

The Role of Leadership in Streamlining Cooperative Service Delivery through Technology

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Abstract

Contemporary organisational environments, shaped by rapid technological transformation and increasing complexity, demand a reassessment of leadership effectiveness beyond singular theoretical models. While transformational leadership remains a dominant paradigm for its motivational and visionary emphasis, its standalone application proves insufficient in addressing the ethical, relational, and technological dimensions increasingly central to effective leadership. This conceptual paper advances an integrative framework that synthesises transformational, servant, and digital leadership as complementary and mutually reinforcing dimensions of leadership effectiveness. Transformational leadership provides the motivational foundation through vision and inspiration; servant leadership embeds ethical rigour and relational depth through empathy and stewardship; while digital leadership extends adaptive capacity through technological fluency and data-driven governance. Drawing on contemporary leadership scholarship, the paper reconceptualises leadership effectiveness as a multidimensional and emergent construct, transcending the fragmentation that characterises existing literature. The cooperative sector serves as the contextual lens, illustrating how this triadic integration addresses the concurrent demands of participatory governance, stakeholder trust, and digital transformation. The synthesis reveals that leadership effectiveness arises not from the dominance of any single orientation, but from the dynamic equilibrium among motivational, ethical–relational, and technological–adaptive competencies. This framework offers both theoretical contributions to leadership scholarship and practical guidance for leaders navigating complex, digitally mediated organisational environments.

Keywords: Leadership Effectiveness, Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership, Digital Leadership, Integrative Leadership Framework, Multidimensional Leadership, Adaptive Leadership, Organisational Performance, Ethical Leadership, Digital Transformation, Cooperative

Introduction

Leadership effectiveness continues to lodge a central position in organisational research, particularly in light of the growing complexity, uncertainty, and technological transformation characterising contemporary organisational environments.

Traditional leadership theories largely focused on identifying stable characters or behaviours that distinguish effective leaders. However, such methods have been progressively criticized for their limited ability to account for contextual variability and the dynamic nature of leadership processes. More recent scholarship has shifted towards viewing leadership as a contextually embedded and adaptive phenomenon, shaped by the collaboration between leaders, followers, organisational systems, and external environments as mentioned Avolio et al. (2021) and Ye et al. (2025).

This evolution reflects a wider recognition that leadership effectiveness cannot be reduced to a singular set of attributes, but rather arises from the alignment of multiple competencies and contextual demands.

According to Bass & Riggio (2021) and Northouse (2022), within this evolving scenario, transformational leadership has emerged as one of the most influential paradigms, primarily due to its emphasis on vision, inspiration, and the development of followers. Extensive empirical evidence links transformational leadership with positive organisational outcomes, including enhanced commitment, innovation, and performance.

However, despite its prominence, increasing attention has been drawn to its conceptual and practical boundaries. In particular, transformational leadership has been criticised for its relative underemphasis on ethical grounding, relational depth, and the technological competences required in digitally mediated environments. These limitations suggest that while transformational leadership provides a strong motivational foundation, it may not fully cover the broader dimensions necessary for sustained leadership effectiveness.

In response to these limitations, other leadership perspectives have gained traction in recent years. Servant leadership, for instance, centres ethical behaviour, empathy, and the prioritisation of follower well-being and happiness, thereby introducing a relational and moral dimension to leadership practice.

Simultaneously, digital leadership has emerged as a critical capability, reflecting the growing importance of technological fluency, data-driven decision-making, and virtual engagement in determining organisational outcomes. Though each of these perspectives contributes valuable insights, the existing body of literature remains largely fragmented, with limited efforts to systematically integrate these approaches into a unified conceptual understanding. This fragmentation presents a significant and unresolved gap in leadership theory. A review of past studies reveals that while transformational leadership has been extensively examined in isolation (Bass & Riggio, 2021; Northouse, 2022; Ahmad et al., 2020), and servant leadership has been empirically validated as a driver of trust and ethical behaviour (Eva et al., 2021; Liden et al., 2021; Greenleaf, 2021), and digital leadership has been identified as an emerging imperative for technologically mediated governance (Westerman et al., 2021; Li & Chen, 2022; Wang & Liu, 2022), no study has yet proposed a unified conceptual framework that systematically integrates all three orientations. Existing literature treats these perspectives as parallel but separate streams, leaving unexplained how their combined

interaction shapes leadership effectiveness in complex, digitalised, and stakeholder-driven environments such as the cooperative sector. This study directly addresses that gap by advancing a conceptual synthesis between transformational, servant, and digital leadership as interconnected and mutually reinforcing dimensions of a unified leadership model.

