptive leadership operates in local ICT training environments where leaders must balance educational objectives with organisational sustainability. This gap limits the availability of evidence-based strategies for fostering adaptive leadership within higher education project settings.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how adaptive leadership can be effectively applied to support successful project management in an ICT training institution in Cape Town. By linking adaptive leadership theory with practical project management strategies, the study seeks to demonstrate how leadership adaptability can strengthen institutional resilience, responsiveness, and competitiveness.

Research Objectives

The study pursues the following objectives:

1. To explore the principles of adaptive leadership relevant to project management within an ICT training institution.
2. To identify strategies through which adaptive leadership can be implemented to improve project success.
3. To evaluate how adaptive leadership contributes to institutional resilience and competitiveness in dynamic environments.

Significance of the Study

This study makes both theoretical and practical

contributions. Theoretically, it extends adaptive leadership literature into the under-researched context of South African ICT-based higher education institutions. Practically, it provides insights for institutional leaders and project managers on how to embed adaptive leadership principles such as emotional intelligence, fairness, continuous learning, and technological foresight into project systems. The findings also inform curriculum design for leadership and management programmes within the higher education sector, thereby contributing to improved leadership development and project performance in the 21st-century educational landscape.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is a contemporary framework that addresses the limitations of traditional leadership approaches in responding to complex and uncertain environments. Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow (2009) ^[6] define it as the practice of mobilising individuals and organisations to tackle tough challenges and thrive in changing conditions. Unlike transactional or transformational leadership, adaptive leadership does not rely on positional authority or charisma but on the leader's ability to facilitate learning, experimentation, and collaboration (Cote, 2022) ^[2]. Recent studies highlight adaptive leadership as particularly relevant for organisations facing rapid technological change and crisis conditions (Haron *et al.*, 2022; Chughtai *et al.*, 2024) ^[5, 1]. In educational institutions, where project-based operations are increasingly common, adaptive leaders are required to create safe spaces for innovation, empower diverse teams, and foster resilience in the face of uncertainty (Mahlangu, 2023; Tetteh & Boateng, 2023). This shift marks a move from managing tasks to orchestrating adaptive systems.

Theoretical Foundations of Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is grounded in systems thinking and complexity theory. According to Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018), organisations function as complex adaptive systems where leadership involves enabling emergent solutions rather than enforcing predetermined plans. The theory differentiates between technical problems, which can be solved with existing expertise, and adaptive challenges, which require new learning and behaviour change (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009) ^[6]. From a higher education perspective, adaptive leadership complements the learning organisation theory (Senge, 1990), which advocates continuous learning and knowledge sharing as the foundation for innovation. When applied to project management, adaptive leadership encourages leaders to view change not as a disruption but as an opportunity to experiment, co-create, and reframe institutional practices (Teece, 2023).

Moreover, the theory integrates well with emotional intelligence frameworks (Goleman, 2022), emphasising empathy, social awareness, and self-regulation as essential for managing team dynamics under stress. Within the South African context, adaptive leadership resonates with Ubuntu-based leadership principles that value collective learning, fairness, and relational accountability (Mangaliso & Nkomo, 2021).

Principles of Adaptive Leadership

The adaptive leadership model comprises four core

principles (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009; Haron *et al.*, 2022) ^[6, 5]:

1. **Emotional intelligence** has to do with the leader's capacity to recognise, understand, and manage emotions to foster trust and cohesion (Cote, 2022) ^[2]. Emotional intelligence enables leaders to navigate uncertainty while maintaining psychological safety for teams (Cote, 2022) ^[2].
2. **Organisational justice** has to do with fairness, transparency, and respect in decision-making processes that promote trust and commitment (Imam & Zaheer, 2021) ^[8]. Justice in organisational practices enhances morale and encourages constructive engagement during change (Imam & Zaheer, 2021) ^[8].
3. **Development** is regarded as continuous learning and innovation to build resilience (Chughtai *et al.*, 2024) ^[1]. Adaptive leaders invest in learning opportunities, mentoring, and reflective practice to sustain adaptability over time (Chughtai *et al.*, 2024) ^[1].
4. **Character** has to do with the integrity, authenticity, and creativity when responding to turbulence. Character ensures ethical decision-making and accountability in uncertain conditions (London, 2022) ^[10].

These principles create a holistic foundation for leaders to guide organisations through disruption, fostering adaptive capacity across individual, team, and organisational levels.

