Functioning While Fracturing: Theorizing Leadership Quiet Cracking Under Continuous Digital Transformation

Muhammad Safizal Abdullah, Muhamad Azan Yaakob, Wan Mashumi Wan Mustafa, Muhammad Asyraf Mohd Kassim, Nurfareena Zahari

Faculty of Business & Communication, Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), Uniciti Alam Campus,02100 Padang Besar, Perlis, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation is increasingly experienced not as a bounded program of organizational change but as a condition of recurrent and overlapping adaptation. Research has clarified many technological, strategic, and employee-level consequences of this shift, yet it has paid less attention to a leadership-specific problem: the possibility that leaders can continue to look effective while progressively losing the cognitive, emotional, temporal, and recovery resources required to remain effective. This conceptual paper develops a leadership-specific process theory of quiet cracking under continuous digital transformation. Rather than claiming a wholly new strain construct, the paper refines the emerging quiet-cracking literature by specifying a distinctive leadership configuration in which preserved short-term role enactment coexists with hidden resource erosion. Conservation of Resources theory provides the primary explanatory engine, while role theory, Job Demands-Resources theory, compensatory-control theory, emotional-labor research, recovery theory, and Restricted Employee Sustainability Theory are integrated to explain the process. The model proposes that continuous digital transformation intensity generates experienced transformation load; that resource loss and institutionalized recovery deficits translate this load into leadership quiet cracking; and that the dual position of leaders as change recipients and change agents, together with change-champion emotional labor, accelerates depletion. Compensatory effort can preserve visible performance and create a detection lag between internal deterioration and external failure. Adaptive leadership resilience and recovery-supportive organizational resources can slow this trajectory, but persistent overload can produce a resilience-masking loop in which resilient performance delays corrective action until buffering capacity saturates. The paper contributes a temporal and role-specific explanation of hidden leader deterioration and positions human sustainability as a boundary condition of digital agility.

Keywords: leadership quiet cracking; continuous digital transformation; conservation of resources; compensatory control; leader well-being; recovery paradox; resilience; human sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a recurring condition of organizational life rather than a single transition toward a stable technological end state. Artificial intelligence, automation, algorithmic decision systems, cloud platforms, data-intensive coordination, cybersecurity requirements, and digitally mediated work practices continuously alter how organizations create value and how work is designed, evaluated, and led. Reviews of digital transformation have long emphasized that the phenomenon extends beyond technology adoption to changes in structures, capabilities, value creation, and organizational boundaries (Vial, 2019; Verhoef et al., 2021). More recent synthesis increasingly treats digital transformation as an ongoing process of adaptation rather than an episodic implementation challenge (Hanelt et al., 2021; Moganadas et al., 2026). This temporal shift matters because organizations may no longer experience a clear post-change period in which attention can return to baseline, routines can stabilize, and depleted human resources can be replenished.

The human implications of digitally intensified work are now well established. Research documents technostress, work intensification, attention fragmentation, connectivity pressure, uncertainty, work-nonwork

boundary erosion, AI-related anxiety, and altered work design as important features of digitalized workplaces (Parker & Grote, 2022; Li et al., 2025; Rademaker et al., 2025; Valtonen & Holopainen, 2025; Moganadas et al., 2026). Yet the most developed strand of this research remains employee-centered. Digital leadership scholarship similarly tends to emphasize what leaders must do: formulate digital strategy, build digital capabilities, enable innovation, support technology adoption, lead virtual work, reduce follower technostress, and coordinate transformation (López-Figueroa et al., 2025). Leadership is therefore commonly theorized as an input into organizational adaptation or as a resource for followers.

This emphasis is incomplete, not because leader well-being is an unstudied topic, but because the specific process through which continuous digital transformation may erode leaders while they continue to perform remains underdeveloped. Contemporary leader well-being research shows that holding formal leadership roles can carry meaningful well-being costs, although those costs vary across roles and contexts (Oc & Chintakananda, 2025). Broader leadership and well-being reviews demonstrate that leaders shape follower well-being while also carrying their own role-related well-being consequences (Inceoglu et al., 2018; Kaluza et al., 2020). What is less well explained is how a leader can remain a competent transformation actor in the short term while the resource base supporting that competence deteriorates over time.

This problem is particularly acute for middle and senior managers responsible for digital transformation. These leaders are not merely exposed to change; they help produce, interpret, and legitimize it. Middle managers translate strategy into operating practice, shape digital initiatives, manage local resistance, reconcile capability disagreements, and influence transformation trajectories (Christodoulou et al., 2022; Alguera Kleine et al., 2026). At the same time, digital automation and restructuring can alter the managers' own expertise, authority, role embeddedness, and career relevance (Van Doorn et al., 2023). Digitalization can also change managers' experience of time, increasing work pace, workload, people-management demands, and expectations of instant availability even when technology simultaneously automates some tasks (Focacci et al., 2025). Leaders are therefore placed in a structurally distinctive position: they must absorb change as recipients while creating confidence and direction as agents of the same change.

The emerging notion of quiet cracking offers a provocative way to examine hidden deterioration, but it requires theoretical discipline. The term first gained practitioner visibility as a label for persistent, often concealed workplace unhappiness and erosion (TalentLMS, 2025). Balcıoğlu and Altındağ (2026) subsequently advanced an employee-level conceptualization of quiet cracking as an organizationally induced form of psychological erosion in which external performance can be sustained while motivation, emotional resilience, and future orientation deteriorate internally. Their work is important because it shifts quiet cracking from a popular label toward an emerging academic construct and uses Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theories to explain it. Consequently, a leadership paper can no longer credibly claim to originate quiet cracking or to establish novelty simply by combining COR and JD-R.

The theoretical opportunity instead lies in specifying a leadership-specific process. Leaders face symbolic and relational expectations that many employees do not. During transformation, they are expected to embody confidence, interpret ambiguity, maintain momentum, contain follower anxiety, and represent strategic coherence. These expectations can make concealment functional in the short term. A leader who remains uncertain may nevertheless need to reassure a team; a manager whose expertise is threatened by automation may still be required to sponsor it; a transformation director who doubts the feasibility of a deadline may still be expected to project control. Leadership quiet cracking (LQC), as developed here, therefore refers not to a wholly separate syndrome but to a leadership-specific configuration of quiet cracking in which role obligations systematically encourage continued compensatory performance while internal resources are progressively depleted.

The central theoretical puzzle can be stated as a functioning-while-fracturing paradox. Organizations often infer leadership health from visible functioning: milestones are delivered, teams are reassured, systems go live, and executives continue to attend meetings, decide, and communicate. Yet maintained output does not necessarily indicate sustainable capacity. Compensatory-control theory shows that people under high workload can protect performance by mobilizing additional effort and resources, creating trade-offs between performance maintenance and energetic or psychological cost (Hockey, 1997). Research on self-endangering

work behavior similarly shows that working longer or more intensively can be used to meet demands even when such strategies are resource intensive and harmful over time (Dettmers et al., 2016; Baethge et al., 2026). The theoretical novelty of functioning while fracturing therefore does not rest on claiming that strained people can still perform. It rests on explaining why continuous transformation makes compensatory functioning structurally attractive to leaders, why leadership display obligations conceal its costs, and why conventional transformation metrics can detect deterioration only after significant resource loss has occurred.

A second theoretical problem concerns recovery. High demands do not automatically create unsustainable strain if individuals can restore the resources expended in meeting them. Recovery research emphasizes the importance of psychological detachment, restoration, and temporal separation from demands (Sonnentag et al., 2017; Sonnentag et al., 2022). The recovery paradox is especially relevant: the conditions that make recovery most necessary can also undermine the very recovery processes needed to restore well-being (Sonnentag, 2018). Continuous digital transformation may institutionalize this paradox. Overlapping implementation waves, after-hours escalation, persistent connectivity, anticipatory uncertainty, and rapid reconfiguration can contaminate or eliminate the recovery interval between transformations. The problem is therefore not merely high demand but a recurring demand-recovery imbalance.

A third problem concerns sustainability. Human sustainability scholarship asks whether work can be accomplished while preserving the human capacity that makes work possible. Restricted Employee Sustainability Theory (REST) organizes employee sustainability around maintenance, growth, and generativity and distinguishes states such as thriving, surviving, and subsisting (Barnes et al., 2023). Barnes and Wagner (2023) extend REST by emphasizing leaders' responsibility for the human sustainability of employees. The present paper reverses the lens: what sustains the human sustainability of the leaders expected to sustain others? Continuous transformation can create a situation in which leaders remain productive today by consuming the resources required to lead tomorrow. This suggests that human sustainability is not merely a desirable outcome of transformation but a boundary condition on the organization's capacity to remain digitally agile.

Against this background, the paper develops a leadership-specific process theory of quiet cracking under continuous digital transformation. It addresses four questions. First, what distinguishes leadership quiet cracking from adjacent concepts such as burnout, change fatigue, technostress, compensatory performance, self-endangering work behavior, workaholism, presenteeism, and generic quiet cracking? Second, through what mechanisms does continuous digital transformation create hidden leadership deterioration? Third, how do compensatory functioning, recovery conditions, and leadership display requirements delay organizational detection? Fourth, when do adaptive leadership resilience and organizational resources cease to protect leaders and instead contribute to a resilience-masking loop?

The paper makes four contributions. First, it refines the emerging quiet-cracking literature by specifying a leadership-specific nomological configuration rather than proposing quiet cracking as a wholly new strain category. Second, it develops the dual change-role mechanism and change-champion emotional labor to explain why leaders face a distinctive resource burden when they must simultaneously adapt to change and lead others through it. Third, it integrates COR, compensatory control, self-endangering work behavior, and the recovery paradox to explain the temporal divergence between internal deterioration and visible performance. Fourth, it connects digital leadership to REST by theorizing the resilience-masking loop: resilient leaders may preserve performance long enough to conceal transformation overload, thereby delaying corrective organizational action until the buffering value of resilience saturates. Together, these contributions shift digital leadership theory from an exclusive focus on adaptive capability toward the sustainability of the human capacity through which adaptation is repeatedly delivered.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

This paper uses a phenomenon-driven, integrative conceptual approach. Conceptual scholarship is most valuable when it does more than summarize prior findings: it clarifies constructs, reveals assumptions, connects previously separated theoretical conversations, and develops a new explanatory logic (Whetten, 1989; Corley & Gioia, 2011; MacInnis, 2011; Jaakkola, 2020). The objective here is therefore not to conduct a

systematic review of every article that uses the term quiet cracking. Such a corpus remains too recent and too narrow to support the process theory required. Instead, quiet cracking is treated as the focal phenomenon around which explanatory literatures are theoretically sampled.