The motivation for this study stems from a pressing practical reality: organisations across sectors, and cooperatives in particular, are simultaneously navigating member expectations for participatory and ethical governance, escalating performance pressures, and the imperatives of digital transformation. Despite the availability of multiple leadership theories, practitioners often lack conceptual guidance on how to integrate these orientations in a coherent, context-sensitive manner. The significance of this research lies in its potential to bridge this theory–practice divide. By conceptualising leadership effectiveness as a multidimensional and emergent phenomenon, this paper equips leaders and policymakers with a more holistic framework for understanding and cultivating effective leadership in digitally complex environments. Furthermore, for the cooperative sector specifically—where democratic values, stakeholder trust, and technological adaptation intersect—such an integrative framework carries direct relevance for governance reform and leadership development initiatives.

Rather than positioning these perspectives as competing and separate paradigms, the study conceptualises them as complementary dimensions that collectively shape leadership effectiveness. By doing so, this paper makes three primary contributions to the field. First, it theoretically advances leadership scholarship by offering a unified integrative framework that reconciles motivational, ethical–relational, and technological–adaptive dimensions of leadership—something absent from prior literature. Second, it extends contextual sensitivity in leadership theory by applying this framework to the cooperative sector, a setting underexplored in leadership research despite its distinctive governance demands. Third, it provides a practically relevant model for leadership development, enabling cooperative leaders and organisational practitioners to cultivate the full spectrum of competencies required for effective leadership in the digital era. In doing so, this paper responds to scholarly calls for more holistic, integrative, and context-informed approaches to leadership theory (Avolio et al., 2021; Ye et al., 2025).

Theoretical Overview

The theoretical framework for this study is principally anchored in Transformational Leadership Theory, which provides a dynamic mechanism for understanding how leaders can drive significant organisational change within the cooperative sector. As conceptualised by Bass and Riggio (2021), this theory emphasises a leader’s capacity to inspire and motivate subordinates beyond their immediate self-interest, fostering enduring commitment to personal and organisational development.

This model is predominantly suited to the context of cooperative because it aligns diverse member interests with a shared vision, moving away from traditional, stiff hierarchical structures toward a more inclusive and participative governance model.

The theory is operationalised through four key dimensions namely idealised influence, where leaders act as ethical role models; inspirational motivation, through the articulation of a

convincing future; intellectual stimulation, which encourages innovative problem-solving; and individualised consideration, where leaders provide personalised mentorship to members.

In the Malaysian service sector, transformational leadership has been empirically related to heightened engagement and performance, as it enables leaders to balance the democratic requirements of a cooperative with the strategic agility needed for market existence. Complementing this is the Digital Leadership Model, an emerging paradigm demanded by the rapid pace of technological change and the global reform toward digital-first operations. Digital leadership extends beyond the sheer adoption of tools; it requires a strategic mindset that integrates technology to enhance decision-making, streamline governance, and improve service delivery.

In the cooperative environment, this model plays an important role in fostering transparency and inclusivity, as digital platforms like online voting and virtual town halls allow for wider participation in decision-making processes regardless of geographic limitations. Leaders adopting this model must steer unique challenges, including the "digital divide" among older or rural demographics and possible resistance to changing traditional governance models. However, as evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic, cooperatives with strong digital leadership were better positioned to maintain business continuity, sustain member interactions, and adapt to instable economic conditions.

Ultimately, the integration of transformational and digital leadership creates a hybrid framework where technology serves as an assistant to human-centred, visionary leadership, ensuring that cooperatives remain resilient and relevant in a modern, vary business landscape.

Literature Review

Towards a Multidimensional Understanding of Leadership

Contemporary leadership research increasingly departs from the supposition that a single leadership style can universally ensure effectiveness. While previous models sought to identify dominant traits or behaviours, more recent scholarship conceptualises leadership as a contextually embedded and dynamically adaptive process (Avolio et al., 2021). This shift echoes the growing complexity of organisational environments, where leaders are required to concurrently manage performance demands, relational expectations, and technological transformation.

