



Effective leadership practice among senior leaders working from home and in the hybrid workplace across COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted and reshaped effective leadership practices by introducing working-from-home protocols (WFH) and the hybrid workplace model. The current study sought to identify and understand leadership practices adopted in WFH and the transition to the hybrid model, the effectiveness of these practices, and the implications of these on future effective leadership practices in knowledge-based organizations. The current study employed an inductive thematic analysis on semi-structured interviews with thirteen senior leaders in marketing agencies and departments, grounded in causal leadership epistemology. Five themes were identified: (1) remote leadership capabilities required, (2) a soft skills leadership renaissance, (3) introspection is a coping strategy, (4), leaders' temporal quandary, and (5) hybrid leadership uncertainty. The study findings indicated the leaders who successfully coped and continued to be effective exhibited a more adaptive and resilient mindset, evolving their leadership practices and skills to suit the needs of remote (WFH) leadership. They embraced softer leadership skills and developed more humanistic leadership behaviors. They developed an introspection practice to maintain their mental and psychological balance and they mastered time management in an always-on world. This study offers leaders, managers, and employers practical insights into ongoing effective leadership practice with remote (WFH) empowered workforces and hybrid workplace normalization.

Keywords Leadership · Introspection · Hybrid workplace · Working from home · Humanistic · COVID-19

JEL Classification D80 · D81 · J24 · L20 · L84 · M12 · M14 · M30 · M31 · M37 · M50 · M53

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic placed leadership theories and effective practices globally under once-in-a-lifetime pressure (Bartsch et al. 2020; Dirani et al. 2020), with the forced, mass, and rapid transition of 72% of the global workplace to working from home (WFH) protocols (Chavez-Dreyfuss 2020). In the US, WFH rose from 5 to 60% (The Economist 2021); in the EU from 5.6% to 40% (Milasi et al. 2020); in Australia from 24 to 47% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021), and in Asia, 88% of organizations instigated WFH protocols (Wiles 2020). Looking forward, 74% of organizations (McKendrick 2022) and 90% of executives (Alexander et al. 2021) acknowledged the hybrid model (a split between WFH and the office) as the default knowledge-based organization workplace of the post-pandemic future.

Amidst this significant shift in work dynamics, a critical research gap emerged concerning the implications of WFH and hybrid workplace models on traditional proximal leadership and managerial effective practices, which became more acute as hybrid workplaces normalized globally. WFH and hybrid workplace leadership was predominately a new experience for the majority of knowledge-based organization leaders, and the sudden mass transition to these models necessitated a reevaluation of previously established leadership styles and practices as they quickly became obsolete or ineffective (Kohntopp and McCann 2020; Lagowska et al. 2020). The gap highlighted the need for comprehensive insights into effective leadership practice for the hybrid workplace model in particular.

In light of this gap, this paper aimed to explore and understand the evolving leadership landscape in WFH and hybrid workplace environments. It began by providing context to the unprecedented circumstances that prompted the need for reevaluating leadership and management practices. Existing literature was then reviewed, examining established leadership theories, emerging concepts relevant to remote and hybrid workplace leadership, and the challenges posed by the rapid transition to remote and hybrid leadership. Following this, the paper presented the methodology employed to investigate leadership practices in WFH and hybrid environments. It then offered key insights derived from senior leaders' first-hand experiences, shedding light on effective leadership practices and their implications. Finally, the paper integrated these findings, discussed their significance, and proposed recommendations for future effective leadership practice, and leadership and management research.

Literature review

Leadership is the ability to inspire, motivate, encourage, and make people want to follow you (Jonsson and Strannegard 2015), and leadership expectations include providing guidance, comfort, hope, and accurate information (Lagowska et al. 2020). The concept of effective leadership is all about results, which are

evaluated across the dimensions of personal leadership (competency and inspiration), organizational culture (partially influenced by the leader), follower development (empowerment), and achieving organizational goals; from the perspective of the leader (self-leadership) and the followers (Minja 2013).

However, it is posed effective leadership remains conceptually debatable (Vilkinas et al. 2020) and it is argued there are continuously overlapping and competing definitions of leadership (Bogenschneider 2016). This overlap and competition are visible in the evolution and parallel existence, of leadership theories such as innate trait-based theories which focus on certain characteristics or traits such as intelligence, self-confidence, and effective communication to define leadership; style and behavior-based theories which emphasize how leaders act and behave such as autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire; and more contemporary leadership theories integrating leader–follower perspectives and contextual dynamics (Khan et al. 2016) such as process (servant) leadership and leader-member exchange leadership. Transformational leadership, where leaders inspire and empower individuals and teams towards a higher goal is currently considered one of the most effective leadership styles (Khan et al. 2016). Pre-COVID leadership literature on the then prevalent leadership theories, practices, and the relationship with business performance (people, organizational, and financial) is significant, including identifying leadership as a vital influencer of employee performance (Tildiz et al. 2014), as well as defining the five best leadership practice (Kouzes and Posner 2012), (i) model the way; (ii) Inspire a shared vision; (iii) Challenge the Process; (iv) Enable Others to Act, and (v) Encourage the heart; and understanding how the leader–follower power dynamic influences leaders' behaviors (Koo and Park 2018).

