Human-Centered Leadership in the Digital Era: The Role of Empathy in Organizational Effectiveness

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation has reshaped organizational practices, leadership responsibilities, and employee experiences, creating challenges in maintaining trust, engagement, and adaptability in technology-driven workplaces. Although research has examined digital leadership and empathetic leadership separately, limited conceptual integration explains how leadership empathy may contribute to organizational effectiveness through employee experiences. This article addresses this gap by developing a human-centered leadership framework through a narrative conceptual synthesis of published scholarship. Drawing on emotional intelligence theory, transformational leadership theory, and social exchange theory, the review integrates evidence concerning empathetic leadership and four employee-related mechanisms: psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability. These mechanisms are conceptualized as four parallel mediators, each providing a distinct potential indirect pathway between empathetic leadership and organizational effectiveness. Psychological safety may facilitate open communication and organizational learning; trust in leadership may support cooperation and organizational coordination; employee engagement may encourage sustained effort and participation; and employee adaptability may strengthen responsiveness to technological change. The article develops propositions addressing the associations between empathetic leadership and each mechanism, between each mechanism and organizational effectiveness, and the proposed parallel mediation structure. Digital transformation is treated as the organizational context rather than a formally specified mediator or moderator. The framework contributes to leadership scholarship by distinguishing psychological, relational, motivational, and adaptive pathways while integrating technological and human-centered perspectives. Managerially, it highlights attentive communication, employee support, learning opportunities, and fair decision-making during organizational change. Because the framework is conceptual and its relationships have not been empirically tested, future research should assess the proposed pathways across industries, organizational settings, and levels of digital transformation, including hybrid work environments.

Keywords: Empathetic Leadership; Human-Centered Leadership; Digital Transformation; Organizational Effectiveness; Employee Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformation has become a defining feature of contemporary organizational environments. The increasing adoption of artificial intelligence, digital communication platforms, automation, and remote work arrangements has changed how employees perform their responsibilities and interact with organizational leaders. These developments have created opportunities for greater efficiency and innovation while introducing new challenges involving employee adjustment, interpersonal communication, trust, and workplace well-being.

Leadership plays an important role in determining how organizations manage these changes. Although technological capabilities are essential for successful digital transformation, organizational outcomes also depend on how effectively leaders support employees throughout the transition. Recent research on digital leadership emphasizes the importance of leadership capabilities in facilitating organizational change, innovation, and employee adaptation during digital transformation (Lin, 2025; Rademaker et al., 2025).

Empathy is particularly relevant in this context because it enables leaders to recognize and respond to employees' concerns, emotions, and experiences. Empathetic leadership extends beyond understanding employees' feelings;

it also involves demonstrating concern through appropriate communication, support, and managerial decisions. Muss et al. (2026) identified multiple organizational outcomes associated with empathetic leadership, including employee attitudes, interpersonal relationships, performance, and well-being.

The growing importance of empathy raises questions about how human-centered leadership can contribute to organizational effectiveness in digitally evolving workplaces. Existing research has examined empathetic leadership and digital leadership, but their integration into a coherent framework linking empathy, employee experiences, and organizational effectiveness requires further conceptual development.

Accordingly, this article has three objectives: (1) to examine the theoretical foundations of empathetic leadership in the digital era; (2) to explain how empathy may influence organizational effectiveness through employee engagement, psychological safety, trust, and adaptability; and (3) to propose a human-centered leadership framework that can guide organizational practices and future empirical research.

The article contributes to management and leadership literature by positioning empathy as a relational capability that complements technological competence and supports sustainable organizational effectiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Human-Centered Leadership and Empathy

Human-centered leadership emphasizes the importance of recognizing employees as individuals whose emotional, psychological, and social needs influence their workplace experiences and organizational contributions. Unlike leadership approaches that focus primarily on task completion, operational efficiency, and performance outcomes, human-centered leadership considers employee well-being, interpersonal relationships, and meaningful participation as essential components of organizational effectiveness. This perspective is increasingly relevant as organizations adopt digital technologies that reshape communication, collaboration, and decision-making.

Empathy represents a central capability within human-centered leadership. It generally involves understanding another person's emotional experiences and responding with appropriate sensitivity. In organizational settings, empathy allows leaders to recognize employees' concerns, understand different perspectives, and demonstrate support when employees experience uncertainty or workplace challenges. However, empathy should not be interpreted simply as emotional understanding. Effective empathetic leadership also requires appropriate behavioral responses, including attentive listening, respectful communication, fair treatment, and supportive managerial decisions.

Muss et al. (2026) conducted a systematic literature review of 42 studies examining the effects of empathetic leadership in organizations. Their review identified nine categories of outcomes associated with empathetic leaders, including employee attitudes, interpersonal relationships, leadership practices, performance, and well-being. These findings suggest that empathy is relevant to multiple dimensions of organizational functioning rather than being limited to interpersonal communication. Nevertheless, the relationships identified in the literature may vary according to organizational conditions, leadership practices, and employee characteristics.

Human-centered leadership is particularly important during periods of organizational transformation because technological and structural changes can create uncertainty among employees. Leaders who recognize these concerns may be better positioned to facilitate communication, strengthen workplace relationships, and support employees as they adjust to new organizational expectations. Consequently, empathy can be conceptualized as a relational leadership capability that complements managerial competence and technological knowledge.

2.2. Theoretical Foundations of Empathetic Leadership

The relationship between empathy and organizational effectiveness can be examined through emotional intelligence theory, transformational leadership theory, and social exchange theory. Although these perspectives emphasize different mechanisms, they collectively provide a foundation for understanding how empathetic leadership may influence employee attitudes and organizational outcomes.

2.2.1. Emotional Intelligence Theory

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to perceive, understand, use, and regulate emotions in oneself and others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Within leadership contexts, emotional intelligence provides a basis for recognizing employees' emotional responses and responding appropriately to workplace challenges. Leaders who demonstrate emotional awareness may be better equipped to identify dissatisfaction, manage interpersonal conflict, and communicate effectively during organizational change.

Empathy is closely related to emotional intelligence, although the two concepts are not interchangeable. Emotional intelligence encompasses a broader set of emotional abilities, whereas empathy focuses specifically on understanding and responding to others' experiences. From this perspective, empathy represents an important interpersonal component of emotionally intelligent leadership.

In digitally evolving organizations, emotional intelligence may become particularly relevant because employees frequently interact through communication technologies that provide fewer interpersonal cues than face-to-face interactions. Leaders may therefore need to demonstrate greater sensitivity when interpreting employee concerns and communicating organizational decisions. Emotional intelligence theory suggests that recognizing these emotional dynamics can support more constructive leadership responses.

2.2.2. Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership emphasizes the ability of leaders to inspire followers, communicate a shared vision, stimulate innovative thinking, and provide individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Among these dimensions, individualized consideration is particularly relevant to empathetic leadership because it involves recognizing employees' different needs, abilities, and developmental aspirations.

