

The Transition of Leadership Practices in Organisations Post COVID-19, Evidenced from The JSE Top 40 Organisations

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly transformed leadership practices across global organisations, with pronounced effects observed among Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Top 40 companies. This study explored the transition from traditional command-and-control leadership models to more adaptive, compassionate, and inclusive approaches, foregrounding the centrality of employee well-being in navigating crisis contexts. Framed by the BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) paradigm, the research examined how senior leaders responded to heightened uncertainty and complexity. Adaptability and empathy emerged as critical leadership competencies. The findings indicated that leaders who prioritised psychological safety, flexibility, and open communication were more effective in maintaining organisational performance, morale, and resilience during the pandemic. This study contributed to the growing body of crisis leadership literature and offered actionable insights into leadership development, strategic HR practices, and organisational sustainability in a post-pandemic world.

Keywords: Crisis leadership; BANI framework; JSE Top 40; Employee Well-being; Post-pandemic leadership; Adaptive leadership; Organisational resilience.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the world of business in ways no one could have fully anticipated. Almost overnight, organisations had to adapt to remote work, embrace digital solutions, and confront serious economic turbulence, while navigating the emotional toll the crisis took on their employees. For South Africa's largest and most influential companies, the JSE Top 40, this period marked a defining moment. These organisations, central to the country's economic stability, were faced with the tough challenge of keeping operations running while also looking after the well-being of their employees during a time filled with fear and uncertainty. In a society already grappling with deep socio-economic divides, the pandemic made it clear that leadership needed to go beyond strategy and structure, it had to show heart, empathy, and a genuine responsiveness to the human side of business.

From a social significance perspective, this study addresses a critical contemporary issue, how leadership practices must evolve in response to systemic crises that impact both business operations and employee well-being. Existing literature has increasingly called for a shift toward more empathetic, inclusive, and resilient leadership models in times of crisis (Dirani

et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021). However, empirical research that examines this shift within the context of emerging markets, particularly in Africa, remains limited. By focusing on the JSE Top 40, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how leadership practices can be reshaped to foster resilience, psychological safety, and human-centred organisational cultures during and beyond crisis events.

In terms of scientific significance, this research offers a novel contribution to the post-pandemic leadership discourse by integrating the BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) framework, an emerging paradigm that provides a more contemporary lens for analysing today's complex environments. While the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) model has historically guided leadership theory, BANI offers greater specificity in describing the instability and emotional dissonance leaders and employees experienced during COVID-19 (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). This study contributes to literature by addressing a notable gap. While the BANI framework is increasingly discussed in theoretical contexts, limited empirical studies have applied it to leadership behaviour within large

organisations. This research addresses that gap by empirically examining how leaders in JSE Top 40 companies applied adaptive strategies aligned with BANI conditions.

The study is grounded in a conceptual framework that intersects crisis leadership theory, emotional intelligence, and the BANI model. It draws on transformational and servant leadership theories (Bass, 1990; Greenleaf, 1977) to explain the emergence of empathetic and inclusive leadership responses, and integrates psychological safety theory (Edmondson, 1999) to highlight the role of trust and well-being during organisational recovery. These theoretical strands are interwoven within the BANI framework to contextualise how leadership must evolve in response to brittle systems, anxious workforces, non-linear disruptions, and incomprehensible change.

