

# Competencies for leadership development in hybrid work environments



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**Orientation:** The exponential change experienced by organisations, driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and accelerated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, has transformed work arrangements and placed new demands on organisations to develop leadership competencies suited to this dynamic environment.

**Research purpose:** To identify and empirically validate the competencies for leadership development in hybrid work environments within a regulatory institution in South Africa.

**Motivation for the study:** Understanding the competencies required to lead distributed teams is essential for organisational resilience and employee engagement.

**Research approach/design and method:** A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving semi-structured interviews with 30 participants across executive and senior leadership, middle management and individual contributors. Thematic analysis, supported by ATLAS.ti, was used to identify key leadership competencies.

**Main findings:** The research identified nine competencies for leading hybrid teams grouped into three domains: (1) human-centric (empathy, employee well-being, trust and autonomy), (2) strategic and operational (digital proficiency, output-based management, agility and adaptability), and (3) enabling and integrative (communication, collaboration, inclusion and resilience). These formed the leadership competencies for hybrid work environments (LCHWE).

**Practical/managerial implications:** The findings underscore the need to identify the necessary competencies to inform effective leadership development and strategies for hybrid workforces.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study advances the discourse on leadership by proposing an LCHWE, providing practical guidance for leadership and talent development professionals and laying a foundation for future research.

**Keywords:** leadership; hybrid work; Fourth Industrial Revolution; COVID-19; leadership competencies; leadership development; emotional intelligence; trust and adaptability.

## Introduction

Technological convergence associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic accelerated the institutionalisation of hybrid work, defined here as a deliberate combination of remote and on-site work, governed by formal policies and digital infrastructure (Agbehadji et al., 2021; Collings et al., 2021; Mayer, 2024). Beyond location, hybrid work reconfigures how oversight, coordination and culture are enacted. In regulatory institutions, where decisions must be transparent, defensible and auditable, the leadership challenge is not merely to enable flexibility but also to sustain compliance, risk management and public accountability without relying on co-presence (Voloc, 2021).

While scholarship documents leadership in distributed settings, much of that work is situated in generic corporate or multinational contexts, offering limited relevance for rule-bound organisations (Bisschoff et al., 2024; McCombs et al., 2024). In South Africa, uneven digital access and historically hierarchical contexts further complicate the translation of global leadership prescriptions into practice. Consequently, there is a need for an empirically grounded, context-specific articulation of the competencies that enable leaders to reconcile agility with compliance and inclusion in hybrid environments. This study addresses that need by deriving and validating a competency set for hybrid leadership in a South African financial regulatory institution.

## Problem and significance

Leadership models developed for stable, co-located teams inadequately address the paradoxes inherent in hybrid work, managing visibility without surveillance, cultivating trust without physical proximity and enabling discretion within auditable boundaries (Bisschoff et al., 2024; McCombs et al., 2024). These tensions are amplified in regulatory institutions that must preserve operational continuity and public trust while functioning through distributed, digitally mediated processes (DasGupta, 2011; Voloc, 2021). The absence of a regulatory-contextualised competency framework constrains leadership development and readiness for future disruptions. This study contributes by specifying a competency architecture responsive to the constraints and opportunities of hybrid leadership in a compliance-intensive environment.

## Research purpose and objectives

### Purpose statement

The purpose of this study was to identify leadership development competencies in hybrid work environments within a financial regulatory institution in South Africa.

### Research questions

This study attempted to answer the following questions: (1) *What were the challenges and successes experienced by the leaders and team members in leading teams that transitioned to remote and hybrid modes of work post- COVID-19?*; (2) *What support did the leaders and team members receive from their organisation to lead in remote and hybrid work environments?*; (3) *What leadership approaches and strategies did the leaders employ to lead teams in a hybrid work environment?*; and (4) *What do the leaders and team members view as the competencies required for leadership development in hybrid work environments?*

## Literature review

### Hybrid work, fourth industrial revolution and leadership

Hybrid work has shifted the locus of leadership from proximity supervision to digitally mediated influence, requiring competencies that integrate relational sensitivity with technological fluency (Collings et al., 2021; Mayer, 2024). The literature converges on recurring demands, maintaining cohesion, calibrating autonomy and safeguarding well-being, yet offers limited theorisation for rule-bound settings where audit trails, compliance, and risk controls shape leadership discretion.

