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Sustainable Business and Management

<https://ojs.bilpub.com/index.php/sbm>

REVIEW

Adaptive Leadership and Digital Transformation Success: The Roles of Cultural Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this conceptual paper is to examine how adaptive leadership contributes to sustainable digital transformation in Saudi Arabia, where organizations are simultaneously responding to rapid technological modernization, workforce diversification, and the long-term objectives of Vision 2030. The paper argues that sustained digital transformation requires organizations to continuously adapt to technological and organizational change. It further explores how cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence may strengthen this relationship in culturally diverse and emotionally demanding transformation contexts. A framework is proposed by integrating adaptive leadership theory with digital transformation and leadership literatures. The model proposes that adaptive leadership influences transformation success directly and through employee behaviors such as employee readiness, learning orientation, commitment, and innovative work behaviors. The paper also proposes that cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence may moderate the relationship between adaptive leadership and employee behaviors. More specifically, adaptive leadership may improve and sustain digital transformation success by helping employees deal with uncertainty and adapt to change. Additionally, cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence are proposed to strengthen this relationship in multicultural and dynamic workplaces. The paper extends adaptive leadership theory to the context of digital transformation and provides a basis for future empirical research in Saudi Arabia and other emerging economies. It is recommended that future research use multi-source and time-lagged designs to strengthen causal inference and validate the proposed relationships across different organizational and cultural contexts. Organizations should complement technological investment with leadership development focused on adaptive capability, cultural intelligence, and emotional intelligence to support sustainable digital transformation success.

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 19 March 2026 | Revised: 16 May 2026 | Accepted: 23 May 2026 | Published Online: 30 May 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/sbm.v2i1.102523>

CITATION

Malik, A.R., 2026. Adaptive Leadership and Digital Transformation Success: The Roles of Cultural Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence in Saudi Arabia. *Sustainable Business and Management*. 2(1): 1–16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55121/sbm.v2i1.102523>

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Keywords: Adaptive Leadership; Cultural Intelligence; Emotional Intelligence; Digital Transformation

1. Introduction

Digital transformation has emerged as one of the most significant strategic priorities for organizations in the twenty-first century^[1–3]. Advances in artificial intelligence, cloud computing, automation, data analytics, and digital platforms are reshaping how organizations create value, organize work, engage customers, and compete in increasingly volatile markets^[4–6]. The emergence of these new technologies requires organizations to develop adaptive capabilities that enable them to sustain technological development and organizational competitiveness over time. Scholars consistently emphasize that sustainable digital transformation is a technological upgrade as well as a broad organizational change process involving the redesign of structures, processes, capabilities, leadership practices, and employee mindsets^[1, 2, 7, 8]. This distinction is particularly relevant in national economies undergoing rapid modernization, where technology adoption is closely intertwined with institutional reform, workforce transformation, and changing competitive demands^[9, 10].

Saudi Arabia provides one of the most important contemporary settings in which to examine these dynamics. Through Saudi Vision 2030, the Kingdom has launched an ambitious national strategy to diversify the economy, modernize public institutions, strengthen private sector competitiveness, develop human capital, and accelerate sustained digital innovation^[11, 12]. The reform agenda explicitly connects economic diversification, labor-market modernization, entrepreneurship, education reform, and digital infrastructure to long-term national prosperity. Consequently, organizations across Saudi Arabia are increasingly expected to digitize services, adopt advanced technologies, enhance operational efficiency, and cultivate innovation-oriented cultures^[13, 14]. The long-term success of these investments hinges not just on adopting new technologies but also on organizations' ability to continually evolve, integrate, and sustain them over time. Consequently, sustainable technological evolution calls for leaders who can instigate continuous development and adaptability within the organization. In the present paper, sustainability refers to organizations' ability to continuously generate value from digital technologies by developing leadership capability, employee competencies, and adaptive or-

ganizational processes that support long-term technological renewal.

Despite substantial investment in digital initiatives globally, many transformation efforts fail to achieve expected outcomes^[1, 8]. Existing research suggests that the most persistent barriers are often human and organizational rather than technological. Resistance to change, limited employee readiness, poor communication, inadequate leadership support, capability gaps, and rigid organizational cultures frequently undermine implementation^[2, 15]. These challenges are particularly relevant in Saudi Arabia, where some organizations continue to balance traditional hierarchical structures with increasing demands for agility, innovation, empowerment, and decentralized decision-making^[16, 17]. As organizations respond to Vision 2030 priorities, leadership approaches capable of guiding people through uncertainty and continuous adaptation become increasingly important.

Within this context, adaptive leadership offers a particularly relevant theoretical lens. Originally developed by Ronald Heifetz and colleagues, adaptive leadership focuses on how leaders mobilize people to address complex challenges for which existing routines or technical expertise alone are insufficient^[18, 19]. Unlike traditional leadership approaches that assume leaders provide solutions, adaptive leadership emphasizes diagnosing emerging problems, distinguishing technical from adaptive challenges, encouraging experimentation, regulating distress, and enabling collective learning. These capabilities are especially valuable during digital transformation, where organizations frequently encounter evolving technologies, uncertain outcomes, competing stakeholder expectations, and resistance to new ways of working.