Against this backdrop, the study aims to explore how leadership practices evolved within South Africa's JSE Top 40 companies in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, it investigates how traditional hierarchical models gave way to more adaptive, emotionally intelligent, and inclusive approaches, with a particular

emphasis on employee well-being and psychological safety. The research objectives are threefold: first, to examine how leaders responded to organisational fragility, heightened anxiety, and decision-making under uncertainty; second, to identify how adaptability, collaboration, and responsiveness emerged as strategic priorities; and third, to surface the competencies required for navigating high-pressure, high-ambiguity environments, including emotional intelligence, stakeholder co-creation, and digital engagement. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study contributes empirical insight into the evolving role of leaders in South Africa's corporate sector and adds to the growing body of knowledge on post-crisis leadership in complex, emotionally charged conditions. The remainder of the study is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on leadership during periods of crisis. Section 3 outlines the research design and methodology employed in the current study. Section 4 presents the findings and provides an interpretation of the results. Finally, Section 5 offers the conclusion.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted organisational leadership worldwide, forcing companies to adapt to an era of extreme uncertainty, rapid digital transformation, and evolving workforce expectations (Dirani et al., 2020). Traditional leadership models, which historically prioritised hierarchy, efficiency, and control, proved inadequate in the face of prolonged crises requiring adaptability, empathy, and resilience (Kniffin et al., 2021). While extensive research exists on crisis leadership in developed markets (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016; West et al., 2020), there is a critical knowledge gap in understanding how leadership evolved within emerging markets, particularly in South Africa's JSE Top 40 companies, which form a significant part of the national economy.

This section reviews the existing literature on crisis-era leadership, examining how leadership models evolved during the pandemic. It also introduces the BANI (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) framework as a lens for understanding leadership in an unpredictable world.

2.1 The Evolution of Leadership: From Hierarchy to Adaptability Pre-Pandemic Leadership: A Traditionalist Approach

Before COVID-19, many corporate environments, including those within the JSE Top 40, were dominated by transactional and bureaucratic leadership models, which focused on efficiency, top-down control, and performance-based incentives (Bass & Avolio, 1994). These models worked well in stable environments but lacked the agility needed for crisis response (Mhlanga, 2021).

The Rise of Adaptive and Compassionate Leadership During COVID-19

The pandemic catalysed a fundamental leadership shift, with many organisations adopting adaptive leadership (Heifetz et al., 2009) and compassionate leadership (West et al., 2020) to navigate the crisis. Adaptive leadership encourages decentralised decision-making, rapid learning, and an openness to change, while compassionate leadership emphasises employee well-being and psychological safety.

Recent studies confirm that leaders who prioritised adaptability and empathy were more successful in maintaining employee engagement and performance during the

crisis (Carroll & Conboy, 2020). This shift was particularly evident within the JSE Top 40, where leaders grappled with the dual pressures of maintaining operational continuity and safeguarding employee well-being amid high stress and pervasive uncertainty, reflected in the fact that 70% of these companies formally recognised pandemic-related risks as emergent governance priorities (Denhere & Moloi, 2024).

2.2 The BANI Framework: A More Relevant Lens Than VUCA Why VUCA Became Insufficient

For decades, the VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) framework guided leadership strategy during turbulent times (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). However, COVID-19 exposed the limitations of VUCA, as it failed to capture the deeper psychological and systemic fragilities revealed by the pandemic (Cascio & Montealegre, 2016).

BANI: A New Model for Crisis-Era Leadership

The BANI framework (Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, Incomprehensible) provides a more accurate depiction of modern leadership challenges (Sukhera, 2021). This model suggests that leaders must:

- Recognise systemic fragility (Brittle), Build resilience through decentralised decision-making.
- Address workforce anxiety (Anxious), Foster psychological safety and well-being.
- Adapt to unpredictable changes (Nonlinear), Develop flexible, scenario-based strategies.
- Navigate uncertainty (Incomprehensible), Emphasise transparency and communication.

To visualise the practical application of the BANI framework in leadership settings, Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual model that connects environmental volatility to leadership behaviour and, ultimately, organisational outcomes. As proposed by Sukhera (2021), the BANI conditions, Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear, and Incomprehensible, demand a shift in how leaders respond to disruption. This model suggests that leaders who adopt adaptive, compassionate, and inclusive leadership styles are better positioned to mitigate systemic fragility, alleviate workforce anxiety, respond flexibly to unpredictability, and navigate informational complexity. These leadership adaptations, in turn, foster enhanced employee well-being, sustained organisational performance, and a culture

of trust and resilience, particularly in high-pressure environments. The framework helps ground abstract leadership theories in actionable practice and offers a structured lens for navigating modern uncertainty.