### Hybrid work in financial and regulatory context

Financial and professional services have widely implemented hybrid models; however, regulatory bodies face additional accountability requirements (e.g. evidence-led decision paths, consistent application of rules and cybersecurity constraints) that complicate inclusive participation and timely decision-making. (Mariscal-Cáceres et al., 2024; Nesindande et al., 2024). South African contexts introduce further structural challenges (digital inequality, legacy

hierarchies) that condition how leadership competencies are enacted in hybrid arrangements.

### Theoretical anchors and gaps

Classical theories such as traits, behavioural and contingency offer useful baselines but underspecify leadership practice when visibility is partial, and coordinated across digital platforms (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). Contemporary theories being transformational, adaptive, and situational, foreground agility, emotional intelligence and context sensitivity (Heifetz & Linsky, 2014; Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016). Hybrid leadership is not reducible to any single model; rather, it requires integration across relational (trust, empathy), digital (platform fluency, data stewardship) and structural (outcome-based management, inclusion protocols) dimensions. The present study addresses this integrative gap by deriving a competency set that is empirically anchored in a regulatory case and analytically linked to these theoretical strands.

## Research design

### Design and case boundaries

An interpretivist, exploratory single-case study was undertaken to examine how leadership competencies are understood (Bryman, 2016). The case is bounded by: (1) a South African financial regulatory institution; (2) leaders and employees engaged in hybrid work during the post-pandemic normalisation period; and (3) the organisational policies and digital systems governing hybrid work during the study timeframe.

### Sampling

As shown in Table 1, a purposive, stratified sampling yielded 30 participants distributed across three organisational levels as follows:

- Executive and senior leadership (9 participants)
- Middle management and team leaders (10 participants)
- Individual contributors (11 participants)

This structure enabled the study to capture a wide spectrum of leadership experiences across hierarchical layers within the regulatory institution.

To preserve confidentiality in a single institution context while enhancing transparency, the following aggregated, non-identifying indicators are provided to illustrate the diversity of the sample:

### Demographic and professional diversity

The demographic and professional diversity were as follows:

- Gender representation was balanced across cohorts, with both males and females represented in executive and senior leadership, middle and team leadership, and non-managerial levels.
- Age and career stage diversity were evident, ranging from early career professionals to long-term senior

**TABLE 1:** Research sample.

| Cohorts                             | Participant  | Level               | Department (type) | Age group (years) | Race                 | Gender | Highest qualification |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|---------------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------|--------|-----------------------|
| 1. Executive and senior leaders     | SenMan01     | Senior Manager      | Support           | 46–50             | Black African person | Male   | Master's degree       |
|                                     | SenMan02     | Senior Manager      | Core              | 46–50             | Coloured person      | Female | Master's degree       |
|                                     | SenMan03     | Senior Manager      | Support           | 46–50             | Black African person | Female | Honours degree        |
|                                     | SenMan04     | Senior Manager      | Core              | 46–50             | Black African person | Female | Master's degree       |
|                                     | SenMan05     | Senior Manager      | Support           | 46–50             | Black African person | Female | Master's degree       |
|                                     | ExecMan01    | Executive Manager   | Support           | 46–50             | Coloured person      | Male   | Honours degree        |
|                                     | ExecMan02    | Executive Manager   | Core              | 56–60             | White person         | Female | Doctoral degree       |
|                                     | ExecMan03    | Executive Manager   | Core              | 51–55             | Indian person        | Male   | Honours degree        |
|                                     | ExecMan04    | Executive Manager   | Core              | 51–55             | Coloured person      | Male   | Honours degree        |
| 2. Middle managers and team leaders | TeamLead01   | Team Leader         | Support           | 36–40             | Black African person | Female | First degree          |
|                                     | TeamLead02   | Team Leader         | Support           | 46–50             | Coloured person      | Female | First degree          |
|                                     | TeamLead03   | Team Leader         | Support           | 46–51             | White person         | Female | First degree          |
|                                     | MiddleMan01  | Middle Manager      | Support           | 46–50             | Black African person | Female | Honours degree        |
|                                     | MiddleMan02  | Middle Manager      | Core              | 46–50             | Black African person | Female | Master's degree       |
|                                     | MiddleMan03  | Middle Manager      | Core              | 56–60             | Black African person | Female | Master's degree       |
|                                     | MiddleMan04  | Middle Manager      | Core              | 51–55             | Coloured person      | Female | Doctoral degree       |
|                                     | MiddleMan05  | Middle Manager      | Support           | 36–40             | Black African person | Female | Honours degree        |
|                                     | MiddleMan06  | Middle Manager      | Core              | 41–45             | Black African person | Female | Honours degree        |
|                                     | MiddleMan07  | Middle Manager      | Core              | 46–50             | Black African person | Female | Honours degree        |
| 3. Individual contributors          | IndivContr01 | Professional        | Support           | 41–45             | Black African person | Female | Master's degree       |
|                                     | IndivContr02 | Senior Professional | Support           | 51–55             | Black African person | Male   | Master's degree       |
|                                     | IndivContr03 | Professional        | Core              | 36–40             | Black African person | Female | First degree          |
|                                     | IndivContr04 | Professional        | Support           | 41–45             | Black African person | Female | Honours degree        |
|                                     | IndivContr05 | Professional        | Core              | 31–35             | Black African person | Male   | Honours degree        |
|                                     | IndivContr06 | Professional        | Core              | 41–45             | Black African person | Female | Honours degree        |
|                                     | IndivContr07 | Junior Professional | Support           | 46–50             | Black African person | Female | Matric certificate    |
|                                     | IndivContr08 | Junior Professional | Support           | 56–60             | Black African person | Male   | First degree          |
|                                     | IndivContr09 | Senior Professional | Core              | 36–40             | Black African person | Male   | Master's degree       |
|                                     | IndivContr10 | Professional        | Core              | 46–50             | Coloured person      | Female | Matric certificate    |
|                                     | IndivContr11 | Lead Specialist     | Core              | 41–45             | Indian person        | Female | Master's degree       |