The mass transition to WFH and the hybrid workplace model increased interest in other, less common and researched, leadership theories and practices, including adaptive leadership (Nelson and Squires 2017), where the leaders' adaptive capacity and behavior is the key to effective leadership, especially in periods of change; and shared or distributed leadership, defined by key stakeholders' agentic roles, empowerment, and interaction (Zhu 2018); or remote leadership where leaders are physically distant from their team (Meyer 2010).

With WFH protocols and the hybrid model, most leaders were now practicing remote leadership to various degrees. Yet the literature on it is limited, reflecting its low pre-COVID level of academic interest (Kohntopp and McCann 2020; Wong and Nordengen Berntzen 2019).

Meyer (2010) argued remote leadership differs from proximal leadership in four ways: (i) more formalization and clarity of role and responsibilities is required, (ii) more self-awareness of the inapplicability of traditional leadership styles and impact is necessary, (iii) trust measured on reliability and (iv) effective communication is more vital. Maduka et al. (2018) further defined a set of remote leadership skills required to be effective, including building trust; having social, process, and activity awareness; being an advanced communicator, and being reliable. Other research highlighted behaviors and skills like empowerment and collaboration (Hill and Bartol 2016), time management (Nansen et al. 2010), and communication and managing employee engagement (Wong and Nordengen Berntzen 2019) as critical for effective remote leadership.

Remote leadership requires skills, behaviors, and practices that traditional proximal leaders may not possess, or be able to adapt to, making the experience stressful and confusing for those traditional leaders (Lagowska et al. 2020). The literature agrees that leading remote teams is more challenging (Liao 2017) and unsuitable for every leader (Lagowska et al. 2020). Most leadership studies occurred in stable working environments (Dirani et al. 2020), and did not factor in the effect of rapid change with ongoing uncertainty, where established leadership practices are suddenly obsolete or ineffective, and new more effective ones need to be applied, which is what happened during the COVID-pandemic.

Adoption of the hybrid workplace as the new norm for knowledge-based organizations accelerated during the pandemic (Kane et al. 2021; Price Waterhouse Coopers [PWC] 2021). From an organizational perspective, the mass shift to WFH and hybrid models did not negatively impact productivity. In one study, 48.7% of organization leaders stated productivity improved and 22.7% stated there was no impact (Chavez-Dreyfuss 2020). In another study, 83% of leaders said WFH was successful (PWC 2021). More broadly, a study predicted a 5% productivity boost to the US economy through shifting to ongoing WFH protocols (Curran 2021). WFH's perceived productivity success plus its normalization amongst employees also meant organizations began to review the need for costly office space, with 47% of organizations intending to reduce it moving forward (Kaplan 2020); as well as rethink the purpose of remaining office space in a hybrid workplace environment (Lahti and Nenonen 2021). For employees, the hybrid workplace combines benefits such as flexibility and empowerment with the traditional human and social interaction office elements (O'Rourke 2021), with 65% of employees wanting to continue WFH/hybrid to some degree (Pelta 2021). The hybrid workplace benefits employers and employees over the traditional full-time workplace model.

Yet, no consensus exists on what constitutes a hybrid workplace, with 55% of employees wanting at least three days WFH, whereas 68% of leaders expect employees in the office at least three days a week (PWC 2021). Despite this lack of consensus, 74% of organizations expect employees to continue to work remotely (Castrillon 2020), and 34.4% of organizations expect their permanent remote workforce to double (Chavez-Dreyfuss 2020). Various large global corporations including Microsoft, Amazon, and Facebook extended existing WFH protocols or adopted more personalized and flexible ones (Dickler 2021), and recruitment businesses like Indeed report a doubling of remote job postings and searches compared to pre-pandemic (Kolko 2021).

WFH and the hybrid workplace normalization instigated discussions of effective leadership practice in these contexts (Bartsch et al. 2020; Lagowska et al. 2020; O'Rourke 2021; The Economist 2021). Previously underrated leadership practices and skills such as those necessary for remote leadership (Meyer 2010; Maduka et al. 2018); and characteristics and behaviors such as resilience, agility, introspection, humility, and active learning were now seen as vital for effective leadership (Lagowska et al. 2020; Singh et al. 2020). Overall, a more humanistic leadership approach including transparent and honest communication (McGuinness 2020), showing genuine care and empathy, and providing flexibility, engagement, and active listening (Joy 2021; Tigar 2020) is considered critical to effective leadership in remote (WFH) and hybrid workplace

environments. Even well-established effective leadership practices have been re-considered, with Dirani et al. (2020) re-imagining Kouzes and Posner's (2012) five leadership best practices for the new hybrid workplace norm.

Senior leaders' ongoing uncertainty around effective leadership practice for a hybrid workplace norm is found in a McKinsey survey (Bar Am et al. 2020) where only 21% of executives felt they had the right expertise and resources to move forward successfully. This leadership crisis is supported further by an Oracle Workplace Intelligence survey (2020) which found leadership executives experienced more mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, isolation, depression, and burnout, than their employees while WFH. The executives found it the most difficult to collaborate virtually with their teams, deal with the loss of the workplace culture, and manage job stress and anxiety. Leaders' uncertainty about effective leadership practice for a hybrid workplace poses problems for future effective leadership practice.