Empathetic leaders may strengthen transformational leadership practices by demonstrating genuine concern for employees and providing support that reflects individual circumstances. Such behaviors may encourage employees to develop confidence in their leaders and become more willing to participate in organizational change.

However, empathy and transformational leadership should be regarded as related but distinct concepts. Transformational leadership encompasses broader motivational and developmental behaviors, while empathy specifically concerns understanding and responding to others' perspectives and emotional experiences. Integrating these perspectives suggests that empathy may enhance the relational quality of transformational leadership, particularly when employees face uncertainty associated with technological change.

2.2.3. Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory provides an additional explanation for how empathetic leadership may influence organizational outcomes. Blau (1964) proposed that social relationships develop through reciprocal exchanges involving trust, support, and mutual obligations. In organizational contexts, employees who perceive supportive and considerate treatment from their leaders may respond through positive workplace attitudes and constructive organizational behaviors.

From a social exchange perspective, empathetic leadership may communicate that employees are valued and respected. These perceptions can encourage trust, organizational commitment, and willingness to contribute beyond formal job requirements. However, reciprocal responses should not be assumed to occur automatically, as they may depend on perceived fairness, organizational culture, and the consistency of leadership behaviors.

During digital transformation, social exchange theory is especially relevant because employees may interpret organizational changes through their relationships with leaders. Supportive communication and consideration for employees' circumstances may strengthen trust, whereas poorly communicated technological changes may contribute to uncertainty and resistance. Thus, empathetic leadership may help sustain positive employee–organization relationships during periods of transformation.

2.3. Empathetic Leadership in the Digital Era

Digital transformation involves changes in organizational processes, work arrangements, communication practices, and managerial decision-making through the adoption of digital technologies. Although these developments can improve operational efficiency and organizational responsiveness, they can also create new demands for employees. The implementation of artificial intelligence, automation, and digital monitoring systems may alter job responsibilities, increase expectations for technological competence, and affect employees' perceptions of autonomy and job security.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of leadership capabilities in facilitating digital transformation. Lin (2025) identified digital empowerment, innovation, cross-boundary collaboration, and dynamic adaptation as important dimensions of digital leadership. Similarly, Dhingra and Jaiswal (2025) highlighted the relevance of organizational and individual factors in explaining digital transformation. These perspectives suggest that successful technological change requires more than technological investment; it also depends on leadership practices that support employees' participation and adjustment.

López-Figueroa et al. (2025), in their systematic literature review of 74 studies, further highlighted the growing importance of digital leadership in contemporary organizations. Their review identified digital transformation, virtual teams, communication technologies, and creativity as prominent themes in the literature. The authors emphasized that effective digital leadership requires both technological capabilities and human-centered competencies. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of integrating technological expertise with interpersonal leadership capabilities, including empathy, when managing organizational transformation.

Beyond technological competencies, leadership also plays an important role in addressing employees' psychological and social experiences in digitally mediated workplaces. Rademaker et al. (2025) reviewed the literature on leadership and technostress, highlighting the relevance of leadership in understanding employees' responses to technology-related workplace demands. Similarly, Czakert and Berger (2024) examined the relationship between leadership, employees' work–nonwork experiences, and well-being. These reviews suggest that leadership practices should consider not only technological adaptation but also the psychological and relational challenges associated with changing work environments.

Within this context, empathetic leadership may help organizations address several employee-related challenges. First, leaders can recognize differences in employees' technological abilities and provide appropriate learning opportunities. Second, empathetic communication may reduce misunderstandings arising from increased reliance on electronic communication. Third, leaders who acknowledge employees' concerns about workload, technological change, and professional development may be better positioned to support employee adaptability and constructive participation in organizational change.

Nevertheless, empathetic leadership should not be viewed as a substitute for effective technological systems, organizational resources, or appropriate work design. Its potential contribution is more likely to be realized when accompanied by adequate training, transparent communication, fair organizational policies, and opportunities for employee participation. Therefore, human-centered leadership in the digital era requires the integration of interpersonal sensitivity with organizational and technological competence.

2.4. Empathetic Leadership and Employee Experiences

Employee experiences represent an important pathway through which empathetic leadership may contribute to organizational effectiveness. These experiences include psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and adaptability. Although these constructs are conceptually distinct, they may interact in shaping employees' responses to organizational expectations and workplace changes.

2.4.1. Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to employees' perceptions that they can express concerns, ask questions, acknowledge mistakes, and contribute ideas without excessive fear of interpersonal consequences. Edmondson

and Bransby (2023) reviewed the development of psychological safety research and highlighted its relevance to learning, interpersonal relationships, and organizational performance.

Du and Xie (2025) examined the relationships among leader mindfulness in communication, leader empathy, interpersonal trust, and employees' psychological safety. Based on 458 valid responses collected in two waves, their findings revealed a significant positive association between leader empathy and psychological safety. Leader empathy and interpersonal trust also served as mediating mechanisms linking mindful leadership communication to employees' psychological safety. These findings provide empirical support for the argument that empathetic leadership may contribute to a psychologically safe work environment in which employees feel more comfortable expressing concerns, sharing ideas, and responding to organizational changes.

Empathetic leadership may support psychological safety by encouraging respectful communication and demonstrating openness to employees' perspectives. When leaders respond constructively to concerns and acknowledge employees' difficulties, employees may become more comfortable discussing problems and seeking assistance.

Psychological safety may be particularly important during digital transformation because employees often need to acquire unfamiliar skills, experiment with new technologies, and adapt to changing procedures. An environment that encourages questions and constructive feedback may facilitate learning and reduce reluctance to engage with technological change.

2.4.2. Trust in Leadership

Trust represents another potential mechanism connecting empathetic leadership with employee experiences. Employees may develop greater confidence in leaders who demonstrate consistency, fairness, and concern for their well-being. Empathetic behaviors can contribute to perceptions that leaders understand employees' needs and consider their interests when making organizational decisions.

Oh and Choi (2026) examined the relationships among leader work meaningfulness, leader empathy, employees' perceived respect, and trust in leadership. Drawing on data from 333 leader–employee pairs in South Korea, their findings indicated that leader work meaningfulness was indirectly associated with employees' affect-based and cognition-based trust through leader empathy and perceived respect. These findings highlight the importance of empathy and respectful interpersonal treatment in developing trusting leader–employee relationships. Building on this evidence, the present article proposes that empathetic leadership may strengthen employees' trust by demonstrating genuine concern, understanding individual experiences, and responding sensitively to employees' needs during organizational transformation.

Trust may become especially important when digital transformation introduces uncertainty about future job responsibilities, performance expectations, and organizational priorities. Leaders who communicate transparently and acknowledge employees' concerns may be better positioned to maintain constructive relationships throughout the change process.

Nevertheless, empathy alone does not guarantee trust. Employees also evaluate leaders based on competence, integrity, and the consistency between their statements and actions. Therefore, empathetic leadership should be understood as one component of a broader foundation for trustworthy leadership.

