

Traits of Innovative Leadership

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Abstract: Innovations are essential in maintaining or obtaining a competitive advantage. Innovations emerge from the combination of new resources and creative efforts, providing a significant foundation for economic growth. By promoting a culture of innovation, an organization's ability to innovate is strengthened. Innovative companies are better positioned to utilize the full potential of external knowledge and resources to enhance their innovation activities and, in turn, gain competitive advantages. The culture of an organization is directly affected by the leadership of an organization. Leadership can promote a culture valuing creativity and risk taking while also encouraging employees to seek innovative ideas. Innovative leadership is also characterized by the ability to inspire and motivate teams to embrace change. Innovative leadership involves setting a clear vision, fostering a culture of continuous learning, and encouraging collaboration across all levels of the organization. Organizations are faced with rapidly changing environments and smart technologies. Innovative leaders are adaptable to changing environments and new technologies, open to new ideas, and skilled at leveraging diverse perspectives to drive growth and improvement. Innovative leaders also place great emphasis on effective communication and collaboration. An online questionnaire was distributed to Master level students at two universities of applied sciences in Finland. The participants had several years of work experience as at least two years of relevant work experience after their first degree is required for them to be eligible to apply. The questionnaire was distributed to identify the traits of innovative leaders and the importance of organizational culture and values as elements of innovative leadership. The research aims to establish how various leadership factors, including understanding content technologies, communication with stakeholders, visionary thinking, and internal and external conditions, influence the effectiveness and innovation of leadership within an organization. The relationship between different aspects of leadership and their impact on organizational success and innovation are also examined in this study.

Key words: Innovation, Innovative Leadership, Innovative Leadership Traits, Organization, Enterprise

1. Introduction

Organizations need to produce innovative products and services for survival, sustainability and growth (Siakas et al., 2020). Innovation is seen as the main vehicle for value creation in business organizations and in society. The ability of an organization to innovate is strengthened when a culture of innovation is promoted through its organizational practices and organizational culture. Innovative leadership is a significant element in fostering innovation and creativity in organizations. It includes guiding individual employees and teams to generate and implement new ideas, which is imperative for maintaining a competitive advantage in the swiftly changing business environment (Kremer et al., 2019). The organizational culture is mainly created by strong leadership, a robust mission guided by a realistic vision, and strengthened by a value system that brings together employees around a shared purpose (Schein, 1986; Lampropoulos & Siakas, 2018). The organizational system that promotes innovation needs to include characteristics, such as encouragement of open communication, participation and collaboration, provision of resources enabling creativity, training, and exploration of innovative projects, incentives and recognition of open-mindedness, forward thinking, flexibility, as well as establishment of innovation goals. The changing environment and the increased utilization of smart technologies place new requirements on organizations to leverage diverse perspectives related to innovation, growth and improvement.

To gain advantage over competitors, development strategies of business organisations and even of nations are supported by the need for innovation (Sheriff et al., 2013). There is an assumption that innovation is positively correlated with value creation, which is the ultimate goal of every business and every human activity. The

literature suggests that organizations perceive innovation as integral for value creation and gained competitive advantage (Sheriff et al., 2013). Figure 1 shows the relationship between innovation, culture and value.