From a managerial perspective, WFH and the growth of the hybrid model required managers, as well as leaders, to adapt and develop a more humanistic and less metric-driven, organizational approach (Joy 2021; McGuinness 2020; Tigar 2020; McDonald 2012). Yet, resistance to qualitative research remains high in mainstream managerial literature (Lanka et al. 2021) as the field continues to focus on improving outcomes and efficiencies, through variables that can be scientifically and objectively measured (Hassard et al. 2009). Generally, managerial qualitative research is still judged by quantitative standards (Lanka et al. 2021). However, qualitative research allows for diverse perspectives and experiences, and in doing so can improve organizational communication and organizational context (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; Kotera and Van Gordon 2019). The continued focus on quantitative research in mainstream managerial literature ignores the social and human dimensions, and agency of stakeholders within organizations (Lanka et al. 2021). Yet, qualitative research such as this study, is critical for managers, and leaders, to "perceive more richly and act more intelligently" (Donmoyer 2000: p. 60) toward the needs of their organizations' most important resource, people.

The current study aimed to add to the limited literature on the COVID-19 long-term effect on effective leadership practice in knowledge-based organizations, by appraising the first-hand experience of senior leaders. The current study sought to identify and understand leadership practices adopted in WFH and the hybrid model, the effectiveness of these practices, and the implications of these on future effective leadership practices in knowledge-based organizations. These insights are also valuable from the perspective of managerial research given the expectation of a more humanistic organizational approach from the newly empowered WFH and hybrid workplace workforce.

Method

Design

The current exploratory study employed a qualitative analysis on semi-structured interviews with 13 individuals in senior leadership positions, as it allowed for the

flexible examination of the leadership practices adopted, and their effectiveness while WFH or in a hybrid workplace. The study duration spanned six months (January–June 2021) encompassing planning, data collection, and analysis for a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. A qualitative methodology was beneficial as it helped the researchers better understand the implications for future effective leadership practice.

Bogenschneider (2016) argued the many and often competing proposed leadership epistemologies are just definitions of leadership, and there is no overarching agreement on how to know and evaluate leadership, and the concept of effective leadership remains debatable (Vilkinas 2020).

Therefore, causal leadership epistemology was used as it aligns with Minja's (2013) effective leadership evaluation framework (personal leadership, organizational culture, follower development, and achieving organizational goals) proposing effective leadership as an observable agentic interaction between a leader and followers, to achieve an outcome, and overcome any adversity; in this case the transition to remote working (WFH) and the hybrid workplace model.

To ensure the relevance of participants' insights, we targeted individuals with a minimum of five years of senior leadership experience in knowledge-based industries. This criterion ensured they had navigated leadership challenges both pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing invaluable context. Additionally, participants were required to currently hold senior leadership positions, ensuring their ongoing experiences informed their insights (Marshall and Rossman 2011; Mack et al. 2005).

In addressing potential biases, we recognized the importance of neutralizing any inherent predispositions. To achieve this, we crafted an interview guide with targeted interview questions and conducted relatively lengthy interviews to maximize information power (Malterud et al. 2016). Moreover, we remained vigilant throughout the research process to identify and mitigate biases related to participants' backgrounds or perspectives, particularly focusing on their senior leadership roles and experiences.

The principle of saturation guided our sample size determination, emphasizing the point where additional participants yield diminishing returns in terms of new insights or information (Mason 2010; Guest et al. 2006). Notably, Guest et al. (2006) found that 92% of 109 codes were generated within the initial 12 interviews, with only 8% emerging from the subsequent 18 interviews, indicating saturation after the first 12 interviews. Marshall (1996) similarly observed that no new themes emerged after 15 interviews. While saturation is recognized as a fundamental aspect of qualitative research, there's no universally agreed-upon threshold due to variables like research scope, type, participant segment, and researcher expertise, leading to saturation points ranging from 4 to 70 participants (Bonde 2013; Guest et al. 2006). However, for studies with relatively homogenous study populations and narrowly defined objectives such as this one, 9–17 interviews were determined as the saturation range (Hennink and Kaiser 2022).

In this study, saturation was attained with 13 respondents, despite initially planning for 15 or more. Moreover, it's widely acknowledged that a minimum of 12 participants is necessary for qualitative research validity, although this number

could be lower depending on participant homogeneity (Sim et al. 2018; Guest et al. 2006). Thus, with 13 participants, our study meets the minimum requirements for qualitative research validity according to expert consensus (Sim et al. 2018; Guest et al. 2006), and it was further agreed among the authors that at 13 interviews the information power (Malterud et al. 2016) was sufficient, with additional interviews unlikely to bring any new meaningful findings.

The 14 questions for the Interview Guide (Appendix A) were developed from two sources. First, from contemporary leadership and management sources such as Forbes, McKinsey, The Economist, HBR, and PWC discussing challenges of WFH and the hybrid model, and secondly from the researchers' own 20 years of experience as a senior leader across North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific.

Participants

Participants were required to have a minimum of five years of leadership experience and be currently working in a knowledge-based organization. Participants were recruited from LinkedIn using the lead author (KB)'s account. All participants viewed KB's LinkedIn profile: gender, current position, and previous experience before the interviews. Of 19 leaders approached, 13 consented to participate in an hour-long interview via video conferencing software.

