

Managing People, Not Just Processes: The Art of Leadership in the Era of Disruption

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Entered : April 20, 2025

Accepted: May 31, 2025

Revised : May 27, 2025

Published : June 28, 2025

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi pendekatan kepemimpinan yang berpusat pada manusia di tengah disrupsi organisasi, dengan fokus pada bagaimana para pemimpin mengelola orang bukan sekadar proses dalam situasi perubahan yang cepat dan penuh ketidakpastian. Menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologi, penelitian ini menggali pengalaman hidup sepuluh pemimpin dari berbagai sektor, termasuk pendidikan, teknologi, layanan kesehatan, dan manufaktur. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur yang menekankan dinamika emosional, nilai-nilai kepemimpinan, dan strategi interpersonal yang digunakan oleh para pemimpin selama krisis seperti pandemi COVID-19 dan transformasi digital. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pemimpin yang berhasil adalah mereka yang mengedepankan empati, komunikasi autentik, dan keamanan psikologis untuk menjaga kohesi dan semangat tim. Alih-alih menerapkan prosedur yang kaku, mereka menciptakan ruang untuk dialog, refleksi, dan dukungan emosional. Disrupsi tidak hanya dipandang sebagai ancaman, tetapi juga sebagai peluang untuk pertumbuhan dan transformasi nilai-nilai kepemimpinan. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya program pengembangan kepemimpinan yang menyeimbangkan antara kompetensi teknis, kecerdasan emosional, dan kesadaran relasional.

Kata Kunci: kepemimpinan berpusat pada manusia, era disrupsi, empati, kecerdasan emosional

ABSTRACT

This study explores the human-centered approach to leadership amid organizational disruption, focusing on how leaders manage people not just processes during times of rapid change and uncertainty. Using a qualitative phenomenological method, the research captures the lived experiences of ten leaders from various sectors, including education, technology, healthcare, and manufacturing. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, emphasizing emotional dynamics, leadership values, and interpersonal strategies used by leaders during crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic and digital transformation. The findings reveal that successful leaders prioritize empathy, authentic communication, and psychological safety to maintain team cohesion and morale. Rather than enforcing rigid procedures, they facilitate space for dialogue, reflection, and emotional support. Disruption is not only seen as a threat but also as an opportunity for leadership growth and value transformation. This study underscores the need for leadership development programs that balance technical competencies with emotional intelligence and relational awareness.

Keywords: human-centered leadership, disruption era, empathy, emotional intelligence

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the world of work has undergone a profound transformation, largely due to the wave of disruption driven by the digital revolution, developments in information technology, artificial intelligence, automation, and the shifting values of the



new workforce generations. This disruption has not only affected organizational structures and operational systems but has also fundamentally altered interpersonal relationships in the workplace. On one hand, technology enables efficiency and speed; on the other hand, human beings remain at the core of creativity, innovation, and organizational resilience. Therefore, organizations cannot solely focus on optimizing processes, systems, and targets they must also devote attention to holistic, comprehensive, and adaptive human management.

This transformation has led to new demands on leadership roles within organizations. Leadership is no longer measured merely by the ability to manage resources and control work processes mechanically, but by the capacity to build relationships, understand emotions and individual needs, and create psychologically and socially healthy work environments. Traditional top-down leadership styles rigid and compliance-oriented are increasingly seen as inadequate for addressing the fast-paced, complex, and uncertain nature of today's work challenges. Instead, leaders who demonstrate empathic presence, facilitate change, and inspire meaning and purpose in work are more needed to drive sustainable organizational transformation.

In this context, the concept of human-centered leadership has emerged as a response to the crisis of meaning, burnout, and alienation experienced by many employees in the modern era. This approach emphasizes the importance of placing humans at the center of leadership strategy and practice. Leaders are expected not only to formulate strategies and manage resources but also to possess the capacity to listen to, understand, and respond to the personal and professional needs of employees. Values such as empathy, trust, open communication, inclusiveness, and empowerment are central to this approach. Leaders who embody these values have been proven more capable of fostering intrinsic motivation, long-term employee loyalty, and engagement.