leaders with some more than 15 years of organisational experience.

- Function diversity was reflected through participation from both core and support departments.
- The highest qualifications of the participants ranged from those with Matric certificates to individuals holding doctoral degrees.

## Hybrid work exposure diversity

The hybrid work exposure diversity were as follows:

- Most participants had never worked in a hybrid or remote environment since they started their careers. It was the first time they experienced working in a hybrid work environment.
- The format of hybrid work modes differed by team: some units adopted rotational schedules, while most work full-time remotely and only meet in person when there is a need, such as strategic planning or meetings requiring collaborative and collective inputs.

## Leadership responsibility diversity

The leadership responsibility diversity were as follows:

- Executive and senior leaders contributed a strategic perspective on governance, auditability, and institutional mandate.

- Middle managers and team leaders provided insight into workflow coordination, trust-building and operational oversight challenges.
- Individual contributors highlighted day-to-day experiences of inclusion, communication cadence, technological access and support mechanisms.

## Rationale for diversity emphasis

This diversity enriched the data by:

- Revealing differences in how hybrid work was experienced across roles and responsibilities.
- Demonstrating variability in leadership expectation across hierarchical levels.
- Highlighting structural and cultural factors that shaped hybrid leadership practices.
- Strengthening the credibility and transferability of findings by showing that results reflect a broad and heterogeneous participant base.

## Research method

### Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 participants via Microsoft Teams, and consent was recorded from the participants. The first interviews were regarded as a pilot, after which the interview guide was refined.

The interview guide was continuously refined as necessary, especially once data saturation was reached. The interviews took between 30 min and an hour each. Most participants kept their cameras on during the interview, which helped build rapport and create a safe environment for openly sharing their experiences. There were no follow-up interviews, as each interview sufficiently covered all the questions.

The transcripts of each interview were downloaded from the recorded Microsoft Teams and cleaned manually by the researcher, removing any names or information that could compromise confidentiality.

As shown in Figure 1, the interview guide was mapped to the research objectives and elicited experiences of hybrid transition, perceived leadership challenges, support mechanisms, enacted strategies, and required leadership competencies. The researcher's notes captured contextual cues associated with the online modality, such as connectivity interruptions and rotation dynamics, to inform analytic interpretation.

## Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed. The analysis proceeded iteratively through familiarisation and memoing, generation of initial codes (both data-led and sensitised by literature and research questions), construction and review of themes to identify patterns and themes within the data. The process involved iterative coding, starting with anchor themes (e.g. adaptation to hybrid work, organisational support, leadership practices) derived from literature study and progressing to inductive codes derived from participant responses. ATLAS.ti software facilitated systematic coding, theme development, and relational analysis, enhancing the analysis. Rigour was enhanced through an audit trail (code iterations, theme decisions), reflexive journaling and peer debriefing sessions focused on challenging early interpretations and exploring negative cases. Claims were framed cautiously and remain tethered to participants' accounts.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Ref. No. EMS180/23). Participants were informed about the study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality limits and recording. Each participant signed the consent form before the interview. Transcripts were anonymised; files were stored on encrypted, access-restricted folders with defined retention periods. Given the single-institution context, the risk of deductive disclosure was mitigated by removing role-specific identifiers in reported excerpts. To preserve confidentiality, verbatim quotations are labelled using role-level codes (e.g. ExecMan01, TeamLead01, IndivContr01).