Among the 13 participants, seven held C-Suite positions, two were directors, one was a Vice President, one was a Managing Director, one was a General Manager, and one was Head of Brand Marketing. Four participants were in Australia, three in Singapore, two in the Philippines, two in Vietnam, one in Thailand, and one in Malaysia. Seven of the participants were women and six were men. This gender distribution skews slightly towards women: it is estimated women currently hold 45% of all senior/executive leadership positions and are forecast to grow (Association of National Advertisers 2019). The leadership experience range was 6 to 18 years ($M = 12.2$), and 69% of the participant's ages ranged from 40 to 50 years. At the time of interviews, March–May 2021, WFH protocols imposed by the country, government, and organizations across the previous 12 months, ranged from 10 to 52 weeks, with an average of 47.7 weeks. Table 1 summarizes the participant information.

Procedure

Participants were instructed to choose a private and comfortable place to attend an online interview. KB conducted the interviews from a secure and quiet space within his home. Interviews ranged in length from 40 to 60 min and were conducted in English and recorded. The recorded files were transcribed by KB. Ethical approval was provided by the university research ethics committee (ETH2021-2293). The semi-structured interviews consisted of an interview guide of 14 open-ended questions, in language that was relevant and understandable to the participants, and which allowed the researcher to probe the participant's responses. The interview guide is in Appendix A.

Table 1 Participant age, gender, position, leadership experience, location, weeks with WFH protocols, and training experience

Participant	Age	Gender	Position	Leadership Exp (yrs) ^{a†}	Location	Weeks with WFH protocols	Previous formal leadership training	Previous formal remote leadership training	Previous remote leadership experience
1	45–50	F	Head of Brand Mktg	15	Malaysia	48	Yes	No	Limited
2	50–55	M	CEO	10	Australia	44	No	No	No
3	40–45	M	CEO	8	Vietnam	10	Yes	No	No
4	50–55	M	GM	6	Vietnam	52	Yes	No	No
5	45–50	M	CEO	16	Australia	46	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	45–50	F	Director	15	Singapore	44	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	40–45	F	CEO	10	Australia	46	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	35–40	F	CDO	10	Philippines	52	Yes	No	Limited
9	40–45	F	Director	12	Singapore	40	No	No	No
10	45–50	F	CIO / Partner	8	Philippines	52	No	No	No
11	50–55	M	VP	15	Singapore	52	Yes	Yes	Yes
12	40–45	F	CDO	18	Thailand	36	Yes	Yes	Yes
13	45–50	M	MD	15	Australia	50	Yes	No	Limited
Mean				12.2		47.7			

Note. ^{a†}Leadership experience in years

Data analysis

Reflexive inductive thematic analysis seven-phase methodology (Braun and Clark 2019) was employed for its flexibility in examining, analyzing, and reporting themes in qualitative data, and its compatibility with a range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks, including the causal leadership epistemology (Bogenschneider 2016) applied in this study. The seven phases include transcription; reading and familiarization; coding; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes and finalizing the analysis.

Using ATLAS.ti software the transcribed data was coded into meaningful groups. 79 initial codes were identified. Examples of the codes included “deeper understanding of team members”, “empowerment”, “uncertainty”, “empathy” and “role of the office”, as shown in Appendix B. The 79 codes were collated into broader sub-themes, where each code was attached to a themed pile (Fig. 1),

Theme 1 Remote leadership capabilities required	Theme 2 A soft skills leadership renaissance	Theme 3 Introspection is a coping strategy	Theme 4 Leaders' temporal quandary	Theme 5 Hybrid leadership uncertainty
Adaptive leadership	Authenticity	Energy	Amplified traits and behaviors	Consistency WFH
Beyond traditional leadership	Collaboration	Isolation	Asian behaviors	Culture
Critical of knowledge	Comfort	Leadership evaluation	Distracted	Different WFH expectations
Distributed leadership	Communication	Mental health	Functional technical requirements	Future leadership
Leadership experience	Deeper understanding of team members	Own mental health	Higher staff involvement	Future leadership challenges
Loss of face-to-face skills	Empathy	Productivity	Less formal	Generational leadership change
New to role	Empowerment	Reflection	New ways of working required	Human social interaction
New training for remote leadership	Engagement	Resilient leadership	Structured	Leader determines hybrid model
Pace of change	EQ	Self-awareness	Time Management	Leaders of compromise
Previous leadership experience not useful	Female leadership	Self-doubt	Technology adaptive behaviors	Leadership evolution
Previous leadership training not useful	Humble	Self-motivation	TQ	Leadership training
Remote experience	Increased listening	Support	Under time pressure	New measures of success
Team maturity	Lack of empowerment	Unpredictable peer/staff behavior	Work life blur	No answer yet
Training for remote leadership	People based leadership	Vulnerability		Osmosis & observation
Transactional leadership	Softer skills			Reshaping business
	Teaching soft skills			Role of the office
	Transparency			Suitable home environment
	Trust			Team flexibility
				Uncertainty

Fig. 1 Organising codes into themes via a mind map

for example, codes such as "self-awareness", "reflection", "energy", "own mental health" and "resilient leadership" were brought together into a broader sub-theme of introspection. The codes and sub-themes were finally grouped into five themes: (1) remote leadership capabilities required, (2) a soft skills leadership renaissance (3) introspection is a coping strategy, (4) leaders' temporal quandary, and (5) hybrid leadership uncertainty. Author YK reviewed the consistency and coherency of the theme generation (Kotera 2018) and agreed with those five.