The development process combined iterative keyword searching with backward and forward citation chaining from influential reviews and foundational papers, consistent with the logic of integrative literature-based conceptual inquiry rather than systematic-review exhaustiveness (Snyder, 2019). Search iterations were organized around seven intersecting streams: digital transformation and digital work; digital leadership and middle management; leader well-being; COR and JD-R; role strain and emotional labor; compensatory performance, self-endangering effort, and work recovery; and human sustainability and resilience. Emerging quiet-cracking scholarship and neighboring constructs were then used to test construct boundaries. The search process was intentionally theory driven rather than designed for statistical exhaustiveness. Sources were retained when they contributed to at least one of four theoretical tasks: defining the transformation context, explaining resource-depletion mechanisms, clarifying why deterioration can remain hidden, or specifying moderators and boundary conditions.

The approach follows model-building logic rather than theory synthesis for its own sake (Jaakkola, 2020). COR is used as the primary dynamic theory because it explains resource investment, loss, replenishment, and loss spirals. Role theory explains the structural configuration of demands created by simultaneous change-recipient and change-agent positions. JD-R provides a work-design architecture for demands and resources. Emotional-labor theory explains the self-regulatory cost of maintaining a credible change-leadership display. Compensatory-control theory and self-endangering work behavior explain how visible performance can be protected through costly effort. Recovery theory explains the temporal conditions under which resource expenditure becomes unrecovered erosion. REST supplies the human-sustainability lens needed to interpret whether repeated transformation preserves the capacity for future functioning.

Construct clarity is treated as a central design requirement. Management research is vulnerable to construct proliferation when new labels merely rename established phenomena without adding explanatory value (Suddaby, 2010). Accordingly, this paper does not define LQC as any hidden stress among leaders. LQC is useful only if it identifies a specific configuration that existing constructs do not efficiently capture as a whole: progressive internal resource erosion, preserved short-term leadership enactment, role-driven concealment or compensation, constrained recovery, and declining sustainability under recurrent transformation responsibility. The construct-boundary analysis later in the paper explicitly tests this claim against close alternatives.

Finally, the proposed theory is explicitly temporal. The model distinguishes transformation intensity from experienced transformation load; resource expenditure from unrecovered resource erosion; internal deterioration from visible performance; and short-term resilience from long-term sustainable capacity. This temporality is essential because the core phenomenon is a detection lag. A static cross-sectional view can observe a leader who is performing and conclude that the leader is coping. A process view asks what resources are being consumed to preserve that performance and whether they are being restored quickly enough to make the same performance repeatable.

CONTINUOUS DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AS A CHRONIC CHANGE ENVIRONMENT

3.1 From Transformation Episodes to Continuous Adaptation

Classical approaches to organizational change often assume an identifiable movement from a current state to a desired future state. Digital transformation complicates that logic because the target state itself remains unstable. New digital infrastructures create new opportunities for data use, automation, coordination, and customer interaction; organizations then redesign work around those technologies while the technologies continue to evolve. Reviews of digital transformation therefore increasingly emphasize continuous adaptation, dynamic reconfiguration, and the interaction between technology and organizational design (Vial, 2019; Hanelt et al., 2021; Verhoef et al., 2021).

Continuous transformation does not imply maximum disruption at every moment. It describes an organizational condition in which technological, strategic, structural, and work-process changes recur or overlap often enough that full stabilization periods become shorter, partial, or absent. This distinction is theoretically important. A difficult transformation can be sustainable when followed by consolidation and resource restoration. A series of moderately demanding transformations can become unsustainable when each new wave begins before cognitive, emotional, relational, and temporal resources have recovered from the previous one.

Recent work on employee well-being in digital transformation supports a demands-resources view of this environment. Moganadas et al. (2026), synthesizing 57 studies, show that digital transformation can simultaneously generate resources and demands, and they highlight the need for temporally sensitive explanations of how digitalized work affects well-being. Research on work design likewise shows that technology can alter autonomy, monitoring, workload, feedback, skill requirements, and relational characteristics of work at the same time (Parker & Grote, 2022). For leaders, the implication is that transformation exposure must be conceptualized as an ongoing portfolio rather than as a sequence of independent projects.

3.2 Continuous Digital Transformation Intensity

We define continuous digital transformation intensity as the degree to which leaders are exposed to recurrent digital change characterized by velocity, simultaneity, ambiguity, and temporal compression. These four properties describe the transformation environment rather than the leader's subjective reaction to it.

Velocity refers to the rate at which technologies, operating models, decision rules, and capability requirements change. High velocity shortens the useful life of expertise and increases the frequency with which leaders must update mental models, re-interpret strategy, and re-coordinate work. The acceleration associated with AI and data-driven technologies can make prior learning obsolete before it has been fully institutionalized.

Simultaneity refers to the number and interdependence of transformation streams that overlap. A manager may concurrently navigate a platform migration, AI-enabled workflow redesign, data-governance requirements, restructuring, cyber controls, and revised performance metrics. Each stream may be manageable in isolation, yet their co-occurrence creates interference, fragmented attention, and competition for the same decision capacity.

Ambiguity refers to uncertainty about technological capabilities, organizational implications, role expectations, and criteria for success. Generative AI illustrates the problem. Leaders may be expected to accelerate experimentation while managing risk, improve productivity while protecting quality, encourage use while containing legal and ethical exposure, and provide direction while the technology's capabilities continue to change. Ambiguity therefore converts technical uncertainty into role and identity uncertainty.

Temporal compression refers to shrinking windows for sensemaking, consultation, learning, implementation, correction, and recovery. Digital communication can intensify expectations of availability, responsiveness, and rapid escalation. Focacci et al. (2025) show that digitalization can reduce managers' available time through higher work pace, workload, and people-management demands even as some tasks are automated. Temporal compression is therefore not simply faster work. It is the shortening of the full cycle through which leaders normally interpret change, mobilize resources, act, learn, and recover.

3.3 From Transformation Intensity to Experienced Transformation Load

The same transformation portfolio will not affect every leader equally. We therefore distinguish transformation intensity from digital transformation load, defined as the cumulative cognitive, role, temporal, and emotional demands a leader must absorb, interpret, regulate, and act upon in order to sustain both transformation and ongoing operations.

Cognitive load arises from repeated learning, uncertain decision making, scenario evaluation, information integration, and technology-related sensemaking. Role load arises when leaders must simultaneously satisfy

expectations that can be difficult to reconcile: maintain operational reliability while disrupting routines, enforce enterprise standards while enabling experimentation, reduce costs while investing in learning, and project certainty while remaining open to revision. Temporal load arises from deadlines, interruptions, coordination density, context switching, expanded availability, and insufficient uninterrupted time for reflection. Emotional load arises from regulating one's own reactions while containing the anxiety, resistance, frustration, and threat experienced by followers.

The distinction between intensity and load is important for theory and practice. Transformation intensity is an environmental property; transformation load is the burden generated when that environment encounters a particular role architecture and resource configuration. Leaders with stronger teams, greater autonomy, better technology expertise, clear priorities, and meaningful senior support may experience less load under the same transformation conditions. Conversely, leaders with high transformation centrality - those through whom many change initiatives must pass - can experience disproportionate load even when overall organizational transformation intensity is moderate. Transformation centrality therefore becomes an important boundary condition on the intensity-load relationship.

THE HUMAN PARADOX OF DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

4.1 Leaders as Both Transformation Resources and Resource-Bearing Humans

Digital leadership research commonly treats leaders as enablers of transformation. Leaders formulate digital strategy, allocate resources, create meaning, shape culture, develop talent, manage resistance, and coordinate implementation (López-Figueroa et al., 2025). Middle managers are especially important because they connect strategic aspiration to operational reality and can broaden, scale, narrow, or reinterpret digital initiatives (Alguera Kleine et al., 2026). These functions effectively make leadership capacity part of the organization's transformation infrastructure.

The infrastructure metaphor is useful but dangerous. Technical infrastructure is routinely monitored for capacity, load, latency, failure rates, and redundancy. Human leadership capacity is rarely governed with comparable precision. Organizations monitor project milestones, adoption rates, benefits realization, system performance, budgets, and delivery risk while leaving leadership attention, emotional regulation, sleep, recovery, and decision bandwidth largely implicit. Competent leaders can therefore become victims of their own reliability. Because they continue to deliver, organizations continue to draw on them.

This is where leader well-being research becomes theoretically relevant. Oc and Chintakananda (2025) show that the well-being consequences of formal leadership are heterogeneous and context dependent, challenging simplistic assumptions that leadership roles are inherently beneficial or harmful. The present argument specifies one context in which the cost of leading should become especially consequential: high transformation centrality under recurrent digital change. The issue is not that leadership is generally harmful. It is that continuous transformation can create a role system in which successful leadership depends on repeated resource investment without proportionate replenishment.

4.2 The Dual Change-Role Paradox

Role theory helps explain why leaders can be especially exposed. Role conflict occurs when expectations are incompatible, role ambiguity when expectations are unclear, and role overload when the volume of expectations exceeds available capacity (Rizzo et al., 1970). Continuous digital transformation can produce all three. Yet it also produces a more specific configuration: leaders are simultaneously change recipients and change agents.

As change recipients, leaders must adapt their own expertise, identity, routines, authority, relationships, and career assumptions. Digital automation can change the strategic value of middle-management tasks and alter the importance of managerial expertise and role embeddedness (Van Doorn et al., 2023). As change agents, the same leaders are expected to create meaning for others, establish priorities, manage resistance, protect

performance, reassure employees, and ensure implementation. The roles are not merely additive. They can be recursively contradictory.

A leader whose own expertise is threatened by automation may be expected to advocate for that automation. A manager who has not resolved personal uncertainty may be required to reduce uncertainty for followers. A transformation leader who privately questions a deadline may be expected to communicate confidence in it. The organization therefore asks the same person to metabolize change internally while transmitting a coherent, actionable version of change externally.

We call this the dual change-role paradox. Its significance lies in the interacting nature of the demands. Leaders cannot complete their own adaptation before beginning to lead others because both processes unfold concurrently. Self-adaptation and other-directed adaptation compete for the same finite cognitive, emotional, and temporal resources. The paradox should be strongest when leaders' own roles are materially disrupted by the transformation they are required to implement.

4.3 Change-Champion Emotional Labor and Upward Silence

Leadership during transformation contains emotional display expectations. Emotional labor involves regulating feelings and expressions to meet occupational display rules (Grandey, 2000; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). It becomes particularly costly when displayed and felt emotion diverge, especially when sustained surface acting is required (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Grandey & Melloy, 2017).