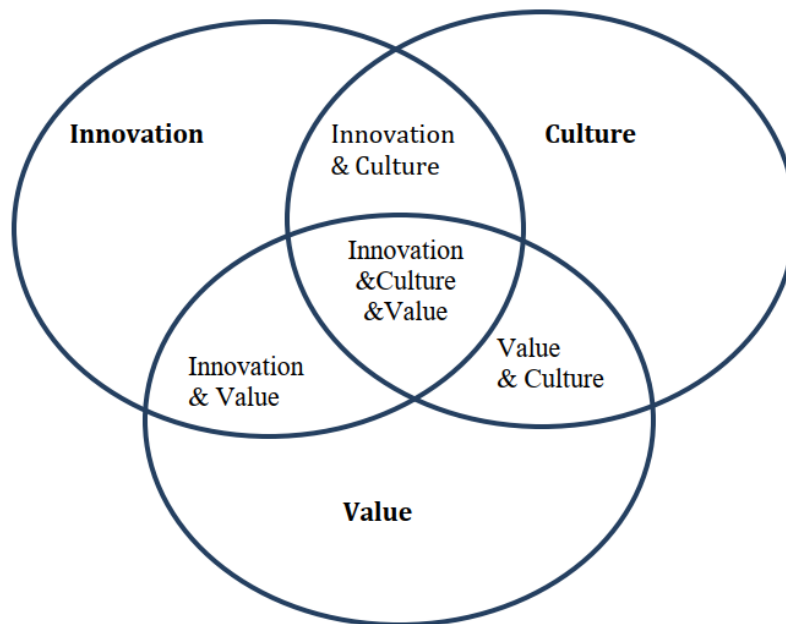


Figure 1: Conceptual framework relating Innovation, Culture and Value (Sheriff et al., 2013).

The interactions between Innovation, Culture, and Value can be classified into two main categories, namely interactions that enable the creation of opportunities (synergies) and interactions that create obstacles (tension) that needs to be mitigated. The innovative organization needs to capitalize on the synergistic factors and mitigate the factors that cause tension. The traits of innovative leadership are expected to offer a role model for strengthening innovative behavior of subordinates so that they can contribute to the competitive advantage of the organization. In this paper we investigate traits of innovative leadership by establishing various leadership factors that are identified to influence the effectiveness and innovation of organizations.

2. Literature Review

Three of the most important sources of organizational cultures are (Siakas, 2002) societal or national culture within which an organization is physically situated, the vision, management style and personality of the founder of the organization (or dominant leader), the type of business an organization conducts and the nature of its business environment (e.g. influence from stakeholders). Figure 2 shows the societal iceberg, which divides the organization into a formal and informal organization.



Figure 2: The Societal Iceberg (Siakas, 2002).

The idea of an iceberg represents a visible part of an showing the formal aspects of an organization while the informal aspects of an organization hide under water and are difficult to discover. The informal part is the greater part of the societal iceberg and will act to help or hinder an organizational process of change. It often leads to resistance to the change process. The structure (hierarchy) of the organization can be visualized to some degree by, for example, organizational charts, which show the roles and responsibilities in the organization. Goals and strategy are visible. They are planned, decided and documented and from this point of view visible. Products and services are also visible. Standards adopted and procedures applied are visible components of the formal organization, both in their documentation and in their use. Quality standards, for example, are document oriented in that procedures and processes in the organization have to be identified, documented and followed. Management is visible in the organizational chart, but management style and behavior are culture bound and thus difficult to recognize for an outsider. Thus, leadership and behavior belong to the informal organization. Another important factor for the success of the organization is financial resources, which can be divided into people and infrastructure resources. If enough people are employed and the latest technology is available, we still cannot predict to what degree the goals and objectives will be fulfilled. For the management of any workforce, but particularly for the management of a diverse workforce in a global organization, the underlying culture and norms of behavior must be understood to obtain commitment at all levels in the organization. Cultural studies are mainly concerned about fundamental values, attitudes, and beliefs. From an anthropological point of view, culture is considered to be static and changes only slowly over time. To understand an organization, both the formal and the informal features of an organization are essential. It is likely that it is more difficult to measure or assess the informal part of an organization. To create and maintain an adequate organizational culture, management activity and relationships, together with leadership and commitment, are significant factors.