Figure 1 – Conceptual Framework - Leadership Adaptation to BANI Conditions



Source: Adapted from BANI framework (Sukhera, 2021) and leadership theory (Heifetz et al., 2009; West et al., 2020).

2.3 Synthesis of Leadership Models Relevant to Crisis Contexts

The literature provides a range of theoretical models to guide leadership during times of disruption. Table 1 below summarises key frameworks and their application during the pandemic, showing how they support your findings from the JSE Top 40 context.

Table 1 – Comparative Summary of Crisis Leadership Models

Leadership Model	Key Traits	Relevance During COVID-19	Limitations
Adaptive Leadership	Experimentation, decentralisation, agility	Enabled quick responses to uncertainty (Heifetz et al., 2009)	Can cause instability in rigid structures
Compassionate Leadership	Empathy, listening, well-being focus	Fostered trust and psychological safety (West et al., 2020)	Risk of perceived lack of authority
Transformational Leadership	Vision, long-term motivation	Inspired employees through crisis (Bass & Avolio, 1994)	Less agile in short-term disruptions
Servant Leadership	Service to others, ethical decision-making	Prioritised people over profit (Greenleaf, 2002)	Can be challenging in high-stakes crises
BANI-Aware Leadership	Emotional intelligence, adaptability, agility	Addressed modern crisis realities (Sukhera, 2021)	Still under-theorised in empirical studies

Sources: Heifetz et al. (2009); West et al. (2020); Bass and Avolio (1994); Greenleaf (2002); Sukhera (2021)

This comparison highlights how leadership models evolved during the pandemic, particularly in South Africa's corporate sector. The integration of BANI principles with adaptive and compassionate leadership models offered a strategic advantage to JSE Top 40 companies, ensuring long-term resilience and performance.

2.4 Knowledge Gap and Contribution to Scholarship

While there is substantial literature on crisis leadership (Dirani et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021), there is limited empirical research on how leadership specifically evolved within South Africa's JSE Top 40 during COVID-19. This study fills a critical gap by:

- Applying the BANI framework to real-world corporate leadership cases.
- Examining leadership transitions in an emerging market context, which differs from Western-centric studies.
- Providing empirical evidence on how adaptive and compassionate leadership shaped employee well-being and organisational performance.

By addressing these gaps, this research contributes both theoretical advancements and practical applications for leadership development in the post-pandemic world.

This literature review establishes the theoretical foundation for understanding leadership transitions post-COVID-19. It highlights the relevance of adaptive, compassionate, and BANI-aware

leadership models in guiding organisations through crisis. The next section will detail the methodology, outlining how this study empirically investigates leadership transitions within South Africa's JSE Top 40.

Research Design and Methodology

Building on the conceptual foundations discussed in the literature, this study employed an empirical investigation to explore how senior leaders within South Africa's JSE Top 40 organisations navigated leadership transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodology outlined below was designed to capture both the breadth and depth of this transition through a mixed methods approach.

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed methods research (MMR) design, comprising an initial quantitative phase followed by qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative strand identified broad patterns in leadership transitions, while the qualitative strand offered explanatory depth through semi-structured interviews. This design was appropriate given the need to explore both measurable trends and subjective experiences within crisis-era leadership.

The study was situated within a pragmatic paradigm, integrating post-positivist assumptions in the quantitative phase and constructivist interpretations in the qualitative phase. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of leadership behaviours, combining statistical analysis with context-rich narratives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2014).

The target population comprised senior executives from companies listed on the JSE Top 40 Index, selected due to their strategic roles and direct involvement in organisational responses during the COVID-19 crisis. For the quantitative phase, a non-probability sampling technique was used, combining convenience and voluntary response methods, which were appropriate given the elite nature and limited availability of participants (Etikan et al., 2016).