Change leadership intensifies this issue because the leader's emotional stance can itself become part of implementation. Leaders may need to display confidence when outcomes are uncertain, optimism when they are fatigued, calmness when they feel threatened, and commitment when they remain ambivalent. Huy (2002) showed the importance of emotional balancing by middle managers during radical change. Under continuous transformation, however, emotional balancing can become a chronic rather than episodic requirement.

We use the term change-champion emotional labor to describe the regulation and display of emotions required to maintain a credible public stance of confidence, composure, optimism, and commitment toward transformation despite personally experienced uncertainty, fatigue, ambivalence, or threat. The concept is not intended as a new general form of emotional labor; it identifies the transformation-specific display rules attached to the symbolic role of the change champion.

Whether this labor becomes corrosive depends partly on upward psychological safety. Psychological safety research typically examines whether employees can take interpersonal risks in teams (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017), while voice and silence research shows that people withhold concerns when speaking up appears risky or futile (Morrison, 2014). Leaders also need permission to disclose capacity constraints upward. If transformation culture equates uncertainty with incompetence or challenge with resistance, the acceptable managerial signal becomes confidence even when conditions are unsustainable. Low upward psychological safety therefore converts emotional labor into a concealment mechanism: leaders continue to display transformation confidence while suppressing signals that might trigger resource protection or portfolio correction.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: A PROCESS ACCOUNT OF HIDDEN LEADERSHIP EROSION

5.1 Conservation of Resources Theory as the Primary Dynamic Engine

COR theory starts from the proposition that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and build valued resources and experience stress when resources are threatened, lost, or insufficiently gained after investment (Hobfoll, 1989). Later extensions emphasize the disproportionate salience of loss and the possibility of loss spirals in which depleted resource reserves make subsequent coping more difficult (Hobfoll et al., 2018). COR is especially useful for continuous digital transformation because leaders must repeatedly invest attention, time, expertise, emotional regulation, social capital, self-efficacy, and recovery time in order to maintain change momentum.

The central distinction for this paper is between resource expenditure and resource erosion. Resource expenditure is normal and often productive. Effective leadership requires effort, attention, emotion regulation, and learning. Expenditure becomes erosion when resources are repeatedly invested without sufficient restoration or gain, lowering the baseline from which future demands must be met. This distinction prevents the model from treating all intense transformation as harmful. High demand can generate learning, mastery, and resource gain when it is bounded, supported, and followed by recovery. LQC becomes likely when the leader's resource trajectory trends downward across successive cycles.

COR also clarifies why deterioration can accelerate. A leader with reduced cognitive resources may need more time to make decisions, increasing temporal pressure. Reduced recovery can weaken emotion regulation, making interpersonal demands more effortful. Declining confidence can trigger more checking, preparation, or centralization, consuming further attention. In this sense, resource loss is not merely an outcome of transformation load; it can recursively increase the cost of meeting the next demand. Recent methodological work on COR warns that gain and loss cycles should be theorized and tested explicitly across time rather than inferred from static associations (Sonnentag & Meier, 2024). This strengthens the case for a process model in which LQC develops through trajectories rather than one-time levels of strain.

5.2 Role Theory and the Source of Transformation-Specific Demands

COR explains why losses accumulate; role theory identifies important sources of that loss. Digital transformation can expand, destabilize, and contradict leadership expectations. Leaders may need to deliver current results while redesigning the system that produces them, standardize digital practices while encouraging experimentation, accelerate technology adoption while protecting people from overload, and maintain local responsiveness while meeting enterprise governance requirements. Role conflict, ambiguity, and overload therefore become central transformation demands.

The dual change-role paradox extends this logic by emphasizing recursive exposure. The leader must manage an altered personal role while actively altering the roles of others. This is particularly relevant to middle managers, whose strategic importance can be reshaped by digital automation even as they remain responsible for implementation (Van Doorn et al., 2023). Contemporary digital-strategy research further demonstrates that middle managers actively shape transformation trajectories rather than simply transmit top-management directives (Alguera Kleine et al., 2026). Their strategic agency may therefore increase at precisely the moment when their roles become more cognitively and politically demanding.

5.3 JD-R as a Work-Design Architecture

JD-R theory provides a complementary architecture for classifying the proximal conditions that shape resource trajectories. Job demands require sustained physical or psychological effort, whereas job resources help achieve goals, reduce demands, or support growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Contemporary JD-R theory emphasizes multilevel processes, person-situation interactions, and resources across work and nonwork domains (Bakker et al., 2023).

In the present model, transformation velocity, simultaneity, ambiguity, temporal compression, expanded availability expectations, role conflict, and change-champion emotional labor operate as demands. Decision autonomy, capable teams, senior-management support, clear priorities, learning infrastructure, psychological safety, and protected recovery opportunities operate as resources. Digital technology itself can function on either side of the ledger because its consequences depend on work design (Parker & Grote, 2022). JD-R is therefore not used as a duplicate of COR. JD-R specifies the configuration of demands and resources; COR explains the dynamic consequences when that configuration repeatedly produces unrecovered loss.

5.4 Compensatory Control and the Performance-Cost Trade-Off

A central weakness in many strain models is the assumption that internal deterioration should quickly appear as poor performance. Compensatory-control theory challenges this assumption. Hockey (1997) argues that under stress and high workload, people can protect task performance by dynamically allocating additional

effort and resources. Performance maintenance therefore has costs. The same level of output can reflect very different internal states depending on how much compensatory effort is required to sustain it.

This insight is crucial for LQC. Leaders with strong professional identity, high accountability, or strong reputational incentives may increase effort precisely when they are depleted. They may work longer, check more, centralize decisions, reduce discretionary reflection, postpone recovery, or narrow attention to the most visible deliverables. Such responses can preserve externally observable competence while intensifying internal cost. Maintained performance is therefore ambiguous: it can indicate healthy capacity, or it can be the product of costly compensation.

Self-endangering work behavior provides a closely related behavioral lens. Dettmers et al. (2016) define self-endangering work behaviors as coping responses that can be functional for short-term goal attainment but harmful to health and long-term work ability. Recent diary research shows that working longer and more intensively can paradoxically increase unfinished tasks and time pressure over time rather than resolving them (Baethge et al., 2026). These findings suggest a recursive mechanism particularly relevant to transformation leadership. Compensatory effort used to protect today's delivery can consume tomorrow's capacity and can even generate additional demands that require further compensation.

The model therefore treats compensatory functioning as both a protective mechanism and a hidden cost. It protects short-term role enactment, which delays visible failure. At the same time, it accelerates resource expenditure and can increase the gap between what the organization observes and what the leader can sustainably reproduce.

5.5 The Recovery Paradox and Institutionalized Recovery Deficit

Recovery is the process through which strain reactions return toward baseline and depleted resources are restored. Research consistently shows that psychological detachment, rest, sleep, and other recovery processes matter for sustained well-being and functioning (Sonnentag et al., 2017; Sonnentag et al., 2022). Yet recovery is not simply a matter of personal discipline. Sonnentag's (2018) recovery paradox shows that high job stressors can impair the very processes that are most needed for recovery.

Continuous digital transformation can institutionalize this paradox. Implementation problems remain cognitively active after work; global systems create after-hours escalation; digital connectivity extends accessibility; overlapping rollouts reduce genuine downtime; restructuring increases spans of control; and each completed implementation can generate a new optimization cycle. The leader may therefore experience not a simple lack of leisure but a structurally produced inability to disengage from transformation demands.

We use recovery deficit as a transformation-specific condition rather than as a standalone new construct. It refers to a persistent imbalance in which the resources consumed by transformation-related work exceed the realistic opportunities for restoration before subsequent demands arrive. Recovery deficit operationalizes the organizational expression of the recovery paradox across repeated transformation cycles. It shifts attention from whether leaders know how to recover to whether the transformation system permits recovery at all.

5.6 Restricted Employee Sustainability Theory and the Leadership Sustainability Reversal

REST asks how work can be accomplished while sustaining the human capacity that makes work possible (Barnes et al., 2023). It organizes human sustainability around maintenance, growth, and generativity and distinguishes qualitatively different sustainability states, including thriving, surviving, and subsisting. Barnes and Wagner (2023) extend this logic to leadership by arguing that leaders shape the human sustainability of followers and organizations.

The present paper introduces a leadership sustainability reversal. Digital transformation frequently assumes that leaders will monitor, support, motivate, and sustain employees through change. Yet the leader who performs those functions is also a human resource-bearing actor whose own maintenance, growth, and generativity can deteriorate. A leader may continue to be productive while moving from thriving toward

surviving or subsisting. If performance metrics capture output but not regenerative capacity, this decline can remain invisible until the leader's capacity to support others also begins to fail.

This reversal matters because it reframes digital agility. An organization that repeatedly transforms by consuming nonrenewable leadership capacity is not sustainably agile. It is borrowing from future leadership performance. Human sustainability therefore becomes a constraint on the repeatability of transformation rather than a peripheral well-being outcome.

LEADERSHIP QUIET CRACKING AS A LEADERSHIP-SPECIFIC PROCESS CONFIGURATION

6.1 From Generic Quiet Cracking to Leadership Quiet Cracking

Quiet cracking should be treated as an emerging scholarly phenomenon rather than as an empty conceptual space. Practitioner discourse initially used the term to describe persistent hidden workplace unhappiness and deterioration (TalentLMS, 2025). Balcıoğlu and Altındağ (2026) subsequently formalized quiet cracking at the employee level as a subtle and involuntary process in which external performance can be maintained while motivation, emotional resilience, and future orientation erode. Their work also connects the phenomenon to organizational structure and to JD-R and COR mechanisms.

Accordingly, this paper does not claim that leadership quiet cracking is an entirely new psychological syndrome. Instead, it specifies a leadership-specific process configuration with distinctive antecedents, mechanisms, expression, and organizational consequences. The leadership role changes the meaning of quiet cracking in three ways. First, leaders face a dual transformation role: they are changed by transformation while being responsible for leading it. Second, visible confidence, composure, and commitment can become instrumental requirements of the role, increasing emotional-regulation costs and incentives to conceal strain. Third, leaders possess greater opportunities to protect visible performance through compensatory control, delegation, extended effort, prioritization, and authority, which can lengthen the period during which deterioration remains undetected.