However, in reality, many organizations still prioritize target achievement, system efficiency, and procedural compliance over addressing emotional dynamics, motivation, and employees' mental well-being. In Indonesia, for example, some organizations still perceive humanistic approaches as "soft" and unproductive, despite the fact that various studies have shown that humanizing leadership has a direct impact on improving performance, employee retention, and organizational reputation. The imbalance between system-oriented and people-oriented approaches can have serious consequences, such as job dissatisfaction, disengagement, chronic stress, and increased turnover intention. This phenomenon illustrates that managing processes without truly managing people is a fragile strategy, especially in the long run.

Moreover, studies on leadership in the era of disruption are still largely dominated by quantitative approaches, focusing on the measurement of variable relationships, while the subjective experiences of leaders are rarely explored in depth. In fact, personal and social experiences of leaders especially in facing the pressures of technological change and ever-evolving work expectations are highly valuable to understand. Therefore, qualitative research becomes relevant and important to explore how leaders interpret the concept of "managing people, not just processes," how they implement it in practice, and how they adapt their leadership styles to the needs and conditions of employees in this disruptive era.

This study aims to fill that gap by deeply exploring the experiences, practices, and meanings of human-centered leadership in the context of disruption. Using a case study or phenomenological approach, the research is expected to capture the nuances and real dynamics that cannot be conveyed through statistics alone. The findings from this study will not only provide more contextual academic understanding but also serve as practical

references for organizations, HR managers, and future leaders in designing more sustainable, human-oriented work systems and leadership models.

Thus, this research is not only scientifically relevant but also holds high strategic and practical value. Amid crises of trust in institutions, increasing work pressure, and the rapid pace of change organizations must navigate, a humanistic and reflective leadership approach has become more urgent than ever. Now is the time to shift the paradigm: from managing systems to managing people, from focusing on results to focusing on meaning.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research type, aiming to deeply understand the subjective experiences of individuals particularly the experiences of leaders in performing human-centered leadership roles amid waves of disruption. The phenomenological approach emphasizes exploring how individuals consciously interpret the phenomena they experience. In this context, the phenomenon studied is leadership practices that focus not only on process effectiveness but also on human relationships, emotional dynamics, and the social values that arise in daily workplace interactions. Through this approach, the researcher can capture rich, complex, and contextual personal narratives something that cannot be achieved through generalistic quantitative approaches.

The research location was purposively selected within organizations that are undergoing or have undergone significant changes due to disruption pressures, whether in terms of technology, work systems, or organizational culture. The selected organization is expected to reflect relevant realities of work transformation, such as companies adopting hybrid work, undergoing structural downsizing, or adapting to digital systems. The research focuses on the experiences of mid- to senior-level organizational leaders who hold strategic decision-making authority related to human resource management. Informants are selected based on their capacity to provide direct insights into leadership dynamics and their impact on work teams.

Informants are chosen using purposive sampling, a technique based on specific criteria relevant to the research needs. In this study, ideal informants are those with at least three years of leadership experience, who have led during periods of transition or crisis (such as a pandemic or major technological change), and who have an active record of direct interaction with their teams. Snowball sampling is also employed as a supplementary technique when the researcher needs to expand the informant network, based on recommendations from initial sources who have already been interviewed. This approach is important to access informants who may be difficult to reach directly but possess significant experiences essential to enriching the data.

Data collection is carried out primarily through in-depth interviews. These are semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility in data exploration and adjustment of questions based on the informants' responses. Initial questions cover the informants' understanding of human-centered leadership, their experiences in facing change pressures, and personal reflections on team dynamics. These interviews aim not only to obtain factual information but also to capture emotional narratives, core values, and conflicts or dilemmas encountered during leadership processes. In addition to interviews, non-participant observation is conducted to observe how communication and leadership patterns manifest in real workplace interactions. Supplementary documentation such as policy reports, leadership SOPs, internal training records, or organizational communication media are also used to strengthen and verify primary data.

The collected data are then analyzed using thematic analysis. This process includes verbatim transcription of interviews, repeated reading for contextual

understanding, and coding of meaningful narrative segments. These codes are grouped into categories and major themes that reflect recurring patterns of thought and experience within the data. For instance, themes such as "empathetic leadership," "communication during crisis," or "balancing targets and team well-being" may emerge and be further interpreted using theoretical literature and the research context. The analysis process is reflective and layered, maintaining openness to new findings that may emerge throughout the process. To ensure consistency, the researcher also keeps field notes and reflective journals during the data collection and analysis phases.