## Results

As shown in Table 2 and Figure 2, the qualitative analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews across three organisational levels identified nine leadership competencies for effective leadership in hybrid work environments. These competencies are grouped into three interdependent domains: (1) emotional and relational (e.g. empathy, trust and autonomy and employee well-being), (2) strategic and operational (e.g. outcome-based management, resilience and agility and adaptability) and (3) enabling and integrative (e.g. communication, digital proficiency and collaboration and inclusion).

### Domain 1: Emotional and relational

#### Empathy

Leaders consistently highlighted empathy as foundational to hybrid leadership, particularly for recognising the emotional strain associated with remote work:

'Emotional intelligence is crucial ... Emotional intelligence requires empathy. Emotional intelligence is ineffective without empathy.' (SenMan04, Black African person, Female)

'Empathy is quite important because in this virtual environment, people have their challenges ... You need a leader who will show compassion and empathy.' (ExecMan01, Coloured person, Male)

'Understanding and empathy became a critical skill ... There is a great deal more required of a leader today than just technical expertise.' (IndivContr04, Black African person, Female)

These quotations illustrate how empathy functions as a regulatory mechanism for emotional attunement, psychological safety and relational trust across levels.

#### Trust and autonomy

Trust was a recurring theme across all cohorts, signalling the shift from presence-based supervision to output-driven accountability:

'You need to be able to trust your people ... I cannot micromanage people.' (ExecMan01, Coloured person, Male)

'Another challenge was transitioning from traditional supervision towards trusting that tasks were being completed without direct oversight.' (MiddleMan06, Black African person, Female)

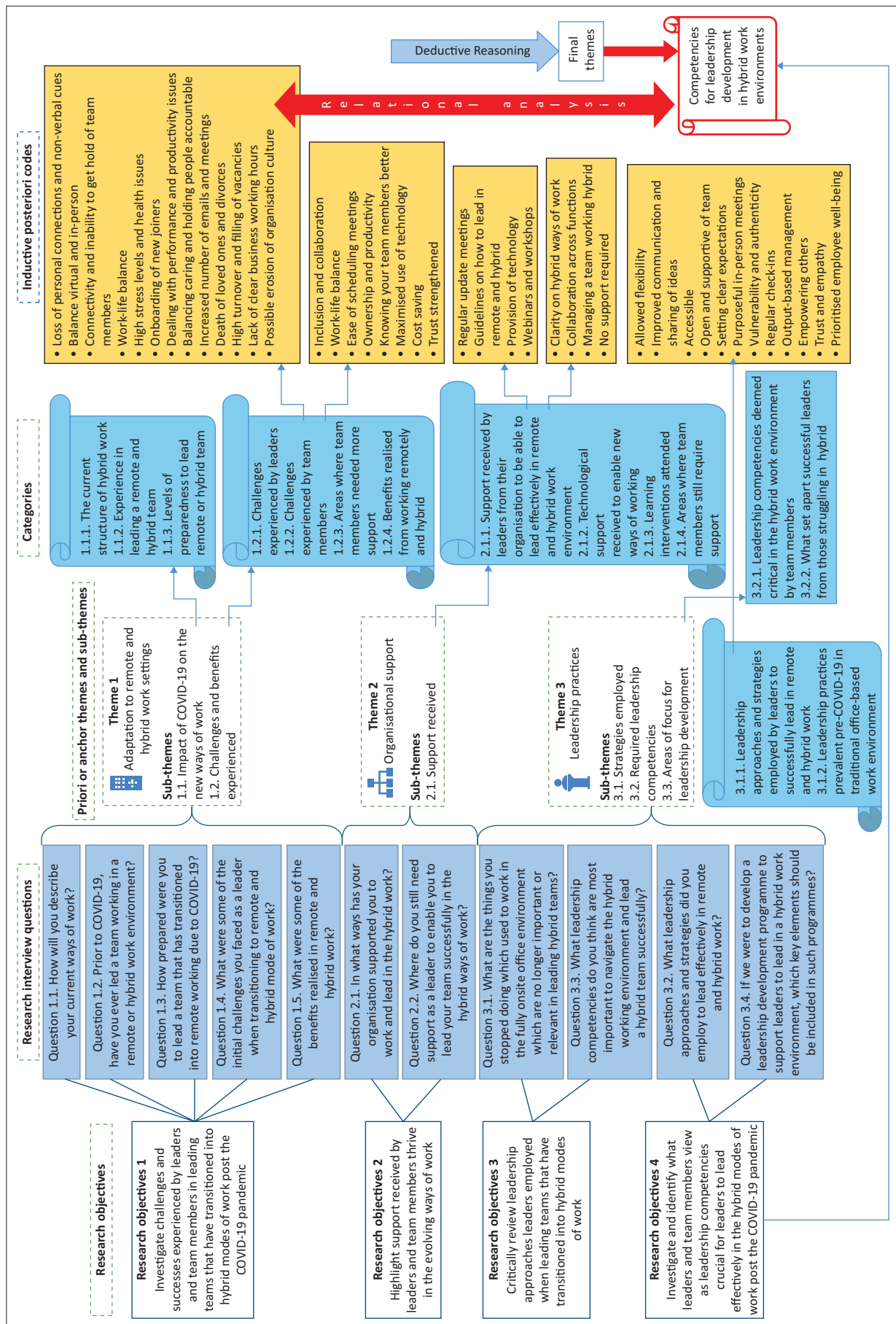
'The minute you give me autonomy ... I meet my manager halfway. When trust is received, it is reciprocated.' (IndivContr00, Black African person, Female)