We therefore define leadership quiet cracking as follows:

> *Leadership quiet cracking is a progressive leadership-specific process in which recurrent transformation demands produce unrecovered resource erosion while leaders preserve sufficiently credible short-term role enactment through compensatory effort, emotional regulation, and continued responsibility, thereby delaying organizational recognition of declining leadership sustainability.*

This definition deliberately avoids treating burnout, exhaustion, or low engagement as synonymous with LQC. It emphasizes configuration and process. LQC requires a combination of internal resource decline, preserved role enactment, and delayed detectability under conditions of continued responsibility. A leader who is stressed but well recovered is not quietly cracking. A leader who immediately withdraws effort may be depleted, but the functioning-while-fracturing dynamic is absent. A leader who works long hours because of intrinsically driven workaholism may experience health costs, but transformation-driven role concealment is not necessarily present.

6.2 Constitutive Features

Four constitutive features define the leadership-specific process.

First, progressive resource erosion means that the leader's usable cognitive, emotional, temporal, relational, or recovery resources decline across repeated demand cycles. The critical element is trajectory, not momentary fatigue.

Second, preserved short-term role enactment means that the leader continues to perform sufficiently well to maintain the appearance of competence. This does not require flawless performance. It requires enough visible functioning that deterioration is not immediately classified as leadership failure.

Third, role-driven concealment and compensation mean that the discrepancy between internal condition and external functioning is sustained partly because leadership expectations reward continuity, confidence, and responsibility. Concealment can be intentional or emergent. A leader may explicitly hide strain, or the strain may simply remain invisible because compensatory strategies keep outputs stable.

Fourth, declining sustainability means that continued performance increasingly depends on resource investment that cannot be replenished at the necessary rate. This feature is what differentiates temporary heroic effort from quiet cracking. A leader can work intensely for a short period and recover. LQC begins when the performance-cost trade-off progressively undermines the capacity for future leadership.

6.3 A Five-Stage Temporal Progression

LQC is best understood as a process with analytically distinct stages rather than a static state. The stages do not imply that every leader follows an identical linear path, but they clarify how internal and external trajectories can diverge.

Stage 1: Sustained mobilization. The leader responds to transformation demands by increasing attention, effort, learning, emotional regulation, and coordination. Performance remains strong, and the leader may experience challenge, mastery, or purpose. Resource expenditure is high but potentially sustainable because recovery and resource gain remain possible.

Stage 2: Accumulating depletion. Recurrent transformation continues before resources are fully restored. Cognitive fatigue, emotional strain, reduced detachment, role overload, and time scarcity accumulate. The transition from Stage 1 occurs when resource expenditure persistently exceeds replenishment. The leader still has enough reserve to compensate.

Stage 3: Functional concealment. Internal condition deteriorates while external role enactment remains credible. Compensatory effort becomes more pronounced: longer hours, increased checking, narrowed priorities, centralized decisions, emotional suppression, and reduced nonwork recovery. The transition from Stage 2 occurs when preserving performance increasingly requires self-endangering resource investment. Low upward psychological safety can deepen this stage by discouraging disclosure.

Stage 4: Cracking threshold. The resource margin becomes narrow enough that ordinary disruptions produce disproportionate consequences. Decision quality becomes more variable, relational availability declines, flexibility narrows, patience shortens, and micro-failures in judgment, attention, or connection begin to emerge. The transition occurs when compensatory capacity can no longer fully absorb incremental demands.

Stage 5: Observable impairment, withdrawal, or exit. Deterioration becomes externally consequential through sustained performance decline, relational withdrawal, sickness absence, burnout, turnover intention, role exit, or transformation failure. At this stage, the organization finally sees a problem that may have developed much earlier.

The model allows interruption and recovery at every stage. Reduced transformation intensity, role redesign, resource gains, staffing support, psychological safety, or genuine recovery can reverse or stabilize the trajectory. The stages therefore describe a conditional process, not an inevitable collapse.

6.4 Construct Boundaries and Incremental Explanatory Value

A leadership-specific process theory is only valuable if it makes distinctions that neighboring concepts do not make efficiently. Table 1 summarizes the closest boundaries.

Table 1. Construct boundaries of leadership quiet cracking

Construct	Primary theoretical focus	Typical expression	Relationship to LQC
Burnout	Chronic occupational exhaustion, mental distancing/cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy	Exhaustion, detachment, impaired efficacy	Burnout can overlap with or follow LQC, but LQC specifically theorizes preserved short-term leadership enactment and delayed detectability during progressive resource erosion.
Technostress	Strain created by technology-related demands such as overload, complexity, invasion, insecurity, or uncertainty	Stress, fatigue, overload, reduced satisfaction or performance	Technostress can be one source of transformation load; LQC includes role, emotional, temporal, and recovery mechanisms beyond technology-related strain.
Change fatigue	Depletion and reduced capacity or willingness to respond to repeated organizational change	Cynicism, resistance, reduced commitment, withdrawal	Change fatigue concerns reactions to repeated change; LQC focuses on leaders who may continue to champion change despite deteriorating internal capacity.
Generic quiet cracking	Emerging employee-level psychological erosion with hidden internal decline	Silent compliance, declining motivation, emotional erosion, maintained external functioning	LQC refines the generic phenomenon by specifying leadership role obligations, dual change exposure, emotional display, compensation, and delayed organizational detection.
Quiet quitting	Deliberate or semi-deliberate restriction of discretionary effort and stronger work boundaries	Doing required work while withdrawing extra-role effort	Quiet quitting can conserve resources through effort reduction; LQC frequently involves continued or intensified effort to preserve responsibility and credibility.
Presenteeism	Continuing to work while ill or impaired	Attendance despite health impairment, often with productivity cost	Presenteeism centers on attendance under illness; LQC centers on a transformation-linked resource trajectory and does not require a diagnosed or perceived health condition.
Emotional exhaustion	Depletion of emotional energy	Feeling emotionally drained and overextended	Emotional exhaustion can be a component of LQC but does not capture cognitive depletion, recovery deficit, compensatory functioning, or role-based concealment.
Compensatory control/performance protection	Maintaining task performance under stress by mobilizing additional effort or resources	Stable output with increased effort or energetic cost	Compensatory control explains how performance can be protected; LQC explains why leadership roles under continuous transformation repeatedly incentivize such compensation and how it contributes to hidden erosion.
Self-endangering work behavior	Coping behaviors that support short-term goal attainment while harming health or long-term	Working longer or more intensively, reducing recovery, self-exploitation	Self-endangering behaviors are mechanisms that can sustain functioning during LQC; they are not equivalent to the broader leadership resource-erosion process.

	work ability		
Workaholism/heavy work investment	Compulsive or excessive investment in work	Persistent overwork, difficulty disengaging	Workaholism can intensify resource loss but is not required for LQC; LQC can arise from transformation role demands even among leaders without compulsive work motivation.
Recovery paradox	High stressors increase the need for recovery while simultaneously impairing recovery	Difficulty detaching or restoring under high demand	The recovery paradox is a mechanism that helps explain why transformation-related expenditure becomes unrecovered erosion; it is not itself a leadership deterioration state.
Leader strain/low leader well-being	Broad domain of leaders' negative affective, psychological, or health states	Stress, exhaustion, poor well-being, impaired health	LQC occupies a narrower temporal configuration within leader well-being: hidden erosion plus preserved enactment plus declining repeatability under recurrent transformation responsibility.

Burnout remains the most important boundary. Burnout is a well-established work-related syndrome characterized by exhaustion, mental distancing or cynicism, and impaired professional efficacy (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). LQC does not challenge that construct. Instead, it identifies a temporal configuration that can precede or coexist with burnout: a leader may be highly depleted while still preserving efficacy signals through compensatory effort. Burnout measures may eventually capture the deterioration, but they do not by themselves explain why the organization continues to read the leader as functional during the preceding period.

Compensatory control is the second critical boundary because it provides part of the mechanism behind functioning while fracturing. The present theory does not claim that protected performance under strain is new. Hockey (1997) established the performance-cost trade-off. The incremental contribution is to locate that trade-off within a leadership role system that can repeatedly reward compensation, suppress capacity signals, and thereby convert performance protection into delayed detection.

Self-endangering work behavior and workaholism create a third boundary. Self-endangering behaviors can be functional for immediate goal attainment while harmful to long-term ability to work (Dettmers et al., 2016), and workaholism is associated with a range of health and work outcomes (Clark et al., 2016). Adjacent withdrawal and strain literatures reinforce the need for discriminant precision. Change fatigue has been linked to repeated change exposure, uncertainty, reduced commitment, and turnover-related outcomes (Bernerth et al., 2011; Cox et al., 2022; Beaulieu et al., 2023; de Vries & de Vries, 2023). Quiet quitting is more appropriately understood as effort restriction or boundary-protective withdrawal than as hidden continued overinvestment (Armstrong & Pfandler, 2024; Corbin & Flenady, 2024). Presenteeism likewise captures attendance despite illness rather than the transformation-specific resource trajectory theorized here (Johns, 2010). LQC differs because neither excessive effort nor compulsive motivation is sufficient. The focal phenomenon is a transformation-linked resource trajectory in which continued leadership responsibility, display expectations, and organizational detection interact.

6.5 Boundary Conditions of the Process

LQC should be most applicable where four conditions coincide: recurrent change exposure, substantial leadership responsibility for implementation, limited permission to display vulnerability or uncertainty, and sufficient discretion or competence to compensate for deterioration. These conditions are common among middle managers, transformation program leaders, technology-intensive operational leaders, and senior managers overseeing multiple change streams.

The process should be weaker where transformation responsibility is low, strain can be signaled without reputational penalty, roles can be redesigned quickly, or organizational systems provide reliable recovery and redundancy. High upward psychological safety may shorten the concealment stage because leaders can report capacity constraints before performance fails. Strong team capability and distributed decision authority may

reduce transformation centrality and lower the need for compensatory effort. These boundary conditions are important because LQC should explain a coherent subset of leadership strain, not all managerial difficulty.

THEORETICAL MODEL AND PROPOSITION DEVELOPMENT

Figure 1 integrates the proposed process. Continuous digital transformation intensity is theorized to increase experienced transformation load, especially for leaders with high transformation centrality. Transformation load produces LQC through resource loss and institutionalized recovery deficit. The dual change-role paradox increases depletion because leaders must simultaneously adapt themselves and enable others' adaptation. Change-champion emotional labor further intensifies the pathway, particularly where upward psychological safety is low. Once internal resources begin to decline, compensatory effort can preserve short-term role enactment and create a detection lag. Adaptive leadership resilience and recovery-supportive organizational resources can slow the process. Under persistent overload, however, resilient performance may itself become a masking signal that delays organizational correction, producing a resilience-masking loop and eventual saturation of buffering capacity.

