



JIMBIS NUSANTARA

Jurnal Inovasi Dan Manajemen Bisnis Nusantara

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The Distinction Between General And Strategic Leadership Styles In Complex Organizational Environments

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Abstract

This study investigates the distinction between general and strategic leadership styles in complex organizational environments. Grounded in Complexity Leadership Theory^[8], this research utilizes a qualitative, comparative case study of firms in stable and dynamic industries. Findings reveal that general leadership is predominantly administrative, effective in predictable contexts. In contrast, strategic leadership is defined by the skillful integration of administrative, adaptive, and enabling functions^[5]. Strategic leaders use enabling behaviors to harness emergent innovation for formal advantage, a practice essential for navigating volatility and securing future viability.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, Complexity Leadership Theory.

INTRODUCTION

In an era of unprecedented market volatility and complexity, traditional leadership models focused on hierarchical control^[3] are increasingly insufficient for ensuring long-term success. This has intensified the need to understand the nuanced distinction between general leadership and the more agile, forward-looking practice of strategic leadership. While general leadership is often associated with maintaining operational stability and efficiency, strategic leadership is tasked with navigating profound uncertainty and driving organizational evolution. This research addresses the critical gap in defining these differences by examining how leaders balance the competing demands for bureaucratic control and adaptive innovation to secure future viability in dynamic environments.

To explore this distinction, this study is grounded in Complexity Leadership Theory, which conceptualizes leadership as an interplay of administrative, adaptive, and enabling functions. Utilizing a qualitative, comparative case study design^[4], this research investigates leadership practices within organizations from both stable and high-velocity industries. It posits that strategic leadership is distinguished not by a single style but by the skillful integration of all three functions, particularly the enabling behaviors that connect emergent innovation to formal strategy. By analyzing how context shapes these practices, this study provides an empirically grounded framework differentiating general from strategic leadership based on this integrative capacity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in Complexity Leadership Theory, which provides a framework for understanding leadership within complex adaptive systems^[9]. Arising from the limitations of traditional bureaucratic models, this theory addresses the challenges of the volatile, unpredictable information age. It posits that organizational success depends less on top-down control and more on fostering environments conducive to learning, innovation, and continuous adaptation. The theory moves beyond individual leader-follower dynamics to examine leadership as an emergent, interactive process essential for navigating uncertainty and driving organizational evolution.

Complexity Leadership Theory is distinguished by its conceptualization of three intertwined leadership functions: administrative, adaptive, and enabling. Administrative leadership corresponds to the formal, hierarchical functions of planning, coordinating, and controlling to ensure operational efficiency and alignment. In contrast, adaptive leadership is an emergent, informal process that drives learning, creative problem-solving, and adaptation to new challenges. Enabling leadership serves as the crucial link, fostering conditions where adaptive dynamics can thrive and integrating their creative outputs into the formal administrative system for strategic advantage.

This theoretical lens allows for a nuanced distinction between general and strategic leadership styles. General leadership can often be equated with the administrative function, focusing on maintaining stability and executing established procedures within the existing organizational structure. Strategic leadership, however, represents the dynamic interplay of all three functions. It requires not only managing the formal organization but also actively cultivating the adaptive capacity necessary for future success. This involves creating the space for innovation and ensuring novel ideas are effectively integrated.

In this study, Complexity Leadership Theory will serve as the analytical framework to investigate the practices of strategic leaders. It will guide the examination of how these leaders balance the pressures for bureaucratic efficiency with the imperative for strategic renewal and adaptation. By analyzing leadership through the functions of administrative, adaptive, and enabling, this research can systematically identify the similarities and, more critically, the distinct differences that define a truly strategic leadership approach in today's complex and rapidly changing organizational environments.

RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study will employ a qualitative, comparative case study design to explore the distinctions between general and strategic leadership styles. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, the research aims to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of leadership practices as they manifest in real-world organizational settings. By selecting multiple cases representing different leadership contexts, the design facilitates a cross-case analysis to identify commonalities and divergences. This approach is particularly suited for applying the multifaceted lens of Complexity Leadership Theory, enabling an in-depth examination of how administrative, adaptive, and enabling functions are enacted by leaders to navigate complex environments.

The approach will integrate multiple data sources to ensure methodological triangulation^[1] and enhance the validity of the findings. Data collection will primarily consist of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior leaders, designed to elicit detailed narratives about their decision-making processes and operational challenges. This will be supplemented by the analysis of organizational documents, such as strategic plans and annual reports, to understand the formal administrative structures. Furthermore, non-participant observation of strategic meetings will provide insights into the emergent adaptive and enabling leadership dynamics in action, offering a holistic view of leadership practices within the selected organizations.