Adaptive leadership has special relevance in Saudi Arabia; Saudi organizations are managing technological modernization as well as broader institutional change. Public and private sector organizations are increasingly expected to improve service quality, increase productivity, build future skills, and operate with greater responsiveness^[12, 13]. Such sustainable transitions require leaders who can help employees deal with ambiguity, learn continuously, and adapt behaviors rather than simply comply with top-down directives^[20].

Recent scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of leadership in digital transformation, organizational agility, and innovation capability^[20–22]. However, much of this literature remains fragmented and often emphasizes strategic governance, technological capability, or general digital leadership competencies. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to adaptive leadership as a specific framework for understanding how leaders help organizations respond to ongoing disruption, particularly in emerging economies such as Saudi Arabia, where rapid modernization, institutional reform, and workforce transformation occur simultaneously.

In addition to strategic and structural challenges, digital transformation in Saudi Arabia unfolds within culturally diverse workplaces^[23, 24]. Many Saudi organizations employ workforces composed of Saudi nationals and expatriate professionals from South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Arab world, Europe, and North America^[25]. This diversity provides access to broad expertise and international knowledge, but it may also generate differences in communication styles, expectations regarding hierarchy, teamwork norms, and responses to change. In such contexts, leadership effectiveness may depend not only on adaptive capability but also on cultural intelligence (CQ), defined as the capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings^[26]. Digital transformation in Saudi Arabia also creates emotional demands for employees and managers. The introduction of new technologies may generate anxiety regarding role changes, stress associated with reskilling requirements, uncertainty about future career paths, and fatigue arising from continuous reform pressures^[27, 28]. Accordingly, emotional intelligence (EI), defined as one's ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively, may represent another critical leadership capability^[29, 30]. Although research on Saudi Arabia's transformation agenda has expanded, much of the existing literature focuses on macro-level policy reform, e-government development, digital infrastructure, or technology adoption^[31, 32]. Comparatively less scholarly attention has been devoted to the sustainable organizational and leadership mechanisms through which transformation succeeds within Saudi firms and institutions.

Despite growing recognition of the importance of leadership in digital transformation, existing research has devoted comparatively limited attention to the mechanisms

through which adaptive leadership may facilitate sustainable digital transformation, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, while cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence have each been associated with leadership effectiveness, their roles in shaping the effectiveness of adaptive leadership during digital transformation remain underexplored. In the present framework, these capabilities are conceptualized as moderators because they are expected to strengthen leaders' ability to mobilize employees, deal with cultural diversity, and address the emotional demands associated with technological and organizational change. By integrating these perspectives, the paper develops a more comprehensive explanation of the conditions under which adaptive leadership may contribute to sustainable digital transformation.

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual model explaining how adaptive leadership facilitates digital transformation success in Saudi Arabia, and how cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence strengthen this relationship. Specifically, the paper argues that adaptive leadership may enhance employee readiness for change, learning orientation, commitment to transformation, and innovative work behavior. It further proposes that leaders high in CQ are better equipped to manage multicultural collaboration, while leaders high in EI are more capable of addressing the emotional demands associated with technological disruption.

To address these theoretical gaps, this paper makes four contributions. First, it extends adaptive leadership theory to the context of digital transformation by identifying behavioral mechanisms through which leaders shape transformation outcomes in Saudi organizations. Second, it advances cultural intelligence research by positioning CQ as a strategic leadership capability in multicultural Saudi workplaces. Third, it introduces emotional intelligence as a complementary capability that helps leaders manage resistance, uncertainty, and morale during ongoing reform. Fourth, it contributes to the growing management literature on Saudi Arabia by offering a contextually grounded framework aligned with the Kingdom's national modernization agenda.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on digital transformation, adaptive leadership, cultural intelligence, and emotional intelligence in relation to Saudi Arabia. This is followed by theory development, the proposed conceptual model, propo-

sitions, and implications for research and practice.

2. Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on digital transformation, adaptive leadership, cultural intelligence, and emotional intelligence within the Saudi Arabian context. It begins with digital transformation in Saudi Arabia and then turns to the role of leadership and individual capabilities (such as cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence) in shaping transformation processes.

2.1. Digital Transformation in the Saudi Arabian Context

Sustainable digital transformation has become one of the most significant strategic priorities for organizations worldwide^[1, 2]. Technological advancements such as developments in artificial intelligence, cloud computing, automation, data analytics, and digital platforms create opportunities for organizations to generate organizational value and sustain competitiveness in fast-evolving environments^[4, 6]. However, digital transformation goes beyond the adoption of new technologies; it includes a broader organizational process through which digital technologies fundamentally alter and sustain business models, internal processes, structures, capabilities, and patterns of work^[1, 8]. As such, successful transformation requires changes in organizational routines, leadership approaches, employee capabilities, and culture in addition to technological investment^[2]. Under Saudi Vision 2030, the Kingdom has committed to economic diversification, public-sector modernization, sustainable digitization, smart infrastructure, entrepreneurship, and innovation-led growth^[33]. Consequently, organizations in Saudi Arabia are expected to adopt digital tools as well as to redesign operating models, improve service quality, strengthen productivity, and develop future-ready workforces^[13]. In this context, digital transformation is closely linked to national competitiveness and institutional reform rather than isolated technological modernization^[23].