A total of 182 valid responses were received via a structured online survey, exceeding minimum thresholds for exploratory leadership research (Nulty, 2008). For the qualitative phase, 11 senior leaders were purposively selected from the quantitative sample based on their relevance to emerging themes. This purposive sampling enabled depth and thematic richness, aligning with qualitative

inquiry standards (Palinkas et al., 2015). Data saturation was achieved by the 11th interview, in line with established guidelines (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Quantitative data was collected utilising a structured, self-administered questionnaire distributed via Microsoft Forms and LinkedIn. The instrument included Likert-scale items adapted from validated leadership and crisis response frameworks and assessed constructs such as leadership adaptability, inclusiveness, and employee well-being. The questionnaire ensured content validity by aligning with contemporary leadership literature. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. An interview guide, informed by the quantitative results, facilitated consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to explore participants lived experiences. Interviews averaged 35–45 minutes in duration and was recorded with participant consent.

Quantitative data was analysed utilising SPSS v26 and RStudio, focusing on reliability and construct validity. Cronbach's alpha confirmed internal consistency across all major constructs ($\alpha > 0.70$), while Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation supported scale validity (Field, 2013). Pearson

correlation analysis was utilised to examine relationships between leadership variables, such as adaptability and employee well-being. Qualitative data was analysed utilising thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A six-step coding process was applied to identify recurring patterns in leadership behaviour, emotional engagement, and organisational response. The constructivist lens informed the interpretation of themes, recognising the role of context and experience in shaping leadership practices.

The integration of both datasets occurred at the interpretation stage, allowing for triangulation of findings. Convergence between quantitative trends and qualitative narratives enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional ethics committee (Ref: RBSREC2023/008). Informed consent was secured from all participants, who was briefed on the study's aims, confidentiality protocols, and their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was preserved, and data were stored securely in accordance with institutional and national research ethics standards (Bhandari, 2021). A small-scale pilot study was conducted with five senior leaders from non-JSE companies to test the clarity and reliability

of both instruments. Minor revisions were made to improve question phrasing. Cronbach's alpha scores confirmed the

Presentation of Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, structured by the mixed methods design. The **quantitative results** offer a statistical overview of leadership shifts within the JSE Top 40 during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the **qualitative results** provide thematic insights from senior executives. Integration of findings is presented through triangulation. internal consistency of the survey tool, while the interview guide proved effective for eliciting rich narrative responses.

4.1 Quantitative Findings

From the 182 completed survey responses, 69.8% of participants agreed that **adaptability** was more important than resilience in post-pandemic leadership. Additionally, over 60% indicated alignment **with inclusive or democratic leadership styles**, while only 29.5% reported adherence to autocratic models. A significant majority (over 70%) indicated that **employee mental health and well-being** had become strategic leadership priorities during the pandemic period.

Table 2 denotes the perceptions of respondents regarding the emergence of new leadership practices influenced by COVID-19.