2.4.3. Employee Engagement

Employee engagement reflects employees' involvement, energy, and commitment in performing their work. Leadership practices that communicate appreciation, support, and meaningful organizational purpose may contribute to more positive employee experiences.

Empathetic leaders may support engagement by recognizing employees' contributions, understanding work-related challenges, and providing opportunities for participation. These behaviors may strengthen employees' perceptions of organizational support and encourage constructive involvement in workplace activities.

Recent empirical evidence further supports the relationship between empathetic leadership and employee engagement. Durman et al. (2026) examined the effects of empathetic and inclusive leadership on job crafting and employee engagement among 218 Generation Z employees in Indonesia and India. Their findings revealed a significant positive relationship between empathetic leadership and employee engagement, with job crafting serving as an important mediating mechanism. These findings suggest that empathetic leadership may encourage proactive work behaviors and strengthen employee involvement by addressing employees' psychological and professional needs.

In digital work environments, engagement may be affected by changes in communication patterns, work demands, and opportunities for interpersonal interaction. Human-centered leadership may help preserve employees' sense of connection and purpose despite increasing reliance on technology. However, the strength of this relationship requires further empirical investigation across different organizational and cultural contexts.

2.4.4. Employee Adaptability

Employee adaptability refers to the capacity to adjust behaviors, develop new competencies, and respond constructively to changing workplace conditions. Digital transformation frequently requires employees to learn unfamiliar systems, modify established work practices, and collaborate through new technological platforms.

Empathetic leadership may facilitate adaptability by recognizing individual learning needs, encouraging continuous development, and responding constructively to difficulties experienced during technological transitions. Employees who perceive adequate leadership support may be more willing to engage in learning activities and experiment with new work practices.

Bonini et al. (2024), through a systematic review and meta-analysis, demonstrated the relevance of leadership approaches to adaptive performance. Their findings provide a basis for considering leadership as an organizational factor that may influence employees' responses to changing work demands. In the context of digital transformation, empathetic leadership may complement other leadership capabilities by recognizing employees' learning needs and supporting their adjustment to unfamiliar technologies.

Kim and Yoon (2025) examined the relationship between empowering leadership and employee adaptive performance in hybrid work environments. Using data from 290 employees in the South Korean IT manufacturing sector, their study found that empowering leadership positively influenced adaptive performance, with knowledge sharing and employee agility serving as mediating mechanisms. Although their research focused on empowering rather than empathetic leadership, the findings demonstrate how supportive leadership practices can facilitate employees' adjustment to changing work environments. Building on this evidence, the present article proposes that empathetic leadership may contribute to employee adaptability by recognizing individual challenges, encouraging learning, and providing psychological support during digital transformation.

However, adaptability also depends on organizational resources, training quality, technological accessibility, and employees' previous experiences. Consequently, empathy should be examined as a potential supporting factor rather than the sole determinant of successful employee adaptation.

2.5. Empathetic Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness

Organizational effectiveness is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the achievement of organizational objectives, employee performance, operational adaptability, innovation, and sustainable organizational functioning. Although technological investments may improve productivity and efficiency, organizational effectiveness also depends on employees' willingness and ability to contribute to collective goals.

Dong et al. (2024), through a bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review, highlighted the importance of psychological safety and psychosocial safety climate in contemporary workplaces. Their review identified the relevance of these concepts to employee well-being, work engagement, and productivity, particularly in changing work environments characterized by remote working arrangements and emerging technologies. These findings support the proposed role of psychological safety as an important employee experience that may contribute to organizational effectiveness. Within the present framework, empathetic leadership is proposed to foster

psychological safety by encouraging open communication, interpersonal respect, and employee participation during digital transformation.

Corbeanu and Iliescu (2023), in their meta-analysis of 174 studies, examined the relationship between work engagement and job performance. Their findings revealed a positive association between overall work engagement and job performance, highlighting the importance of employees' vigor, dedication, and absorption in supporting workplace performance. These findings provide empirical support for considering employee engagement as a potential contributor to organizational effectiveness. Although their study did not directly examine empathetic leadership, it strengthens the rationale for the proposed framework, in which employee engagement represents one of the mechanisms through which empathetic leadership may contribute to organizational outcomes.

Recent research has emphasized the importance of digital leadership in supporting organizational performance during technological transformation. Abu-Mahfouz et al. (2026), through a systematic literature review, examined the relationship between digital leadership and organizational performance. Their review provides a broader perspective on the leadership capabilities required to support organizational outcomes in technology-driven environments. Building on this perspective, the present article proposes that empathetic leadership may complement digital leadership by addressing employees' psychological and relational needs, thereby contributing to organizational effectiveness through positive employee experiences.

The findings synthesized by Muss et al. (2026) suggest that empathetic leadership is associated with a range of employee and organizational outcomes. These relationships provide a basis for considering empathy as a potentially valuable leadership capability. However, existing evidence should not be interpreted as establishing a universal causal relationship between empathy and organizational effectiveness.

The present article proposes that empathetic leadership may contribute to organizational effectiveness indirectly through positive employee experiences. Specifically, psychological safety may facilitate learning and communication, trust may strengthen cooperative relationships, engagement may encourage sustained contributions, and adaptability may support organizational responses to technological change.

These pathways are especially relevant in organizations undergoing digital transformation, where successful implementation depends not only on technological capabilities but also on employee acceptance, learning, and collaboration. Accordingly, organizational effectiveness may be strengthened when technological advancement is accompanied by leadership practices that recognize employees' psychological and relational needs.

The proposed relationships remain conceptual and require empirical validation. Their strength may also depend on organizational culture, technological readiness, industry characteristics, and the extent of digital transformation.

2.6. Research Gap and Conceptual Direction

Existing scholarship provides substantial evidence concerning the effects of empathetic leadership, psychological safety, employee well-being, and technology-related workplace demands. However, these areas are frequently examined through separate theoretical perspectives. A more integrated explanation is needed to clarify how empathetic leadership may influence organizational effectiveness through employee experiences in digitally transforming workplaces.

Three areas warrant further conceptual attention. First, the relationship between empathetic leadership and organizational effectiveness should be examined through identifiable psychological and behavioral mechanisms rather than assuming a direct effect. Second, digital transformation should be treated as an organizational context that may influence the relevance and expression of empathetic leadership. Third, a human-centered leadership perspective should recognize the complementary roles of technological competence, supportive organizational practices, and employee experiences.

To address these considerations, the present article proposes an integrated conceptual framework positioning empathetic leadership as a leadership capability, employee experiences as potential explanatory mechanisms,

and organizational effectiveness as the broader organizational outcome. Digital transformation is conceptualized as the contextual environment in which these relationships operate.

This framework extends the discussion beyond the general benefits of empathy by identifying specific relationships that can be evaluated in future empirical research. It also provides a foundation for examining how organizations can balance technological advancement with human-centered leadership practices.

The distinctive contribution of this framework lies in integrating empathetic leadership with four complementary employee-related mechanisms within a single conceptual model, thereby providing a structured explanation of how human-centered leadership may support organizational effectiveness during digital transformation.