Since leadership is culture bound, the traits of innovative leadership also need to be investigated through a cultural lens. Personal characteristics of innovative leaders comprise hard and soft personal competencies (Asrarudin, 2023), such as creative and positive thinking, problem solving skills, interdisciplinary understanding, as well as subordinate intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Studies have suggested that innovative leadership is influenced by vision, trust, honesty and integrity, creativity, emotional intelligence, and adaptability (Afsar & Umrani, 2020; Javed et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Asrudin, 2023; Adeel et al., 2024). It positively influences organizational innovation and performance by fostering a supportive environment, encouraging learning. It aims to leverage personality traits like agreeableness, cordiality and openness. Employee innovative behavior is a key factor contributing to long-term survival, self-sustainability, resilience and growth. Diverse leadership characteristics were examined and their impact on employee innovative work behavior and organizational performance: 1) *Innovative leadership* (leadership style that promote innovation and creativity to manage people and projects) has a positive relationship with sustainable performance, a combination of economic, social and environmental performance of thriving highly energized employees (Aman-Ullah et al., 2024). 2) *Transformational leadership* (leadership style that empowers people to accomplish positive change through vision, inspiration, and action) has a positive impact on employees' innovative work behavior (Afsar et al., 2018). 3) *Transactional leadership* (leadership style of rewards and punishment) relates positively to organizational performance (Dong, 2023) 4) *Entrepreneurial leadership* (strategic thinking and resilience to communication and financial common sense) positively impacts on Corporate Sustainable Development (CSD) and firm performance through creativity, passion and motivation (Razzaque et al., 2022). Entrepreneurial leadership positively moderates the effects of creative self-efficacy (CSE) (the belief that one has the capacity to perform creative work effectively) on innovative behavior (Newman et al., 2018). 5) *Ethical leadership* (guiding people to make good decisions rooted in ethical values, such as fairness, morals, ethics, trust, honesty, accountability, equality, mutual respect, and honesty). Ethical leadership is a significant predictor of both individual and organizational creativity. For the individual level, the results of multilevel modeling indicate that there is a positive link between ethical leadership and employee creativity. Ethical leadership affects employee creativity through knowledge sharing and empowerment. At the organizational level, the results reveal that ethical leadership is positively associated with organizational innovation (Shafique et al., 2020).

As regards *creative performance*, authentic, empowering, and entrepreneurial leadership confirmed the strongest relationships. For *innovative performance*, both transactional (exchange or interaction between people) and supportive leadership appeared relevant. Mutonyi et al (2022) after testing a sample of 1008 hospital employees revealed that employee individual innovative behavior is related to organizational culture, internal market-oriented cultures and support for autonomy, all mediated through organizational attractiveness. Hence, they are significant drivers of employee perceptions of organizational attractiveness and their innovative behavior. Aschbacher and Sablik (2019) quote that leaders who employ a novel leadership style

can promote innovations. Sen and Eren (2012) argue that innovative leadership combines technology know-how with traditional leadership and management skills. They have described ten skills an innovative leader should possess. Firstly, technology skills are required, particularly know-how about technologies. Leaders must possess the ability to transfer technology knowledge to others through a deliberate process of sharing of knowledge, expertise and skills between individual employees and teams. Knowledge management includes certain organizational structures, processes, principles, and applications that support people in knowledge sharing and leveraging to meet business goals (Siakas & Siakas, 2020). Focus is placed on the individual, but simultaneously it highlights the wholistic character of creating, sharing and managing knowledge. Visionary leadership embrace a holistic understanding and expectation of future changes, including setting clear goals, producing a sense of purpose, and inspiring employees to take actions for actualizing the desired outcome (Karwan et al., 2023). According to Keeney (2008) value-focused thinking helps keep attention throughout the decision process on the aims of desired achievements. It helps define the decision problem in an explicit and clear manner and it inspires creative thinking in modelling the decision. Value-focused thinking enables the creation of alternatives, results in improved objectives for evaluating the alternatives, and proactively identifies more attractive decision opportunities. Leaders need willpower to promote a company into success. Leaders need to obtain followers inside a company. Ndonge (2022) emphasizes that the strategies, types and tactics of influence used by leaders in motivating others influence the achievement of goals and argues that there is positive correlation between leadership, followership, and organizational performance. Effective communication between leaders within a company. Marbun et al. (2023) emphasize that in order to achieve the goals of an organization effective communication is important. The ability to understand internal conditions. Organizational culture is stimulated by leaders to influence various aspects of organizational behavior (Siakas, 2002). According to Keeley et al (2013), the spectrum of innovation is wide and covers many business operations. Additionally, they claim that companies can innovate in ten different ways and they have grouped these approached into three areas, namely configuration, offering, and experience, in their framework. The framework emphasizes leaders should have business thinking from different perspectives reflecting general leadership and management skills.

3. Methodology

To examine the participants' responses and viewpoints regarding the importance of leadership in promoting a culture of innovation within companies, an online survey was created and distributed at two universities of applied sciences in Finland. The main basis for this survey was a previously presented framework by Sen and Eren (2012). The questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. The data collection process consisted of an online questionnaire uploaded on the Webropol platform. The participants rated each item (variable) of attributes on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 where 1 meant "Not important at all" and 5 meant "Extremely important".