Table 2 – The Impact of Uncertain Change & The Emergence of New Leadership Practices (N=182)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	σ	Decision
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)			
The impact of uncertain change through COVID-19 impacted my organisation positively?	11 (6,04)	50 (27,47)	43 (23,63)	66 (36,26)	12 (6,59)	3,10	1,07	Low Perception
The impact of uncertain change through COVID-19 impacted my organisations employees positively?	16 (8,79)	62 (34,07)	48 (26,37)	49 (26,92)	7 (3,85)	2,83	1,05	Low Perception
The impact of uncertain change through COVID-19 influenced my organisations leaders to transition their leadership practices?	7 (3,85)	24 (13,19)	30 (16,48)	103 (56,59)	18 (9,89)	3,55	0,97	High Perception
The impact of uncertain change through COVID-19 influenced my organisations leaders to transition their leadership practices, which impacted the organisation positively?	9 (4,95)	28 (15,38)	38 (20,88)	90 (49,45)	17 (9,34)	3,43	1,02	High Perception
The impact of uncertain change through COVID-19 influenced my organisations leaders to transition their leadership practices, which impacted employees positively?	10 (5,49)	30 (16,48)	39 (21,43)	84 (46,15)	19 (10,44)	3,40	1,06	High Perception
The impact of COVID-19 has influenced the emergence of new leadership paradigms required for my organisational success?	3 (1,65)	22 (12,09)	31 (17,03)	100 (54,95)	26 (14,29)	3,68	0,92	High Perception
The new leadership paradigms will have a positive impact on my organisations agility, adaptability and success?	3 (1,65)	15 (8,24)	27 (14,84)	105 (57,69)	32 (17,58)	3,81	0,88	High Perception
Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have noted my organisations leaders to be more empathetic?	17 (9,34)	20 (10,99)	41 (22,53)	84 (46,15)	20 (10,99)	3,38	1,12	High Perception
Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have noted my organisations leaders to display more compassion?	15 (8,24)	19 (10,44)	44 (24,18)	84 (46,15)	20 (10,99)	3,41	1,08	High Perception
Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have noted my organisations leaders to be more autocratic in their approach?	27 (14,84)	69 (37,91)	34 (18,68)	36 (19,78)	16 (8,79)	2,70	1,20	Low Perception
Since the COVID-19 pandemic, I have noted my organisations leaders to be more democratic in their approach?	13 (7,14)	28 (15,38)	45 (24,73)	81 (44,51)	15 (8,24)	3,31	1,06	Low Perception
Since the COVID-19 pandemic, my organisations leaders have deployed leadership practices that bolster the organisation with organisational agility?	8 (4,40)	28 (15,38)	42 (23,08)	79 (43,41)	25 (13,74)	3,47	1,05	High Perception
Since the COVID-19 pandemic, my organisations leaders have deployed leadership practices that bolster the organisation for organisational success?	6 (3,30)	24 (13,19)	40 (21,98)	89 (48,90)	23 (12,64)	3,54	0,98	High Perception

Note N = 182 SDis = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree.

SAg = Strongly Agree; Decision – Mean of Means = $43.62/13 = 3.35$.

Source: IBM SPSS Statistics 27

The data analytics in Table 2 illustrated that majority of the participants noted a high perception that the impact of uncertain change through COVID-19 influenced their organisations leaders to transition their leadership practices. These transitioned practices impacted on the organisation and employees positively. Based on the average weighted mean of 3.35 majority of the participants denoted high perception, noting that the impact of COVID-19 had influenced the emergence of new leadership practices as paradigms required for their organisational success and these new leadership paradigms will have a positive impact on their organisation's agility, adaptability and success. Majority of the participants further felt that since the COVID-19 pandemic, they noted their organisations leaders to be more empathetic, display more compassion, deployed leadership practices that bolstered the organisations with organisational agility and success. However, conversely majority of the participants noted low perception the fact that the impact of uncertain change through COVID-19 impacted their organisation positively. They further noted the low perception that since the COVID-19 pandemic, they have noted that

organisations leaders to be more autocratic and democratic in their approach.

Mukhtar, Asmawiyah, Nurjaya and Tahir (2021) discuss importance of empathic leadership through the COVID-19 pandemic and noted that leader empathy has a positive and significant effect on job satisfaction. Dreamer's empathy has a positive, however not significant relationship to performance, however job satisfaction as an intermediary variable can increase worker performance. Mukhtar et al. (2021) further note that employee performance can increase if mediated by job satisfaction, so that the job satisfaction factor should be a concern for company leaders. Pearson correlation analyses further revealed a strong positive relationship between leadership adaptability and employee well-being initiatives ($r = .63, p < .01$), suggesting that leaders who adapted rapidly were more likely to implement supportive measures. Factor analysis confirmed the construct validity of the key themes, with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure exceeding 0.8 and Cronbach's alpha values above the 0.7 threshold.