These accounts underscore the relational reciprocity embedded in trust-based leadership.

#### Employee well-being

Well-being emerged as a priority, reflecting leaders' adaptive response to heightened psychosocial demands:

'In a virtual context ... You can work yourself to a standstill. Therein lies a massive challenge for me.' (ExecMan03, Indian person, Male)

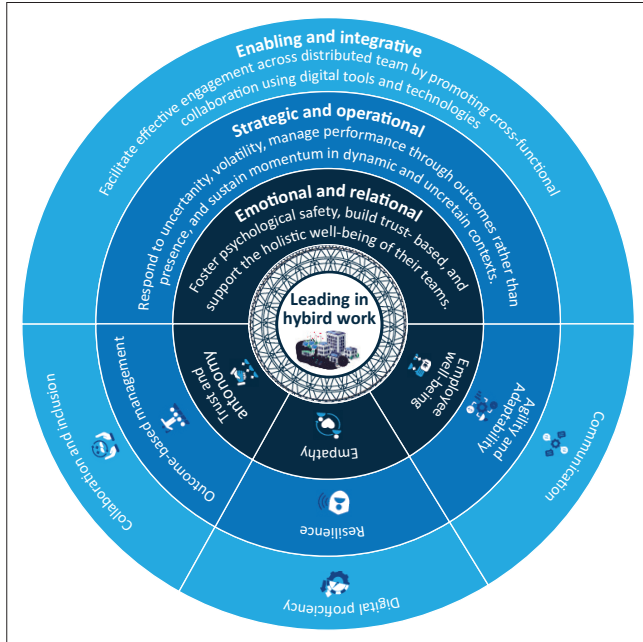


COVID-19, coronavirus disease 2019.

**FIGURE 1:** Detailed coding strategy.

**TABLE 2:** Competencies for leadership development in a hybrid work environment.

| Domain                       | Competencies                                                    |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Emotional and relational  | Empathy, trust and autonomy, well-being                         |
| 2. Strategic and operational | Agility and adaptability, outcome-based management, resilience  |
| 3. Enabling and integrative  | Communication, digital proficiency, collaboration and inclusion |

**FIGURE 2:** Competencies for leadership development in hybrid work environments.

‘Since COVID-19, I have been checking on the well-being of others ... “How are you doing?” became the priority.’ (TeamLead01, Black African person, Female)

‘Managers began reaching out more, showing empathy and checking in on employees’ well-being, which marked a significant shift.’ (IndivContr06, Black African person, Female)

These data show how hybrid work necessitated an expanded leadership role encompassing emotional care and boundary regulation.

## Domain 2: Strategic and operational

### Outcome-based management

Participants described a decisive shift away from monitoring employee presence towards evaluating deliverables:

‘You must be output-based because you did not know whether anyone was working ... All you cared about was getting the output.’ (ExecMan03, Indian person, Male)

‘I stopped checking their Teams status ... What matters is meeting deadlines.’ (TeamLead01, Black African person, Female)

‘Leaders shifted from a more controlling approach to focusing on output rather than time.’ (IndivContr09, Black African person, Male)

These perspectives confirm output-based management as a central mechanism for distributed performance accountability.