Within this evolving discourse, transformational leadership has emerged as a dominant model due to its emphasis on vision, motivation, and follower development (Bass & Riggio, 2021). However, its distinction has also prompted critical reassessment, particularly regarding its capability in addressing the broader dimensions of leadership effectiveness. Scholars increasingly argue that leadership effectiveness must be understood as a multidimensional construct, shaped by the collaboration of motivational, ethical, and technological capabilities rather than a singular leadership orientation.

Reframing Transformational Leadership: Beyond Inspiration

Transformational leadership (TL) has been consistently associated with positive organisational outcomes, including enhanced commitment, innovation, and performance as stated by Northouse (2022) and Ahmad et al. (2020). Its four behavioural dimensions namely idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualised consideration deliver a vigorous framework for understanding how leaders influence followers beyond transactional exchanges.

However, recent literature suggests that the effectiveness of transformational leadership is accountable upon its integration with other leadership mechanisms. In an organized and rule-based organisational contexts, reliance on inspiration alone may lead to uncertainty in expectations and inconsistencies in performance management. As such, academics highlight the importance of combining transformational leadership with transactional elements, such as clear goal-setting, monitoring, and reward systems, to ensure organisational steadiness (Yukl, 2021).

This evolving perspective reframes transformational leadership not as an independent model, but as a core motivational driver within a broader leadership system. Its role is to coherent vision and stimulate engagement, but its effectiveness is enhanced when complemented by structures that translate inspiration into measurable outcomes. Subsequently, transformational leadership is better understood as a necessary but insufficient condition for leadership effectiveness.

Servant Leadership: Embedding Ethics and Relational Depth

In contrast to the performance-oriented focus of transformational leadership, servant leadership presents a normative dimension centred on service, ethics, and follower well-being (Greenleaf, 2021). This perspective shifts the position of leadership from organisational objectives to the needs and development of followers, thereby redefining effectiveness in relational and moral terms.

Empirical studies prove that servant leadership fosters psychological safety, trust, and organisational citizenship behaviour as mentioned by Eva et al. (2021) and Liden et al. (2021). These outcomes are critical in environments where collaboration, engagement, and shared responsibility reinforce organisational success. By prioritising empathy and emotional intelligence, servant leadership toughens interpersonal relationships and enhances the social fabric of organisations.

According to Brown & Treviño (2022) from a governance standpoint, servant leadership reinforces ethical principles such as transparency, accountability, and fairness. These attributes are increasingly recognised as essential to sustainable organisational performance, particularly in settings characterised by stakeholder interdependence. Furthermore, cultural perspectives suggest that the effectiveness of servant leadership is influenced by societal values, with collectivist contexts demonstrating greater accessibility to service-oriented leadership approaches (Hofstede, 2021).

Despite these strengths, servant leadership is not without limitations as its emphasis on inclusivity and consensus may constrain decision-making speed and reduce strategic

responsiveness in highly competitive or time-sensitive environments (Yukl, 2021). This analysis underscores the need to position servant leadership not as an alternative to other models, but as a complementary dimension that implants ethical and relational depth within leadership practice.

Digital Leadership: Extending Leadership into the Technological Domain

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally altered the context in which leadership is exercised and giving growth to the concept of digital leadership. This perspective extends traditional leadership theories by incorporating technological competence, data-driven decision-making, and virtual engagement as core leadership capabilities as stated by Westerman et al. (2021).

Digital leadership improves organisational effectiveness by improving transparency, participation, and responsiveness. Digital platforms enable real-time communication and access to information, in that way strengthening stakeholder engagement and trust (Li & Chen, 2022). Moreover, organisations that successfully integrate digital technologies establish greater adaptability and resilience, particularly in volatile and uncertain environments (Wang & Liu, 2022).

The role of digital leadership becomes especially salient in crisis contexts, where technological infrastructure enables continuousness of operations and sustained stakeholder interaction, contributing an adaptive and resilience-oriented dimension to leadership effectiveness.

However, the integration of digital technologies also introduces significant challenges whereas resistance to change, digital illiteracy, and infrastructural limitations can hinder effective implementation. Additionally, ethical concerns related to data privacy, cybersecurity, and equitable access trigger the risks associated with digital transformation (Singh & Verma, 2022).