Adaptive Leadership and Project Management

Project management within higher education and ICT environments is characterised by complexity, limited resources, and rapidly evolving stakeholder expectations. Research indicates that the success of such projects often hinges more on leadership adaptability than on technical expertise alone (Kaufmann & Kock, 2022) ^[9]. Adaptive leaders contribute to project success by ensuring that learning mechanisms, knowledge-sharing platforms, and psychological safety are in place (Imam & Zaheer, 2021) ^[8]. According to Cummings (2023), adaptive leadership enables project teams to manage ambiguity by engaging in sense-making and iterative planning, essential for navigating unforeseen challenges such as policy shifts or technological disruptions. Within ICT institutions, where project cycles are typically short and innovation-driven, adaptive leadership supports agility and cross-functional collaboration (Khoza, 2022).

Empirical studies have shown that adaptive leadership enhances team cohesion, knowledge integration, and innovation performance (Boonstra & Dhliwayo, 2023; Chughtai *et al.*, 2024) ^[1]. It also promotes shared leadership structures, where authority and decision-making are distributed across members, reinforcing accountability and participation (Imam & Zaheer, 2021) ^[8]. These qualities align strongly with project-based work in educational institutions that demand flexible, collaborative leadership models.

Research Gaps in the South African Context

While international scholarship on adaptive leadership has expanded, limited research has examined its application in South African higher education or ICT-based environments (Mahlangu, 2023). Most local studies focus on transformational or distributed leadership, leaving a gap in understanding how adaptive leadership can improve institutional project performance and resilience.

Furthermore, studies have seldom integrated technological foresight on the use of predictive analytics and digital tools as a component of adaptive leadership. Given the rapid digitisation of higher education, there is a need to explore how adaptive leaders use technology to anticipate change and prepare project teams for emerging challenges (Teece, 2023). This study therefore addresses these gaps by examining how adaptive leadership principles are applied in a Cape Town ICT training institution and how such practices contribute to successful project management and organisational resilience.

Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Rationale

The conceptual framework for this study integrates the key principles of adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow, 2009) ^[6] with constructs from organisational behaviour, knowledge management, and project management literature.

It proposes that adaptive leadership, when operationalised through specific organisational mechanisms, contributes to successful project outcomes in higher education ICT environments characterised by uncertainty and complexity. Building on the literature (Imam & Zaheer, 2021) ^[8]; Chughtai *et al.*, 2024) ^[1]; Teece, 2023), the framework assumes that project performance in such contexts depends not only on technical competence but also on leaders' ability to mobilise adaptive capacity. This capacity is achieved through four interrelated pillars:

1. Talent acquisition is grounded in character and emotional intelligence,
2. Continuous development and knowledge management,
3. Organisational justice and motivational support, and
4. Technological enablement for predictive foresight.

These pillars collectively create a dynamic system that strengthens institutional resilience and project effectiveness. Fig 1 shows the conceptual framework for adaptive leadership in ICT project management.



Source: Own construction

Fig 1: Conceptual framework for adaptive leadership in ICT project management

The conceptual framework shows how adaptive leadership principles work together with organisational systems to increase project success within an ICT training institution. The model is made up of three layers which are adaptive leadership principles, organisational enablers, and adaptive leadership outcomes. The inner layer presents the four key leadership principles which are emotional intelligence, organisational justice, development, and character which provide the behavioural and ethical foundation for adaptive leadership. The middle layer, organisational enablers, represents institutional systems that translate these leadership behaviours into practice, including talent acquisition, continuous development, motivation, and technological foresight. The outer layer displays the resulting consequences such as improved project performance, team cohesion, innovation, and organisational resilience. The arrows connecting the layers highlight the cyclical and interactive nature of adaptive leadership, where learning and feedback continuously shape leadership practices and institutional systems. Generally, the framework establishes that adaptive leadership reinforces project management success when reinforced by fair, learning-oriented, and technology-driven organisational systems.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Philosophy and Design

The study was guided by a constructivist philosophy, which views reality as socially constructed through individuals' experiences and interpretations (De Villiers, Farooq & Molinari, 2022) [3]. A qualitative case study design was employed to enable an in-depth understanding of adaptive leadership within its real-life organisational context (Yin, 2018) [11].

Research Setting and Sampling

The research was conducted at a long-established ICT training institution in Cape Town, operational since 2000. Its project-based structure and longevity made it ideal for examining adaptive leadership practices. Using purposive sampling, seven senior project leaders directly involved in leading institutional initiatives were selected to provide rich and diverse insights. Participant demographics are summarised in Table 1.