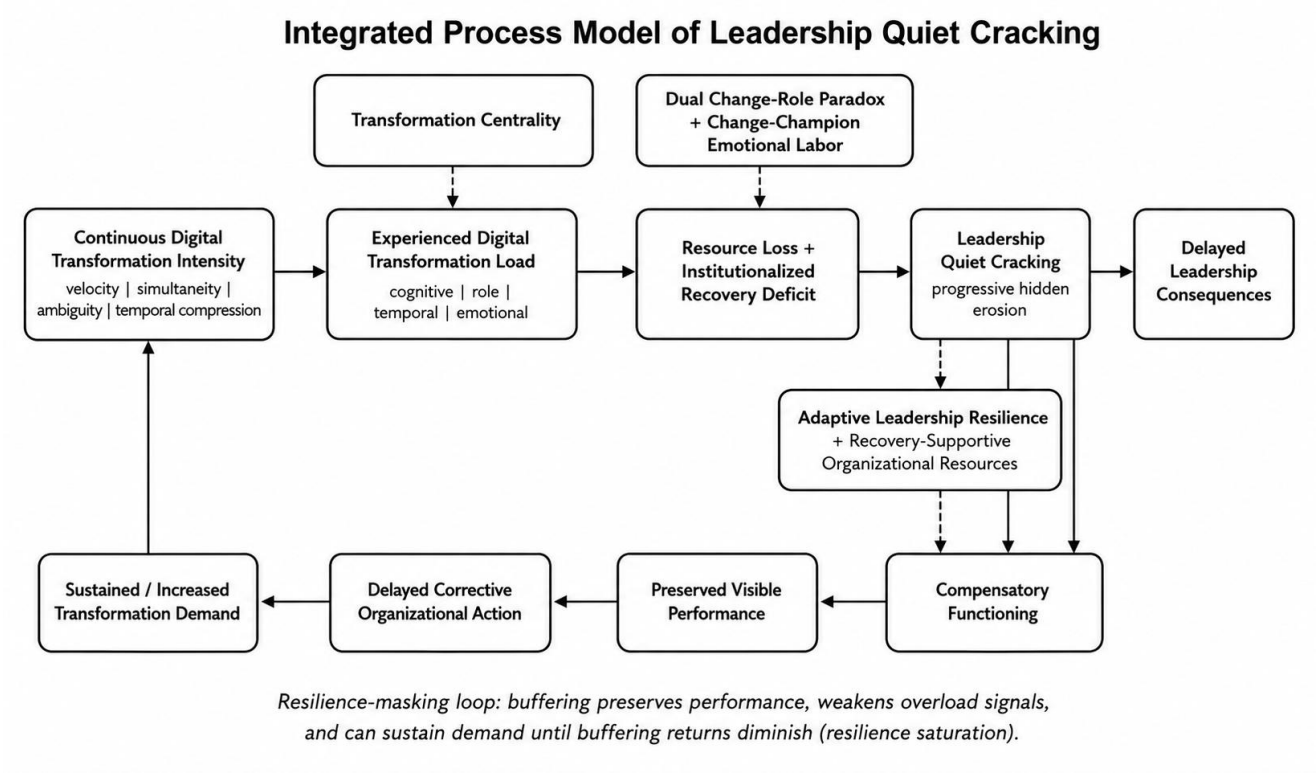


Figure 1. Integrated process model of leadership quiet cracking under continuous digital transformation.

7.1 Transformation Intensity, Transformation Centrality, and Experienced Load

Continuous digital transformation intensity becomes psychologically consequential through the work it generates for particular leaders. Velocity increases the frequency of learning and re-interpretation; simultaneity increases coordination and attention switching; ambiguity increases sensemaking demands; and temporal compression reduces the time available to process and absorb those demands. Yet the same organizational transformation intensity can generate different burdens depending on where a leader sits in the transformation network.

Transformation centrality captures the degree to which the leader becomes a necessary translation, coordination, decision, or emotional-support node across change initiatives. Middle managers often occupy such positions because they mediate between strategy and implementation, and contemporary reviews continue to describe their role in digital transformation as strategically important but increasingly ambiguous (Christodoulou et al., 2022; Henderikx & Stoffers, 2023; Kusmaryanto & Santoso, 2025; Alguera Kleine et al., 2026). High centrality means that more digital decisions, escalations, conflicts, sensemaking demands, and

follower concerns converge on the same leader. The concept therefore provides a boundary condition that prevents the model from assuming a uniform effect of transformation intensity.

> **Proposition 1.** *Greater continuous digital transformation intensity increases leaders' experienced digital transformation load, and this relationship is stronger for leaders with higher transformation centrality.*

7.2 Resource Loss and Institutionalized Recovery Deficit as the Core Mechanism

Transformation load should not lead automatically to quiet cracking. High cognitive, role, temporal, and emotional demands can be sustainable when matched with adequate resources and replenishment. The core mechanism is the conversion of expenditure into unrecovered erosion. COR predicts that persistent resource loss increases vulnerability to subsequent loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018), while recovery research shows that detachment and restoration are necessary to reverse work-related strain (Sonnentag et al., 2022).

Continuous transformation creates a special risk because the recovery interval can be structurally compressed. The leader is not merely working hard; the next implementation cycle, escalation, or role reconfiguration may begin before resources invested in the previous cycle are restored. The recovery paradox deepens the problem: high stressors can make detachment and recovery more difficult precisely when they are most necessary (Sonnentag, 2018). Repeated across transformation cycles, this pattern lowers the leader's resource baseline.

Resource loss and recovery deficit should therefore operate as explanatory mediators between experienced transformation load and LQC. This is a stronger theoretical claim than a simple direct association because it specifies why some high-demand settings produce temporary strain while others produce progressive hidden deterioration.

> **Proposition 2.** *The positive relationship between digital transformation load and leadership quiet cracking is mediated by cumulative resource loss and an institutionalized recovery deficit, such that transformation load is more likely to become quiet cracking when resource expenditure persistently exceeds replenishment.*

7.3 The Dual Change-Role Paradox as an Amplification Mechanism

Leaders differ not only in how much transformation they experience but in whether the transformation alters their own role while they are responsible for implementing it. A leader who must simply adapt to a new system faces learning and adjustment demands. A leader who must adapt while simultaneously creating meaning, confidence, compliance, and coordination for others carries a second layer of demand. When the transformation also threatens the leader's expertise, identity, authority, or future role, the demands become recursively connected.

The dual change-role paradox should amplify resource depletion because self-directed adaptation and other-directed adaptation compete for shared resources. Sensemaking required to interpret personal implications competes with sensegiving required to explain the transformation to others. Emotional resources required to process personal uncertainty compete with emotional resources required to contain follower anxiety. Temporal resources required to learn a new system compete with the time required to support team learning. These are not independent demands; they are overlapping claims on the same resource reservoir.

> **Proposition 3.** *The positive relationship between digital transformation load and resource depletion is stronger when leaders simultaneously experience high change-recipient exposure and high change-agent responsibility, particularly when the transformation materially disrupts the leader's own role or expertise.*

7.4 Change-Champion Emotional Labor and Upward Psychological Safety

Transformation leadership is partly performative. Employees often look to leaders for cues about whether change is coherent, controllable, legitimate, and worth supporting. This creates display expectations that can require leaders to present confidence, calmness, and commitment even when they experience doubt or fatigue.

The greater the discrepancy between felt emotion and required display, the greater the self-regulatory effort likely to be required (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Grandey & Melloy, 2017).

The cost of change-champion emotional labor should be conditional on the leader's ability to disclose uncertainty upward. Where upward psychological safety is high, a leader can acknowledge capacity constraints, request reprioritization, challenge unrealistic timelines, or seek support without necessarily undermining role credibility. Where it is low, the leader is more likely to maintain the public display while withholding the very signals that could reduce demands. Emotional labor then becomes both a depletion mechanism and a concealment mechanism.

> **Proposition 4.** *Change-champion emotional labor strengthens the positive relationship between digital transformation load and leadership quiet cracking, and this amplifying effect is stronger when upward psychological safety is low.*

7.5 Compensatory Functioning and the Detection Lag

The most distinctive observable pattern in LQC is not immediate performance failure but temporal divergence between internal sustainability and external role functioning. Compensatory-control theory predicts that individuals can protect performance by mobilizing additional effort when demands increase (Hockey, 1997). Leaders possess strong incentives to do so because they are accountable for visible outcomes, have professional identities tied to competence, and may perceive withdrawal as harmful to followers or transformation success.

Compensatory strategies can include longer working hours, tighter monitoring, additional checking, reduction of discretionary activities, postponement of recovery, increased centralization, and greater emotional regulation. Self-endangering work behavior research shows why these responses can be doubly costly: behaviors adopted to complete work can increase subsequent time pressure and unfinished tasks (Baethge et al., 2026). In LQC, compensatory functioning therefore stretches the period in which the leader appears effective while simultaneously consuming resources that make future performance harder to sustain.

The theoretical claim is explicitly temporal. Internal resource deterioration should become detectable before externally rated leadership performance declines. The length of that lag should increase when leaders possess strong compensatory capacity, high professional commitment, or access to personal reserves. This explains why short-term cross-sectional studies can underestimate the organizational consequences of leader deterioration.

> **Proposition 5.** *Internal resource deterioration associated with leadership quiet cracking temporally precedes externally observable deterioration in leadership performance, and greater compensatory effort lengthens this detection lag while accelerating subsequent resource loss.*

7.6 From Hidden Erosion to Leadership Effectiveness Deterioration

Compensation is unlikely to protect every dimension of leadership equally or indefinitely. As resource erosion deepens, leaders should lose the spare cognitive and relational capacity required for forms of leadership that are less immediately visible than task completion. Strategic attention requires the ability to hold competing time horizons, detect weak signals, and resist urgency bias. Relational availability requires patience, listening, emotional presence, and the capacity to engage with follower concerns without treating them as interruptions.

These capacities are likely to deteriorate before gross task failure because compensatory effort is often directed toward visible deliverables. A quietly cracking leader may therefore continue to meet deadlines while becoming less curious, less available, more rigid, more centralized, or less authentic. Over time, these proximal changes should impair decision quality, follower trust, change readiness, and the leader's capacity to mobilize others. The model therefore avoids treating leadership effectiveness as one broad distal outcome and identifies strategic attention and relational availability as two parsimonious pathways through which LQC becomes organizationally consequential.