2.7. Literature Identification and Conceptual Synthesis

This article adopts a narrative conceptual review approach to integrate theoretical perspectives and published research concerning empathetic leadership, employee experiences, digital transformation, and organizational effectiveness. The review was developed through a conceptually focused examination of relevant scholarly publications rather than a predefined systematic search protocol. Accordingly, it does not claim to provide an exhaustive review of the available literature.

The literature discussed in this article comprises foundational theoretical contributions, systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses, and empirical studies relevant to the proposed framework. These sources were considered for their conceptual relevance to empathetic leadership, employee-related mechanisms, and organizational effectiveness. Foundational publications provide theoretical explanations, while more recent studies offer contemporary perspectives on leadership and employee experiences in changing organizational environments.

The conceptual synthesis draws on emotional intelligence theory, transformational leadership theory, and social exchange theory. These perspectives provide complementary explanations of how empathetic leadership may influence employees' psychological, relational, motivational, and adaptive experiences. Emotional intelligence theory informs the understanding of empathy as an interpersonal capability, transformational leadership theory emphasizes individualized consideration and employee development, and social exchange theory explains potential reciprocal responses to supportive leadership.

Four employee-related mechanisms are incorporated into the framework because they represent conceptually distinct dimensions of employee experiences. Psychological safety reflects employees' willingness to communicate and participate without fear of negative interpersonal consequences. Trust in leadership concerns confidence in leaders' intentions and actions. Employee engagement represents involvement and commitment to work, while employee adaptability concerns employees' capacity to adjust to technological and organizational changes.

The synthesis connects these four mechanisms to organizational effectiveness through theoretically informed reasoning and findings reported in the cited literature. The resulting framework proposes four parallel mediating pathways for future empirical investigation. As the literature was not identified through a systematic search and screening procedure, the review does not establish the completeness of the available evidence or the relative strength of the proposed relationships. These limitations are acknowledged when interpreting the framework and identifying directions for future research.

Proposed Human-Centered Leadership Framework

3.1. Conceptual Framework Development

Building on the theoretical perspectives and literature reviewed in the preceding section, this article proposes a human-centered leadership framework that explains how empathetic leadership may contribute to organizational effectiveness in digitally transforming workplaces. The framework integrates emotional intelligence theory, transformational leadership theory, and social exchange theory to establish the conceptual relationships among leadership behaviors, employee experiences, and organizational outcomes.

Empathetic leadership is positioned as the principal leadership capability within the proposed framework. It encompasses leaders' abilities to recognize employees' emotional and professional concerns, understand individual perspectives, communicate sensitively, and respond through appropriate managerial support. These behaviors may become particularly important when employees experience uncertainty, changing work responsibilities, or increased technological demands.

Rather than assuming that empathetic leadership directly produces superior organizational performance, the framework identifies four potential explanatory mechanisms: psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability. These mechanisms represent different aspects of employees' psychological, relational, and behavioral experiences.

Organizational effectiveness is conceptualized as a multidimensional outcome encompassing work performance, collaboration, innovation, responsiveness to change, and the achievement of organizational objectives. Digital transformation provides the contextual setting in which the proposed relationships are examined.

The framework therefore emphasizes that the organizational value of empathetic leadership may arise through its influence on employee experiences, which subsequently contribute to organizational functioning.

3.2. Empathetic Leadership and Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is an important condition for employee participation, interpersonal learning, and constructive communication. Employees who perceive their working environment as psychologically safe may be more willing to express concerns, acknowledge mistakes, and contribute suggestions without fear of negative interpersonal consequences.

Edmondson and Bransby (2023) emphasized the importance of psychological safety across organizational research, particularly in relation to learning, communication, and performance. Their review provides a theoretical basis for examining leadership behaviors that may contribute to psychologically safe workplaces.

Empathetic leadership may support psychological safety through attentive listening, respectful responses, and sensitivity toward employees' concerns. When leaders acknowledge difficulties without immediately assigning blame, employees may become more comfortable discussing problems and requesting assistance.

This relationship may be particularly relevant during digital transformation, when employees are expected to learn unfamiliar technologies and adapt to changing procedures. A psychologically safe environment may encourage employees to seek clarification, experiment with new systems, and share concerns about implementation challenges.

Accordingly, the following proposition is advanced:

Proposition 1 (P1): Empathetic leadership is positively associated with employees' psychological safety in digitally transforming organizations.

Beyond its proposed association with empathetic leadership, psychological safety may contribute to organizational effectiveness by facilitating open communication, knowledge sharing, and organizational learning. Employees who feel safe expressing concerns and acknowledging mistakes may be more willing to identify operational problems, suggest improvements, and participate in innovation. These behaviors are particularly relevant during digital transformation, when organizations must continuously adapt their processes and technologies. Consequently, psychological safety is proposed as a distinct explanatory pathway through which empathetic leadership may indirectly contribute to organizational effectiveness.

3.3. Empathetic Leadership and Trust in Leadership

Trust in leadership reflects employees' confidence in their leaders' intentions, integrity, competence, and reliability. Trust is especially important when organizational changes introduce uncertainty regarding work responsibilities, performance expectations, and future employment conditions.

Social exchange theory suggests that employees may respond positively when they perceive supportive and considerate treatment from organizational leaders (Blau, 1964). Empathetic leadership may strengthen these perceptions by demonstrating concern for employees' circumstances and communicating organizational decisions with sensitivity.

Leaders who acknowledge employees' concerns, provide explanations for organizational changes, and demonstrate consistency between their statements and actions may be better positioned to establish trusting relationships.

However, empathy should not be regarded as sufficient to establish trust independently. Trust also depends on fairness, competence, transparency, and organizational practices. Within the proposed framework, empathy is conceptualized as one relational leadership capability that may contribute to trust development.

The following proposition is therefore advanced:

Proposition 2 (P2): Empathetic leadership is positively associated with employees' trust in leadership in digitally transforming organizations.

Trust in leadership may contribute to organizational effectiveness by strengthening cooperation, facilitating organizational coordination, and encouraging employees to support organizational decisions. When employees perceive their leaders as trustworthy, they may demonstrate greater willingness to share information, collaborate with colleagues, and participate in organizational change initiatives. During digital transformation, trust may also reduce uncertainty surrounding new technologies and changing work expectations. Accordingly, trust in leadership represents a distinct relational pathway through which empathetic leadership may indirectly support organizational effectiveness.

3.4. Empathetic Leadership and Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is reflected in employees' involvement, enthusiasm, and commitment toward their work. Engagement is influenced by various organizational factors, including leadership support, job resources, meaningful work, and interpersonal relationships.

Empathetic leadership may encourage engagement by recognizing employees' contributions, understanding their professional challenges, and demonstrating appreciation for their efforts. These behaviors may strengthen employees' perceptions that they are valued members of the organization.

In digitally transforming workplaces, employees may experience changes in work routines, communication methods, and performance expectations. Leaders who demonstrate empathy may help employees maintain a sense of belonging and purpose despite these changes.

