

Agile Leadership and Innovation Capability in the UAE Public Sector: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Public sector organizations face growing pressure to innovate rapidly while maintaining service quality, accountability, and public trust. In the UAE, national transformation agendas strongly emphasize agility and innovation, yet organizational routines and hierarchical cultures often constrain their diffusion. This literature review addresses the gap between strategic intent and routine innovation capability by examining agile leadership as a key enabling mechanism. Drawing on international and the UAE-focused studies, the review synthesizes evidence on how agile leadership influences public sector innovation capability through knowledge-sharing processes and organizational learning. Specifically, it reviews literature on tacit and explicit knowledge sharing as mediators shaping the innovation speed–quality dynamic, and absorptive capacity as a moderating capability explaining variation in outcomes across entities. Findings suggest that agile leadership can enhance innovation speed and quality when supported by effective knowledge-sharing routines and strong absorptive capacity. However, empirical UAE-specific evidence remains limited. Future research should test integrated, multi-level frameworks across public organizations to strengthen generalizability and inform capability-based public sector transformation.

Keywords: Agile Leadership, Innovation Capability, UAE, Public Sector

Introduction

Public sector organizations operate in an environment shaped by rapid technological change, rising citizen expectations, fiscal scrutiny, and complex cross-boundary problems that require faster learning and more adaptive governance. Governments are therefore expected to innovate continuously—not through isolated projects, but as a sustained organizational capability that improves responsiveness while safeguarding service reliability, accountability, and public trust (Dib et al., 2022; Eggers et al., 2024; OECD, 2024a). This creates a central public administration challenge of accelerating improvement without eroding quality, fairness, or legitimacy.

The UAE offers a salient context because its national strategies position agility and innovation as core determinants of government performance and national competitiveness. For example, *We the UAE 2031* national vision frames future government around agility, dynamism, and transformative delivery, supported by policy narratives emphasizing rapid execution, digital enablement, and results orientation (We the UAE 2031, 2022; Jeengar, 2025; Al Sulaity et al., 2025). These priorities are operationalized through number of strategic initiatives such as *Government Accelerators*, which mobilize cross-functional teams to deliver outcomes within “100 days or less,” and the *Zero Bureaucracy* initiative, which seeks to remove procedural friction and shorten decision cycles (Hirdaramani, 2025; Ubaid & Gulrez, 2025; Chaterera-Zambuko & Kabata, 2025). In parallel, the UAE has also invested in digital public infrastructure such as UAE PASS, a secure national digital identity and document verification platform which aims to improve service access, reliability, and trust. In addition, the national strategies promote AI and data-enabled services to strengthen proactive and integrated delivery (OECD, 2021; GlobalPrime, 2024; Intelligence, 2024; u.ae, 2025; u.aeu.ae, 2023; Lewis et al., 2023).

Yet, transformations often encounter entrenched bureaucratic routines and cultural constraints that inhibit experimentation and adaptation. Public sector organizations frequently retain hierarchical authority, siloed structures, and compliance-driven operating models that conflict with agile practices such as decentralization and iteration (Dib et al., 2022; Eggers et al., 2024). In the UAE, high power distance and directive leadership expectations may further limit empowerment and bottom-up participation (Aldhaheeri, 2019; Al dhanhani & Abdullah, 2020; Al Mazrouei, 2024; Alhaddad, 2024). Empirical studies also identify persistent barriers to public sector innovation in the UAE, including risk aversion, weak innovation culture, and limited empowerment, contributing to uneven diffusion across entities (Abuzanjali & Bashir, 2024). This shifts attention from whether the UAE values agility to how agility becomes routine capability across government organizations.

This review focuses on agile leadership as a mechanism for translating national ambition into sustained innovation capability. Agile leadership emphasizes adaptability, empowerment, rapid feedback, and cross-functional collaboration, enabling public organizations to respond to uncertainty while maintaining accountability (Attar & Abdul-Kareem, 2020; Rialti & Filieri, 2024; Sary et al., 2024; Steegh et al., 2025; Eggers et al., 2024). Leadership effects, however, are expected to operate through knowledge processes—particularly tacit and explicit knowledge sharing—which shape organizational learning and the recombination of expertise across boundaries (Lei, Gui & Le, 2020). This is especially relevant given evidence that explicit knowledge sharing is more strongly associated with innovation speed, whereas tacit

knowledge sharing contributes more to innovation quality (Wang & Wang, 2012). Finally, absorptive capacity may explain why similar leadership practices yield different outcomes: organizations vary in their ability to recognize, assimilate, transform, and apply knowledge to produce innovation (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002; Chatterjee et al., 2021; Duan et al., 2021).