Saudi organizations pursue digital transformation for several reasons. Public-sector entities seek more efficient and citizen-centered services, while private firms aim to improve competitiveness, customer experience, operational efficiency, and innovation capability^[1, 13]. Emerging sectors such as fintech, tourism, logistics, health technology, renew-

able energy, and smart infrastructure have further increased demand for digital capability. Additionally, large-scale national initiatives such as NEOM and smart city development projects reinforce the urgency of organizational transformation^[33]. Despite these opportunities, digital transformation remains difficult to implement successfully. Many initiatives fail because organizations underestimate the human side of change^[8, 15]. Similar challenges are relevant in Saudi Arabia, where some organizations continue to operate with hierarchical structures, legacy routines, siloed departments, and uneven digital capability^[25, 34]. Employees may resist changes to established work practices, managers may lack transformation experience, and organizational cultures may prioritize stability over experimentation^[2, 35]. These barriers suggest that digital transformation in Saudi Arabia should be understood as a socio-technical change process requiring alignment between technology, leadership, people, and organizational culture^[9]. Accordingly, while digital infrastructure and technological investment are necessary, they are insufficient on their own^[1]. Saudi organizations require leaders who can mobilize employees, foster learning, manage uncertainty, and guide adaptation in rapidly changing environments. This creates a strong rationale for examining leadership capabilities as central drivers of successful transformation in the Kingdom.

2.2. Adaptive Leadership and Digital Transformation in Saudi Arabia

Adaptive leadership has gained increasing relevance in contexts characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and continuous change^[36]. Adaptive leadership refers to the practice of mobilizing people to tackle difficult challenges for which existing routines, technical expertise, or standard procedures are insufficient^[18, 19]. This leadership model underscores the need to diagnose emerging challenges, distinguish between technical and adaptive problems, create opportunities for experimentation, regulate productive levels of distress, and facilitate collective learning to support adaptation and change^[37]. It is pertinent to sustainable digital transformation, as many transformation challenges are not purely technical. Installing software or purchasing digital systems may be relatively straightforward technical tasks; however, changing employee mindsets, redesigning workflows, overcoming resistance, integrating new capabilities, and coordinating across functions are adaptive challenges

that require learning and behavioral change^[1, 38]. Leaders who treat adaptive problems as technical ones often fail because technological solutions alone do not resolve deeper organizational tensions^[37].

Saudi Arabia provides a particularly relevant setting for adaptive leadership. Organizations across the Kingdom are simultaneously responding to digitalization pressures, regulatory reforms, market competition, localization initiatives, and changing workforce expectations^[33]. Public-sector institutions are expected to improve agility and service responsiveness, while private-sector organizations face pressure to innovate and compete globally^[13]. These conditions create persistent uncertainty and competing priorities, making adaptive leadership especially valuable.

Adaptive leaders may support digital transformation in several ways. First, they help organizations diagnose whether challenges stem from technology gaps, capability deficits, cultural resistance, or structural barriers. Second, they encourage experimentation and learning rather than rigid adherence to outdated routines^[37]. Third, they regulate distress by helping employees manage uncertainty without becoming overwhelmed. Fourth, they distribute responsibility by encouraging participation and shared problem-solving across organizational levels. These adaptive behaviors require Saudi organizations to balance traditional expectations regarding hierarchy with growing demands for empowerment, collaboration, and innovation^[34, 35]. In such settings, adaptive leadership may help organizations manage tensions between continuity and change, control and flexibility, or legacy systems and future-oriented practices^[39].

Although recent scholarship increasingly discusses digital leadership^[40], much of the literature emphasizes technological competence, strategic orientation, or governance capability^[2]. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to adaptive leadership as a specific framework for understanding how leaders help organizations deal with digital transformation, particularly in emerging economies such as Saudi Arabia. This paper addresses that gap by positioning adaptive leadership as a key antecedent of transformation success in the Saudi context.

2.3. Cultural Intelligence and Digital Transformation in Saudi Arabia

Cultural intelligence (CQ) has become increasingly important in organizations characterized by workforce diver-

sity, international collaboration, and cross-cultural interaction^[41, 42]. CQ refers to an individual's capability to function effectively in culturally diverse settings and is commonly conceptualized through four dimensions: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioral CQ^[26, 41]. In Saudi Arabia, many organizations rely on multicultural workforces^[24]. These employees often bring diverse professional expertise, educational backgrounds, languages, and assumptions regarding authority, teamwork, communication, and decision-making. While such diversity can strengthen organizational capability and innovation, it may also create misunderstanding, coordination difficulties, and varied responses to change initiatives^[43]. These dynamics become especially important during digital transformation. Technology implementation often requires collaboration across departments, training participation, process redesign, and sustained communication regarding new expectations^[1]. In Saudi organizations, employees from different cultural backgrounds may respond differently to change messages, authority styles, learning methods, and risk-taking expectations. Without culturally adaptive leadership, transformation efforts may generate confusion, uneven commitment, or implementation delays^[44].