Results

The data analysis identified and examined five key themes related to effective leadership practices in remote work-from-home (WFH) and hybrid models: (1) remote leadership capabilities required, (2) a soft skills leadership renaissance, (3) introspection is a coping strategy, (4) leaders' temporal quandary, and (5) hybrid leadership uncertainty, as presented in Table 2.

Remote leadership capabilities required

Respondents were ill-equipped to adapt leadership styles and practices to be effective as remote leaders as Respondent 11 pointed out, "we were trying to basically replicate the office environment, which is obviously a very immediate, a very personal, and a very interactive environment, virtually, and it's impossible to do that". Traditional proximal leadership practices, such as face-to-face interactions and reading body language became obsolete as Respondent 4 highlighted, "you don't see the body language. You can't. You know you can't have the cooler talk, some of the heated discussion or subtle, you know, in the hallways or in smoking breaks".

Effective remote leadership demanded the acquisition of new approaches and skills, including the ability to let go of traditional proximal practices and proficiency in video communication as indicated by Respondent 13, "It really became this idea of having to adapt my own personal leadership based in a virtual non-physical world, but also understanding that everyone then needed probably very different ways for that mechanic to work", and per Respondent 9, "video call actually gives you a whole load of new clues".

Several respondents struggled to adapt leadership styles, resulting in feelings of isolation, stress, and self-doubt as explained by Respondent 2, "it's pushed a great sense of isolation in terms of leadership when you are sitting on your own more often than not, trying to work this out".

This theme identified effective remote leadership requires different skills to proximal leadership (Meyer 2010), the importance of adaptive leadership in crises (Hayashi and Soo 2012), and highlights the accelerated pace of adaptation prompted by the pandemic (Kotera and Vione 2020).

Table 2 Key themes and example participant extract

Theme No	Key themes	Example participant extract
1	Remote leadership capabilities required	What I'm seeing is a lot of people don't realize the ground underneath them is shifting so fast... How agile is your leadership style? (Respondent 4)
2	A soft skills leadership renaissance	Empowerment or trust of your team, it's kind of now elevated five times, you've really gotta trust (Respondent 13)
3	Introspection is a coping strategy	It has actually been a really interesting opportunity to reset and review (Respondent 11)
4	Leaders' temporal quandary	I went up to 20 meetings a day, now there's only 24 h, it felt like speed dating and then I realized OK, this is not working as a leader (Respondent 12)
5	Hybrid leadership uncertainty	It's OK if we don't have a blueprint of leadership...the skills that brought us here are just not going to help us in the future (Respondent 12)

A soft skill leadership renaissance

Respondents emphasized the critical importance of softer leadership skills and practices for effective leadership in WFH and hybrid workplaces. Soft leadership skills, such as “communication”, “empathy”, “active listening” “empowerment” and “flexibility”, are often intangible and are essential for supporting and navigating the social and psychological aspects of remote work environments (Adams et al. 2023). Respondent 13 articulated the new importance of soft skills best, “whoever successfully navigates the soft skills and has those qualities, I think will be the leaders that not only we want in our business but that will be super successful”.

While traditional leadership approaches may have overlooked these skills, the data highlighted a renewed recognition of their significance in contemporary leadership as per Respondent 2, “the softer skills of people management and inspiration was being overlooked in a world that was becoming more metricated”.

Concerns were raised about how to effectively teach and cultivate soft skills in the context of hybrid work arrangements, as traditionally soft skills were learned through on-the-job osmosis and observation, not formal training (Kotera et al. 2022). Respondent 3 provided a compelling summary, “from a leadership point of view is training because a lot of soft skills come from observation and mimicking behavior so it’s an interesting one, how do you train something that probably inherently should be learned over time through observation and engagement”.

Soft skills are critical for effective remote leadership (Maduka et al. 2018), and the shift to remote work, the emergence of the hybrid workplace, and a more empowered and flexible workforce have led to a soft-skill leadership renaissance. However, the transition to a hybrid workplace raises challenges on how to teach and cultivate soft skills effectively.

Introspection is a coping strategy

Respondents reported increased introspection during WFH, viewing it as a coping strategy amidst isolation and uncertainty as indicated by Respondent 5, “for me, my introspection, again it comes back to the question where do I think I’m a better leader this year versus last year and what I want to change in my own working habit”.

The practice of introspection facilitated self-awareness and reflection on the participants’ leadership styles and practices, enabling them to adapt and improve to the shift to remote work, the emergence of the hybrid workplace, and a more empowered workforce as Respondent 4 stated, “I’m a big believer in reflection, you gotta take a pause, you gotta go into the pit stop”.

While introspection was generally beneficial, some respondents experienced negative feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy. Respondent 10 demonstrated, “to be honest I’m liking my job less; I’m thinking of retiring earlier”.

The data emphasizes the importance of introspection in fostering emotional maturity and resilience among leaders, which underpins better cognitive decision-making and coping processes and is necessary for leadership development (Watts 2012).

Leaders' temporal quandary

Time management emerged as a significant quandary for the respondents in remote (WFH) and hybrid work environments. The restructuring of communication norms and increased demands for engagement resulted in heightened time pressures, extended working hours, and a perceived decline in effectiveness.