Accordingly, this review synthesizes literature explaining how agile leadership influences innovation capability in the UAE public sector services, focusing on (1) the innovation speed–quality dynamic, (2) tacit and explicit knowledge sharing as mediating mechanisms, and (3) absorptive capacity as a moderating capability shaping outcomes. This focus addresses limited the UAE-specific evidence on agile leadership mechanisms and supports a capability-based explanation of how leadership-driven knowledge processes translate into sustained innovation under national transformation agendas (Almazrouei et al., 2024; Cherian et al., 2020; Lootah, 2021; Ojiako et al., 2024).

Public Sector Transformation in the UAE

National transformation agendas in the UAE frame public sector modernization as a competitiveness and governance priority, emphasizing rapid delivery, future readiness, and system-wide innovation. *We the UAE 2031* articulates a model of government that is proactive and adaptive, aligning institutional transformation with long-term national objectives and reinforcing the strategic expectation that public organizations should learn and improve continuously (We the UAE 2031, 2022; Jeengar, 2025). Such visions reflect a broader global shift in public administration away from procedural stability alone toward performance, responsiveness, and public value creation under uncertainty (OECD, 2024a; Dib et al., 2022).

The UAE's transformation approach combines execution-acceleration mechanisms with procedural simplification. *Government Accelerators* are designed to produce tangible outcomes through time-bounded delivery, cross-functional coordination, and implementation-focused governance routines, signaling a shift toward shorter cycles and results-based coordination (Hirdaramani, 2025; Ubaid & Gulrez, 2025). The *Zero Bureaucracy* initiative targets administrative burdens that delay service improvement, positioning process simplification as an enabler of responsiveness rather than merely an efficiency tool (Chaterera-Zambuko & Kabata, 2025). Together, these initiatives represent an attempt to redesign how government work is organized and executed so that speed becomes structurally feasible (Al Sulaity et al., 2025).

Digital infrastructure further supports this transformation agenda by reducing transaction costs and enabling service standardization at scale. UAE PASS, for instance, strengthens interoperability and trust by enabling secure authentication and verified document exchange, supporting faster transactions while enhancing service integrity (OECD, 2021; GlobalPrime, 2024). Complementary national emphasis on AI and data-enabled services indicates a shift toward proactive and integrated delivery models that can anticipate needs and improve decision quality (Intelligence, 2024; u.ae, 2025). The UAE's Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) strategy reinforces this direction by framing advanced technology adoption as central to modern governance and competitiveness (u.aeu.ae, 2023; Lewis et al., 2023).

However, public management research cautions that transformation often face institutional constraints including bureaucratic routines, accountability pressures, and risk-averse cultures which can reduce experimentation and slow adaptation, even when strategies are ambitious (Dib et al., 2022; Eggers et al., 2024). The UAE studies similarly emphasize that hierarchical authority structures and high power distance expectations can constrain empowerment and cross-boundary collaboration, thereby limiting the routinization of agile practices (Aldhaferi, 2019; Al dhanhani & Abdullah, 2020; Al Mazrouei, 2024; Alhaddad, 2024). Empirical work identifies culturally rooted barriers such as risk aversion and weak innovation culture, suggesting that transformation outcomes depend on deep organizational capabilities rather than policy design alone (Abuzanjel & Bashir, 2024). This highlights the need to examine leadership and learning mechanisms that determine whether transformation becomes embedded across entities.

Agile Leadership as a Public Sector Capability

Agile leadership is increasingly conceptualized as a leadership capability suited to volatile and complex contexts, characterized by adaptability, iterative learning, rapid feedback, and collaboration across functions (Attar & Abdul-Kareem, 2020; Rialti & Filieri, 2024). Unlike traditional command-and-control approaches that prioritize predictability and compliance, agile leadership supports decentralized problem-solving and enables teams closer to delivery contexts to respond to emerging information (Eggers et al., 2024). In government settings, this matters because service challenges are often cross-cutting and dynamic, requiring coordination, learning, and adjustment rather than linear execution (Dib et al., 2022).

The UAE transformations create potential spaces where agile leadership behaviours can be exercised. Accelerator-style delivery routines, for example, create time pressure and interdependence that require leaders to enable cross-functional alignment, remove barriers, and encourage rapid learning cycles (Hirdaramani, 2025). These conditions are compatible with agile leadership principles such as empowerment, experimentation, and rapid iteration (Attar & Abdul-Kareem, 2020; Rialti & Filieri, 2024). However, leadership behaviours are shaped by institutional norms, and the UAE organizations may vary in their readiness to shift away from directive leadership, particularly where hierarchy structures expectations about decision authority and accountability (Aldhaferi, 2019; Alhaddad, 2024).