Data Collection

Data was gathered through a semi-structured focus group discussion conducted on-site. Before the session, participants met with the researcher to confirm ethical protocols and signed a memorandum of understanding. The discussion was moderated by a participant, with another acting as secretary to record proceedings, promoting shared engagement and ownership of the research process.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis approach (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) [4]. Transcripts were imported into Atlas.ti and coded in two cycles: a deductive phase applying a pre-defined codebook based on adaptive leadership principles, followed by an inductive phase identifying emergent patterns. Codes were refined into coherent themes through iterative comparison. Relationships among themes were visualised in a network diagram (Fig 2), which encapsulates the integrated

adaptive leadership adoption strategy.

Data Quality and Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility and reliability the following were done:

- Participants reviewed summaries of their responses.
- Use multiple data sources (interviews, documents).
- Document decisions and procedures for transparency.
- Researchers reflected on potential biases throughout the study.

Ethical Considerations

The study obtained ethical clearance from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology Faculty of Commerce Research Ethics Committee (Clearance Certificate No | 2018FBREC542). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation of participant identities and secure storage of transcripts in password-protected files.

Findings

The analysis identified a multi-faceted strategy for adopting adaptive leadership, centred on four interconnected pillars: talent acquisition, continuous development, organisational support, and technological enablement. The findings for each pillar are objectively reported below.

1. Talent acquisition: Prioritising character and innate ability

Participants strongly advocated for a fundamental shift in recruitment strategies. They emphasised that appointing project leaders should extend beyond assessing technical competencies to include robust evaluations of a candidate's character and innate resilience. As Participant 1 stated, recruitment should "follow a strict character assessment that models disruptive situations." This sentiment was echoed by Participant 7, who argued that emotional stability during turbulence is often an "in-born" capability, necessitating "powerful talent search initiatives" to identify such individuals. The need for a strong "organisational-leadership role-leader fit" (Participant 5) further underscored the importance of strategic talent management.

2. Continuous development and knowledge management

A recurring theme was the necessity of ongoing learning. Participants highlighted that adaptive capability is not static but must be cultivated through "continuous development of leaders" (Participant 6). Specific mechanisms proposed included "special project adaptive leadership courses, workshops, training and development initiatives" (Participant 1). Beyond formal training, Participant 3 stressed the importance of creating "learning and knowledge management networks," both locally and internationally, to empower leaders with the versatile knowledge needed to handle novel situations creatively.

3. Organisational support through justice and motivation

To foster the loyalty required for leaders to stand firm during disruptions, participants pointed to the need for strong organisational support systems. Participant 2 explained that "organisational citizenship behaviour" could be developed "through various motivational initiatives like recognition and rewards as well as leader appraisal

strategies." This aligns directly with the adaptive leadership principle of organisational justice, creating a fair and supportive environment that motivates leaders to act in the organisation's best interests.

4. Technological enablement for predictive foresight

A forward-looking finding was the emphasis on using technology to reduce environmental uncertainty. Participant 4 argued that "adaptive leadership can easily be developed through having predictive and forecasting systems," which

allow leaders to prepare for future challenges. The participants recommended that organisations "stay technologically advanced" and leverage the predictive modelling tools made available by the technological revolution to enhance strategic readiness.

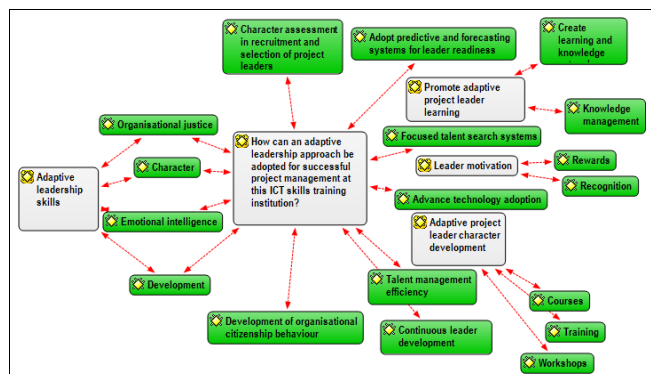
The interplay of these strategies is visualised in the code network diagram (Fig 2), which illustrates that successful adoption relies on a synergistic system rather than isolated initiatives.