3.2 Participant Selection and Context

Participants for this comparative case study will be selected through a purposive sampling strategy^[10], targeting senior leaders from four distinct organizations. The primary selection criterion is the organization's operational environment, chosen to create a clear contrast. Two cases will be drawn from established companies within stable, mature industries, where administrative leadership functions are often pronounced. The remaining two cases will be selected from dynamic, high-growth technology firms operating in volatile markets, where adaptive and enabling leadership are hypothesized to be more prevalent. Within each organization, individuals holding executive-level positions with significant strategic oversight for over five years will be recruited.

This selection strategy is designed to provide a rich comparative context essential for applying Complexity Leadership Theory. By contrasting leadership practices in stable versus complex environments, the study can effectively analyze how the balance of administrative, adaptive, and enabling functions shifts in response to external pressures. This approach facilitates the identification of nuanced differences between general and strategic leadership styles as they manifest in practice. Access will be negotiated through formal requests to the organizations, and all participants and company names will be anonymized to protect confidentiality and ensure candid disclosure of leadership experiences and challenges.

3.3 Operationalization of Leadership Functions

To operationalize the core constructs of Complexity Leadership Theory, this study will employ a multi-indicator approach. Administrative leadership will be identified through the analysis of formal organizational documents and interview questions targeting planning, coordination, and control processes. Indicators will include references to established protocols, hierarchical decision-making, and resource management to maintain efficiency. Adaptive leadership will be captured by analyzing interview narratives and observational data for instances of emergent problem-solving, creative responses to market volatility, and informal learning networks. Enabling leadership will be assessed by identifying leader behaviors that bridge the formal and informal, such as fostering psychological safety and championing innovative ideas.

A detailed coding framework will be developed based on the theoretical definitions of administrative, adaptive, and enabling leadership. Using qualitative data analysis software^[6], interview transcripts and observational field notes will be systematically coded to tag specific behaviors, decisions, and statements corresponding to each function. The frequency and richness of these coded segments will serve as the primary metric for analysis, allowing for a comparative assessment of the prevalence and interplay of these functions across different organizational contexts. To ensure reliability, a second researcher will independently code a subset of the data, and inter-coder agreement will be calculated.

3.4 Data Analysis and Comparative Framework

The analysis of qualitative data will proceed through a systematic, multi-stage process. Initially, all interview transcripts and observational field notes will be imported into qualitative data analysis software for management. A thematic analysis^[2] will be conducted, guided by the a priori coding framework based on the administrative, adaptive, and enabling functions of Complexity Leadership Theory. This deductive approach will be supplemented by an inductive process to capture emergent themes not anticipated by the theory. To ensure the reliability of the coding, an inter-coder agreement protocol^[7] will be implemented, where a second researcher independently codes 20% of the data.

Upon completion of the coding phase, a cross-case comparative analysis will be performed to identify patterns, similarities, and divergences across the four organizational contexts. This comparative framework will focus on the relative frequency and interplay of the three leadership functions, contrasting practices in stable versus dynamic environments. The analysis will seek to build a theoretical narrative explaining how the balance of these functions differentiates general leadership from strategic leadership. By mapping these distinct configurations, the study aims to generate a nuanced, empirically grounded understanding of how strategic leaders navigate the tensions between organizational stability and adaptive change.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Administrative Leadership: Efficiency in Stable vs. Dynamic Contexts

The analysis of data from the two mature industry firms revealed a pronounced emphasis on administrative leadership functions. Interview transcripts with senior leaders consistently referenced established protocols, hierarchical decision-making, and meticulous resource management as cornerstones of their operational success. This was corroborated by organizational documents, which detailed highly structured planning cycles and control mechanisms designed to maximize efficiency and predictability. Within these stable environments, such practices were equated with effective leadership, directly contributing to reliable performance. This finding aligns with Complexity Leadership Theory's conceptualization of administrative leadership as a primary mechanism for maintaining organizational stability and executing established procedures effectively.

In stark contrast, leaders in the high-growth technology firms exhibited a more ambivalent relationship with purely administrative functions. While acknowledging the necessity of planning and control for accountability, interview data indicated that rigid administrative structures were often perceived as impediments to market agility. Observational data from strategic meetings showed that formal procedures were frequently bypassed in favor of more fluid, responsive decision-making processes. This suggests that in dynamic contexts, the efficiency derived from traditional administrative leadership can be counterproductive, hindering the adaptive capacity required for strategic renewal, thus confirming its contextual limitations as predicted by the theoretical framework.