The questionnaire contained eleven background questions at the beginning of the questionnaire, such as age, gender, student status (university of study, full or part time), number of university years completed, work status, current position in workplace and the field of the degree. Ten questions regarding leadership were administered after the background questions. The last question was an open question asking what constitutes innovative leadership from the respondents' viewpoints. The questions and their grouping can be seen in Table 1. Descriptive statistics using SPSS were used to analyze the data of the responses of the 42 Finnish master's students who took part in this study.

4. Findings

The participants consisted of 17 female students (40.48%) and 25 male students (59.52%) in Finland who had an average age of 41 years and studied business management and administration as well as information technology and digitalization. Figure 3 shows most students were employed (n=35, 83.33%) with only a few being unemployed (n=7, 16.67%) at the time the survey was undertaken. Additionally, most participants were undertaking their master's courses as full-time students (n=25, 59.52%). The participants had an average of 18.36 years in working experience and most had 11-15 years of experience (28.57%), followed by those with 16-20 years of experience (21.43%) It can be concluded that majority of respondents had at least five years of work experience (95,24%) , which is in line with the fact that respondents were master level students in Finland, as work experience of at least two years is required for admission to a master's degree.

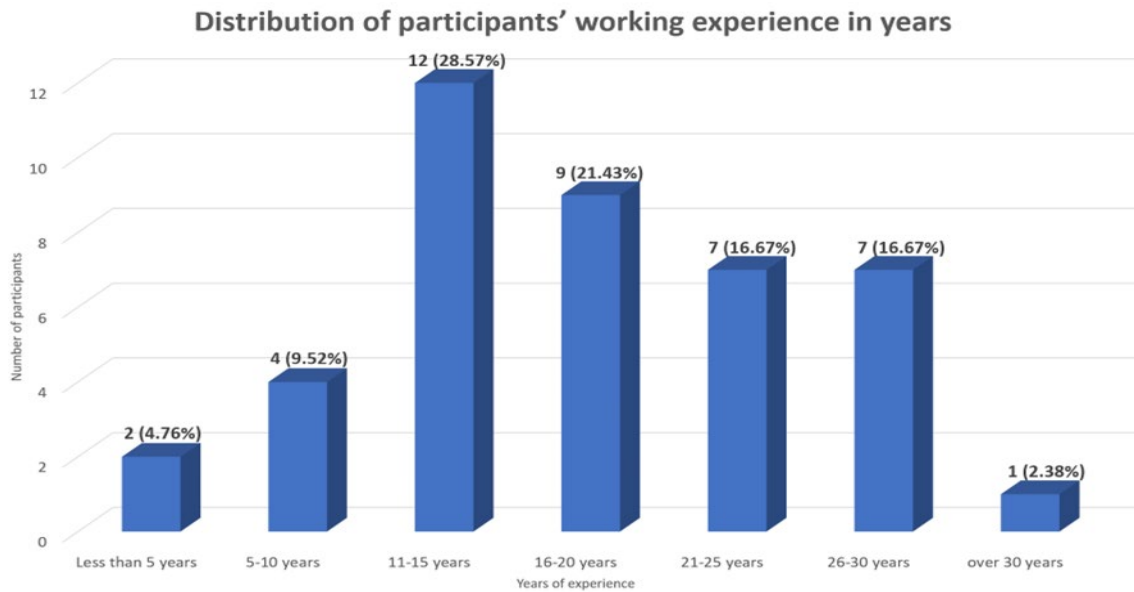


Figure 3: Distribution of participants' working experience in years.

Given their age and years of experience, when examining their seniority in their current or previous companies, most participants were mid-level employees (n=21, 50.0%). However, there were also 9 participants (21.43%) who worked as executives and 9 (21.43%) who had roles at an operational level. Three of the younger participants, who were currently unemployed, had less than 5 years of working experience, and were taking part in the master's program as full-time students, reported that they had no previous roles within a company that could be categorized within these three levels. It can be concluded that majority of the respondents possessed work experience supporting the understanding of a company culture, leadership and innovation. Furthermore, to acquire a better understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences regarding the importance of leadership and its role in promoting innovation, ten Likert scale questions were set as. The findings are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency of participant responses.