Table 1: Biographical characteristics of the participants (N=7)

Participant	Racial group	Gender	Age range	Level of education	Number of years in leadership position
1	Black African	Male	30-40 years	Degree	6
2	Coloured	Female	20-30 years	Masters	5
3	Black African	Male	Above 50 years	Masters	17
4	Black African	Male	Above 50 years	Degree	8
5	Indian	Female	30 - 40 years	Doctorate	13
6	Coloured	Male	30-40 years	Diploma	9
7	Black African	Male	20-30 years	Degree	5

Source: Own construction from findings

The relationships between these strategies and the overarching goal were further analysed using Atlas.ti, resulting in a code network diagram that visually represents the data structure. This model illustrates that the successful adoption of an adaptive leadership approach is not reliant on a single factor but is the product of a synergistic system encompassing talent acquisition, continuous development, organisational support systems, and technological enablement.



Source: Own construction from findings

Fig 2: Code network diagram for the adoption of an adaptive leadership approach

Fig 2 illustrates the complex interplay of strategies required for adopting adaptive leadership. The central node represents the core objective, with primary themes such as development and talent management acting as pillars. The diagram shows that initiatives such as character-based recruitment and continuous training (development) are foundational, while technological systems (predictive forecasting) and motivational strategies (organisational justice) provide critical enabling support. Thus, adopting an adaptive leadership requires a full system which is to hire resilient people, train them continuously, support them with fair rewards, and give them technology to predict future challenges.

Discussion

This study sought to develop a framework for adopting adaptive leadership in a dynamic ICT project environment. The findings present a cohesive model that both aligns with and extends the existing literature on adaptive leadership. The strong emphasis on character-based recruitment provides a practical method to operationalise the principle of 'Character' (Haron *et al.*, 2022) [5]. This represents a significant move beyond competency-based hiring, advocating for processes that evaluate a candidate's inherent resilience and tolerance for ambiguity, which is pivotal for navigating turbulence (Cote, 2022) [2]. The focus on focused talent search further underscores the strategic importance of identifying individuals with an innate disposition for adaptive work.

The theme of continuous development powerfully resonates with the principle of 'Development' (Heifetz *et al.*, 2009) [6], aligning with the concept of the learning organisation. The call for robust knowledge management systems adds a critical structural dimension, suggesting that individual learning must be supported by organisational mechanisms to capture and disseminate knowledge, a key driver of innovation and agile response (Imam & Zaheer, 2021) [8]. The findings related to organisational justice and motivational strategies offer a practical pathway to build trust and loyalty essential for adaptive leadership. By implementing recognition and reward systems, organisations can cultivate organisational citizenship behaviour, thereby scaling the importance of trust and cohesion from the team level (Imam & Zaheer, 2021) [8] to the leader-organisation relationship.

Finally, the advocacy for predictive technologies extends the traditional view of adaptive leadership as a purely behavioural response. It posits that the modern adaptive leader must leverage data analytics and modelling to anticipate disruptions, transitioning from a reactive to a proactively prepared stance. This finding strongly exemplifies the growing indispensability of technology in contemporary business management (Imam & Zaheer, 2021) [8].

Implications for Practice and Theory

These findings have substantial practical implications; organisations must therefore revamp recruitment to assess resilience, invest in continuous leadership development, implement knowledge management, and integrate predictive technologies for strategic foresight. Theoretically, this study integrates adaptive leadership theory with other management domains, including Human Resource Management (talent acquisition), Organisational Behaviour (motivation and justice), and Knowledge Management. It proposes a more holistic model where adaptive leadership is not an isolated skill set but a system supported by talent practices, learning structures, and technology.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its qualitative, case-study design within a single institution, which affects the generalisability of the findings. Future research should employ quantitative methods to test the relationships proposed in the code network model (Fig 2) across a larger sample. Furthermore, as suggested by the participants and this study, future inquiry should specifically investigate the role of artificial intelligence, big data analytics, and other forecasting technologies in enhancing the predictive capabilities and adaptive capacity of project leaders. Exploring the balance between innate talent (in-born capabilities) and developed skills would also be a valuable contribution to literature.

Conclusion

This study concludes that adaptive leadership is not merely a skill set but an integrated organisational system vital for project management success in the ICT sector. The adoption process is initiated by recruiting for character and innate potential, sustained through continuous development and knowledge sharing, motivated by fair and just organisational systems, and empowered by predictive technological tools. Through embedding these interconnected strategies, ICT organisations can significantly enhance their resilience, project outcomes, and overall competitiveness in an increasingly volatile environment.

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