The relationship between empathetic leadership and engagement can also be interpreted through social exchange theory. Employees who experience supportive leadership may respond with greater willingness to participate in organizational activities and contribute to collective objectives.

Nevertheless, employee engagement is influenced by multiple conditions, and empathetic leadership should be understood as one potential contributing factor rather than its sole determinant.

The following proposition is proposed:

Proposition 3 (P3): Empathetic leadership is positively associated with employee engagement in digitally transforming organizations.

Employee engagement may contribute to organizational effectiveness by encouraging sustained work effort, proactive participation, and commitment to organizational objectives. Engaged employees may be more willing to contribute ideas, collaborate with colleagues, and maintain performance during periods of organizational change. In digitally transforming workplaces, engagement may also support employees' participation in

technological initiatives and continuous improvement activities. Therefore, employee engagement is proposed as a motivational and behavioral pathway through which empathetic leadership may indirectly contribute to organizational effectiveness.

3.5. Empathetic Leadership and Employee Adaptability

Employee adaptability refers to the capacity to adjust to changing organizational conditions, acquire new competencies, and modify established work practices. Adaptability is particularly relevant during digital transformation because employees may be required to use unfamiliar technologies, collaborate through digital platforms, and respond to evolving job expectations.

Rademaker et al. (2025) highlighted the importance of leadership in the literature concerning technology-related workplace stress. Their review supports the broader argument that leadership practices are relevant to employees' experiences of technological change.

Empathetic leaders may contribute to adaptability by recognizing differences in employees' technological confidence, encouraging learning, and responding constructively when employees encounter difficulties. These behaviors may help create conditions in which employees feel supported while developing new capabilities.

Furthermore, empathetic leadership may encourage employees to communicate their training needs and seek assistance without excessive concern about negative evaluation.

However, successful adaptation also requires adequate resources, effective training, technological accessibility, and organizational support. The proposed framework therefore positions empathetic leadership as a potential facilitator of adaptability rather than a substitute for organizational investment in employee development.

The following proposition is advanced:

Proposition 4 (P4): Empathetic leadership is positively associated with employee adaptability in digitally transforming organizations.

Employee adaptability may contribute to organizational effectiveness by enabling employees to acquire new competencies, adjust established work practices, and respond constructively to changing organizational requirements. Adaptable employees may facilitate the implementation of new technologies, reduce disruptions during organizational transitions, and support continuous improvement. These capabilities are particularly valuable in digitally transforming organizations, where technological developments require ongoing learning and behavioral adjustment. Accordingly, employee adaptability is proposed as a distinct adaptive pathway through which empathetic leadership may indirectly support organizational effectiveness.

3.6. Employee Experiences and Organizational Effectiveness

The proposed human-centered leadership framework conceptualizes psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability as four parallel mediating mechanisms linking empathetic leadership to organizational effectiveness. Each mechanism represents a distinct dimension of employee experience and provides a theoretically informed pathway through which empathetic leadership may indirectly contribute to organizational outcomes.

Psychological safety represents a psychological pathway that may support organizational effectiveness by encouraging open communication, knowledge sharing, learning, and constructive problem-solving. Employees who feel psychologically safe may be more willing to identify organizational challenges, suggest improvements, and participate in innovation, particularly during technological transformation.

Trust in leadership represents a relational pathway through which empathetic leadership may contribute to organizational effectiveness. Employees who perceive their leaders as trustworthy may demonstrate greater willingness to cooperate, share information, and support organizational decisions. These responses may facilitate organizational coordination and the implementation of technological change.

Employee engagement represents a motivational and behavioral pathway. Engaged employees may demonstrate greater commitment, sustained work effort, and proactive participation in organizational activities. Such behaviors may contribute to productivity, collaboration, and the achievement of organizational objectives.

Employee adaptability represents an adaptive pathway that may support organizational effectiveness through employees' willingness and ability to acquire new competencies, modify established work practices, and respond constructively to technological and organizational changes. These capabilities may strengthen organizational responsiveness and facilitate the successful implementation of new technologies.

Although these four mechanisms may be conceptually related, the proposed framework adopts a parallel mediation structure rather than assuming a predetermined sequential relationship among them. Each mediator is proposed to transmit a separate indirect association between empathetic leadership and organizational effectiveness. The framework does not require psychological safety to precede trust, engagement, or adaptability, nor does it assume that these mechanisms develop in a fixed order. Potential interactions or sequential relationships among the mediators may be examined in future empirical research.

Importantly, the proposed mediation pathways remain theoretical and have not been empirically tested in the present article. The framework therefore identifies relationships for future investigation rather than establishing causal effects. Empirical studies may assess the relative contributions of the four mediators and determine whether the proposed indirect relationships differ across organizational contexts and levels of digital transformation.

Proposition 5a (P5a): Psychological safety is positively associated with organizational effectiveness in digitally transforming organizations.

Proposition 5b (P5b): Trust in leadership is positively associated with organizational effectiveness in digitally transforming organizations.

Proposition 5c (P5c): Employee engagement is positively associated with organizational effectiveness in digitally transforming organizations.

Proposition 5d (P5d): Employee adaptability is positively associated with organizational effectiveness in digitally transforming organizations.

Proposition 6 (P6): Psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability are proposed to operate as four parallel mediating mechanisms in the relationship between empathetic leadership and organizational effectiveness in digitally transforming organizations.

3.7. Digital Transformation as the Organizational Context

Digital transformation is treated as the contextual environment within which the proposed leadership relationships operate. It includes technological changes affecting organizational processes, communication, work arrangements, and employee responsibilities.

The framework does not assume that digital transformation automatically strengthens or weakens the effects of empathetic leadership. Instead, it suggests that leadership empathy may become particularly relevant when technological change creates uncertainty, learning demands, or challenges to interpersonal relationships.

The contextual influence of digital transformation may vary according to several organizational dimensions, including technological intensity, digital readiness, the extent of automation, and the prevalence of digitally mediated communication. In organizations with high levels of technological intensity, employees may experience greater demands for continuous learning and adjustment. Similarly, organizations with limited digital readiness may face challenges involving inadequate training, technological uncertainty, and resistance to change. These contextual differences may influence the relevance of empathetic leadership and the extent to which psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability contribute to organizational effectiveness.

Organizations experiencing different levels of digital transformation may therefore exhibit different patterns in the relationships among empathetic leadership, employee experiences, and organizational effectiveness.

Future empirical research could investigate whether the extent of digital transformation moderates these relationships. Such research would help determine whether empathetic leadership is equally important across traditional, hybrid, and highly digitalized organizational environments.

Importantly, digital transformation is conceptualized as an organizational context rather than a formally specified mediator or moderator in the proposed framework. The framework does not assume that digital transformation directly transmits or statistically modifies the relationships among empathetic leadership, employee experiences, and organizational effectiveness. Instead, it provides the setting in which the four proposed parallel mediating pathways may operate. Future empirical studies may extend the framework by examining whether specific dimensions of digital transformation moderate these relationships.