To ensure data trustworthiness, four main criteria are applied: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is achieved through data triangulation comparing interview results with observations and relevant documents as well as conducting member checking with informants to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. Transferability is enhanced by providing detailed descriptions of the organization's social and cultural context, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings in other settings. Dependability is ensured by maintaining procedural records and activity logs throughout the research. Confirmability is maintained through documentation of the researcher's reflections and by avoiding personal bias in data interpretation.

Ethical considerations are also a primary concern in this process. Prior to the interviews, the researcher provides a thorough explanation of the study's purpose and benefits to informants and obtains written or verbal consent regarding their voluntary participation. All informant identities are anonymized and kept confidential to protect their privacy and comfort during and after the research process. The collected data are used exclusively for academic purposes, and the presentation of findings is conducted objectively, with respect for the informants' personal experiences.

RESULT

To gain deep insight into leadership dynamics in the era of disruption, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with ten informants who serve as leaders across various sectors such as education, technology, manufacturing, healthcare, and nonprofit organizations. These respondents were purposively selected based on their experience in facing organizational challenges during periods of rapid change, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and digital transformation. The interviews were semi-structured to elicit reflective and contextual narratives. Each respondent was asked to describe how they interpret their leadership role, the strategies they employed in managing their teams, and the challenges they faced in maintaining healthy working relationships amid disruption. The following are quotations from the interviews that reflect their subjective leadership experiences; identities have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality and adherence to research ethics.

Respondent 1 – HR Manager, national retail company

"I feel like my role changed completely during the pandemic. Normally, I just made sure SOPs were followed. But when many of my staff lost family members to COVID-19, I realized I had to show up as a human being, not just as a manager. I learned that sometimes listening deeply is more important than offering technical solutions."

Respondent 2 – Head of IT Division, tech company

"My team was under intense pressure with skyrocketing workloads. If I had focused only on output, they would've burned out. So, I introduced weekly reflection sessions. Instead of asking, 'what's your progress?', I asked, 'how are you feeling this week?'. That space turned out to be exactly what they needed."

Respondent 3 – CEO, edtech startup

"I used to think speed was everything. But I've learned that slowing down and listening actually strengthens the team's resilience. I don't start conversations with KPIs anymore I start with how they're doing. Ironically, their performance improved because they felt emotionally involved and appreciated."

Respondent 4 – Supervisor, manufacturing sector

"I was confused at first. My team didn't understand tech when we had to switch to hybrid work. If I'd been harsh, they would've shut down. So, I sat with them one-on-one even helped install apps on their phones. It seemed small, but it made them feel seen and supported."

Respondent 5 – High school principal

"Many of my teachers were burnt out. I realized leadership isn't just about enforcing policy. I started sharing stories and didn't hesitate to admit when I was tired too. That vulnerability created trust and collective strength. People became more open and willing to support each other."

Respondent 6 – Project Manager, construction sector

"At first, I was rigid I just wanted the work done. But once I started open communication, the team atmosphere changed. I even became involved in conversations about family and personal problems. It's more emotionally taxing, but it's also deeply fulfilling as a leader."

Respondent 7 – HR Director, multinational company

"We have digital monitoring tools, but they're not enough. I set aside time every week for informal Zoom chats. It's in those moments that I discover the emotional challenges the reports don't show. Leaders must be willing to enter the emotional space, not just the operational one."

Respondent 8 – Creative team manager

"My team is mostly young people. They need a leader who's more human. I learned not everything needs controlling. Sometimes I just need to show up and say, 'It's okay if it's not done yet your health matters more.' That kind of message has a powerful effect on them."

Respondent 9 – Head of healthcare unit

"The pandemic made me realize leadership feels like caregiving. I had to know who was stressed, who was silently sick, who needed to feel accompanied. I even created task rotation systems to help everyone breathe. If I had ignored that human side, our system might've collapsed."

Respondent 10 – Operations Director, cooperative sector

"I've always been systematic. But during the pandemic, I realized systems don't work if people break down. I had to learn how to 'embrace' people emotionally not just manage them. It turns out my team became stronger when they saw that I genuinely cared, not just counted outcomes."