Leaders high in CQ are more likely to interpret the above-mentioned differences accurately and adapt their behavior accordingly^[26]. They may tailor communication during digital rollouts, ensure inclusive participation in training programs, and reduce misunderstandings during implementation. CQ may therefore strengthen adaptive leadership by helping leaders diagnose challenges more accurately, engage diverse employees more effectively, and build collective commitment during change. Although CQ research has traditionally focused on expatriates' and immigrants' adjustment and multinational assignments^[45, 46], comparatively limited attention has been devoted to CQ as a leadership capability supporting sustainable digital transformation in domestic Saudi organizations. This paper addresses that gap by positioning CQ as a moderator that enhances adaptive leadership effectiveness during transformation.

2.4. Emotional Intelligence and Digital Transformation in Saudi Arabia

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to perceive, understand, regulate, and use emotions effectively in oneself and others^[29, 30]. While digital transformation creates technological and cultural complexity, it also gener-

ates emotional complexity^[47]. Employees may experience anxiety about automation, stress associated with learning new systems, uncertainty regarding changing job roles, frustration during implementation setbacks, and fatigue from continuous reform initiatives^[8, 15, 48]. These emotional reactions can undermine morale, engagement, and willingness to support change. At the same time, Saudi organizations are simultaneously responding to digitalization pressures, workforce localization initiatives, evolving performance expectations, and broader modernization reforms^[33]. Employees may face technological disruption alongside organizational restructuring and changing career expectations. During these challenging times, some employees embrace digital change quickly, while others may require reassurance, support, and developmental guidance.

Leaders high in EI typically demonstrate empathy, emotional self-control, social awareness, and relationship management skills. Research consistently links EI with trust building, conflict management, employee well-being, and leadership effectiveness^[49, 50]. In the context of digital transformation in Saudi organizations, emotionally intelligent leaders may be better positioned to respond empathetically to employee concerns and to maintain morale during difficult implementation phases. They may also normalize learning challenges when employees struggle with new systems or processes. In environments undergoing rapid change, leaders who remain calm and supportive during setbacks can reinforce resilience across teams^[51, 52]. The literature demonstrates that digital transformation is an organizational change process requiring leadership capability, employee engagement, learning, and effective implementation^[1, 8]. Un-

der Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi organizations are expected to modernize rapidly while remaining operationally effective, making emotional intelligence an important leader's competency.

3. Theory Development and Proposition Development

This paper draws on Adaptive Leadership Theory^[18, 19, 37] and complements it with a socio-technical perspective of digital transformation^[8, 9]. Adaptive leadership explains how leaders mobilize people to confront complex challenges for which existing routines, technical expertise, or formal authority alone are insufficient. Rather than simply providing solutions, adaptive leaders focus on helping people manage change by making sense of unfamiliar situations, addressing complex challenges, supporting new ways of working, and creating opportunities for shared growth and development^[37].

From a socio-technical perspective, digital transformation is not achieved through technology alone. Rather, transformation outcomes depend on alignment between technological systems and human systems, including leadership capability, employee attitudes, learning behaviors, and organizational culture^[1, 8]. Accordingly, this paper proposes that adaptive leadership facilitates digital transformation success by influencing key employee-level mechanisms, and that this effect is strengthened when leaders possess high cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence (please see **Figure 1**). Next, we explain how adaptive leadership may be helpful for sustainable digital transformation success.

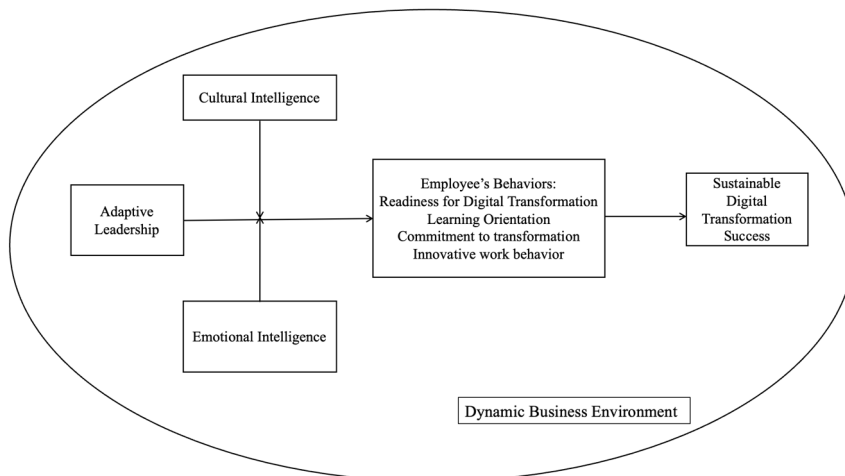


Figure 1. Towards a conceptual model of adaptive leadership and digital transformation success.

