

Employee Attitude as a Mediator between Transformational Leadership Style and Employees' Readiness to Change during COVID-19

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Abstract: Early this decade, COVID-19 has wreaked havoc globally, which is compelling society and organizations to change. The Pandemic incident highlighted the significance of leadership style in influencing employee attitude and readiness to meet problems that have an impact on their daily tasks and performance. Consequently, this study is intended at finding the influence of transformational leaders on workers' readiness to change during COVID-19 and how employee attitude mediates the relationship between both. The data was gathered from 386 participants using a standardized survey questionnaire. To explore the effect of transformational leadership on workers' willingness to change and the significance of attitude between transformational leadership and readiness to change, this study has used Smart PLS-SEM version 4 for data analysis. This study significantly supported all the hypotheses; transformational leadership's impact on the employee's readiness to change revealed a positive correlation between employee willingness to change and their attitude during COVID-19. The attitude also acts as a mediator between transformational leadership and employee readiness to change, which has been confirmed by the research. Although the study's scope was restricted to Saudi Arabian workers, future studies can collect data from other nations and take into account the effects of different leadership philosophies. It is critical to comprehend how managers may encourage staff to accept change by assisting them in developing a feeling of the necessity for change. This study will assist managers in developing policies to address employee-related problems and enable staff members to accept change in the face of emergencies like the COVID-19 epidemic.

Keywords: Transformational Leadership, Employee Attitude, Readiness to Change, COVID-19, Pandemic, Crisis.

1 Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared that the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 is to blame for the COVID-19 pandemic (2020). In most industries, the COVID-19 epidemic has resulted in record-breaking trade barriers and the closure of numerous firms. Investments have to be prioritized across all corporate groups, and initiatives that would not benefit the environment had to be delayed [1]. Under the COVID-19 situation, the vast majority of workers and organizations are obligated to carry telecommuting duties despite the fact that they lack expertise and are not ready for it [2]. The whole world have learned a very important insight from the COVID-19 pandemic. Authorities all across the world implemented security protocols during this epidemic, which caused a considerable rapid relocation of daily routines from workplaces and factories to private residences [3]. The capacity of employees to work remotely can result in erratic work schedules. However, everyone has other obligations and responsibilities to prioritize, such as looking after children or family members. Because it allows everyone to comprehend one another's circumstances and prevent potential hostility and anxiety over perceived injustices, and remote work helped managers to develop empathy [4]. When the COVID-19 epidemic hit a lot of things and altered, including leadership techniques. Even though the covid19 pandemic situation has partially improved in most countries, the employees' attitudes toward switching between their personal and professional lives need to be examined. Additionally, most of the organizations have not yet returned to normal operations and profitability. The readiness for change (RTC) in every organization, especially the global business organization, comes

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in between the strategy that is advised to be taken into consideration. Today's global competition demands constant adaptability from everyone employed in manufacturing. The ongoing global Covid-19 pandemic issue necessitates modifications to the circumstances and state of the existing businesses [5,6]. Therefore, to save the organizations from the impending disaster, management must employ both tactical and strategic measures to protect some poorly prepared parts of the business.

A lot of researchers from many scientific areas and fields have been drawn to the phenomenon of crisis (economics, history, politics, medicine, ecology, psychology, Human resources, etc.). The term crisis, on the other hand, is frequently employed as a "universal box," that is, as a notion that contains all forms of unpleasant events. In a larger sense, the term crisis refers to conditions that are unwelcomed, unexpected, unforeseen, and virtually unimaginable, causing bewilderment and uncertainty [7]. But the present COVID-19 pandemic disaster, which kicked off in China in the winter of 2019 [8], clearly shows a negative global influence on socioeconomic conditions by dividing the population in a number of ways. The global economic market is in a state of flux, and the stock market is crashing on a regular basis. Factories, restaurants, bars, marketplaces, airplanes, hyper stores, malls, institutions and colleges, and other companies have been compelled to close their doors [9]. Companies at present face additional challenges like ambiguity since they have to deal with currently prevailing "grand challenges," or extremely complex harms not normally limited to political, commercial, or social limits [10,11]. But, with the current occurrence of COVID-19, companies are facing an extraordinary trial, which is compelling them to dive into and openly cope with the unparalleled ground through changing their labor force in never-before-seen practical, physical, and socio-psychological means. With the consequences of the pandemic, organizations essentially have to reply as well as adjust to severe modifications throughout the world, and balance their labor force consequently. Human Resource Management (HRM) is crucial in aiding workers in addressing the obstacles taken by unforeseen modifications in the place of work [12]. Additionally, management has a favorable as well as a large impact on willingness to transform [13]. According to research on various forms of leadership, transformational leadership (TL) has an important influence firm's success that is experiencing transformation [14]. According to Robbins & Judge [15], transformational leadership is explained as motivating the followers for changing their lives and seeks for greater objectives in addition to the greater idea. A transformative leader as defined by Luthans et al., [16] is capable of changing their supporters' awareness, developing their inner self, as well as encouraging them to make sure of providing their finest to fulfill the company's objectives, and their readiness for transformation must originate from inside. Employee preparedness for change, on the other hand, reflects the recipients' emotive, behavioral, and cognitive reactions to change and has been highlighted as a critical constituent of effective organizational transformation [17-19].