Table 3 extends this by examining perceptions of leadership behaviour and practices during the COVID-19 period.

Table 3 – The Perceptions of Leadership Behaviour and Practices (N=182)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	σ	Decision
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)			
My organisations current leadership behaviour, is that which is deemed above acceptable?	8 (4,40)	26 (14,29)	31 (17,30)	96 (52,75)	21 (11,54)	3,53	1,02	Low Perception
My organisations leaders portrayed above acceptable leadership behaviour through the COVID-19 pandemic periods?	4 (2,20)	16 (8,79)	33 (18,13)	98 (53,85)	31 (17,03)	3,75	0,92	High Perception
My organisations current leadership practices is that which is above acceptable?	5 (2,75)	28 (15,38)	37 (20,33)	84 (46,15)	28 (15,38)	3,56	1,02	Low Perception
My organisations leaders portrayed above acceptable leadership practices through the COVID-19 pandemic periods?	3 (1,65)	19 (10,44)	41 (22,53)	81 (44,51)	38 (20,88)	3,73	0,96	Low Perception
My organisations current leadership are bold to make tough decisions through uncertain terrains?	5 (2,75)	21 (11,54)	26 (14,29)	86 (47,25)	44 (24,18)	3,79	1,03	High Perception
My organisations leaders made tough decisions through COVID-19 which had positive impact on employees well being?	6 (3,30)	22 (12,09)	37 (20,33)	77 (42,31)	40 (21,98)	3,68	1,05	High Perception
I had the confidence in my organisations leaders to lead through the COVID-19 crisis?	4 (2,20)	14 (7,69)	40 (21,98)	86 (47,25)	38 (20,88)	3,77	0,94	High Perception
I have the confidence in my organisations leaders to lead through new norms of uncertain terrains?	9 (4,95)	27 (14,84)	27 (14,84)	85 (46,70)	34 (18,68)	3,59	1,10	Low Perception

Note N = 182 SDis = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree;

SAg = Strongly Agree; Decision – Mean of Means = $33.00/9 = 3.67$.

Source: IBM SPSS Statistics 27

The data analytics in Table 3 depicted that majority of the participants attested that their organisations leaders portrayed above acceptable leadership behaviour through the COVID-19 pandemic periods and are bold enough to make tough decisions through uncertain terrains. The data analytics further alluded to the fact that the

majority of the participants felt that their organisations leaders made tough decisions through COVID-19 which had positive impact on employee's well-being, which further provide confidence to the participants organisational leaders to lead through the COVID-19 crisis. However, the mean of means depicted that there was a

low perception noted by the participants with regards their organisations current leadership behaviour and practices, been deemed above acceptable. This question was posed in an affirmation questioning technique and similarly there was a low perception by the participants noting that their organisations leaders did not portray above acceptable leadership practices through the COVID-19 pandemic periods. In conclusion the data depicted that the participants further displayed a low perception for the confidence in their organisations leaders to lead through new norms of uncertain terrains.

Richards (2021) discusses impactful leadership practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. He noted the larger scale of unexpected events and higher levels of uncertainty, that many leaders faced difficulties in managing their employees and stakeholders. Thus, to overcome their challenges from the pandemic, leaders began mastering crisis management in the time of a pandemic, which required an overly directive and actionist leadership style. Richards (2021) further noted that leaders grew a capability to make quick decisions in exceptional circumstances which aided leaders to take a more human-centric and radically driven decisions approach. Richards (2021) summarises and

attest that the leadership styles and practices that proved to be most effective during the COVID-19 pandemic was that of proper planning, compassion, and leadership confidence. He further noted that policymakers continued to introduce new policies to save the economy, while organisational leaders implemented behavioural changes to prevent the pandemic from further affecting their businesses and stakeholders. By finding new these possibilities in such a persistent crisis, great leaders seized the opportunity and gave their employees and the world new hope for a better future.