3.8. Summary of the Proposed Framework

The proposed human-centered leadership framework integrates empathetic leadership, four employee-related mechanisms, and organizational effectiveness within the context of digital transformation. It proposes four parallel mediating pathways through which empathetic leadership may indirectly contribute to organizational effectiveness.

The framework offers four conceptual contributions. First, it positions empathy as a relational leadership capability that complements technological competence during organizational transformation. Second, it identifies psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability as distinct but complementary mechanisms connecting empathetic leadership with organizational outcomes. Third, it distinguishes the proposed relationship between empathetic leadership and each mediator from the relationship between each mediator and organizational effectiveness. Fourth, it conceptualizes digital transformation as an organizational context that may influence the relevance of these relationships without specifying it as a formal mediator or moderator.

The proposed parallel mediation structure does not assume a predetermined sequence among the four mechanisms. Instead, each mechanism represents a separate theoretically informed indirect pathway. Although the mechanisms may interact in organizational practice, such interactions are not formally specified in the current framework and remain an area for future empirical investigation.

By integrating emotional intelligence theory, transformational leadership theory, and social exchange theory, the framework provides a structured explanation of how empathetic leadership may contribute to organizational effectiveness through employees' psychological, relational, motivational, and adaptive experiences. The proposed relationships remain conceptual and require empirical validation across different organizational settings and levels of digital transformation.

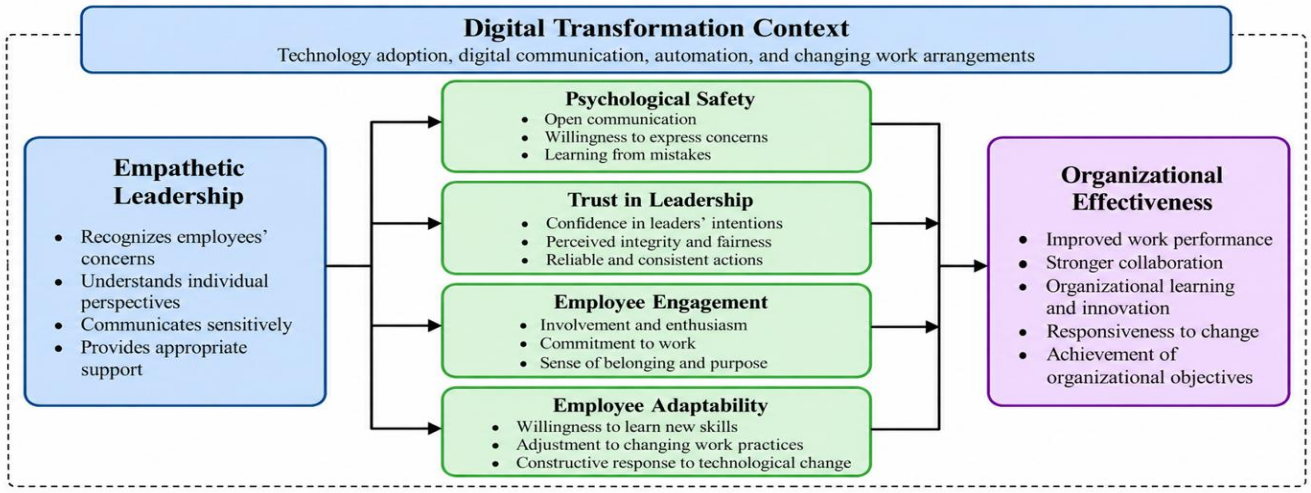

Figure 1. Proposed Human-Centered Leadership Framework with Four Parallel Mediating Pathways

Note. The framework proposes four parallel mediating pathways linking empathetic leadership to organizational effectiveness through psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability. Each mediator represents a distinct theoretically informed indirect pathway. Digital transformation serves as the organizational context rather than a formally specified mediator or moderator. The arrows indicate proposed conceptual relationships and do not represent empirically tested causal effects.

DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1. Empathetic Leadership as a Strategic Capability in the Digital Era

The proposed human-centered leadership framework highlights the potential importance of empathy as a strategic leadership capability in organizations undergoing digital transformation. Although technological advancement is frequently associated with improved efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness, organizational effectiveness also depends on employees' ability and willingness to adapt to changing workplace conditions. The framework suggests that leaders who recognize employees' concerns, understand their perspectives, and provide appropriate support may create conditions that facilitate organizational adjustment and sustainable performance.

This perspective extends conventional discussions of digital transformation by emphasizing the relational dimensions of leadership. Technological investments alone may not produce the intended organizational outcomes when employees experience uncertainty, inadequate communication, or difficulties adjusting to new systems. Consequently, the implementation of digital technologies should be accompanied by leadership practices that recognize employees' psychological and professional needs.

Okunlola et al. (2024), in their systematic review of digital leadership during the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the importance of leadership practices in supporting organizational adaptation to technology-driven changes. Their review provides further insight into the evolving responsibilities of leaders in digitally mediated environments. Building on this perspective, the present article argues that empathetic leadership can complement digital leadership by addressing employees' psychological and relational needs, particularly when technological transformation introduces uncertainty and changing workplace expectations.

The systematic review conducted by Muss et al. (2026) provides support for considering empathy as an important leadership attribute associated with various employee and organizational outcomes. However, the present framework goes beyond identifying these associations by proposing specific mechanisms through which empathetic leadership may contribute to organizational effectiveness.

In particular, psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and adaptability are positioned as potential pathways connecting empathetic leadership with organizational outcomes. These mechanisms suggest that empathy may have strategic relevance not merely because it improves interpersonal relationships, but because it may support organizational learning, collaboration, and responsiveness to change.

Nevertheless, empathy should not be regarded as a replacement for strategic decision-making, technological competence, or performance accountability. Effective human-centered leadership requires an appropriate balance between understanding employees' needs and maintaining organizational objectives. Leaders must therefore combine interpersonal sensitivity with clear expectations, responsible decision-making, and effective resource management.

4.2. The Role of Employee Experiences in Organizational Effectiveness

A central contribution of the proposed framework is its emphasis on employee experiences as potential explanatory mechanisms linking empathetic leadership with organizational effectiveness. Rather than assuming that empathy directly improves organizational performance, the framework proposes that its organizational value may emerge through changes in employees' psychological, relational, and behavioral experiences.

Psychological safety represents one important mechanism. Employees who feel comfortable expressing concerns, asking questions, and acknowledging mistakes may be better positioned to participate in organizational learning and problem-solving activities. Edmondson and Bransby (2023) highlighted the importance of psychological safety in supporting learning and constructive interpersonal processes. Within digitally transforming organizations, these conditions may be particularly valuable because employees often need to experiment with unfamiliar technologies and adapt to changing work procedures.

Trust in leadership represents another potential pathway. Employees may respond more positively to organizational change when they perceive their leaders as considerate, transparent, and reliable. From a social exchange perspective, supportive leadership may encourage reciprocal attitudes and behaviors that strengthen employee–organization relationships (Blau, 1964). However, trust also depends on organizational fairness, managerial competence, and consistency between leadership communication and actual decisions.