The reactions, beliefs, and attitudes of change recipients, which show employee preparedness for change [20], are crucial factors to the success of change [18]. The mental predecessor to either opposition or backing for a change endeavor in readiness for change [21]. Employees' ideas, attitudes, and intents about the point to which modifications are essential and the administration's capacity to effectively execute the desired transformation show their readiness for change. Elias, [22] stated workers' general optimistic or else adverse evaluative assessment of a transformation effort conducted through their association is explained as attitudes to organizational change. Ulloa et al., [23] mentioned an individual's personal behavior choices are determined by their attitudes toward change, which is a reactive propensity to change. Attitudes toward change are regularities in a person's opinions, and beliefs, as well as tendencies to behave to a certain facet of his or her milieu [24]. However, the findings of Hameed et al., [25] provide backing to the idea that worker attitudes and mental conditions may be manipulated to teach transformation readiness.

Considering the strategies that could be utilized to increase preparation for transformation is essential to preparing personnel for a shift in the business. Establishing employee readiness to embrace shifts and addressing issues that prevent transition are the two aspects that a firm may undertake [26]. Organizational dedication may play a role in adaptability. To be committed to an organization is to want to stay with the company, to believe in its values and goals, and to be willing to put in long hours working for them. Worker commitment (engagement in one's job) also affects the success of organizational reforms, particularly those that affect all aspects of the company on a broader scale. Personnel who take part in organizational initiatives are more inclined to welcome and embrace organizational change. Since, COVID-19 has caused havoc globally, there is an immense need to compel organizations and society to adapt in order to flourish and compete economically. It is important to comprehend how managers might encourage change by encouraging people to feel the need for change. During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, managers benefit from this research in understanding employee attitudes (EAT) and how to adjust their attitudes to accept change. To accomplish this, we set out to investigate the effects of a transformational leadership style on employee attitudes and readiness to adapt to change. Furthermore, study include the need for a deeper exploration of contextual factors influencing and their relationship. There is a gap in understanding how industry specific challenges, organizational structures, and cultural contexts during the pandemic may shape these dynamics differently. Additionally, limited empirical evidence exists on the long-term effects of such

mediation, warranting longitudinal studies. Research is needed to unravel nuances in the role of employee attitudes and leadership styles in diverse organizational settings, offering practical insights for tailored interventions in the evolving landscape of work. The study was intended in threefold. Initially, it investigates the influence of TL on both ETA and RTC during COVID-19 (a crisis) secondly, the effect of attitude is examined on worker's RTC and thirdly, the mediation role of employee attitude between TL and employee's RTC during COVID-19 is examined by this research study. The sections of the study are arranged appropriately. In the first two sections, there is a concise overview of the study and a thorough review of the literature. The third component's methodology section goes on to describe the statistical techniques and data collection procedures employed in the research. The study's results are shown in part four, and an extensive discussion of the findings and their consequences is provided in section five. The study's restrictions and research parameters come next. The research study is concluded in the final section.

2 Literature review and hypotheses development

Transformational managerial style has been shown to encourage adaptability in the workforce in a positive way. For instance, research by Deyreh [27] suggests that tiredness, tension, and resentment are all on the rise when employees feel their leaders are not being fair. On the contrary side, good leadership has been associated with greater consent, willingness, and determination to change on the part of employees [28, 29]. Leadership studies have found that when workers think that they are guided well during hard times [29], employees seem more likely to adopt mindsets and actions that aid in the seamless introduction of transformation. The likelihood of employees being adaptable, receptive to change, cooperative, and contented increases when led by a transformational leader [30, 31]. Employees' willingness to embrace transformation will grow if efforts to make transformational changes result in a favorable sense of shift, as stated by Avolio & Bass [32]. Research investigations [28-31,33,34] have shown that changing leadership has a beneficial effect on people's attitudes toward progress.