Overall, the quantitative results affirm that adaptability, empathy, and psychological safety were central to leadership during the COVID-19 crisis, while traditional autocratic approaches diminished in relevance.

4.3 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of 11 executive interviews surfaced three dominant themes:

- **Inclusive and Flexible Leadership:** Leaders described a shift away from command-and-control approaches toward collaborative decision-making. One participant noted, “Leadership today is about creating

space for your teams to think, contribute, and feel valued.”

- **Empathy and Psychological Safety:** Leaders prioritised check-ins, emotional support, and mental health initiatives. A senior executive stated, “Listening, checking in on emotional well-being, being flexible, these were no longer HR issues; they were leadership issues.”
- **Leadership Development and Capacity Building:** Several respondents emphasised that crisis leadership was not innate but developed. One remarked, “We’ve

doubled our focus on EQ and resilience training.”

4.4 Integrated Insights (Triangulation)

Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data revealed strong alignment between the statistical trends and personal narratives. For example, the high survey agreement on adaptability was echoed in qualitative accounts of decentralised decision-making and rapid learning. Similarly, survey responses highlighting employee well-being, which was reinforced by interviewees who described tangible efforts to support staff during the pandemic.

Table 4 below summarises this integration, connecting quantitative trends with qualitative elaboration.

Table 4 – Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

Theme	Quantitative Insight	Qualitative Insight
Adaptive Leadership	69.78% said adaptability > resilience	Widely affirmed; considered critical for future-fit leadership
Inclusive Leadership	60%+ noted democratic tendencies in leadership	Groundedness score: 37; inclusive decision-making and psychological safety
Empathy and Well-being	High scores for leadership support on well-being & mental health	Groundedness: 18; themes of emotional intelligence and trust-building
Capacity Building	Perception of strategic leadership evolution post-COVID	Groundedness: 31; emphasis on training, EQ, and proactive upskilling
Traditional Leadership Decline	29.52% still aligned with autocratic styles	Participants called for evolution from outdated top-down models

Discussion

This study set out to examine how leadership practices evolved within South Africa's JSE Top 40 in response to the COVID-19 crisis, with a focus on adaptability, inclusion, and employee well-being. The findings indicate a marked departure from traditional hierarchical leadership toward models that prioritise flexibility, empathy, and psychological safety, validating insights from literature.

5.1 Leadership Adaptability as a Strategic Imperative

Consistent with Objective 1, the prioritisation of adaptability over resilience reflects a broader shift toward adaptive leadership, particularly in conditions of uncertainty and disruption (Heifetz et al., 2009). Leaders who responded effectively did so by empowering teams, encouraging distributed problem-solving, and demonstrating agility in decision-making. The BANI framework's emphasis on nonlinearity and incomprehensibility was evidenced in the way leaders navigated unpredictable scenarios using real-time information and iterative strategies.

5.2 Human-Centric Leadership and Well-being

Aligned with Objective 2, the emphasis on employee well-being was not merely

reactive but became integrated into leadership priorities. Leaders applied compassionate leadership principles (West et al., 2020), shifting from transactional engagement to authentic care and emotional support. This transition helped mitigate anxiety (BANI's second dimension) and promoted a psychologically safe environment conducive to continuity of performance.

5.3 Emerging Leadership Competencies

In response to Objective 3, the study found that emotional intelligence, stakeholder co-creation, and continuous learning have become foundational to effective leadership in a post-pandemic world. These competencies reflect a deeper transformation in executive development programmes, where technical skills are now augmented by relational and adaptive capacities. Interview data suggest that formal training in empathy, scenario planning, and digital engagement is becoming standard.