3.1. Adaptive Leadership and Digital Transformation Success

Digital transformation often creates ambiguous challenges that cannot be solved through technical expertise alone. Organizations may need to redesign workflows, alter employee roles, integrate new technologies, overcome resistance, and develop new competencies simultaneously^[1, 2]. These issues frequently require behavioral adaptation rather than routine managerial control. Adaptive leaders are well positioned to support transformation success because they help organizations interpret changing realities, prioritize emerging challenges, and mobilize coordinated responses^[37]. They encourage experimentation when solutions are unclear, promote learning when mistakes occur, and help employees adjust to new expectations. Adaptive leaders also regulate distress by maintaining enough pressure for change while preventing employees from becoming overwhelmed^[19]. Organizations in Saudi Arabia are navigating rapid modernization, evolving competitive pressures, localization initiatives, and increasing digital expectations. It is expected that leaders who can help employees adapt to changing systems and uncertain environments are likely to improve implementation quality, technology adoption, operational responsiveness, and long-term transformation outcomes. Therefore, it is argued that:

Proposition 1. *Adaptive leadership is positively associated with sustainable digital transformation success in Saudi organizations.*

3.2. Adaptive Leadership and Employees' Behaviors

In this section, we propose how adaptive leadership may facilitate successful sustainable transformation by fostering employee readiness for change, learning orientation, commitment to transformation, and innovative work behavior.

3.2.1. Employee Readiness for Digital Transformation

Employee readiness for change refers to the extent to which employees believe change is necessary, beneficial, and achievable^[53]. Readiness is a crucial precursor to successful transformation because employees are more likely to support

change when they understand its purpose and feel capable of adapting. Adaptive leadership is likely to enhance readiness through several mechanisms. First, adaptive leaders frame complex challenges honestly while helping employees understand why change is necessary^[37]. Second, they encourage participation in diagnosing problems and generating solutions, which may increase ownership and psychological preparedness. Third, they provide support during uncertainty and help employees reinterpret change as an opportunity for development rather than a threat.

As mentioned above, Saudi organizations are undergoing simultaneous technological, structural, and workforce changes. In this context, employees are asked to adopt new systems while adjusting to new performance expectations and evolving organizational models. Leaders who create psychological readiness can therefore reduce resistance and improve engagement. Hence, we propose the following:

Proposition 2. *Adaptive leadership is positively associated with employee readiness for digital transformation in Saudi organizations.*

3.2.2. Employee Learning Orientation

Sustainable digital transformation often requires continuous learning. Employees must develop new technical competencies, adapt to revised processes, and update knowledge as technologies evolve^[38]. Learning orientation refers to an employee's willingness to acquire new knowledge, develop competencies, and embrace continuous improvement^[54].

Adaptive leadership supports learning because adaptive challenges cannot be solved by old routines. Leaders must therefore encourage employees to experiment, reflect, and learn collectively. Adaptive leaders legitimize learning by recognizing that uncertainty is normal and that progress^[37] often requires trial and adjustment. They also create space for questioning assumptions and exploring new methods. In Saudi Arabia, national priorities under Saudi Vision 2030 emphasize human capital development, future skills, and workforce capability enhancement. Organizations increasingly require employees who can continuously learn and adapt rather than rely solely on existing expertise. Leaders who foster a learning orientation are therefore likely to strengthen transformation capability. Hence, it is proposed that:

Proposition 3. *Adaptive leadership is positively associated*

with employee learning orientation during digital transformation in Saudi organizations.

3.2.3. Commitment to Digital Transformation

Commitment to transformation refers to an employee's psychological attachment to and willingness to support organizational change initiatives^[55]. Even when employees understand the rationale for transformation, implementation may fail if they lack commitment or disengage during difficult phases.

Adaptive leadership may strengthen commitment by involving employees in problem solving rather than treating them as passive recipients of change^[49]. When employees perceive that leaders value their input, acknowledge difficulties, and create shared responsibility, they may develop stronger ownership of transformation efforts. Adaptive leaders also help maintain focus during prolonged uncertainty, which may sustain commitment over time^[56]. Because organizational change in Saudi Arabia is often a lengthy process, it requires employees to remain actively committed throughout the journey rather than comply only at specific points in time. Organizations pursuing modernization often depend on employees to persist through implementation challenges, learning demands, and evolving expectations. Hence, it is suggested that:

Proposition 4. *Adaptive leadership is positively associated with employee commitment to digital transformation in Saudi organizations.*

3.2.4. Innovative Work Behaviors

Digital transformation rarely succeeds through passive compliance alone. Employees often need to identify process improvements, experiment with digital tools, share ideas, and proactively solve implementation problems. Innovative work behavior refers to the generation, promotion, and realization of new ideas that improve work processes or outcomes^[57].

Adaptive leadership is suited to stimulate innovative behavior because it encourages experimentation and challenges outdated assumptions^[36]. Adaptive leaders often create environments in which questioning the status quo is legitimate and where employees are encouraged to test new solutions. By distributing responsibility and valuing diverse perspectives, they may also unlock bottom-up innovation. Employ-

ees who embrace new ways of working and contribute to organizational improvement can help Saudi organizations achieve greater agility, service excellence, and long-term competitiveness. Therefore:

Proposition 5. *Adaptive leadership is positively associated with employees' innovative work behavior during digital transformation in Saudi organizations.*

3.3. Mediating Role of Employee-Level Mechanisms

The preceding arguments suggest that adaptive leadership may influence digital transformation success indirectly through multiple employee-level pathways. Leadership behaviors shape how employees interpret change, whether they are willing to learn, the extent to which they remain committed, and whether they proactively contribute innovative solutions.