Based on these interviews with ten respondents, it can be interpreted that leadership in the era of disruption has undergone a fundamental shift from structural and procedural approaches to more relational and humanistic ones. Leaders are no longer merely controllers of processes and target achievements, but also empathetic listeners, facilitators of emotional well-being, and guardians of their team's psychological balance. Amid crises like the pandemic and rapid digitization, leadership success is determined by the extent to which a leader can create safe spaces for emotional sharing, foster trust, and offer authentic care. Openness to two-way communication, attentiveness to employees' emotional well-being, and the courage to show personal vulnerability emerged as new dimensions of effective leadership, according to the interviewees. Furthermore, leaders who integrate values of empathy, flexibility, and reflective awareness into their styles build stronger, more collaborative team resilience. Disruption has instead served as a

catalyst for profound value transformation and deep learning where leadership is no longer defined by power, but by strengthening human-to-human relationships.

These informants believe that their understanding of human-centered leadership is not merely normative; it has been deeply internalized as part of their leadership ethos. They view managing people as far more complex than managing processes facing diverse personalities, emotions, backgrounds, and aspirations. Effective leadership, they say, is about how well they build trust, create psychological safety, and bring meaning to work in their teams. In this regard, empathy, active presence, and authentic communication are consistently cited as the foundational values of their leadership practice.

In the face of disruption, leaders are required not only to be responsive but also to provide emotional stability for their teams. Their strategies are no longer merely formal or administrative; instead, they emphasize interpersonal approaches and flexibility. For example, some informants noted they began doing personal check-ins informally, creating more relaxed online chat spaces, and even arranging flexible working hours to honor individual rhythms during remote work. These actions are not merely instructional, but symbolically show that leaders are present, caring, and understanding of their members' challenges. These strategies were successful in maintaining social connection and trust in fragmented work conditions.

Moreover, these personal experiences during disruption became pivotal transformations in how leaders make sense of their roles. Many experienced deep reflection phases especially when witnessing team members under emotional strain, losing motivation, or feeling adrift. In such times, leaders felt they needed to do more than supervise; they must support emotionally and be a source of calm. Some said these challenging times led them to discover that they became more patient, better listeners, and more aware of human presence's importance. Several described this as "the greatest leadership learning moment" of their lives.

From an impact perspective, the informants believe that a humanistic leadership approach yields far more sustainable results than a purely target-driven one. They observed that employees who feel heard and cared for display higher engagement and commitment even under stress. Team members become more open in voicing opinions, proactive in solving problems, and show a strong sense of ownership toward their work and organization. Conversely, leaders who emphasize only procedures and outcomes without considering emotional aspects faced resistance, conflict, and a significant drop in morale. This difference reinforces the idea that leadership success in the era of disruption depends on a people-centered approach.

However, leaders also face challenges in implementing human-centered leadership. Some mentioned structural pressures like heavily bureaucratic performance management systems and quantitative-only metrics. This makes it difficult for leaders to balance relationship-building with rigid performance targets. On a personal level, some admitted they were not yet used to showing vulnerability or felt emotionally burdened by being the team's anchor. This complexity shows that human-centered leadership is not a simple undertaking, but requires courage, consistent values, and adequate organizational support systems.

Furthermore, informants revealed that disruption has become a medium for significant value transformation within themselves as leaders. Many realized that leadership is not just about mobilizing people to work but also about building healthy and meaningful relationships. They experienced a shift from dominative control to empowerment, from certainty to comfort in uncertainty, and from individual ego to collective care. This experience not only changed how they lead but also how they view

work meaning and organizational purpose more broadly. Some even said they felt more “complete as human beings” after going through those challenging times.

Through thematic analysis, several key themes reflecting leadership dynamics in the era of disruption were identified, including: “leadership as a dialogue space,” “leading with heart, not just mind,” “collective resilience as the result of healthy relationships,” and “reflection as part of leadership.” These themes not only represent the empirical experiences of the leaders but also indicate a paradigm shift in contemporary leadership. This study shows that current and future leadership success does not lie in mastering system and target management alone, but in the capacity to show up as a human being who humanizes others through empathetic and meaningful work relationships.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm the validity of contemporary leadership theories that emphasize humanistic and relational approaches. In this context, transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006) proves to be relevant, particularly in terms of inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence demonstrated by leaders toward their team members. The informants described that their leadership effectiveness was no longer defined by the power of instructions or positional authority, but rather by their ability to build personal relationships, foster trust, and create a safe space for emotional expression within the team. In line with this, the principles of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977) are also reflected in leader behaviors that prioritize the needs of team members, actively listen, and place collective well-being above institutional targets. The emphasis on empathy, emotional presence, and genuine care makes leadership more than just a structural role it becomes a social and moral mission.