2.1 Transformational leadership and employee's readiness to change:

According to research by Bass and Avolio [28], transformational leaders are those that take the time to get to know their followers and provide them with intellectual challenges. These types of leaders pay close consideration to those under them, shift their followers' perspectives on issues so that they see things in new ways, and motivate them to go above and beyond the call of duty to help the group succeed [28, 29]. Peers or employees working under such executives will find them to be rewarding and productive [35]. By adopting actions that are appropriate for each phase of the transformation process, transformational leaders are able to alter the current situation inside their organization [28]. If current practices are judged to be ineffective, executives will craft a fresh vision for the future with an eye toward both strategy and inspiration [32]. According to research Bass & Steidlmeier, [30]; Bass et al., [31], transformational leaders are more likely to seize chances based on their past leadership roles. The foundational texts are the theory of transformational leadership [36, 37]. Bass leadership is an intellectual stimulation as the author encouraged their subordinates to develop fresh ideas on leadership. Through inspiring motivation and charm, leaders may create perceptions as persons who can assist and care for their subordinates with customized consideration [38]. Transformational leaders possess the capability to alter companies via their idea for the future," writes Kim, [33] besides through expressing their idea, they are able to encourage people to take accountability for realizing that goal." The idealized effect, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, as well as personalized regard are four of the most common characteristics displayed by these leaders [39]. Previous research has shown that transformational leadership does not significantly affect an organization's readiness for change [34]. In contrast [40] discovered evidence that leadership has a favorable as well as a large impact on RTC, in addition to [34, 41, 42]. Based on the results and interpretations of prior investigations, researchers have hypothesized the following.

H1: Transformational leadership have a positive relationship with employee's readiness to change during COVID-19

2.2 Employee attitude and employee Readiness to change:

Change, uncertainty, and ambiguity do not affect people in a passive way. Quite the reverse, they respond vehemently to what is going on at their workplace [43]. Therefore, the state of being prepared for change among workers is known as a person's conviction in the advantages of a planned change effort [44] and/or their mental, psychological, or physical preparedness to contribute to administrative growth actions [45]. Employee attitudes are an excellent forecaster of organizational change willingness; so, for fruitful change, workers' attitudes must be measured initially, and then they should be arranged for transformation [46]. Transformation is focused on overcoming the firm's issues and obstacles to guarantee its sustained survival and continued development. Most of the corporate issues and difficulties are the

consequence of both internal and external influences which might affect staff efficiency and overall growth. From this perspective a transformation must play a dynamic role in driving the economic progress and the need to address existing issues [47]. A change can be unpredictable and emotional since there is such a large transition from the familiar to the uncertainty [48]. As people can develop a variety of attitudes, emotions, and activities as a consequence of an unanticipated disaster, workers at the firm are the ones who have the greatest impact in such a scenario [49]. Similarly, Soumyaja et al., [50] discussed this construct from three dimensions which are related at individual, process and contextual stages. At the individual level, the author investigated employees' intellectual ability, at the process level, the authors examined how effectively decisions are made and communicated, and at the contextual level, the credibility of the leadership and the history of change were studied. However, the author did not study the direct relation to predict the employees' readiness to change, instead they have used the mediation of commitment to change at the emotional and social norm levels. Employees' viewpoint on accepting the change is affected by how much leadership or administration is behind the planned improvements. As personnel can see that the company is dedicated to and supportive of the execution of the proposed shift at work, they are more likely to have faith in management. Therefore, workers will adhere to the company's shift management strategies. Workers have faith in management's rationale for implementing changes. Therefore, individuals pay attention to how well transformation is received inside the firm, how efficient it is, and how well it integrates with the overall mission. If workers are confident in their own competence, they will behave in accordance with the objectives of the organization, which may include a need to accomplish improvement. The trust of workers is crucial for the effective execution of strategic initiatives. According to research conducted by Andrew & Sofian, [51], the effect of worker attitude on their preparedness for administrative transformation has been substantial and acceptably proven to a considerable degree in this examination. As a result, we propose:

H2: Employee attitude has positive influence on employee's readiness to change during COVID-19.