Previously informal and fluid vital traditional proximal leadership practices became more formal and planned as video-call meetings. Respondent 13 explained the time implications, "there was this sense of having to set up a meeting, then having to do a call, then having to do a follow-up call, and a lot of the things that used to take probably two to three minutes in a fireside chat took a lot more steps because of the remote working elements". Increased employee communication and mental health management expectations meant increased time demands on respondents as Respondent 3 explained, "I started spending one on one calls even with the junior-most person in my team to understand the kind of load they have".

Respondents employed various time-management strategies to regain control over their schedules, highlighting the critical link between effective leadership and the efficient use of time (Mumford et al. 2007) as Respondent 9 emphasized, "The first thing we need to do is protect ourselves 'cause you don't have a physical boundary. You're gonna do it in your calendar".

Most respondents were unprepared for the temporal demands of remote and hybrid leadership, and as effective virtual leadership is argued to require more time (Nansen et al. 2010) this highlighted the need for vastly improved time-management skills.

Hybrid leadership uncertainty

All respondents supported respondents expressed support for the hybrid model, as Respondent 11 explained, "I think the hybrid model works better than just even working from home or everyone back in the office, so everyone back in the office genie is out of the bottle a bit and I don't think that people want to go back to that".

However, uncertainty loomed regarding its impact on leadership practices, particularly in areas such as organizational culture building and workforce flexibility as indicated by Respondent 7, "I had this weird perception that our culture was built around our office, our culture, and the office was very closely connected for me", and as per Respondent 13, "it's them telling us what their version of flexibility is and as the leader we've gotta find ways if they are a great employee to make that work".

The respondents identified the pandemic as a catalyst for reevaluating leadership practices and styles as explained by Respondent 7, "it's forced an outcome, I think,

will modernize the workplace”, but uncertainty persists regarding the definition of effective leadership practices in a hybrid workplace.

Discussion

The current study aimed to probe into the leadership practices adopted in remote work (WFH) and the hybrid model, assess their effectiveness, and explore their implications for future leadership practices in knowledge-based organizations. By conducting inductive thematic analysis on data from semi-structured interviews with 13 senior leaders from knowledge-based organizations, five key themes emerged: Remote leadership capabilities required; A soft skills leadership renaissance; Introspection as a coping strategy; Leaders’ temporal quandary; and Hybrid leadership uncertainty.

The first theme of “Remote leadership capabilities required” revealed it was necessary for most respondents to rapidly adopt remote leadership skills and practices related to empowerment, trust, communication, and process (Hill and Bartol 2016; Maduka et al. 2018; Meyer 2010) to continue to be effective. Despite this necessity, only 38% of respondents had received remote leadership training, and most had either zero or minimal remote leadership experience, leaving many ill-prepared for the psychological demands of remote leadership. The study data corroborated previous research emphasizing the need for a distinct skill set in remote leadership compared to traditional proximal leadership (Maduka et al. 2018; Meyer 2010).

To adapt to effective remote leadership, respondents had to undergo three essential leadership shifts; to quickly let go of outdated traditional proximal leadership practices such as walking the corridor and water-cooler chats (Kohntopp and McCann 2020); to embrace new leadership behaviours such as resilience, self-awareness, flexibility. This was compounded by an increased expectation of more humanistic leadership, due to WFH protocols and pandemic-driven anxiety, including empathy, care, and emotional intelligence (Joy 2021); and to acquire practical remote leadership skills like mastering video calls, which had now become the primary communication channel. In video calls non-verbal cues essential to effective proximal leadership (Batool 2013) were now only available from the shoulders up (Kotera et al.2021). The study data indicates leaders had to learn new non-verbal skills to enhance workplace relationships, psychological safety, and nonjudgmental listening (Chen and Sriphon 2021). Flaws in previous communication practices were quickly highlighted and underscored the importance of active listening (Tigar 2020) and inclusive meeting protocols (Koo and Park 2018) as now necessary effective leadership practices. The study findings align with emerging literature on the remote and humanistic leadership practices essential for remote and hybrid workplace effective leadership practice (Joy 2021; The Economist 2021).

The study data revealed that respondents with prior remote leadership training and/or experience adapted more smoothly and faster, coped with stress better, and exerted resilience. At the same time, those lacking previous remote training or experience struggled, psychologically and practically, particularly if they had authoritarian leadership styles (Blake-Beard et al. 2020; Kotera and Van Gordon 2019).

This data supported remote leadership as more complicated, and not for all leaders (Lagowska et al. 2020; Liao 2017).

Additionally, many respondents struggled with the increased expectation for humanistic leadership behaviors such as empathy and active listening, indicating the necessity for adaptability in leadership styles, as these leadership behaviors were beyond their prior expertise (Joy 2021).

The study data supported the argument that if leaders in periods of change fail to adapt, pressure (internal and external) will increase on the leader (Hayashi and Soo 2012), and the leader's effectiveness will diminish. The study data also lends credibility to Adaptive Leadership Theory (Hayashi and Soo 2012; Nelson and Squires 2017) as a pre-eminent theory in times of crisis, and continued change.