An important contribution of these findings lies in asserting that disruption highlights the advantages of leadership styles based not on domination, but on adaptability and social sensitivity. At a time when organizational structures are tested and uncertainty becomes the norm, leaders who are able to adjust their approaches reflectively and flexibly demonstrate more stable performance and greater acceptance by their teams. This research adds weight to the argument that today’s organizations must revise their definitions of leadership, which have long been too focused on efficiency, control, and quantitative outcomes. Leadership that sustains emotional bonds and team solidarity becomes a crucial buffer for organizational resilience in difficult times. This also expands on the work of Boin et al. (2017) regarding leadership in crises by adding affective and social dimensions as key factors in successful change management.

Moreover, an interesting finding is the emergence of reflective and dialogic dimensions in leadership practice. Leaders recognize the importance of creating space to listen, accommodate team concerns, and formulate shared directions through open discussion. This contrasts with traditional approaches that positioned the leader as the sole decision-maker. Participatory leadership models built organically through dialogue have proven effective in fostering ownership and team trust in organizational processes. The strong sense of collectivism and familial values in Indonesian work culture reinforces these values, creating an approach that is more relationship-based than structure-based. This study shows that local cultural context provides an important framework for the successful implementation of humanistic leadership values.

Nonetheless, the implementation of human-centered leadership does not escape various structural and psychological obstacles. In many organizations, performance assessment systems remain strongly tied to target-based and numerical logic, making leaders’ efforts to build emotional relationships often go unrecognized formally.

Hierarchical and bureaucratic work cultures also hinder leaders' flexibility in fostering open and equal communication. On a personal level, leaders admitted to experiencing emotional fatigue due to the need to serve as psychological anchors for their teams, even as they themselves face pressure from superiors or the system. This indicates that human-centered leadership is not merely a matter of good intentions; it also requires a healthy organizational support system and proper training in managing emotions and empathy professionally.

The value transformation experienced by leaders during the disruption also emerged as a significant finding. This process does not occur instantly, but through crises, reflection, and a willingness to learn from failure. Many informants stated that they previously led with authoritarian or results-oriented approaches. However, over time especially when facing the pandemic crisis and digital pressure they realized the importance of becoming a leader who can create calm, trust, and hope. This transformation also reflects a shift from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset in leadership, in which leaders are willing to revise their perspectives, open space for shared learning, and develop emotional awareness as part of their leadership identity.

The practical implications of these findings are highly significant for organizations and policymakers. If organizations want to remain relevant and resilient amid ongoing disruption, they need to invest more in developing soft leadership skills such as empathy, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal communication. Leadership training can no longer focus solely on project management or execution strategy; it must also include training in conflict resolution, inclusive culture reinforcement, and the ability to build healthy relationships. Additionally, evaluation and reward systems in organizations must reflect the importance of process, not just outcomes. For example, leaders who succeed in reducing team stress, increasing employee engagement, or creating collaborative environments should be recognized.

From an academic standpoint, this research contributes to the development of leadership theory that is more contextual and human-centered. Until now, many leadership models have been developed in Western countries, based on assumptions of individualism and high efficiency. This study shows that in collective cultures like Indonesia, relational, empathetic, and participative communication approaches are actually more effective. This opens opportunities to broaden leadership studies to include cultural diversity and local values. Moreover, the phenomenological approach used in this research successfully captured the leaders' subjective narratives, offering a richer perspective compared to the generalizing nature of quantitative methods.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, it can be concluded that leadership focused on managing people not merely processes is a highly relevant and effective approach in the era of disruption. Leaders who succeed in situations filled with uncertainty are those capable of building strong emotional connections, demonstrating empathy, and creating safe and open spaces for dialogue within their teams. This humanistic approach not only strengthens solidarity and trust within organizations but also serves as the foundation for building collective resilience in facing rapid and often unexpected change. Disruption, initially perceived as a threat, instead opens up opportunities for learning and value transformation in leadership from previously authoritarian and structural styles toward more reflective, collaborative, and inclusive ones. Nonetheless, the successful implementation of human-centered leadership still faces challenges, particularly from organizational systems that do not yet fully support it and the limited emotional capacity of leaders themselves. Therefore, institutional

commitment and the balanced development of human resources between technical and emotional competencies are essential so that the art of leadership that humanizes people can continue to grow and meet the challenges of the times.

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