## Resilience

Resilience emerged as both a personal and team-level capability required for sustained hybrid functioning:

‘What I am seeing now is the challenge we are facing ... And it is resilience.’ (ExecMan03, Indian person, Male)

‘Mental agility, emotional agility [indicating resilience as multi-dimensional] ...’ (MiddleMan06, Black African person, Female)

‘Supportive of staff well-being [evidence of resilience-building at team level] ...’ (IndivContr02, Black African person, Male)

These quotations illustrate resilience as intertwined with adaptability, well-being and emotional regulation.

## Agility and adaptability

Hybrid leadership required rapid sense-making and procedural flexibility:

‘Somebody who can sit down and plan and change and adjust as the environment dictates ...’ (SenMan03, Black African person, Female)

‘Constant changes are happening within the organisation ... Being adaptable to change is crucial.’ (MiddleMan05, Black African person, Female)

‘Resilience and agility are crucial ... Leaders must adapt to economic, political, and environmental changes.’ (IndivContr11, Indian person, Female)

The quotations illustrate adaptive capability as a core competence under uncertainty

## Domain 3: Enabling and integrative

### Communication

Communication emerged as the highest-frequency competency across all cohorts:

‘The ability to communicate what the strategy and the objectives are ... Becomes crucial in a virtual environment.’ (ExecMan02, White person, Female)

‘Communication competencies are crucial ... Concise and timely communication is key.’ (MiddleMan06, Black African person, Female)

‘Hybrid working requires different forms of communication and skills to use the different channels available.’ (IndivContr02, Black African person, Male)

These quotations show that communication enables alignment, clarity and cohesion in hybrid settings.

## Digital proficiency

Digital fluency enabled collaboration, communication and operational continuity:

‘We work in a much more efficient environment with Teams ... The entire suite of apps becomes very efficient.’ (ExecMan02, White person, Female)

‘My organisation ensured that we were trained on applications like Teams and Zoom so we could continue to collaborate.’ (TeamLead03, White person, Female)

‘You need to be strong in knowing and using the technology to drive collaboration.’ (IndivContr02, Black African person, Male)

This evidence reflects the dual technical and pedagogical expectations placed on hybrid leaders.

### Collaboration and inclusion

Hybrid work reshaped collaboration patterns, requiring intentional inclusive practices:

‘I have seen much collaboration ... Hybrid helped with that.’ (SenMan01, Black African person, Male)

‘Empowerment and inclusivity were the most important leadership practices.’ (MiddleMan04, Coloured person, Female)

‘We seek leaders who are skilled and willing to engage in collaborative endeavours with their teams.’ (IndivContr02, Black African person, Male)

The data confirm inclusion as both a relational and structural leadership requirement.

### Relational analysis for the identified competencies

As shown in Figure 3, a network-style relational analysis diagram illustrates how the identified leadership

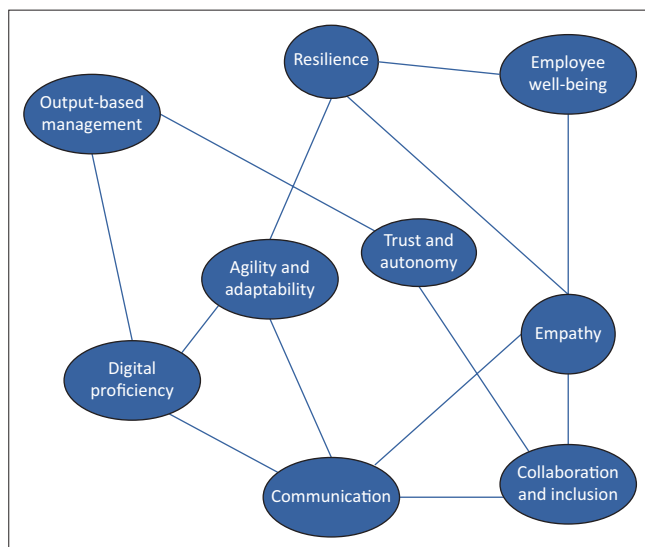


FIGURE 3: Relational analysis of identified competencies.

competencies interrelate and reinforce one another in hybrid work environments.

The nodes represent the nine essential leadership competencies. The edges represent the conceptual and functional relationship, that is, competencies that mutually reinforce or co-occur in leadership practice. Domains demonstrate how competencies such as empathy, trust, autonomy and communication are integral to the emotional and relational core of hybrid leadership. Digital proficiency, agility and output-based management form a strategic and operational domain. Resilience bridges emotional and strategic domains, reinforcing both well-being and adaptability.