Readiness helps reduce resistance and increases adoption of new systems. Learning orientation supports capability development required for digital work environments. Commitment sustains motivation during long transformation processes. Innovative work behavior enables bottom-up improvement and practical problem-solving during implementation^[1]. These mechanisms may explain how leadership is translated into transformation outcomes, i.e., adaptive leaders influence digital transformation by shaping employee cognition, motivation, and behavior. Hence, it is suggested that:

Proposition 6. *Employee readiness for change, learning orientation, commitment to transformation, and innovative work behavior mediate the positive relationship between adaptive leadership and digital transformation success.*

The preceding propositions explain how adaptive leadership may influence sustainable digital transformation directly and indirectly through key employee behaviors. However, these relationships are unlikely to be equally strong across all organizational contexts. Leadership effectiveness often depends on contextual and interpersonal factors that shape how employees perceive and respond to leaders' behaviors. In the next two sections, the proposed framework considers two leadership capabilities, i.e., cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence, that may strengthen the effectiveness of adaptive leadership during digital transfor-

mation.

when leaders demonstrate high cultural intelligence.

3.4. Moderating Role of Cultural Intelligence

Although adaptive leadership may generally support transformation, its effectiveness may vary depending on leaders' ability to manage cultural diversity. Cultural intelligence (CQ) reflects the capability to function effectively in culturally diverse situations through awareness, knowledge, motivation, and behavioral adaptability^[26, 41]. Several organizations in the Kingdom employ multicultural workforces consisting of Saudi nationals and expatriates from different regions. Employees may differ in communication preferences, authority expectations, attitudes toward risk, and responses to change. Without cultural sensitivity, even adaptive leadership efforts may be misunderstood or unevenly received. Leaders with high CQ are better able to tailor communication, build inclusive participation, and adapt behavioral responses across diverse employee groups^[42].

These capabilities are particularly important during digital transformation, where employees are often required to abandon familiar routines, acquire new skills, and engage with uncertain organizational changes. Adaptive leaders seek to mobilize employees, encourage experimentation, and facilitate collective learning; however, employees are more likely to respond positively when leadership messages are communicated in culturally appropriate ways and when their perspectives are acknowledged and respected. High-CQ leaders are better equipped to reduce misunderstandings, build trust, and foster psychological safety among diverse employees. As a result, employees may become more willing to embrace digital transformation, engage in continuous learning, remain committed to transformation initiatives, and contribute innovative ideas. Consequently, adaptive leadership is likely to have a stronger positive influence on employee readiness for digital transformation, learning orientation, commitment to transformation, and innovative work behavior when leaders possess higher levels of cultural intelligence. Therefore, it is proposed that:

Proposition 7. *Cultural intelligence positively moderates the relationship between adaptive leadership and employee behaviors (such as readiness for digital transformation, learning orientation, commitment to transformation, and innovative work behavior), such that the relationship is stronger*

3.5. Moderating Role of Emotional Intelligence

Digital transformation places considerable emotional strain on employees. They may worry about their ability to use new technologies or fear job loss. They may also become frustrated when implementation challenges arise and feel exhausted by the constant need to adapt to ongoing change^[15]. During these times, adaptive leadership is helpful as it often requires surfacing difficult issues, challenging established routines, and asking employees to change behaviors. These processes may generate discomfort or resistance. Leaders high in EI are more likely to recognize hidden concerns, respond empathetically, regulate their own emotions during setbacks, and sustain morale during stressful transitions^[29, 49].

The rapid transformation taking place across Saudi organizations places significant emotional demands on employees, making emotional capability essential for managing ongoing technological and organizational shifts. Leaders who combine adaptive behaviors with emotional intelligence are therefore likely to be more effective than leaders relying on structural change alone. By recognizing and addressing employees' emotional reactions to change, emotionally intelligent leaders can reduce resistance, strengthen trust, and foster a supportive environment for adaptation. Employees are consequently more likely to embrace transformation initiatives, engage in continuous learning, remain committed to organizational change efforts, and contribute innovative ideas. Furthermore, emotionally intelligent leaders are better able to maintain motivation and psychological safety during periods of uncertainty, enabling employees to view transformation challenges as opportunities for growth rather than sources of threat. Therefore, the positive effects of adaptive leadership on readiness for digital transformation, learning orientation, commitment to transformation, and innovative work behavior are expected to be stronger when leaders possess higher levels of emotional intelligence. Drawing on the above discussion, it is proposed that:

Proposition 8. *Emotional intelligence positively moderates the relationship between adaptive leadership and employee behaviors (such as readiness for digital transformation, learning orientation, commitment to transformation,*

and innovative work behaviors), such that the relationship is stronger when leaders demonstrate high emotional intelligence.

The previous sections considered the moderating roles of cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence independently. However, digital transformation often requires leaders to respond simultaneously to cultural diversity and employees' emotional reactions to change. In the next section, the joint moderating effects of cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence are presented.

3.6. Joint Moderating Effects of Cultural Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence

While cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence may independently enhance the effectiveness of adaptive leadership, digital transformation often presents challenges that require both capabilities simultaneously. Adaptive leadership involves helping employees deal with unfamiliar situations for which existing solutions are inadequate. In such contexts, leaders must interpret not only diverse employee perspectives but also the varied reactions that emerge as transformation unfolds. Possessing only one capability may therefore be insufficient to fully address the multifaceted demands associated with organizational change.

Cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence represent distinct yet complementary leadership resources. As discussed above, CQ provides leaders with the capability to understand differences in values, assumptions, and workplace expectations, whereas EI enables leaders to accurately interpret and manage the emotional dynamics that accompany adaptation and change. Both of these capabilities enhance leaders' ability to diagnose challenges, mobilize employees, and facilitate collective adjustment during transformation initiatives. In Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 has accelerated digital transformation initiatives across both public and private sector organizations. As organizations introduce new technologies, redesign work processes, and manage increasingly diverse workforces, employees face growing demands for adaptation and collaboration. These conditions increase the importance of leadership capabilities that enable leaders to effectively manage both interpersonal complexities and ongoing organizational change. Leaders who possess both CQ and EI are better positioned to integrate diverse view-

points, maintain alignment around transformation objectives, and sustain employee engagement throughout the change process.

Consequently, the influence of adaptive leadership on employee readiness for digital transformation, learning orientation, commitment to transformation, and innovative work behavior is expected to be strongest when leaders possess high levels of both cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence. The combined presence of these capabilities enables leaders to address the broader social and interpersonal demands associated with digital transformation more effectively than either capability alone. Hence, it is suggested that:

Proposition 9. *The positive relationship between adaptive leadership and employee behaviors (such as readiness for digital transformation, learning orientation, commitment to transformation, and innovative work behaviors) is strongest when leaders demonstrate high levels of both cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence.*

4. Discussion and Contributions

Sustainable digital transformation is frequently portrayed as a technological challenge centered on automation, digital platforms, data integration, and infrastructure investment^[1, 8]. While these elements are important, the present paper argues that such a view is incomplete. Successful sustainable transformation also depends on leadership capability and employee adaptation^[2, 15]. By developing a conceptual framework, this paper emphasizes that digital transformation is fundamentally a human and organizational process rather than a purely technical one^[1, 8]. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is no exception, as organizations are simultaneously dealing with rapid modernization and workforce diversification^[33]. The nine propositions should be interpreted as an integrated framework rather than as independent relationships. Proposition 1 establishes the direct relationship between adaptive leadership and sustainable digital transformation success. Propositions 2–6 identify the employee-level mechanisms through which adaptive leadership influences transformation outcomes, highlighting employee readiness, learning orientation, commitment to transformation, and innovative work behavior as the primary pathways. Propositions 7–9 further extend the framework by

identifying cultural intelligence and emotional intelligence as important boundary conditions that strengthen these relationships, with their combined effect expected to provide the greatest support for sustainable digital transformation in culturally diverse and dynamic organizational environments.

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

The first contribution of this paper is the extension of adaptive leadership theory to the context of digital transformation. Although adaptive leadership has traditionally been discussed in relation to complex change, crisis response, and institutional challenges, its application to sustainable digital transformation remains comparatively underdeveloped^[19, 37]. This omission is notable because digital transformation often involves ambiguous problems, shifting priorities, incomplete information, and resistance to behavioral change—conditions highly consistent with adaptive leadership logic^[37, 38]. The present framework therefore positions adaptive leadership as particularly suitable for contemporary transformation contexts where leaders must mobilize learning rather than merely provide technical solutions. The paper further contributes by identifying employee-level mechanisms through which adaptive leadership may influence transformation outcomes. Rather than assuming a direct relationship between leadership and success, the framework aims to open the ‘black box’^[58] between leadership models and digital transformation success and proposes that leaders shape readiness, learning orientation, commitment, and innovative work behavior. This micro-foundational perspective aligns with growing calls to better understand the behavioral pathways through which leadership creates digital capability and organizational agility^[2]. The second contribution of the paper is the repositioning of cultural intelligence (CQ) as a strategic capability for digital transformation leadership. Much of the CQ literature has focused on expatriate and recent immigrant effectiveness, cross-border assignments, or multicultural teams^[26, 41]; the present paper extends this discussion by arguing that CQ is equally relevant in domestic organizations operating with culturally diverse workforces and implementing large-scale change. In Saudi Arabia, where many organizations employ Saudi nationals alongside expatriate professionals, leaders must deal with diverse communication styles, expectations of authority, and approaches to collaboration^[42]. Under such conditions, CQ may enhance

leaders’ ability to interpret reactions to change, tailor communication, and build inclusion during transformation. The third contribution is the integration of emotional intelligence (EI) into digital transformation leadership research. Existing digital transformation studies often emphasize technology readiness, strategy, and governance, while paying less attention to employee anxiety, technostress, uncertainty, and morale^[1, 15]. Yet recent research increasingly shows that emotional capability is critical in digitally disruptive environments, especially when employees face rapid change and technological overload^[59]. By positioning EI as a moderator of adaptive leadership effectiveness, the present paper adds an important human-centered dimension to the digital transformation literature. The fourth contribution is contextual. Much of the mainstream literature on leadership and digital transformation has been developed in Western settings^[2]. By grounding the framework in Saudi Arabia, this paper responds to calls for more context-sensitive management research in emerging economies. Saudi Arabia offers a distinctive environment characterized by rapid institutional reform, ambitious digitalization goals, a culturally diverse labor market, and strong state support for modernization^[33]. These features make the Kingdom a theoretically rich setting in which to study leadership and transformation dynamics.

