Abstract

In a world of increasing complexity and rapid change, the ability of organizational leaders to adapt to evolving circumstances has become central to leadership effectiveness. Yet, despite broad agreement on its importance, adaptive leadership remains theoretically underdeveloped. Through a mixed-methods approach that integrates inductive theory building and deductive research across three interconnected studies, this dissertation aims to contribute to a more robust theoretical understanding of how and why leaders adapt to change.

Following an introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents an exploratory qualitative study designed to clarify and theoretically ground the concept of adaptive leadership. Through analysis of rich narrative data, the study revealed multiple forms of adaptive change, highlighting the complexity and multifaceted nature of adaptive leadership. From this, an integrative framework was developed that depicts adaptive leadership as a dynamic, context-dependent process in which leaders respond to evolving demands by combining immediate behavioral adjustments with longer-term developmental adaptation. Grounded in established psychological theory, the framework explains how adaptations are governed by mechanisms at both behavioral and leader levels of analysis. By linking these levels, the framework connects ongoing behavioral adaptation with leader development. As a result, it offers a unified, comprehensive model of how leaders enact adaptive change.

Building on the qualitative phase, two subsequent quantitative studies tested specific predictions about the antecedents (Chapter 3) and consequences (Chapter 4) of adaptive leadership. Chapter 3 examines how leaders respond to threat by testing two competing interpretations of threat-rigidity theory (Staw et al., 1981). According to one interpretation, threat constricts control, leading to more directive and less participative behavior. The alternative suggests that threat triggers leaders to behave more in line with their dominant leadership style. These competing hypotheses were tested using daily observations from leaders in high-stakes professions, collected through a multisource experience sampling method. Surprisingly, multilevel analyses showed that threat was associated with increased use of both directive and participative behaviors. Leaders also did not revert to their dominant leadership style under threat. Exploratory analyses further revealed curvilinear relationships between threat and leadership. These findings challenge the idea that threat leads to

behavioral narrowing, as assumed by traditional threat-rigidity theory. Instead, they point to a more adaptive and complex leadership response under pressure.

In Chapter 4, the focus shifts to the consequences of adaptive leadership, examining how followers interpret and evaluate leaders who change their behavior over time. Drawing on attribution theory (Kelley, 1967, 1973), the study investigates how behavioral consistency shapes leadership perceptions using an experimental vignette methodology. Results show that followers perceive leaders as more effective when their behavioral changes are systematic and rule-based rather than random. Both trust and uncertainty mediated the relationship between behavioral consistency and perceived effectiveness. Systematic behavioral variability increased trust and reduced uncertainty, leading to higher effectiveness ratings. In contrast, inconsistent behavior reduced trust and increased uncertainty. These findings suggest that behavioral adjustments are most effective when grounded in a coherent logic.

The final chapter summarizes the key findings of the studies, along with a discussion of their theoretical and practical implications. The limitations of the research are also evaluated. The dissertation concludes by outlining an agenda for future research aimed at establishing adaptive leadership as a distinct area of study within the science of leadership.