

EXPLORING HOW ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE SHAPES LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOUR IN HYBRID WORKPLACES: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

Background and Rationale:

The hybrid work model—combining remote and in-office setups—has become a standard in post-pandemic UK organizations. This transformation requires a rethinking of leadership approaches. While some firms emphasize flexibility and autonomy, others lean on structure and oversight. Organizational culture plays a critical role in shaping how leaders behave, communicate, and make decisions in hybrid environments. Despite growing interest, academic literature has not yet sufficiently captured how cultural norms within organizations influence adaptive leadership in these evolving work settings.

Research Objectives:

- To explore how organizational culture influences leadership behaviour in hybrid work environments.
- To identify how leaders interpret and apply cultural values in distributed team management.
- To examine how employees perceive the alignment (or misalignment) between organizational culture and leadership actions in hybrid settings.

Research Questions:

1. How do organizational cultural values shape leadership behaviour in hybrid workplaces?
2. What leadership practices emerge as responses to specific cultural expectations in a hybrid context?
3. How do employees interpret leadership effectiveness in relation to their organization's cultural norms?

Methodology:

- **Research Design:** Single case study
- **Approach:** Interpretivist, exploratory

- **Setting:** A mid-sized UK-based service organization operating under a hybrid work policy since 2021
- **Participants:**
 - 10 employees and 5 managers from different departments
 - Purposive sampling based on tenure, department, and leadership exposure
- **Data Collection Methods:**
 - Semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams
 - Internal policy documents and cultural artefacts (e.g., onboarding materials, leadership memos)
- **Data Analysis Strategy:**
 - Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
 - Coding conducted manually and validated through peer review
 - Use of reflexive journaling to address researcher bias

Key Findings:

1. Culture of Trust Leads to Distributed Leadership

- Employees in departments with strong cultural emphasis on trust and autonomy described managers as enablers rather than supervisors.
- Leaders in such departments delegated freely and encouraged asynchronous collaboration.

2. Control-Oriented Cultures Reinforce Surveillance-Based Leadership

- In contrast, employees in more traditional teams reported high levels of monitoring and frequent “check-ins,” resulting in lower perceived autonomy.

3. Cultural Ambiguity Created Inconsistency in Leadership

- Participants noted discrepancies in leadership styles between departments despite shared corporate values, creating confusion around expectations and fairness.

4. Employee Perception of Authentic Leadership Linked to Cultural Alignment

- Leaders who explicitly reinforced cultural values in their communication (e.g., “we value flexibility”) were seen as more credible and trustworthy by their teams.

Conclusion and Theoretical Implications:

The findings suggest that **organizational culture directly informs how leadership manifests in hybrid environments**. Trust-centric cultures support participatory and empowering leadership, while legacy cultures default to control mechanisms. Consistency in cultural messaging and leadership training is essential for equitable employee experience in hybrid settings. This study contributes to organizational behaviour literature by connecting cultural constructs to leadership adaptation in post-pandemic workplaces.

Future Research Scope:

- Cross-case comparison across industries (e.g., healthcare vs tech)
- Longitudinal tracking of cultural change and leadership response over time
- Exploration of middle-management's dual role as cultural carriers and leaders
- Incorporating diversity and inclusion factors into leadership-culture alignment

Academic and Corporate Suitability:

- **Academic:** Relevant for dissertations in organizational behaviour, HRM, and leadership studies, especially under qualitative research methodology.
- **Corporate:** Useful for internal leadership development programmes, HR strategy teams, and consultants helping organizations adapt culture to new work models.