4.2. Practical Implications

The proposed framework also offers several practical implications for organizations in Saudi Arabia and beyond. First, organizations should recognize that digital transformation is as much a people challenge as a technology challenge. Investments in enterprise systems, automation, AI, or analytics should therefore be accompanied by leadership development and workforce capability initiatives^[1, 15]. Second, organizations should develop adaptive leadership capabilities among managers. This includes helping leaders diagnose whether transformation barriers are technical or behavioral, regulate employee distress during uncertainty, facilitate experimentation, and distribute responsibility for problem solving^[37]. In many cases, failed digital initiatives stem not from poor technology, but from treating adaptive challenges as technical problems^[19]. Third, organizations operating in multicultural environments should integrate CQ development into leadership programs. Saudi organizations frequently depend on diverse teams, expatriate expertise, and

international partnerships. Leaders with stronger CQ may be better able to coordinate collaboration and sustain trust across cultural differences during transformation^[42]. Fourth, EI development should be prioritized. Recent scholarship notes that leaders in digital contexts must increasingly manage technostress, fatigue, and emotional strain associated with accelerated change^[59]. Managers who demonstrate empathy, emotional regulation, and transparent communication may be better able to maintain morale and engagement during transformation journeys^[29, 49]. Finally, organizations in Saudi Arabia should monitor employee readiness, learning orientation, commitment, and innovative behavior as leading indicators of transformation progress. These employee-level mechanisms may determine whether technological investments produce sustainable value^[2].

4.3. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study has limitations. First, the present study is conceptual in nature and therefore the proposed relationships remain theoretical until empirically tested. While grounded in prior literature, future evidence is required to validate the framework across settings^[60]. Second, the paper is intentionally contextualized within Saudi Arabia. While this strengthens practical relevance to the Kingdom's modernization agenda, some relationships may differ in countries with distinct institutional environments, labour market structures, or cultural conditions. Comparative cross-national research would therefore be valuable^[61]. Finally, the framework adopts a relatively linear perspective in which leadership shapes employee mechanisms that subsequently influence outcomes. In practice, digital transformation is often iterative and nonlinear, with feedback loops where successful implementation may also reshape leadership behavior and employee attitudes over time^[8].

As a conceptual paper, the present framework invites empirical testing and refinement. Future studies may examine the proposed model using multi-source and time-lagged designs to reduce common method bias and capture transformation processes over time^[62]. For example, employees may assess adaptive leadership, CQ, and EI of their supervisors at an initial stage, followed by later measurement of readiness, learning orientation, commitment, and innovative work behavior. Digital transformation success may then be evaluated

by supervisors or senior managers. Saudi Arabia offers an especially rich setting for such research because organizations across sectors are actively engaged in modernization under Saudi Vision 2030^[12]. Future studies may sample organizations in banking, healthcare, logistics, higher education, telecommunications, hospitality, and public administration. Cross-sector comparisons would help determine whether the proposed relationships vary according to transformation intensity or regulatory complexity. Validated measures from prior literature may be used to test the framework. Adaptive leadership may be measured through scales derived from Heifetzian leadership behaviors^[30], CQ through the Cultural Intelligence Scale^[41], EI through established instruments such as the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale^[49], and mediators through existing measures of readiness, commitment, and innovative work behavior^[53, 55, 57]. Given the complexity of the framework, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) would be appropriate because it enables simultaneous testing of direct, indirect, and moderating relationships^[63]. Future studies may also examine whether leaders high in both CQ and EI outperform those high in only one capability. Such findings would extend emerging work suggesting that effective digital-era leadership increasingly requires combinations of agility, emotional intelligence, and cultural intelligence rather than isolated competencies. In addition to quantitative methods, qualitative studies would be valuable. Interviews and case studies in Saudi organizations could explore how employees interpret adaptive leadership during digital change, how leaders manage cultural tensions, and how emotional demands emerge during implementation. Longitudinal case studies may be especially useful because transformation unfolds across multiple phases rather than through a single event^[64].

5. Conclusions

Digital transformation has become a strategic imperative for organizations seeking competitiveness, innovation, and long-term sustainability. However, the success of transformation initiatives depends not only on technological investment, but also on leadership capability and employee adaptation. The present paper argues that adaptive leadership may provide an important pathway through which organizations can mobilize employees, build readiness for change,

encourage learning, strengthen commitment, and stimulate innovative work behavior during digital transformation. Additional leadership capabilities may also be crucial; cultural intelligence enables leaders to handle multicultural workforces and diverse expectations, while emotional intelligence helps leaders manage uncertainty, resistance, and the emotional demands associated with rapid change. Leaders who possess both capabilities may be especially well positioned to guide organizations through complex transformation environments.

Funding

This work received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

No data was collected for this research.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editor and reviewers for their suggestions to improve the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used an AI tool (such as Grammarly) solely for language refinement. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of scientific content. All outputs were critically reviewed and edited by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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