Proposition 6. *Prolonged leadership quiet cracking reduces subsequent leadership effectiveness by diminishing strategic attention and relational availability, which in turn weaken decision quality, follower mobilization, and change-leadership effectiveness.*

7.7 Adaptive Leadership Resilience and Recovery-Supportive Organizational Resources

Resilience should not be treated as a heroic trait that enables leaders to absorb unlimited demand. Contemporary resilience research conceptualizes workplace resilience as dynamic and context dependent, involving interactions among individual capacities, teams, and organizational conditions (Hartmann et al., 2020). In continuous transformation, resilience cannot simply mean returning to a previous equilibrium because the previous equilibrium may no longer exist.

We define adaptive leadership resilience as the capacity to preserve, mobilize, replenish, and reconfigure cognitive, emotional, relational, and boundary resources while operating under continuing change. It includes flexible sensemaking, realistic optimism, help seeking, boundary control, prioritization, resource orchestration, and recovery discipline. Research on work-nonwork boundary management further suggests that perceived control over boundary permeability is consequential for how individuals manage competing role demands (Kossek et al., 2012). Such capacities can reduce the amount of resource loss produced by a given level of transformation load.

Yet individual resilience is only one side of the buffering system. Recovery-supportive organizational resources include clear priorities, manageable transformation portfolios, staffing redundancy, decision support, team capability, autonomy, senior-management support, psychological safety, and protected recovery windows. These resources can reduce demands, increase resource gain, or enable more rapid restoration. Their inclusion is important because a theory that relies on individual resilience alone risks individualizing a structurally produced problem.

Proposition 7. *Adaptive leadership resilience and recovery-supportive organizational resources jointly weaken the positive relationship between digital transformation load and leadership quiet cracking by reducing resource loss and improving resource replenishment.*

7.8 The Resilience-Masking Loop and Resilience Saturation

Resilience can create a paradoxical organizational signal. Highly resilient leaders are often better able to reorganize resources, maintain boundaries, mobilize support, and compensate when demands rise. These capacities reduce immediate deterioration and can preserve visible performance. From the organization's perspective, continued performance can be interpreted as evidence that transformation capacity remains available. The leader's success in coping can therefore delay the recognition that the system itself is overloaded.

This creates what we call the resilience-masking loop. High resilience initially buffers LQC and preserves performance. Preserved performance reduces the likelihood of corrective organizational action because project dashboards and leadership assessments remain positive. The absence of corrective action permits continued or additional transformation demand. Continued demand expands the recovery deficit and increases resource expenditure. Over time, the same resilient capacities that protected the leader become insufficient because feasible replenishment cannot match sustained outflow. The buffering effect reaches resilience saturation.

The loop is theoretically different from a simple nonlinear moderation. It explains how a protective resource can change the organizational feedback environment. Resilience masks overload long enough for the organization to infer spare capacity, which can increase future demands. In this sense, resilience can be simultaneously protective at the individual level and risk-amplifying at the system level when performance preservation prevents demand correction.

Proposition 8. *Under persistent transformation overload, adaptive leadership resilience can create a resilience-masking loop in which preserved short-term performance delays organizational corrective action, sustains or increases subsequent transformation demands, and eventually produces diminishing buffering returns as resilience saturation is reached.*

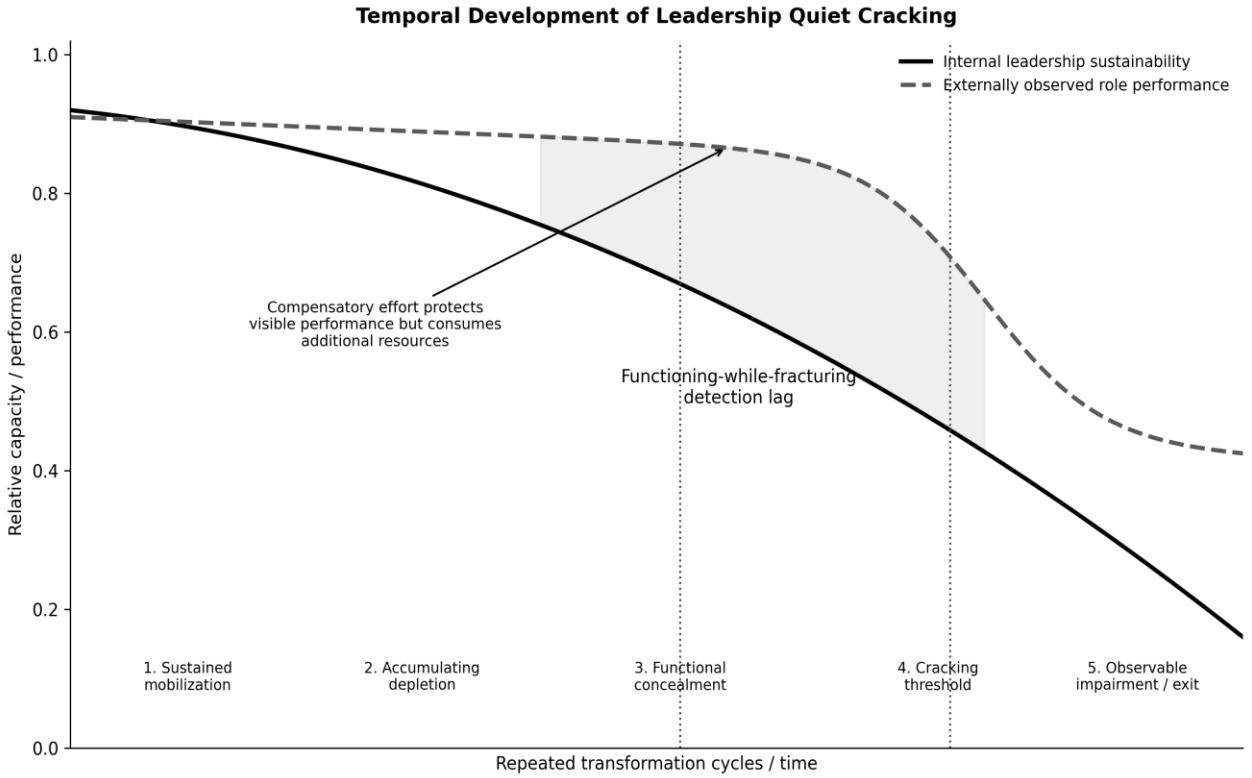


Figure 2. Temporal development of leadership quiet cracking: functioning while fracturing, compensatory performance, and delayed detection.

7.9 Integrated Temporal Logic

Taken together, the propositions describe a dynamic sequence. At Time 1, transformation intensity is translated into experienced load according to the leader's transformation centrality. At Time 2, repeated load produces resource loss and institutionalized recovery deficit. The dual change-role paradox and change-champion emotional labor accelerate depletion. At Time 3, compensatory functioning allows external role enactment to remain comparatively stable even as internal sustainability declines. This creates the functioning-while-fracturing detection lag. At Time 4, strategic attention and relational availability begin to deteriorate, making leadership consequences increasingly visible. At Time 5, continued demand without correction can push the leader through a cracking threshold into observable impairment, withdrawal, burnout, or exit.

Resilience and organizational resources alter the slope and timing of this process. When both are strong and demand remains within replenishable limits, the trajectory can stabilize or reverse. When individual resilience is strong but organizational correction is weak, resilient performance can mask overload and extend the detection lag. Figure 2 illustrates this temporal divergence between internal sustainability and external performance.

Table 2. Proposition architecture and primary empirical implication

Proposition	Core theoretical claim	Primary empirical implication
P1	Transformation intensity increases experienced transformation load, especially under high transformation centrality.	Measure organizational transformation intensity separately from leader-level load and model transformation centrality as a moderator.
P2	Resource loss and institutionalized	Use repeated measures to establish temporal

	recovery deficit mediate load-to-LQC development.	ordering and resource trajectories rather than cross-sectional strain correlations.
P3	Simultaneous change-recipient and change-agent exposure amplifies depletion.	Compare leaders whose own roles are strongly versus weakly disrupted under similar implementation responsibility.
P4	Change-champion emotional labor amplifies load-to-LQC, especially under low upward psychological safety.	Test emotional-display discrepancy and upward safety with diary or experience-sampling designs.
P5	Internal deterioration precedes external performance decline; compensation lengthens the detection lag.	Use leader self-reports with follower/supervisor performance ratings across multiple waves.
P6	LQC erodes effectiveness through reduced strategic attention and relational availability.	Model proximal leadership-capacity pathways before distal turnover or transformation failure.
P7	Adaptive resilience and recovery-supportive organizational resources buffer LQC.	Use multilevel models distinguishing individual resilience from work-system resources.
P8	Resilient performance can mask overload, delaying correction until resilience saturates.	Test feedback loops, nonlinear buffering, and whether preserved performance predicts subsequent demand escalation.

DISCUSSION

The central argument of this paper is not that digital transformation is stressful, that leaders can burn out, or that resilient people eventually become tired. Each of those claims is already well established. The paper instead theorizes a specific organizationally important configuration: continuous digital transformation can create conditions in which leaders preserve the appearance of adaptive capacity by consuming the resources required to remain adaptive. The result is a temporal mismatch between what the organization can see and what the leader can sustainably reproduce.

This reframing matters because digital transformation research often evaluates success through current outputs: adoption, implementation speed, productivity, innovation, milestones, or strategic progress. A leader who continues to deliver under pressure can therefore be classified as a transformation asset. The present theory asks a different question: what resource trajectory makes that performance possible? A transformation system can be successful at Time 1 while simultaneously degrading the leadership capacity required at Time 2. The functioning-while-fracturing paradox captures this difference between visible output and regenerative capacity.

8.1 A Leadership-Specific Refinement of Quiet Cracking, Not Construct Proliferation

The first contribution is to the emerging quiet-cracking conversation. Balcıoğlu and Altındağ (2026) establish that quiet cracking can involve internal psychological deterioration despite sustained external performance. That insight substantially narrows the space for any paper to claim novelty simply by adding a leadership prefix. The contribution developed here is therefore configurational and processual rather than ontological.

Leadership changes the antecedent structure, the concealment mechanism, and the organizational consequences of quiet cracking. Leaders are expected to absorb uncertainty and reduce it for others; their emotional stance has symbolic value; they have greater accountability for continuity; and they often possess discretion that enables compensation. These features mean that a leader's continued performance can be part of the mechanism through which deterioration remains hidden. The theory therefore narrows quiet cracking to a leadership-specific nomological position rather than attempting to create an all-purpose new strain construct.

This approach also reduces the risk of construct proliferation. Burnout, change fatigue, technostress, presenteeism, workaholism, self-endangering work behavior, and low leader well-being all explain important parts of the phenomenon. LQC is justified only as the process configuration that links those parts under recurrent transformation responsibility. It is not intended to replace established measures. Empirically, its

future value will depend on incremental validity: LQC must predict theoretically meaningful temporal patterns beyond existing constructs, especially the divergence between internal resource deterioration and externally observed leadership functioning.