The second theme "A soft skills leadership renaissance" underscored the resurgence of leadership soft skills, driven by the demands of remote work and the hybrid workplace. Soft skills are defined as non-technical, intangible, and personality-based (John 2009), commonly known as people skills, and include self-regulation, self-awareness, empathy, motivation, and social skills (Goleman 2000). Soft skills are considered vital for effective remote and hybrid leadership (Howland 2021; Maduka et al. 2018). Further, soft skills are critical for leaders in times of uncertainty and complexity, improving decision-making by providing a more holistic view (Christensen 2020). The respondents identified numerous soft skills they had to learn, develop and practice to be effective remote and hybrid workplace leaders including "emotional intelligence (including empathy, motivation, self-awareness, self-management, and social skills)", "trust", "empowerment", "reflection", "resilience", "adaptability", "flexibility", and "communication" (including "active listening").

There was also an expectation of a more humanistic leadership approach by organizations and employees, due to the emotional and mental impact of WFH and the uncertainty and complexity of a hybrid workplace. While respondents with pre-existing humanistic traits such as benevolence and empowerment fared better, many found practicing soft skills to be a new experience due to the lack of formal training in this area. Soft skills training is infrequently included in corporate leadership development programs and receives limited attention in business schools and university curriculums (Marques 2013). The lack of formal soft skills training means leaders traditionally considered soft skills unimportant to success and the work environment, and therefore soft skills are not every leader's forte (Muir 2004). Yet, leadership success is argued as 85% reliant on soft skills, which means they are critical to effective leadership (Watts and Watts 2008, as cited in John 2009); and leaders with more humanistic traits are preferred organizationally (Marques 2013). The study's findings align with other literature that soft skills are crucial for the evolution of future effective leadership practice (Joy 2021; Singh et al. 2020; Tigar 2020).

The next theme "Introspection is a copy strategy" highlighted the increased practice of introspection among respondents driven by the psychological stress and anxiety of remote working (WFH) and the hybrid workplace (Kotera and Winson 2021). Introspection is considered a vital leadership practice as it demonstrates a leader's emotional maturity, and assists in improving psychological balance, decision-making, and coping processes under stress (Watts 2012). Introspection as a regular practice motivates and energizes leaders (Lanaj et al. 2018). Yet, leaders do not tend to

practice it when things are going well (Watts 2012), with only 10–15% of leaders being self-aware (Eurich 2018).

Generally, the respondents found introspection enabled positive self-reflection and aided in the self-awareness and adaption needed for effective leadership, often by recognizing how to leverage strengths and minimize weaknesses (Vione and Kotera 2021; Watts 2012). In line with previous literature (Saps 2021; Watts 2012), the respondents reported introspection helped maintain the emotional balance and resilience required to thrive in a chaotic and dynamic environment. Introspection was a new experience for some respondents and for others it was about turning introspection into a more regular practice. Respondents reported developing several introspection practices aligning with best practice self-reflection mechanisms (Beheshti 2018) such as active self-management, meditation, physical exercise, and creating a quiet time. Introspection emerges as a pivotal component for ongoing leadership development, as leaders' growth potential diminishes in its absence (Watts 2012). It is recommended future leadership training initiatives incorporate introspection practices. The study data also highlights the indispensable role of self-transformation through self-reflection in effectively leading organizational transformations or changes (Pounder 2001).

The next theme "Leaders' Temporal Quandary" explored the evolved practices around time management. Despite spending a significant portion, estimated between 70 and 90%, of their time communicating with employees (Bligh and Hess 2007, as cited in Bluedorn and Jaussi 2008), the shift to remote work (WFH) and the emergence of hybrid workplaces altered the accustomed communication styles and processes of the respondents, leading to a temporal dilemma for them as leaders. In a remote and video-call environment, previously casual, quick, and informal interactions such as watercooler chats became more regimented and pre-planned, while other essential leadership communication and business practices, including strategy, creativity, collaboration, and innovation, demanded more time and attention. Additionally, leaders were expected to achieve increased employee engagement and to provide mental health support (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2021), exacerbating the temporal pressures they faced. Consequently, respondents' schedules became inundated with consecutive meetings and constant demands for their time, ultimately extending their working hours (Green 2020).

To regain temporal control of their schedules and personal lives, respondents resorted to implementing rigorous time-management strategies. These practices included temporal marking (Nansen et al. 2010) with non-negotiable blocks of time designated for specific leadership tasks, meeting availability, or personal requirements. Moreover, scheduling shorter meetings, 45 min or less, allowed for fragmented time management to address the respondents' leadership responsibilities throughout the day (MacArthur 2020). Alternatively, some respondents adopted a more asynchronous approach to communication and collaboration (Lufkin 2021). Other respondents explored more effective remote leadership models such as distributed or shared leadership (Zhu et al. 2018) which empowered their teams to alleviate the time pressures on them.

The study findings support remote leadership accentuates time demands and pressure, necessitating greater agency and self-discipline in time management to

maintain effectiveness (Coffey and Wolf 2018; Wong and Nordengen Berntzen 2019), as well as adept utilization of technology (Nansen et al. 2010). Respondents who neglected rigorous time-management practices reported feeling less effective and more pressured in their leadership role (Mumford et al. 2007; Hayashi and Soo 2012), often resorting to a transactional and task-focused approach due to the altered leader–follower power dynamic resulting from increased employee interaction (Sparrowe and Liden 1997). Despite the acknowledged importance of time management on leadership effectiveness, its correlation remains inadequately researched (Shamir 2011), although its impact on employee engagement and organizational performance is well accepted.