Groups	Questions: How important is it for leaders ...	Not important at all	Not very important	Neutral	Quite important	Extremely important	Mean	Std. Dev.
Understanding & communicating content technologies	to understand the technologies used in the companies to effectively lead them?	0	1 (2.38%)	4 (9.52%)	25 (59.52%)	12 (28.57%)	4.14	0.68
	to communicate the use & value of these technologies to stakeholders (e.g., employees, customers, clients, & other interested parties)?	0	4 (9.52%)	7 (16.67%)	21 (50.00%)	10 (23.81%)	3.88	0.89
Leadership skills & attributes	to have skills, as visionary thinking, & the ability to analyze the company current status and future potential?	1 (2.38%)	3 (7.14%)	5 (11.90%)	16 (38.10%)	17 (40.48%)	4.07	1.02
	to understand & align with the company's core values?	0	1 (2.38%)	1 (2.38%)	17 (40.48%)	23 (54.76%)	4.48	0.67
	to showcase strong willpower &	0	2 (4.76%)	4 (9.52%)	24 (57.14%)	12 (28.57%)	4.10	0.76

Groups	Questions: How important is it for leaders ...	Not important at all	Not very important	Neutral	Quite important	Extremely important	Mean	Std. Dev.
	commitment to their work?							
	to effectively manage both processes and people within the company?	0	3 (7.14%)	6 (14.29%)	27 (64.29%)	6 (14.29%)	3.86	0.75
Leadership dynamics & influence	to acknowledge the role of employees in shaping leadership within the company?	0	1 (2.38%)	17 (40.48%)	18 (42.86%)	6 (14.29%)	3.66	0.73
	to interact & communicate effectively with stakeholders to lead the company?	0	0	5 (11.90%)	18 (42.86%)	19 (45.24%)	4.33	0.69
Internal & external influences	to consider internal factors, e.g. organizational culture, in influencing leadership effectiveness within the company?	0	2 (4.76%)	5 (11.90%)	20 (47.62%)	15 (35.71%)	4.14	0.81
	to consider external factors, such as politics, economy, and societal factors, in influencing leadership effectiveness within the company?	1 (2.38%)	4 (9.52%)	13 (30.95%)	13 (30.95%)	11 (26.19%)	3.69	1.05

In all the questions, participants consistently emphasized the importance of leadership in increasing innovation and productivity. Specifically, participants highlighted that effective leadership required strong understanding of adopted technologies and used within the company (n=37, 88.10%) and the ability to effectively communicate with other stakeholders about these technologies and methods (n=31, 73.81%).

With regards to questions relating to attributes of leadership, the participants also highly regarded the importance of visionary thinking and analytical skills to evaluate the current state of the company and identify opportunities for further improvements and advancements (n=33, 78.57%). Moreover, participants vastly agreed that effective leadership required leaders to understand the core values of the company (n=36, 85.71%), demonstrate interest and commitment in their work (n=33, 78.57%), and be capable of managing and directing both processes and employees (n=40, 95.24%). They also emphasized that to effectively lead an innovation-driven company, leaders should be able to interact and communicate effectively with employees (n=37, 88.10%), as employees play a key role in shaping leadership within the organization (n=24, 57.14%). The employees playing a key role in leadership within the organization had, with regards to questions related to the attributes of the leadership, the lowest mean indicating it the least important of the attributes.

Participants highlighted that both internal conditions (n=35, 83.33%), such as organizational culture, and external factors (n=24, 57.14%), e.g., political, economic, and societal influences, significantly impact leadership effectiveness within the company. A strong and adaptable organizational culture is important for leadership success, while external conditions require leaders to remain flexible and responsive to ever-changing challenges. Internal factors had a higher mean value than the external factors, thus the respondents see the understanding of internal factors as more important than external factors.

An open-ended question for the participants to describe what makes leadership innovative was included in the survey. As it was not mandatory to answer this question, only 16 (38.10%) of the participants responded. Nonetheless, based on the participants' viewpoints on innovative leadership, several key characteristics and approaches that make leadership effective in fostering innovation are highlighted. Emphasis was placed on the importance of creativity, visionary thinking, and an open-minded approach, with leaders being able to think "outside the box" and leverage new technologies. It was also revealed that to foster innovation, it is essential to empower stakeholders and motivate employees to learn, adapt, and give feedback. A focus on leading change,

taking bold actions, and having a servant leadership attitude, which prioritizes the needs of others, was frequently mentioned.