8.2 The Dual Change-Role Paradox Reframes the Human Cost of Digital Leadership

The second contribution concerns why leaders can face a distinctive transformation burden. Digital leadership scholarship has largely developed around capabilities, behaviors, and competencies needed to navigate technology and virtual work (López-Figueroa et al., 2025). Middle-management research increasingly recognizes that managers actively shape digital strategy rather than merely implement it (Alguera Kleine et al., 2026). Role-theoretical research also shows that automation can alter the strategic importance and embeddedness of middle managers themselves (Van Doorn et al., 2023).

The dual change-role paradox connects these literatures. The leader is simultaneously an object of transformation and an agent of transformation. The same technology that reconfigures the leader's expertise may be the technology the leader must legitimize to others. The same restructuring that creates personal uncertainty may be the restructuring the leader must explain as coherent and manageable. This recursive role architecture helps explain why transformation load cannot be reduced to workload or technostress. It contains self-adaptation and other-directed adaptation at the same time.

The paradox also clarifies why middle managers are theoretically important rather than merely convenient respondents. Their structural position makes them likely sites of cross-level compression. They receive strategic pressure from above, operational variability from below, and technology-induced changes in their own roles. Research on digital strategy shows that they can broaden, narrow, or reshape transformation pathways (Alguera Kleine et al., 2026). Their strategic significance can therefore rise at the same time as the sustainability of the role is threatened. This is a more consequential claim than saying that middle managers experience change stress.

8.3 Change-Champion Emotional Labor Explains Concealment Without Assuming Deception

The third contribution concerns emotional display. Transformation leadership frequently requires leaders to make uncertainty psychologically manageable for others. Huy (2002) demonstrates that middle managers' emotional balancing can support major change, while emotional-labor research shows that regulating displayed emotion has psychological costs when felt and expressed states diverge (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). The present model brings these literatures together through change-champion emotional labor.

The concept matters because it explains concealment without assuming strategic deception. A leader may sincerely believe in a transformation while also feeling threatened, exhausted, or uncertain. The leader may suppress those feelings not to manipulate followers but to avoid amplifying team anxiety, undermining implementation, or appearing unable to lead. Professional responsibility can therefore produce the very silence that prevents the organization from recognizing resource strain.

Upward psychological safety becomes an important boundary condition. Psychological safety has traditionally been studied as a condition that helps employees speak, learn, and take interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999; Frazier et al., 2017). LQC suggests an underexamined application: leaders require upward safety to communicate that the transformation system itself is exceeding sustainable capacity. Without such safety, leadership display rules convert a potentially informative capacity signal into private emotional labor.

8.4 Functioning While Fracturing Integrates Compensatory Control With Resource Erosion

The fourth contribution is the temporal integration of compensatory-control and resource theories. Hockey (1997) explains why performance can be protected under stress through additional effort. COR explains why

repeated resource loss can reduce future coping capacity (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Self-endangering work behavior explains how coping strategies that are functional for immediate goal attainment can become harmful to long-term work ability (Dettmers et al., 2016), and recent diary evidence shows that working longer and more intensively can generate rather than resolve future stressors (Baethge et al., 2026). Recovery theory explains why high demand can impair the restoration needed to reverse those costs (Sonnentag, 2018).

Combining these literatures produces a more precise interpretation of functioning while fracturing. Performance preservation is not the novelty. The novelty lies in the leadership-specific feedback structure around performance preservation. Leaders are rewarded for maintaining continuity, so compensation is likely. Compensation protects visible outputs, so the organization receives weak signals of overload. Weak signals reduce the probability of corrective action, so demands remain high. Continued demand increases resource loss and recovery deficit, which requires still more compensation. The detection lag is therefore not incidental; it can be generated by the same behavior that makes the leader appear resilient.

This integration also has methodological consequences. Studies that relate leader strain to contemporaneous performance can produce misleadingly small effects if the relevant time horizons are misaligned. A leader can report substantial depletion at one wave while follower or supervisor performance ratings remain high because compensation is still working. The theory predicts that performance consequences should emerge later and may be preceded by subtler changes in strategic attention, relational availability, flexibility, or decision quality.

8.5 Human Sustainability as a Boundary Condition of Digital Agility

The fifth contribution connects digital transformation to human sustainability. REST reframes human sustainability around the capacity to maintain, grow, and generate while preserving physical, psychological, and social functioning (Barnes et al., 2023). Barnes and Wagner (2023) extend this perspective by showing how leaders can foster the sustainability of employees and organizations. The present theory introduces the leadership sustainability reversal: the actor expected to sustain others must also be sustained.

This reversal changes how transformation effectiveness should be evaluated. A leader who delivers an AI implementation through chronic overwork, depleted recovery, narrowed attention, and eventual exit may look highly effective under a project window and highly ineffective under a sustainability window. The short-term metric captures output; the long-term metric captures whether the leadership capacity needed for future adaptation has been maintained.

Human sustainability therefore becomes a boundary condition of digital agility. Digital systems, analytics, cloud infrastructure, and software can often be scaled quickly. The human systems that interpret, legitimate, coordinate, and absorb change may not scale at the same rate. When the speed of transformation exceeds the regeneration rate of leadership resources, agility becomes self-eroding. The organization can continue to transform, but each cycle draws down the human capacity needed for the next one.

This contribution also offers a way to interpret the stages of LQC through a sustainability lens. Stage 1 can coexist with thriving because challenge and growth may accompany intense but supported work. Stage 2 increasingly resembles surviving as leaders maintain functioning with less slack. Stage 3 can move toward subsisting when a growing proportion of resources is devoted simply to maintaining expected performance. The cracking threshold signals that maintenance demands are beginning to crowd out growth and generativity. This interpretation links the process model to established human-sustainability theory rather than treating sustainability as a rhetorical add-on.

8.6 The Resilience-Masking Loop Extends Resilience Beyond Simple Moderation

The sixth contribution is the resilience-masking loop. Resilience is normally theorized as beneficial because it enables individuals to adapt, recover, and continue functioning under adversity (Hartmann et al., 2020). The present model retains that logic but adds a systems consequence. When resilient leaders continue to perform despite excessive load, their performance can be misinterpreted as evidence that the organization possesses unused transformation capacity.

The loop therefore creates a cross-level paradox. At the individual level, resilience reduces immediate deterioration. At the organizational level, the same preserved performance can weaken the feedback signal that would otherwise trigger demand reduction, reprioritization, staffing, or recovery. Continued demand then increases the probability that individual resilience will eventually reach saturation. The strongest leaders may consequently conceal system overload for the longest period.

This argument avoids the common problem of treating resilience as an unlimited personal responsibility. The practical and theoretical question is not simply whether leaders can become more resilient. It is whether the organization can learn from capacity signals before resilient individuals have exhausted the resources used to generate those signals. Recovery-supportive organizational resources are therefore not secondary controls; they are part of the causal architecture that determines whether resilience remains protective or becomes masking.

8.7 A Cross-Level Theory of Transformation Capacity

Taken together, the propositions suggest a broader cross-level account. Organizational transformation intensity creates leader-level load. Leader-level load changes resource trajectories and coping behavior. Compensatory behavior affects what the organization observes. Organizational interpretation of those signals then influences subsequent transformation demand. The model therefore moves beyond a one-way sequence from organizational stressor to individual outcome. It proposes a feedback system in which individual performance can shape organizational demand decisions.

This perspective opens a different understanding of transformation capacity. Capacity is not merely the amount of change an organization can launch. It is the amount of change the organization can repeatedly absorb without degrading the human actors required for future adaptation. The key unit of management therefore becomes the relationship between transformation velocity and regenerative capacity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

The theory suggests practical directions, but these should be treated as propositions for organizational design rather than as interventions already proven to prevent LQC. The underlying principle is that transformation governance should treat leadership attention, recovery, and emotional capacity as finite strategic resources rather than invisible inputs.

9.1 Measure Transformation Load, Not Only Project Progress

Transformation dashboards typically track budget, schedule, adoption, benefits, defects, utilization, and delivery risk. These indicators are necessary but can remain positive during the functioning-while-fracturing stage. Organizations may benefit from adding work-system indicators that estimate cumulative transformation load: concurrent major initiatives per leadership unit, decision-cycle density, after-hours escalation, changes in span of control, cross-project dependencies, technology-learning burden, and the availability of recovery windows.

The objective should not be intrusive mental-health surveillance. The model points instead toward structural indicators that reveal whether work design is consuming leadership capacity faster than it can be restored. A dashboard that shows ten initiatives on schedule while the same five managers absorb every decision bottleneck is not showing full transformation risk.

9.2 Conduct Portfolio-Level Transformation Load Audits

Project governance often evaluates feasibility one initiative at a time. LQC implies that cumulative burden can be nonlinear because multiple individually feasible initiatives compete for the same leaders' attention, emotional labor, and decision capacity. Portfolio governance may therefore benefit from transformation load audits that map where initiative overlap converges on particular leaders or teams.

Such audits could examine transformation centrality, role disruption, decision dependencies, concurrent implementation peaks, staffing redundancy, and required learning. The relevant question changes from 'Can

each project be delivered?' to 'Can this portfolio be delivered by the same human system without degrading the capacity required for the next portfolio?'

9.3 Protect Transformation Recovery Windows

Recovery research suggests that restoration is necessary for sustained functioning (Sonnentag et al., 2022). Organizations may therefore benefit from governing the post-implementation period as deliberately as the implementation itself. Transformation recovery windows are protected periods after major releases, restructurings, or adoption waves in which new discretionary initiatives are constrained, meeting density is reduced, outstanding work is normalized, learning is consolidated, and leaders regain cognitive and temporal slack.

These windows should not be interpreted as inactivity. Consolidation is part of transformation. It allows resource investment to convert into learning and resource gain instead of being immediately recommitted to the next initiative. Where continuous transformation makes long recovery periods unrealistic, organizations can still design micro-recovery into portfolios through staggered go-lives, protected decision-free periods, delegation, and local redundancy.

9.4 Build Upward Psychological Safety for Capacity Signals

Leaders need safe mechanisms to communicate uncertainty, overload, and resource constraints upward without those signals being interpreted as resistance or incapacity. Senior leaders can help by explicitly separating commitment to transformation from agreement with every timeline or resource assumption. Governance forums can normalize statements such as 'this portfolio is strategically sound but operationally over capacity' as evidence of leadership judgment rather than weakness.