### Alignment of identified leadership competencies to anchor themes

Table 3 illustrates how the nine leadership competencies identified across the three cohorts align with the three anchor themes, being, adaptation to remote and hybrid work, organisational support and leadership practices. This mapping not only clarifies the functional relevance of each competency but also deepens the understanding of how leadership can evolve in hybrid contexts.

#### Anchor theme 1: Adaptation to remote and hybrid work

This theme drew upon the competencies that empower leaders to navigate disruptions to traditional work norms. Empathy, agility, trust and digital proficiency are essential in enabling teams to transition from physical to virtual modalities. Leaders must reframe their roles from supervisors to facilitators of autonomy, emotional stability and digital fluency.

#### Anchor theme 2: Organisational support

Organisational support is most effective when it is responsive to the competencies leaders need to thrive. Communication, prioritisation of well-being and collaboration are central to designing support structures that are inclusive, transparent

TABLE 3: Mapping leadership competencies to anchor themes.

| Leadership competency       | Adaptation to remote and hybrid work                                          | Organisational support                                    | Leadership practices                                      |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Trust and autonomy          | Supports decentralised work and self-management                               | Encourages flexible policies and role repurposing         | Reinforces empowerment and accountability                 |
| Empathy                     | Facilitates emotional adjustment and relational continuity in remote settings | Informs wellness initiatives and support structures       | Enables human-centred leadership and psychological safety |
| Employee well-being         | Mitigates stress and burnout in remote contexts                               | Grounds wellness programmes and emotional support         | Cultivates compassionate leadership and relational trust  |
| Outcome-based management    | Replaces time-based supervision with performance metrics                      | Aligns with organisational emphasis on deliverables       | Promotes accountability and results-oriented leadership   |
| Resilience                  | Supports psychological endurance in uncertain contexts                        | Informs leadership of development and coaching needs      | Models adaptive coping and emotional regulation           |
| Agility and adaptability    | Enables rapid response to changing work modalities                            | Supports dynamic resource allocation and policy evolution | Fosters resilience and strategic flexibility              |
| Collaboration and inclusion | Sustains cross-functional engagement in dispersed teams                       | Informs inclusive policy design and team integration      | Builds diverse, empowered and cohesive teams              |
| Digital proficiency         | Facilitates digital collaboration and remote operations                       | Supports infrastructure provisioning and training         | Enhances operational efficiency and innovation            |
| Communication               | Bridges physical distance and ensures clarity in virtual environments         | Enhances transparency in organisational messaging         | Strengthens team cohesion and strategic alignment         |

and psychologically safe. Digital proficiency and output-based management also align with the provisioning of tools and frameworks that enable remote productivity (Wang et al., 2021).

### Anchor theme 3: Leadership practices

This theme reflects the evolution of leadership identity and behaviour. Competencies such as empathy, trust and autonomy and employee well-being signal a shift from hierarchical control to relational and adaptive leadership. Leaders model emotional intelligence, cultivate inclusive cultures and exercise strategic clarity with a focus on human sensitivity.

## Discussion

### Interpretation of findings in relation to the literature

The findings substantiate established observations about hybrid leadership while contributing context-specific mechanisms salient to regulatory environments. Firstly, the competency triad demonstrates paradox navigation where leaders balance flexibility with control by coupling trust with autonomy to output-based management and by embedding auditability within digital workflows. Secondly, the results specify boundary conditions: digital proficiency is not only tool use but also cyber-aware judgement in data handling; inclusion requires procedural safeguards against proximity bias rather than goodwill alone. Thirdly, the integration of competencies clarifies how emotional-relational capacities enable operational performance in hybrid settings, and how empathy and well-being orientation stabilise capacity for agility and resilience in contexts where discretionary effort is mediated through screens (Collings et al., 2021; Makowski, 2023). Collectively, the study extends the literature by articulating an empirically anchored, regulatory-specific leadership competency set and by explicating the interplay across domains.

### Practical implications

#### For leadership development

**Human-centred leadership:** Leadership development programmes should prioritise emotional intelligence, empathy and psychological safety. Training should include modules on managing well-being, building trust and leading with compassion.

**Agility and digital skills:** Programmes must equip leaders with skills to adapt quickly, manage change, and leverage digital tools for collaboration and performance management.

**Output-based management:** Leaders should be trained to set clear deliverables, monitor outcomes and empower teams with autonomy, moving away from traditional time-based supervision.

**Continuous learning:** Leadership development should be seen as an ongoing journey, with opportunities for coaching, peer learning and reflective practice.