4.2 Adaptive and Enabling Functions: Catalysts for Strategic Renewal

Conversely, the analysis revealed that adaptive and enabling leadership functions were the primary drivers of strategic renewal within the high-growth technology firms. Observational data from these dynamic contexts captured frequent instances of emergent, bottom-up problem-solving where informal

teams collaborated to address unforeseen market shifts. Interview narratives consistently emphasized the value of creative experimentation and learning from failure. This aligns with Complexity Leadership Theory's assertion that adaptive leadership is the source of novelty and innovation. In the stable industry cases, these adaptive behaviors were far less prevalent, with a clear preference for established solutions over emergent creativity.

Furthermore, the strategic impact of these adaptive processes in the technology firms was directly facilitated by enabling leadership behaviors. Senior leaders were observed actively fostering psychological safety, creating environments where novel ideas could be proposed and debated without fear of reprisal. They acted as critical intermediaries, connecting informal adaptive networks with the formal administrative structure to secure resources and champion promising innovations. This enabling function—bridging the informal creative space with the formal organizational system—was a defining practice in dynamic settings, serving as the mechanism to harness emergent adaptation for strategic gain.

4.3 The Interplay of Functions: Distinguishing Strategic from General Leadership

The findings reveal that the distinction between general and strategic leadership lies not in the presence of specific functions, but in their dynamic interplay and integration. In the stable industry cases, leadership was predominantly administrative, focused on optimizing existing processes and maintaining stability. This approach, while effective for predictable environments, aligns with a more general leadership style. In contrast, leaders in the dynamic tech firms demonstrated a strategic style by actively managing the inherent tension between administrative control and adaptive innovation. They skillfully integrated all three functions, using enabling behaviors to harness emergent creativity for formal organizational advantage.

This integration was most clearly operationalized through the enabling leadership function. Strategic leaders in the dynamic contexts consciously acted as intermediaries, bridging the gap between informal adaptive networks and the formal administrative system. Observational data showed them creating protected spaces for experimentation and then translating successful innovations into the language of strategic plans and resource requests. In the stable firms, this crucial linking mechanism was underdeveloped. The administrative and adaptive functions operated in separate spheres, with the former often stifling the latter, thereby limiting the organization's capacity for strategic evolution.

4.4 Contextual Influences on Leadership Style Manifestation

The findings strongly suggest that the organizational environment is a primary determinant of the manifested leadership style. In the stable, mature industry cases, the low-volatility context directly reinforced an administrative-dominant leadership model. The market rewarded predictability and operational efficiency, making hierarchical control and process optimization the most rational leadership priorities. Consequently, a general leadership style, focused on maintaining stability, emerged not as a deficiency but as a logical adaptation to environmental conditions. The absence of significant external turbulence meant that the impetus for developing robust adaptive or enabling capacities was minimal, shaping a contextually appropriate leadership manifestation.

Conversely, the dynamic context of the technology firms acted as a powerful catalyst for the development of strategic leadership. The high degree of market uncertainty and rapid competitive shifts made a purely administrative focus unsustainable. This environment demanded constant adaptation, elevating the importance of emergent, creative problem-solving. Leaders were compelled to cultivate enabling functions to harness this adaptive potential for strategic advantage. In this setting, strategic leadership was not an abstract ideal but a pragmatic necessity for survival and growth, with the context itself selecting for leaders capable of integrating all three functions.

CONCLUSION

This research concludes that the distinction between general and strategic leadership lies not in possessing different traits, but in the dynamic integration of leadership functions. General leadership, as observed in stable industries, aligns closely with the administrative function of Complexity Leadership Theory, prioritizing control and efficiency. Strategic leadership, conversely, represents a more holistic approach required in volatile environments, involving the active management of tension between administrative stability and adaptive innovation. The key differentiator is the enabling function, which strategic leaders use to bridge informal creative processes with formal organizational structures, thereby harnessing emergent novelty for sustained competitive advantage.

The study's findings underscore that organizational context is a primary determinant shaping leadership styles. In stable environments, a general leadership approach dominated by administrative functions emerges as a rational adaptation to market demands for predictability and efficiency. Conversely, the volatile conditions of high-growth industries act as a catalyst for strategic leadership. The imperative for continuous adaptation compels leaders to move beyond mere administration and actively cultivate enabling functions to integrate emergent innovation. This confirms that strategic leadership is not a universal ideal but a pragmatic necessity forged by the pressures of complex, unpredictable organizational environments.

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