Confidential escalation channels, structured capacity reviews, and retrospective discussions that include leader load can make hidden strain more visible. The practical objective is not compulsory vulnerability. It is to ensure that the organization does not reward only one signal - confidence - when accurate risk information sometimes requires leaders to express doubt.

9.5 Redesign Resilience Development

Resilience development remains useful, but the target should be adaptive capacity rather than tolerance for unlimited demand. Development may emphasize resource orchestration, prioritization, realistic optimism, boundary control, help seeking, delegation, recovery discipline, and the ability to renegotiate conflicting role expectations. Yet such programs should be paired with structural resources.

The resilience-masking loop creates a clear warning. When highly resilient leaders repeatedly require exceptional personal effort to maintain ordinary performance, the appropriate response may not be additional resilience training. It may be reduction of initiative overlap, clearer priorities, staffing support, redesigned decision rights, or protected recovery. Individual resilience should increase sustainable capacity, not increase the amount of unsustainable work that can remain hidden.

9.6 Evaluate Leadership Effectiveness Across Two Time Horizons

The model suggests that organizations should distinguish current delivery effectiveness from sustainable leadership effectiveness. The first asks whether the leader is delivering now. The second asks whether the resource base required for repeated delivery is being maintained. Succession planning, talent reviews, and transformation performance systems may benefit from treating sustained cognitive availability, relational capacity, retention risk, and recovery conditions as part of long-horizon leadership effectiveness.

This dual-horizon approach is consistent with human sustainability theory. Organizations should not have to choose between performance and well-being as competing objectives. The more useful question is whether current performance is being generated in a way that preserves future performance capacity.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

The present theory is intended to generate a research program rather than to declare LQC empirically established. Because the theory rests on configuration, temporality, and delayed detectability, future empirical work must be designed carefully. A cross-sectional self-report scale alone would be insufficient to validate the central claims.

10.1 Phenomenological and Qualitative Foundation

The first empirical priority should be qualitative research with leaders who have substantial digital-transformation responsibility. Interviews, longitudinal qualitative panels, and critical-incident methods can clarify how leaders recognize early resource erosion, what they conceal, why they continue to perform, and which events mark the transition from sustainable mobilization to compensatory functioning.

Sampling should deliberately include middle managers, transformation directors, technology-intensive operational leaders, and senior managers. Comparative cases would be especially useful: leaders who recovered, leaders who remained highly functional without deterioration, leaders who exited, and leaders who experienced visible impairment. Such contrasts can clarify which features are constitutive of LQC rather than merely common correlates of demanding leadership work.

10.2 Measurement Development as a Configurational Problem

If a dedicated LQC measure is developed, item generation should reflect the defining configuration rather than duplicate burnout or generic quiet-cracking items. Candidate dimensions may include progressive resource erosion, compensatory functioning, constrained recovery, display-related concealment, and declining repeatability of performance. However, the aim should not be to force multidimensionality before qualitative evidence establishes the phenomenology.

Discriminant validation should include burnout, emotional exhaustion, technostress, change fatigue, generic quiet cracking, job stress, presenteeism, workaholism, and self-endangering work behavior. Incremental validity is essential. LQC would earn conceptual status only if it explains theoretically relevant temporal patterns beyond established constructs - especially delayed performance effects, divergence between internal sustainability and external ratings, and transformation-specific withdrawal or exit.

10.3 Longitudinal Tests of the Detection Lag

The functioning-while-fracturing proposition requires longitudinal designs. Researchers could collect repeated leader reports of transformation load, recovery, resource condition, and compensatory effort alongside follower ratings, supervisor ratings, and objective transformation metrics. The key empirical pattern is divergence: internal resource deterioration should emerge before external leadership performance decline for at least a subset of leaders.

Latent growth models, random-intercept cross-lagged designs, dynamic structural equation models, and intensive longitudinal approaches can test whether changes in internal sustainability predict later changes in leadership effectiveness. Studies should also examine the length of the detection lag and whether high compensatory effort, professional identity, or resilience extends it.

10.4 Test the Dual Change-Role Paradox Directly

Research should distinguish change-agent responsibility from change-recipient exposure. Some leaders implement technologies that barely alter their own work; others implement automation or AI that directly changes their expertise, authority, status, or role identity. The theory predicts that the second group will experience greater resource depletion at comparable levels of implementation responsibility.

Useful measures could include role disruption, perceived expertise threat, change responsibility, role conflict, role ambiguity, and identity threat. Quasi-experimental comparison across implementation waves could be particularly informative where some managerial functions are automated earlier than others.

10.5 Develop Change-Champion Emotional Labor Research

Change-champion emotional labor requires independent empirical development. Experience-sampling studies can measure daily discrepancies between felt and displayed confidence, optimism, certainty, or calmness during transformation. Researchers can examine whether these discrepancies predict end-of-day depletion, poorer detachment, next-day fatigue, or compensatory effort.

Upward psychological safety should be tested as a contextual moderator. The theory predicts that emotional-display discrepancy will be especially damaging when leaders cannot safely disclose uncertainty or capacity constraints. Research should also distinguish surface acting from authentic forms of emotion regulation. Not all emotional containment is harmful; deep acting, meaning making, and genuine confidence can support followers without creating the same self-regulatory burden.

10.6 Examine the Recovery Paradox at the Transformation-Portfolio Level

Recovery research has traditionally examined daily or weekly work-nonwork processes. Continuous transformation creates an opportunity to extend this work to the portfolio level. Researchers can model whether clusters of overlapping implementations predict reduced psychological detachment, sleep quality, recovery experiences, and next-cycle resource availability.

Objective indicators such as meeting density, after-hours communication, release calendars, escalation frequency, or initiative overlap can complement self-report data. The critical question is whether transformation timing itself predicts recovery impairment above and beyond total workload. This would empirically distinguish institutionalized recovery deficit from general overwork.

10.7 Test the Resilience-Masking Loop as a Feedback Process

The resilience-masking loop requires designs that connect individual coping to subsequent organizational demand. Researchers could test whether resilient leaders maintain performance under high load, whether maintained performance reduces supervisor perceptions of overload, and whether lower perceived overload predicts additional project assignment or delayed resource intervention. Such a sequence would provide direct evidence that individual adaptation changes the demand environment.

Nonlinear and threshold models should also test resilience saturation. The theory predicts that resilience provides meaningful protection at low-to-moderate demand-recovery imbalance but diminishing marginal protection when transformation demands chronically exceed feasible replenishment. Multilevel designs should separate individual resilience from organizational resources because strong contextual support may prevent saturation by reducing demands rather than asking the leader to tolerate them.

10.8 Connect LQC to Human Sustainability States

REST creates an opportunity to examine whether LQC corresponds to movement across sustainability states. Longitudinal studies can test whether leaders move from thriving toward surviving or subsisting while visible performance remains stable. Measures of maintenance, growth, and generativity may reveal that the earliest deterioration occurs not in current output but in discretionary learning, creativity, mentoring, social connection, or future-oriented thinking.

This line of research could substantially deepen leadership-sustainability scholarship. Barnes and Wagner (2023) focus on how leaders sustain employees; future work can examine reciprocal sustainability, asking how team, organization, and senior-leadership systems sustain the leaders responsible for sustaining others.

10.9 Cross-Level Consequences for Teams and Transformation Outcomes

LQC is theorized at the leader level but should have cross-level consequences. As strategic attention and relational availability decline, leaders may become more centralized, less receptive, less emotionally available, or more urgency focused. These behavioral shifts can influence team psychological safety, follower technostress, change readiness, learning, and implementation quality.

Multilevel longitudinal research can therefore examine a cascade: organizational transformation intensity affects leader resource trajectories; LQC changes leadership behavior; changed leadership behavior affects follower well-being and team adaptation; those team outcomes influence transformation performance. Such models would connect the predominantly follower-focused digital well-being literature with the leader-focused perspective advanced here.

10.10 Cross-Cultural, Occupational, and Institutional Boundary Conditions

Leadership display rules differ across cultures and institutional settings. In contexts with strong power-distance expectations, leaders may experience greater pressure to project certainty and control. In participative or psychologically safe settings, acknowledging uncertainty may carry less reputational cost. Labor-market security, occupational norms, professional identity, industry regulation, and digital maturity may also affect whether leaders compensate, disclose, withdraw, or exit.

Cross-cultural work should therefore distinguish the underlying resource process from its behavioral expression. The resource-depletion logic may generalize while concealment norms, compensation strategies, and cracking thresholds vary substantially.

10.11 AI-Intensive Transformation as a Critical Empirical Context

AI-intensive transformation is particularly suited to testing the theory because it combines high ambiguity with identity and expertise implications. AI can alter task boundaries, decision rights, monitoring, work pace, professional knowledge, and workforce composition simultaneously. Leaders may need to advocate experimentation while controlling risk and make decisions about technologies whose capabilities change faster than organizational rules.

Comparisons between AI-intensive transformations and more standardized digital implementations could test whether ambiguity, perceived expertise threat, and role disruption explain additional variance in transformation load and LQC beyond implementation workload. Such work would also help distinguish general change intensity from genuinely digital forms of leadership strain.

CONCLUSION

Digital transformation research has become increasingly sophisticated in explaining technology, strategy, capabilities, and organizational adaptation. The next theoretical challenge is to explain the sustainability of the leaders who repeatedly make adaptation possible. This paper advances a leadership-specific process theory of quiet cracking to show how continuous digital transformation can generate a hidden deterioration trajectory even while leaders remain outwardly competent.

The model's core insight is that visible functioning is not equivalent to sustainable functioning. Leaders can maintain short-term performance by investing additional effort, extending work, regulating emotion, narrowing attention, and sacrificing recovery. The dual change-role paradox makes this especially likely because leaders must adapt themselves while enabling the adaptation of others. Change-champion emotional labor can make deterioration less visible, while the recovery paradox prevents depleted resources from being restored. Compensatory functioning then creates a detection lag: organizational systems continue to read performance as capacity while the capacity required to sustain performance is declining.

Resilience does not eliminate this problem. Adaptive leadership resilience and recovery-supportive organizational resources can meaningfully protect leaders, but resilience has system-level consequences when it preserves performance under conditions that should otherwise trigger corrective action. The resilience-masking loop explains how strong leaders can unintentionally hide weak transformation design until their buffering capacity saturates.

The theoretical implication is that human sustainability should be treated as a boundary condition of digital agility. An organization is not sustainably agile simply because it can execute the current transformation. It is sustainably agile when it can execute repeated transformation without consuming the leadership resources

required for the next cycle. The managerial challenge is therefore not to produce leaders who can tolerate unlimited change. It is to build transformation systems in which leadership resources can be regenerated at a rate commensurate with the organization's demand for adaptation.

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