The final theme "Hybrid leadership uncertainty", addressed the uncertainty surrounding the impact of the hybrid workplace on effective leadership practices, particularly in areas such as organizational culture building, office space utilization, and leadership training. Organizational culture building is the purposeful development of a set of values and attitudes in an organization (Gregory et al. 2009). A strong organizational culture is linked to positive organizational performance (Lee and Yu 2004), and it is the leader's responsibility to nurture and drive (Warrick 2017). The pre-COVID approach to building a strong organizational culture through the inter-related leveraging of the leaders' proximal presence and the office space (Page et al. 2019) was seen as problematic by the respondents in a hybrid workplace (Kane et al. 2021). Employees initially forced into WFH were now re-evaluating organizational cultures through a more personalized lens (Perkins 2021), adding to the uncertainty. Additionally, the respondents felt a hybrid workplace would shift the nature of the office space from a place for doing all types of work, to a flexible space for collaboration and social interaction (O'Rourke 2021), which would necessitate different leadership styles and practices to remain effective. The study findings reflect the ongoing and unresolved debate over the most effective use of office space in a hybrid model (PWC 2021).

Regarding training, the consideration of the hybrid model as the workplace of the future had several significant implications. From the first theme, 'remote leadership capabilities required' the vital importance of remote leadership and resilience training was emphasised (Gapud 2021) for leaders to be effective. The second theme, 'A soft skills Renaissance' highlighted the importance of comprehensive soft skills training in corporate leadership programs and relevant academic curricula, to recalibrate the prevailing metric-driven performance-focused leadership paradigm (Joy 2021; Singh et al. 2020; Tigar 2020), and to compensate for the loss of osmosis and observation learning. The third theme, 'Introspection is a coping strategy' recommended future leadership training initiatives feature introspection practices for effective leadership development and growth (Pounder 2001; Watts 2012). The fourth theme, 'Leaders' temporal quandary' identified enhanced time management and employee engagement training as business critical for future effective leadership practice in a remote/hybrid workplace (Shamir 2011).

Despite this uncertainty, respondents considered the hybrid workplace model as the new norm and as a catalyst for modernizing leadership practices (Castrillon 2020) aligning with contemporary literature (Kane et al. 2021; PWC 2021). Respondents felt WFH and the hybrid workplace forced a transition from traditional

and rigid leadership styles and practices to more effective ones and ones more suitable for the contemporary socio-cultural environment.

Conclusion

The current study's findings have several limitations: (i) a quantitative component would have improved understanding of the respondent's perceived pre-COVID leadership styles, subsequent changes, and the impact of remote training and experience on adaptability, and (ii) lead author KB's leadership experience in marketing organizations may have induced bias. To counter this a rigorous approach to the thematic analysis stage 5—reviewing themes (Braun and Clarke 2019) was undertaken to ensure the themes reflected and were supported by the respondent's views. The current study also has several strengths: (i) the respondents are practicing senior marketing industry leaders who have and are continuing to deal first-hand with leadership challenges due to the pandemic and the emerging hybrid workplace; (ii) it addresses the issue of participant gender balance in leadership studies, and (iii) includes the under-represented geographical areas of Malaysia, Vietnam, The Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore in leadership research.

With that said, the current study leveraged the firsthand experiences of senior leaders within knowledge-based organizations to identify effective leadership practices adopted in the transition to remote work (WFH) and hybrid models and discussed the necessity of evolving traditional leadership practices to meet the demands of the modern workforce and hybrid workplace environment.

The study findings emphasize that effective leadership in remote and hybrid settings requires a paradigm shift away from traditional leadership styles and practices. Respondents who successfully coped and continued to be effective leaders exhibited a more adaptive and resilient mindset, evolving their leadership practices and skills to suit the needs of remote leadership. They embraced softer leadership skills and developed more humanistic leadership behaviors. They developed an introspection practice to maintain their mental and psychological balance and they mastered time management in an always-on world.

The practices identified in this study align with and support contemporary discussions around evolving effective leadership and management practices and further support the pressing need for the reevaluation, and development, of more comprehensive leadership and management training, not only in corporate programs but in business schools and universities, tailored to the demands of a normalized hybrid work environment which include remote leadership and resilience training; soft-skills training; introspection as a regular practice, and time-management training for an always-on world.

Additionally, this study highlights the potential for future research to explore the concept of 'serendipity' (Balzano 2022) from management literature in the context of leadership development. By nurturing the resources to realize 'serendipitous value' (Balzano 2022: p. 132), leaders may unlock new or improved effective leadership development, training, and practices in the hybrid workplace.

Ultimately, the findings and insights from this study will equip current and future leaders with effective leadership practices to navigate the complexities of the evolving work environment. By embracing change and fostering a culture of continuous learning, leaders can continue to be effective amidst uncertainty and lead their organizations successfully.

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Author's contribution All authors contributed to the study's conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by Kristian Barnes. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Kristian Barnes and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval Ethical approval for this study was provided by the University of Derby research ethics committee (ETH2021-2293). This study adheres to the University of Derby Research Ethics Policy and Code of Practice, the British Psychological Society's Ethical Human Research Principles, and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines.

Informed consent All respondents were over the age of 18 and provided informed consent to participate in the study.

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