#### For human resources

**Policy and practice alignment:** Human resources (HR) should ensure that hybrid work policies are transparent, inclusive and consistently applied across the organisation. This includes guidelines for remote work, performance evaluation and support for well-being (McCombs et al., 2024; Wilson, 2023).

**Support structures:** Human resources must provide robust technological, emotional and developmental support, including access to digital tools, mental health resources and leadership coaching.

**Diversity and inclusion:** Human resources should actively address proximity bias and ensure equitable access to opportunities, recognition and decision-making for all employees, regardless of work location.

#### For organisational policy

**Flexible work models:** Policies should institutionalise hybrid work as a strategic option, balancing organisational needs with employee preferences for flexibility and autonomy.

**Well-being and resilience:** Organisations should embed well-being into their culture and policies, recognising its impact on engagement, retention and performance.

**Digital transformation:** Investment in digital infrastructure and training is essential to support seamless collaboration, communication and innovation in hybrid environments.

**Leadership accountability:** Policies should hold leaders accountable for fostering inclusive, high-trust and high-performance cultures, with regular feedback and evaluation mechanisms.

In summary, the study's findings provide evidence-based competencies for developing hybrid leadership capacity. By aligning leadership development, HR practices and organisational policy with the identified competencies, organisations can build resilient, adaptive and inclusive cultures that thrive in the evolving world of work.

### Limitations and recommendations

This study's findings should be interpreted considering several limitations:

#### Contextual scope

The research was conducted within a single financial regulatory institution in South Africa. The unique organisational culture, regulatory environment and operational dynamics may limit the generalisability of the findings to other institutions, industries or regions.

### Qualitative methodology

The use of qualitative methods, while valuable for capturing rich, contextual insights, introduces subjectivity. The researcher's positionality, prior knowledge and interpretive lens may have influenced data analysis, despite efforts to enhance credibility through reflexivity, triangulation and peer review.

### Sampling

Purposive sampling targeted individuals with direct experience of the transition to hybrid work. While this ensured relevance, it may have introduced selection bias and limited the diversity of perspectives.

### Temporal limitations

Data collection occurred during a specific period post-COVID-19 when organisations were still adapting to hybrid models. As work practices continue to evolve, new challenges and competencies may emerge that were not captured in this study.

### Comparative analysis

The research did not engage in a structured comparison with established leadership competency models or frameworks, which may limit its integration with broader theoretical paradigms.

### Recommendations for future research

While this study provides valuable insights into leadership in hybrid work environments, future research should expand its scope by adopting longitudinal and comparative approaches. It should also address emerging technological and well-being challenges to further inform leadership development and organisational policy.

## Conclusion

This study provided a comprehensive analysis of leadership and management practices in hybrid and virtual work environments, focusing on a financial regulatory institution in South Africa. By addressing four central research questions, the research illuminated the challenges and successes experienced by leaders and teams, the nature of organisational support, and the evolving strategies and competencies adopted for effective hybrid leadership.

Through thematic synthesis, the study identified a set of core leadership competencies, summarised in the leadership competencies for hybrid work environments (LCHWE), that are essential for navigating the complexities of hybrid and virtual work. These include trust and autonomy, empathy, employee well-being, Outcome-based management, Resilience, agility and adaptability, collaboration and inclusion, and digital proficiency and communication. The findings highlight the importance of a holistic, human-centred approach to leadership that fosters resilience, innovation and employee engagement.

The practical implications underscore the need for organisations to invest in leadership development programmes that build these competencies, promote inclusive and adaptive cultures, and align HR and policy frameworks with the realities of hybrid work. While the study's context and qualitative approach present some limitations, the insights and recommendations offer a valuable blueprint for organisations seeking to thrive in the evolving world of work.

In summary, the LCHWE framework provides a foundation for developing leaders and managers who can excel in hybrid environments, supporting organisational excellence, adaptability and sustainable success.

## Acknowledgements

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### Competing interests

The authors, Mmathema A.C. Matle and Karel Stanz, declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article. The author, Karel Stanz, serves as the editor-in-chief of this journal. The peer review process for this submission was handled independently, and the author had no involvement in the editorial decision-making process for this article. The authors have no other competing interests to declare.

### CRedit authorship contribution

Mmathema A.C. Matle: Conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, resources, software, validation, visualisation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing. Karel Stanz: Conceptualisation, data curation, methodology, resources, supervision, validation, visualisation, writing – review and editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available and are available from the corresponding author, Mmathema A.C. Matle, upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or the publisher. The authors are responsible for the results, findings and content of this article.

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