Critically, over-reliance on technology may weaken the human-centric aspects of leadership, including interpersonal relationships and emotional engagement (Eva et al., 2021). This strain suggests that digital leadership must be carefully balanced with relational and ethical considerations, reinforcing the argument that leadership effectiveness cannot be reduced to technological competence alone.

Synthesising Leadership Perspectives: Towards Conceptual Integration

The review of transformational, servant, and digital leadership reveals that each perspective captures distinct yet unified dimensions of leadership effectiveness. Transformational leadership emphasises vision and motivation while servant leadership foregrounds ethics and relationships, digital leadership idealised adaptability and technological competence.

Rather than viewing these approaches as competing paradigms, recent scholarship points towards the need for conceptual integration of all three. Leadership effectiveness emerges not from the dominance of any single type of leadership but from the dynamic interplay between these dimensions, shaped by organisational context and environmental demands.

This synthesis aligns with the broader shift in leadership theory towards hybrid and adaptive models, where leaders are obligatory to balance multiple, and sometimes competing, expectations. For instance, the ability to inspire innovation must be complemented by ethical governance, while technological efficiency must coexist with human-centric engagement.

Accordingly, leadership effectiveness can be reconceptualised as a multidimensional and emergent construct, encompassing motivational alignment (transformational dimension), relational and ethical grounding (servant dimension), and adaptive and technological capability (digital dimension).

This integrative perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of leadership in contemporary organisations, where effectiveness is contingent upon the leader's capability to navigate complexity rather than obey to a singular theoretical model.

Implications for Conceptual Development

The synthesis presented in this review highlights a critical gap in existing leadership literature which is the lack of a unified framework that systematically integrates motivational, ethical, and technological dimensions of leadership. While each perspective offers valuable insights, their fragmented application confines the explanatory power of leadership theory.

By conceptualising leadership effectiveness as an outcome of interacting leadership dimensions, this paper advances a more holistic theoretical foundation or fundamental. It suggests that future research should move beyond isolated constructs and instead examine how different styles of leadership orientations co-exist and reinforce one another in shaping organisational outcomes.

This integrative approach not only reflects the complexity of modern organisational environments but also provides a stronger basis for developing context-sensitive leadership models that are both theoretically robust and practically applicable.

Conclusion

The evolving organisational landscape characterised by complexity, technological disruption, and shifting stakeholder expectations necessitates a reassessment of what constitutes leadership effectiveness. Stretching from transformational, servant, and digital leadership paradigms, this paper has argued that leadership effectiveness cannot be confined to a singular orientation or behavioural model. Instead, it must be understood as a multidimensional construct—an integrative synthesis of motivational, ethical–relational, and technological–adaptive competencies.

The convergence of these dimensions provides a more nuanced and realistic explanation of how leaders in contemporary organisations, particularly cooperatives, can withstand performance, trust, and innovation within digitally mediated environments.

Transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2021; Northouse, 2022) remains an essential anchor, particularly for its aptitude to inspire collective purpose, foster innovation, and mobilise followers toward shared organisational goals. However, as this study highlighted, transformational leadership's inspirational force alone is insufficient in navigating contexts

characterised by ethical complexity and digital interdependence (Avolio et al., 2021; Yukl, 2021).

The cooperative sector exemplifies this challenge; leaders must motivate change while simultaneously ensuring participatory governance and equitable value distribution. Thus, transformational leadership provides the motivational foundation for articulating a shared vision, yet must be balanced with structural clarity and adaptive capacity to translate that vision into measurable outcomes.

In complement, servant leadership stresses moral rigour and relational integrity into leadership practice. The servant leadership model (Greenleaf, 2021; Liden et al., 2021) highlights that effective leadership is not merely about influencing others but about cultivating an environment of trust, empathy, and ethical stewardship.

This orientation strengthens social capital within cooperatives by centring human well-being as both a means and an end of organisational success. Its emphasis on transparency and accountability (Brown & Treviño, 2022) also aligns with the governance principles embedded in cooperative values like togetherness, providing a moral compass within rapidly transforming organisational ecosystems. Servant leadership thus corrects the ethical and relational boundaries observed in purely transformational models, ensuring that digital and strategic ambitions remain grounded in shared humanity.