A further limitation is empirical scarcity, as leadership research in the UAE has often focused on transformational or other leadership models, leaving agile leadership mechanisms underexamined as a distinct construct in public sector contexts (Cherian et al., 2020; Lootah, 2021). This gap is important because agile leadership is not simply a re-labelling of transformational leadership; it emphasizes operational adaptability, short feedback loops, and experimentation under uncertainty—features that are central to innovation speed and implementation capability in transformation contexts (Rialti & Filieri, 2024; Eggers et al., 2024). Consequently, the UAE-specific inquiry is needed to clarify how agile leadership operates within hierarchical institutional environments and which mechanisms convert leadership behaviours into sustained innovation capability.

Innovation Capability in Public Sector Services

Innovation capability is commonly described as an embedded organizational capacity to generate, adopt, and scale new ideas, processes, and technologies systematically, rather than

treating innovation as episodic output (Aas & Breunig, 2017; Huang et al., 2023). In the public sector, innovation capability is tied to public value creation—improving service quality, efficiency, and citizen experience while maintaining legitimacy and accountability (OECD, 2024a). This capability becomes especially important in contexts of uncertainty and rising expectations because public organizations must remain adaptive while meeting transparency and equity obligations.

In the UAE, innovation capability is supported by both governance initiatives and technology-driven service modernization. UAE PASS illustrates how digital identity infrastructure can improve service delivery by streamlining interactions, enhancing verification integrity, and enabling interoperability across agencies (OECD, 2021; GlobalPrime, 2024). The UAE National emphasis on AI and advanced technologies further reflects a shift toward data-driven decision-making and proactive service models, potentially increasing responsiveness and service quality when integrated effectively (Intelligence, 2024; u.ae, 2025). Such initiatives are consistent with broader arguments that digital platforms can enable service standardization and scaling, but only when accompanied by organizational learning mechanisms and capability development (OECD, 2024a).

Yet, innovation capability varies across government entities. Evidence from the UAE public services suggests that organizational structure and agility influence innovation performance and public value outcomes, indicating that innovation maturity is not uniform and depends on internal capabilities (Alosani & Al-Dhaafri, 2023; Almazrouei et al., 2024). Research on innovation readiness similarly suggests that the ability to adopt and sustain innovations depends on organizational conditions—leadership, culture, and integration routines—rather than strategic intent alone (Ojiako et al., 2024). This reinforces the importance of examining how leadership behaviours shape the knowledge processes that enable innovations to move beyond pilots into scalable service improvements.

Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is a central mechanism through which leadership influences innovation capability because it enables learning, problem-solving, and recombination of expertise across units and hierarchies (Lei, Gui & Le, 2020). Knowledge sharing is typically distinguished into tacit knowledge sharing (experiential insights and context-specific judgement) and explicit knowledge sharing (codified documents, procedures, and reports). These forms matter differently in public services because implementation success often depends on both standardized guidance and contextual adaptation.

Empirical evidence indicates that explicit knowledge sharing is more strongly associated with innovation speed, whereas tacit knowledge sharing is more strongly associated with innovation quality (Wang & Wang, 2012). This distinction is particularly relevant in the UAE context, where transformations emphasize acceleration and faster delivery cycles. If innovation speed is prioritized without mechanisms to share and integrate tacit learning from practice, organizations may implement changes rapidly but fail to sustain quality, consistency, or trust in service outcomes (Eggers et al., 2024). Conversely, reliance on tacit learning without codification can slow scaling and replication across entities, limiting system-wide diffusion. Agile leadership, which emphasizes rapid feedback, empowerment, and cross-functional collaboration, is therefore likely to influence both forms of knowledge sharing and

help manage the trade-off between speed and quality (Attar & Abdul-Kareem, 2020; Rialti & Filieri, 2024; Lei, Gui & Le, 2020).

In hierarchical organizational contexts, however, knowledge sharing may be inhibited by cultural norms and risk perceptions. The UAE studies describing directive leadership expectations and limited bottom-up participation suggest conditions that can restrict open exchange, reduce psychological safety for sharing experiential insights, and weaken cross-departmental learning (Al dhanhani & Abdullah, 2020; Aldhaheer, 2019; Alhaddad, 2024). These constraints align with evidence that risk aversion and weak innovation culture remain barriers to diffusion in the UAE government entities (Abuzanjal & Bashir, 2024). This reinforces the importance of examining knowledge sharing not only as a technical process but as a socially embedded mechanism shaped by leadership behaviours and institutional norms.

Absorptive Capacity

Absorptive capacity explains whether shared knowledge becomes usable innovation capability. It refers to the ability to recognize valuable knowledge, assimilate it, transform it, and apply it to organizational outcomes (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002). In public organizations, absorptive capacity can be expressed through learning routines, integration mechanisms, and the capability to apply insights across units and standard operating procedures. This matters because knowledge sharing can remain superficial if organizations lack the internal capability to convert information into redesigned services, revised routines, or scalable innovations.