Additionally, participants noted the importance of staying ahead of competition by researching and integrating new technologies, employing top talents, applying new approaches, enabling all employees to voice their opinions and innovate, and creating a culture that continuously adapts and evolves. The importance of flexibility, open-mindedness, a forward-looking mindset, and the ability to manage change effectively were highlighted as crucial in today's fast-paced, ever-changing world. Leaders were seen as essential in fostering a culture of collaboration, risk-taking, and ethical conduct, while ensuring value creation for the organization and its community. Encouraging diversity, openness to new ideas, and supporting a personal and individualized leadership approach were considered as ways to inspire creativity and continuous learning. Finally, the need to adopt an "experimental culture" where failure is embraced as a learning opportunity and to allow all employees, not just managers, to contribute ideas and solutions was noted.

5. Discussion

The understanding of technologies was seen important in this study. This finding is in line with the work of Sen and Eren (2012) who note that that innovative leadership combines technology know-how with traditional leadership and management skills. They note that innovative leadership should have technology skills are required, particularly know-how about technologies. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of communication and knowledge sharing, which also correlates to the findings of this study. Our findings are also aligned with the framework of 10 types of innovation presented by Keeley et al (2013) as they highlight that an innovative leader needs both traditional competencies and technological competencies to improve business through innovation.

The findings of this study of internal attributes, such as such as organizational culture, and external attributes of the organization playing an important role with regards to innovation activities is in line with the findings of Siakas et al (2020) who found that organizational culture is affected by business type an organization conducts and the nature of its business environment. Based on the outcomes, the mean value of the internal attributes was higher than that of the external attributes e.g. politics, economy, and societal factors.

6. Conclusions

The limitation of this study was the small number of respondents. However, the results show the most critical features of innovative leaders. These features should be developed in the case of any leader who wants to have growth through innovations for their company. General findings suggest leadership traits are associated with innovative leadership. Being aware of the leaders' traits can alter or improve employees' own leadership skills. An increased effort should be made to foster an organizational culture towards a more innovative driven and psychologically safe one, allowing for idea generation and other innovation activities (Brusila-Meltovaara et al, 2025). Based on the outcomes, diversity and service leadership also arose as key elements of innovative leadership which is in line with the outcomes of other related studies (Gomez & Bernet, 2019).

The significance of change management (Kotter, 1996) and servant leadership is also seen important. The other organization related traits confirm that innovative leadership is partly connected to organizational ambidexterity. (O' Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Ambidexterity refers to the ability to concurrently manage the existing business in an efficacious manner and to explore simultaneously novel markets, products, services, and technologies. Organizational ambidexterity enhances organizational performance in numerous ways (Taha et al, 2024). Our findings support the ambidextral and servant leadership traits as innovative leadership traits.

Ethical traits were found to be important in an innovative leader, which supports the notion of ethical leadership, which again predicts both individual and organizational creativity. Ethical leadership also enhances employee creativity through knowledge sharing and empowerment. The findings are in line with Shaficute et al (2020) where at the organizational level, the results reveal that ethical leadership is positively associated with organizational innovation. Diversity, openness to new ideas, and supporting a personal and individualized leadership approach were considered as ways to inspire creativity and continuous learning. The findings confirm that management and leadership are entwined (Nienabler, 2010). The results also highlight the importance of creativity, visionary thinking, and an open-minded approach, with leaders being able to think "outside the box" and leverage new technologies. Furthermore, it is essential to empower stakeholders and motivate employees to learn, adapt, and give feedback to foster innovations. Change management, bold actions, and having servant

leadership attitudes, which prioritize the needs of others (Eva et al, 2019) is seen as important by respondents. The findings also suggest that innovative leadership traits should include adapting to the use of new technologies, employing top talent, providing a psychologically safe environment (Bernards et al, 2024; Kyambade et al, 2024) where opinions and suggestions are encouraged and thus a culture prevails for innovation and creativity. According to Johnson & Hackman (2018), highly competent leaders have good communication skills as well as the ability to listen. Our results demonstrate that the leadership of technology companies should understand content technology. Leading a company is challenging and complex. Hence, awareness of critical leadership factors can play a pivotal role in the success of a business.

Ethics and AI Declaration

This study did not require ethical clearance. AI-assisted writing was employed for grammar checking and paraphrasing. All interpretations were conducted by the authors.

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