Employee engagement may further contribute to organizational effectiveness by encouraging employees to invest effort, participate actively, and maintain commitment during periods of change. Empathetic leadership may support engagement by recognizing individual contributions and responding constructively to workplace challenges. Nevertheless, engagement is also influenced by job design, organizational resources, and broader employment conditions.

Employee adaptability is particularly relevant in the digital era. The introduction of new technologies frequently requires employees to acquire additional competencies and modify established work practices. Rademaker et al. (2025) emphasized the relevance of leadership to technology-related workplace stress. Their findings provide a basis for considering how supportive leadership practices may influence employees' experiences of technological demands.

Collectively, these mechanisms suggest that organizational effectiveness may be strengthened when employees experience psychological support, constructive relationships, meaningful engagement, and opportunities to develop new capabilities. However, the proposed relationships remain theoretical and require empirical testing before causal conclusions can be established.

4.3. Balancing Technological Advancement and Human-Centered Management

Digital transformation has created new opportunities for organizations to improve communication, automate routine activities, and enhance decision-making. At the same time, increasing reliance on digital technologies may introduce challenges related to employee isolation, technological uncertainty, work intensification, and reduced interpersonal interaction.

Recent literature reinforces the importance of integrating leadership capabilities with technological transformation. Lin (2025) emphasized the multidimensional nature of digital leadership, while Wu et al. (2026) examined leadership in the context of digital transformation among small and medium-sized enterprises. Together, these studies support the argument that technological change should be accompanied by appropriate leadership practices and organizational capabilities. The proposed human-centered leadership framework extends this discussion by identifying empathy and employee experiences as potential mechanisms contributing to organizational effectiveness.

The proposed framework suggests that human-centered leadership can complement technological advancement by addressing the employee-related dimensions of organizational change. Leaders who recognize differences in employees' technological confidence and learning needs may be better positioned to facilitate the adoption of new systems.

For example, employees who have limited experience with digital technologies may require additional training, guidance, and reassurance. Rather than interpreting difficulties with technology as resistance or poor performance, empathetic leaders can seek to understand the underlying challenges and identify appropriate forms of assistance.

Similarly, digitally mediated communication may require leaders to adopt more deliberate approaches to maintaining interpersonal relationships. Regular communication, constructive feedback, and opportunities for employees to express concerns may help preserve organizational connections when face-to-face interactions are limited.

However, the implementation of human-centered leadership should not depend solely on individual leaders' interpersonal abilities. Organizations must also establish appropriate policies, resources, and management practices that support employee well-being and technological adaptation. Leadership empathy is more likely to be effective when organizational systems reinforce rather than contradict supportive managerial behavior.

Accordingly, digital transformation should be approached as both a technological and an organizational change process. Successful implementation may require the integration of technological capabilities, employee development, supportive leadership, and organizational learning.

4.4. Theoretical Contributions

The proposed human-centered leadership framework makes four theoretical contributions to the literature on empathetic leadership, digital transformation, and organizational effectiveness.

First, the framework extends existing discussions of empathetic leadership by situating empathy within the context of digital transformation. Previous research, including the systematic literature review by Muss et al. (2026), has identified associations between empathetic leadership and various employee and organizational outcomes. However, the present framework moves beyond summarizing these associations by proposing specific employee-related mechanisms through which empathetic leadership may indirectly contribute to organizational effectiveness in digitally transforming workplaces. This perspective emphasizes empathy as a relational leadership capability that complements technological competence and organizational resources.

Second, the framework identifies four distinct but complementary mechanisms linking empathetic leadership with organizational effectiveness: psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability. These mechanisms represent psychological, relational, motivational, and adaptive dimensions of employee experiences, respectively. Rather than treating employee experiences as a single general construct, the framework distinguishes how each mechanism may contribute to organizational outcomes through different processes, including organizational learning, cooperation, sustained work effort, and responsiveness to change.

Third, the framework advances a parallel mediation structure that distinguishes the proposed relationships between empathetic leadership and each employee-related mechanism from the relationships between these mechanisms and organizational effectiveness. This distinction provides greater explanatory precision by identifying four theoretically informed indirect pathways. The model does not assume a predetermined sequence among the mediators, although potential interactions or sequential relationships may be examined in future empirical research. The proposed structure therefore offers a basis for testing the relative contributions of different employee-related mechanisms to organizational effectiveness.

Fourth, the framework integrates emotional intelligence theory, transformational leadership theory, and social exchange theory to explain the proposed relationships. Emotional intelligence theory provides a foundation for understanding empathy as an interpersonal leadership capability, transformational leadership theory emphasizes individualized consideration and employee development, and social exchange theory explains how supportive leadership may encourage positive employee responses. Integrating these perspectives provides a broader theoretical explanation of how empathetic leadership may influence organizational functioning through employees' psychological, relational, motivational, and adaptive experiences.

Unlike previous reviews that primarily synthesize findings concerning empathetic leadership or digital leadership, the present article develops an integrated conceptual model that explicitly connects empathetic leadership, four parallel mediating mechanisms, and organizational effectiveness within the context of digital transformation. Nevertheless, the proposed framework remains theoretical and requires empirical validation. Its contribution lies in clarifying potential explanatory pathways and providing testable propositions for future research rather than establishing causal relationships.

4.5. Managerial Implications

The proposed framework has several practical implications for organizational leaders, human resource managers, and policymakers responsible for managing digital transformation.

First, organizations should consider incorporating empathetic leadership capabilities into leadership development programs. Such programs may emphasize active listening, perspective-taking, constructive feedback, emotional awareness, and supportive communication. These competencies can complement conventional leadership training focused on strategic planning, technological knowledge, and performance management.

Second, managers should encourage psychologically safe working environments in which employees can raise concerns and discuss difficulties associated with technological change. Regular feedback sessions, accessible communication channels, and constructive responses to mistakes may help employees participate more confidently in organizational learning activities.

Third, organizational leaders should recognize that employees differ in their technological experiences, learning preferences, and readiness for change. Training and development initiatives should therefore accommodate varying employee needs rather than assuming that all employees can adapt to new technologies at the same pace.

Fourth, human resource management practices should support the integration of employee well-being and technological development. Organizations may benefit from assessing employee concerns during digital transformation, providing appropriate learning resources, and evaluating whether new technologies create unintended workload or communication challenges.

Fifth, leadership effectiveness should be evaluated using both organizational performance indicators and employee-related measures. In addition to productivity and operational efficiency, organizations may consider employee engagement, psychological safety, trust, and adaptability when assessing the effectiveness of leadership practices during technological change.

Finally, senior management should demonstrate consistency between human-centered leadership values and organizational decisions. Empathetic communication is unlikely to produce sustained benefits when employees experience unfair treatment, inadequate resources, or contradictory management practices. Therefore, empathy should be embedded within broader organizational policies and leadership expectations.