Meanwhile, digital leadership expands the boundaries of leadership practice by recognising that technological fluency is now a precondition for effective governance and service delivery. As Westerman et al. (2021) and Li & Chen (2022) note, digital leadership extends beyond tool adoption to encompass data-driven decision-making, digital inclusivity, and continuous learning or life-long education. For cooperatives, digital platforms enable transparency, real-time participation, and equitable representation irrespective of geography among its members. Nevertheless, digital transformation also intensifies challenges such as inequalities in access, cybersecurity risks, and resistance to reform as stated by Singh & Verma (2022).

In this regard, digital leadership augments organisational resilience (Wang & Liu, 2022) but must remain balanced with servant leadership's ethical attentiveness and transformational leadership's emotional resonance to prevent over-reliance on technological infrastructure at the expense of human connection.

Synthesising these perspectives exposes an emergent paradigm of integrative leadership where a model that transcends theoretical fragmentation by operationalising leadership as a dynamic equilibrium among motivation, ethics, and technology. Transformational leadership contributes the why of leadership through vision and inspiration; servant leadership defines the how through care, ethics, and inclusivity; while digital leadership determines the where and what by enabling adaptability and innovation through digital infrastructures which matches service delivery within cooperative sector.

The resulting synthesis situates leadership effectiveness as an adaptive capability rather than a fixed trait, aligning leadership action with the contingencies of context and technology as mentioned by Avolio et al (2021). This integrative understanding reflects the growing

scholarly accord that leadership excellence arises from the ability to balance multiple, interdependent domains within complex organisational systems (Ye et al., 2025).

From a theoretical standpoint, this integrative framework advances leadership scholarship by offering a cohesive lens through which diverse leadership theories can be reconciled. It bridges motivational and ethical paradigms with technological imperatives, generating explanatory coherence for leadership phenomena in the digital era. Practically, it provides cooperative leaders with a guiding schematic for cultivating leadership effectiveness that remains both aspirational and operational. Leaders who eloquent compelling visions (transformational), exemplify moral humility (servant), and operationalise technological skill (digital) are best positioned to lead cooperatives toward sustained performance and inclusivity. The synergy of these dimensions alleviates the limitations of each single theory, promoting strategic agility, relational trust, and digital empowerment concurrently.

Furthermore, this multidimensional conceptualisation situates technology not as a substitute for human leadership but as an enabler of human-centred governance. As the cooperative sector increasingly leverages digital platforms for communication, participation, and decision-making, leadership must compose the intersection between technological opportunity and socio-organisational need.

Echoing Westerman et al. (2021), effective digital leaders in cooperative settings use technology to intensify participation among members, accountability, and information symmetry rather than to centralise authority. This aligns with servant leadership's moral imperative to empower others and with transformational leadership's drive to inspire shared visions. In this sense, leadership effectiveness becomes a dynamic process of alignment—between tools and values, systems and people, and innovation and ethics.

However, this paper also recognises that integrative leadership remains empirically underdeveloped. Future research should operationalise this multidimensional concept through quantitative and qualitative inquiry to validate its components and interrelations. Longitudinal studies could examine how the interaction between motivational, ethical, and digital dimensions influences cooperative performance, innovation capability, and member engagement.

Additionally, cross-cultural comparative studies may brighten how societal values, as highlighted by Hofstede (2021), moderate the salience and expression of these leadership dimensions in diverse cooperative contexts. Investigating these linkages would not only enhance theoretical precision but also inform leadership development practices synchronised to real-world complexity.

In conclusion, the synthesis presented here restates that leadership effectiveness in the digital age is neither singular nor static. It evolves through the continuous integration of human, ethical, and technological capacities. Transformational, servant, and digital leadership together form a triadic nexus that echoes the full spectrum of what contemporary leadership demands—visionary inspiration, relational integrity, and adaptive intelligence. By embracing this multidimensional approach, cooperatives and similar organisations can cultivate leadership ecosystems capable of fostering innovation, equity, and resilience among

digital transformation. This conceptual framework responds to the limitations of earlier unidimensional theories and underwrites to the ongoing refinement of leadership thought for organisations navigating the complexities of the 21st century.

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