5.4 Structural Shifts in Leadership Models

Only 29.5% of participants aligned with autocratic styles post-pandemic, indicating a structural shift in leadership norms. The rise of inclusive, emotionally intelligent, and BANI-responsive models suggests that

the crisis served as a tipping point for leadership paradigms. These findings are consistent with Sukhera's (2021) call for leaders to navigate brittle systems with emotional resilience and cognitive clarity.

5.5 Interpretation of Findings

The study's findings highlight a clear transformation in leadership practices within the JSE Top 40, driven by the demands of the COVID-19 crisis. This transition reflects a broader shift from traditional, hierarchical models toward more adaptive, inclusive, and compassionate leadership, aligning closely with the conditions described in the BANI framework.

Leaders who demonstrated adaptability were better positioned to respond to the brittle and nonlinear challenges presented by the pandemic. This supports the relevance of adaptive leadership, particularly its emphasis on decentralised decision-making, learning agility, and situational flexibility (Heifetz et al., 2009). Concurrently, the prioritisation of psychological safety and emotional well-being revealed a growing alignment with

compassionate leadership models (West et al., 2020), where empathy and relational sensitivity are integral to sustaining team cohesion under stress.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative insights suggests that these changes were not ad hoc responses but part of a deeper structural evolution in leadership norms. The decline in autocratic leadership preferences and rise of inclusive practices indicate a redefinition of executive roles, toward collaboration, communication, and emotional intelligence.

By applying the BANI framework to a real-world emerging market context, this study offers a novel contribution to crisis leadership literature. It provides empirical insight into how senior leaders in Africa's largest corporates recalibrated their leadership in response to systemic disruption, offering a foundation for future leadership development in volatile and emotionally charged environments.

Delineations and Limitations

This study focused exclusively on senior executives within South Africa's JSE Top 40 companies, offering deep insights into leadership transformation within large, listed corporates during the COVID-19 crisis. While this focus provided access to strategic-level leadership behaviours in high-impact organisations, it limits the generalisability of findings to smaller firms, public sector entities, or other emerging markets. The use of non-probability sampling, though appropriate for elite access, may also introduce selection bias and reduce representativeness.

Additionally, reliance on self-reported data, particularly in the qualitative interviews, raises the possibility of social desirability bias. However, these limitations were mitigated through methodological triangulation and thematic saturation, which enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. Future studies could expand the scope to include diverse organisational contexts or adopt a longitudinal design to assess the sustainability of observed leadership changes over time.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how leadership practices within South Africa's JSE Top 40

organisations transitioned in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a specific focus on adaptability, inclusion, and employee well-being. The findings revealed a marked shift from traditional, top-down leadership approaches toward more adaptive, emotionally intelligent, and inclusive models. These changes were not temporary crisis responses but indicative of a deeper reconfiguration of leadership identity, one increasingly shaped by the demands of a BANI environment.

Leaders who demonstrated agility, empathy, and collaborative decision-making were more successful in navigating the brittle and nonlinear disruptions of the pandemic. The prioritisation of psychological safety and mental health highlighted the rising importance of human-centric leadership practices. By applying the BANI framework within an African corporate context, this study contributes new empirical insights to the global discourse on crisis leadership and organisational transformation.

Based on these findings, several actionable recommendations are proposed. First, leadership development programmes should embed adaptive and compassionate competencies, including scenario-based decision-making, emotional intelligence,

and digital empathy. Second, executive evaluation frameworks should evolve to include non-financial indicators such as psychological safety, inclusiveness, and resilience-building. Third, organisations should institutionalise employee well-being as a strategic imperative, supported by policies, tools, and metrics that sustain it beyond crisis periods. Lastly, corporate boards and policymakers may consider

integrating crisis-readiness assessments into governance codes to strengthen leadership accountability during systemic shocks.

Together, these recommendations support the cultivation of resilient, responsive, and human-centred leadership capable of navigating uncertainty in a post-pandemic world.

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