These implications suggest that human-centered leadership is not simply an interpersonal management preference but a potentially important component of responsible organizational transformation. By integrating empathy with technological competence and organizational support, leaders may be better positioned to manage employee experiences while pursuing long-term organizational objectives.

Limitations And Future Research

Although the proposed human-centered leadership framework provides a conceptual explanation of how empathetic leadership may contribute to organizational effectiveness in the digital era, several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, this article is conceptual and does not involve primary data collection or empirical hypothesis testing. The proposed relationships among empathetic leadership, psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, employee adaptability, and organizational effectiveness are derived from existing theoretical perspectives and published scholarly literature. Consequently, the framework should be interpreted as a set of theoretically informed propositions rather than empirically established relationships. Future research should examine these propositions using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches.

Second, the article adopts a narrative conceptual review approach rather than a systematic literature review. The literature was examined and integrated based on its conceptual relevance to the proposed framework without employing a predefined systematic search and screening protocol. Consequently, the review cannot claim

comprehensive coverage of the available evidence, and potentially relevant studies or alternative theoretical perspectives may have been overlooked. Furthermore, the absence of formal screening and quality appraisal procedures limits the extent to which the consistency and strength of the reviewed evidence can be assessed. Future research could employ systematic literature review methods, including transparent search strategies, predefined eligibility criteria, and structured quality assessments, to evaluate the proposed relationships and identify additional explanatory mechanisms.

Third, the framework identifies four employee-related mechanisms through which empathetic leadership may contribute to organizational effectiveness. Although psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability represent conceptually distinct dimensions of employee experiences, they do not provide an exhaustive explanation of organizational outcomes. Other factors, including organizational culture, perceived organizational support, leadership competence, job characteristics, and employee well-being, may also influence these relationships. Future studies could extend the framework by incorporating additional mediating or moderating variables.

Fourth, the proposed framework adopts a parallel mediation structure without specifying sequential or reciprocal relationships among the four mediating mechanisms. Although these mechanisms are treated as distinct explanatory pathways, they may interact in organizational practice. For example, psychological safety may facilitate employee engagement, while trust in leadership may encourage adaptability during organizational change. These potential relationships are not formally incorporated into the current framework. Future empirical studies should compare parallel and sequential mediation models to determine whether the mechanisms operate independently, interact, or develop through more complex relationships.

Fifth, digital transformation is conceptualized as the organizational context rather than a formally specified mediator or moderator. The framework does not explicitly account for differences in technological intensity, organizational digital readiness, or the maturity of digital implementation. Organizations may experience different challenges depending on their technological capabilities, industry characteristics, and stages of transformation. Future research should therefore investigate whether the proposed relationships vary across organizations with different levels of digital transformation.

Sixth, the framework does not explicitly examine potential cultural and generational differences in employees' expectations of leadership. Employees from different cultural backgrounds or age groups may differ in their perceptions of empathy, communication preferences, and responses to technological change. Cross-cultural and multigenerational studies could provide further insights into the conditions under which empathetic leadership contributes to positive organizational outcomes.

Seventh, although empathetic leadership may support positive employee experiences, its application may also involve practical and organizational limitations. Excessive emotional involvement may contribute to emotional exhaustion among leaders, particularly when they are expected to respond continuously to employees' personal and professional concerns. Empathetic responses may also create perceptions of favoritism when individual employee needs are addressed inconsistently or without transparent decision-making criteria. Furthermore, leaders may encounter tensions between demonstrating empathy and maintaining performance standards, accountability, and organizational efficiency. These challenges may become more pronounced during digital transformation, when managers must balance employee well-being with technological implementation schedules, resource constraints, and changing performance expectations. Consequently, empathetic leadership should be accompanied by clear professional boundaries, fair organizational policies, and effective managerial judgment. Future research should examine both the beneficial and potentially unintended consequences of empathetic leadership.

Future empirical studies could test the proposed framework using structural equation modeling to examine the direct and indirect relationships among empathetic leadership, the four mediating mechanisms, and organizational effectiveness. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for investigating how these relationships develop during different stages of digital transformation. Qualitative studies could also explore employees' experiences of empathetic leadership and identify contextual factors that influence its effectiveness.

Furthermore, comparative studies across industries, organizational sizes, and national contexts could establish whether the proposed relationships are consistent across different workplace environments. Such investigations would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions under which human-centered leadership supports organizational effectiveness.

Finally, future research should examine how empathetic leadership interacts with emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence, automated decision-making, and digitally mediated employee monitoring. As organizations increasingly rely on these technologies, understanding how leaders maintain trust, psychological safety, and meaningful employee relationships will become an important area of organizational research.

CONCLUSION

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped organizational practices, employee experiences, and leadership responsibilities. Although technological advancements offer opportunities for greater efficiency, innovation, and competitiveness, organizational effectiveness also depends on employees' psychological, relational, motivational, and adaptive experiences. This article proposes a human-centered leadership framework that positions empathetic leadership as a relational capability that may contribute to organizational effectiveness in digitally transforming workplaces.

Drawing on emotional intelligence theory, transformational leadership theory, and social exchange theory, the framework identifies four parallel mediating mechanisms: psychological safety, trust in leadership, employee engagement, and employee adaptability. Each mechanism represents a distinct theoretically informed pathway through which empathetic leadership may indirectly contribute to organizational effectiveness. Psychological safety may facilitate organizational learning and open communication, trust in leadership may strengthen cooperation, employee engagement may encourage sustained effort and participation, and employee adaptability may support responsiveness to technological and organizational changes.

The framework contributes to leadership and management literature by distinguishing the proposed relationships between empathetic leadership and each employee-related mechanism from the relationships between these mechanisms and organizational effectiveness. Unlike approaches that treat employee experiences as a general outcome of supportive leadership, the proposed model identifies four separate indirect pathways within a parallel mediation structure. Digital transformation is conceptualized as the organizational context in which these relationships may operate rather than as a formally specified mediator or moderator.

From a managerial perspective, the framework emphasizes the importance of integrating empathy with technological competence, fair organizational policies, employee development, and responsible decision-making. Leaders should recognize employees' concerns while maintaining professional boundaries, performance accountability, and organizational objectives. Empathetic leadership should therefore be understood as a complementary capability rather than a substitute for effective organizational systems and managerial practices.

As this article adopts a narrative conceptual review approach, the proposed relationships remain theoretical and have not been empirically validated. Future research should test the four parallel mediating pathways, investigate potential interactions among the mechanisms, and examine whether the relationships vary across industries, organizational cultures, and levels of digital transformation. Such investigations may provide a stronger empirical foundation for understanding how human-centered leadership contributes to sustainable organizational effectiveness in the digital era.

Ethical Considerations

No new human participants were recruited, and no new primary data were collected for this study. The analysis was based exclusively on previously published evidence. Ethical considerations relating to the original research were addressed in the respective original studies.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

No new datasets were generated or analyzed for this study. The evidence examined in this article was derived from previously published studies, which are cited in the manuscript.

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