Evidence suggests that the influence of knowledge sharing on innovation outcomes strengthens when absorptive capacity is high, meaning organizations can interpret, integrate, and operationalize knowledge effectively (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Duan et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant in a system like the UAE public sector, where transformation initiatives may diffuse unevenly across entities. Although leadership may promote knowledge exchange, but outcomes differ depending on whether organizations can absorb and apply knowledge into routines and service redesign. This moderating role implies that leadership-driven knowledge processes are necessary but not sufficient; internal learning capability conditions shape whether innovation improves speed, quality, or both (Zahra & George, 2002; Duan et al., 2021).

Literature Gap

The literature suggests the UAE has established strong strategic intent and visible transformation mechanisms to accelerate government delivery, complemented by investments in digital infrastructure and advanced technologies (We the UAE 2031, 2022; OECD, 2021; Hirdaramani, 2025; Intelligence, 2024). However, structural and cultural constraints—hierarchy, risk aversion, siloed coordination, and compliance-driven routines—can limit experimentation and the routinization of agility across entities (Dib et al., 2022; Abuzanjal & Bashir, 2024; Al dhanhani & Abdullah, 2020). This creates a gap between national-level ambition and organization-level capability.

Agile leadership is proposed as a mechanism for bridging this gap, but the UAE-specific evidence remains limited on how agile leadership translates into sustained innovation capability, particularly through knowledge sharing pathways and the speed–quality dynamic

(Cherian et al., 2020; Lootah, 2021; Wang & Wang, 2012). Absorptive capacity also remains underexplored as a boundary condition that explains variation in innovation outcomes across public organizations operating under similar transformation pressures (Zahra & George, 2002; Chatterjee et al., 2021; Duan et al., 2021). Addressing these gaps requires an integrated capability-based framework connecting agile leadership, knowledge sharing, absorptive capacity, and innovation capability in the UAE public sector services (Almazrouei et al., 2024; Ojiako et al., 2024).

Table 1

Literature Gaps and Future Research Directions on Agile Leadership and Innovation Capability in the UAE Public Sector

Area / Gap	Gap in the literature	Future research directions	Key references
Strategy → routine capability	The UAE transformations show strong strategic intent and execution mechanisms, but evidence is limited on how these translate into <i>routine</i> , organization-wide agility across diverse entities.	Examine institutionalization mechanisms (routines, governance, incentives, talent systems) that convert national transformation programs into sustained capabilities; compare high vs low maturity entities to identify capability pathways.	We the UAE 2031 (2022); OECD (2021); Hirdaramani (2025); Intelligence (2024)
Structural and cultural constraints	Hierarchy, risk aversion, and siloed structures are widely cited barriers, yet there is insufficient explanation of <i>how</i> these constraints are reduced in practice in the UAE public organizations.	Test how leadership creates psychological safety, empowerment, and cross-boundary collaboration under high power distance; explore which accountability designs enable experimentation without undermining compliance.	Dib et al. (2022); Abuzanjal & Bashir (2024); Al dhanhani & Abdullah (2020); Aldhaheiri (2019)
Agile leadership mechanism gap	Agile leadership is argued to fit complexity and uncertainty, but the UAE public-sector evidence on its behavioural mechanisms and outcomes is limited and often substituted with transformational leadership.	Develop and validate the UAE-relevant agile leadership measures; examine effects on innovation capability using process models (leadership → knowledge processes → innovation outcomes) and multi-level designs.	Attar & Abdul-Kareem (2020); Rialti & Filieri (2024); Cherian et al. (2020); Lootah (2021)

Area / Gap	Gap in the literature	Future research directions	Key references
Speed–quality trade-off underused	Research recognizes speed and quality as distinct innovation dimensions, but the UAE transformation studies rarely evaluate how initiatives balance them and what “good fast” looks like in public services.	Operationalize innovation capability as two outcomes (speed and quality); test which knowledge pathways (tacit vs explicit) and governance practices improve speed without degrading quality, equity, and trust.	Wang & Wang (2012); Eggers et al. (2024); Dib et al. (2022)
Absorptive capacity underexamined	Absorptive capacity is known to shape whether knowledge becomes innovation, but its moderating role is rarely tested in the UAE public-sector innovation studies.	Model absorptive capacity as a moderator between knowledge sharing and innovation outcomes; identify which routines build absorptive capacity (training, communities of practice, after-action reviews, data integration).	Cohen & Levinthal (1990); Zahra & George (2002); Chatterjee et al. (2021); Duan et al. (2021)
Need for an integrative capability framework	Studies frequently treat leadership, knowledge sharing, absorptive capacity, and innovation capability separately, limiting cumulative explanation of how transformations become sustainable capability.	Build and test an integrated framework linking agile leadership → tacit/explicit knowledge sharing → innovation speed/quality, with absorptive capacity as a moderator; validate across multiple the UAE entities for generalizability.	Almazrouei et al. (2024); Ojiako et al. (2024); Lei, Gui & Le (2020)

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