2.3 *Employee attitude as a mediator between TL and RTC:*

An employee's attitude toward a change can be thought of as his or her overall evaluation of the shifting approach implemented by the firm Elias, [22]. An employee's tendency to adapt to a new situation is determined by his or her internal condition [52]. Emotional constancy refers to the psychological consistency with which someone experiences and responds to various stimuli to the surrounding conditions [24]. Expansion of businesses, increased challenges, and technological advancement all necessitate revised corporate policies and tactics [53]. Competitiveness, technological advances, mergers and acquisitions, high-quality goods protection, appealing workforce productivity, fast-growing establishments, and leadership transformational changes, future challenges, and organizational support all contribute to the difficulties that businesses face [54]. An effective transformation in a firm is possible when leaders and other stakeholders consider the willingness of staff members regarding embracing those changes at the corporate level [55]. Transformation at the corporate level is the change in the status quo from what workers expect and what they do not know, is a useful tool for studying the efficacy of management, staff, and the workplace as a whole. The potential for detrimental effects on worker perceptions has been the topic of certain studies [56]. According to research Rafferty & Simon, [57], fostering a pleasant place to work is a crucial aspect in ensuring the achievement of any initiative to implement transformation in entities. According to the research of Karyn [58], shifts and transformations in organizations are hard slogs. When the environment is not willing to accept innovation or anticipate its positive effects, even the most determined efforts to effect transformation will collapse. Persons' unwillingness toward transformation is primarily because of one's personality and psychological influence and dominance of standards, customs, integration, and supportive circumstances. According to Maria & Ioannis [59], aversions toward transformation in the workplace are due to occupational stress. Challenging work that carries a heavy load or is compensated unfairly can generate hostility toward the transformational procedure. Based on this theoretical discussion, we propose:

H3: Transformational leadership have a positive significant relationship with employee's attitude.

An individual's perspective on willingness to change tends to evolve over a long period of time. Manners-related anxiety and the ways in which people create it are the major topics of discussion. In this research, we focus on how workers' attitudes can affect their propensity to initiate a prepared response to change, as well as how this knowledge can be applied to the business context and how attitudes can have implications for people's choices and behaviors. The word "attitude" is used in the field of psychological studies to describe a person's favorable or unfavorable feelings about a certain task, problem or organization. Several additional meanings have been developed as a result of attitude research. To cause something for or against an emotional object is one definition of attitude. According to Thurstone [60], attitude is control over situations. Strategic transformation should be a constant focal point in an organization. An entity can help its personnel adjust to new circumstances by raising their consciousness of the need for transformation and providing them with an explicit strategy for doing so. According to Allport, [61], a wide range of attitudinal contexts were studied. To

name a few the author covered both a behavioral and cognitive level of readiness, preplanned with experience, and attitude when there is peer pressure.

This study is aimed at looking at the part of attitude between TL and employee willingness to change. Because of the reasons described above, attitude was chosen as a moderator in this study. Employees' overall favorable or negative evaluations of their organization's change efforts are referred to as attitudes toward organizational change [22] positive attitude modifications were confirmed to be vital to achieving corporation aims and successfully conducting change programs. Worker opposition to transformation is related to the increase of adverse attitudes regarding transformation and remains the utmost significant feature in the failure of transformation programs within companies. Worker attitudes around change can have an influence on self-esteem, efficiency, as well as turnover [62]. To begin, Baron & Kenny, [63] recommended the time forecaster and criterion variables' association is discovered to be fragile or inconsistent, a moderating variable should be supplied, in keeping with past research on the stated correlations. Second, based on the notion of contingency theory, the current article offers attitude as a mediator among TL style and worker willingness to change. As a result, adding attitude as a moderator variable between two variables has been suggested as a way to improve knowledge and avoid erroneous conclusions about contingency connections.

H4: Employee attitude mediates the association between TL and RTC during COVID-19.

The study conducted by Manzoor et al. [64] investigated the influence of transformational leadership on job performance, with corporate social responsibility (CSR) serving as a mediating factor. The results of the study indicate that there is a significant and favorable relationship between transformational leadership and job performance. The study reveals that corporate social responsibility (CSR) has a substantial role in mediating the impact of transformational leadership on job performance. Based on the aforementioned findings, it can be elucidated that transformational leadership, job performance, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) are significant components within an organizational context. A study conducted by Hongdao et al. [65] aimed to examine the associations between transformational leadership, employee job performance, and corporate social responsibility (CSR), as well as the potential mediating role of CSR in the aforementioned independent and dependent variables. The study posited a hypothesis that there exists a strong association underlying transformational leadership and work performance as well as corporate social responsibility (CSR). Furthermore, it suggests that CSR acts as a mediator in the interaction between both transformational leadership and job performance. Similarly, in a study conducted by Nisar et al. [66], the researchers examined the tactics employed by leaders in managing emotional labor and the subsequent impact on the emotional engagement of their followers. The study also investigated the mediating role of perceived transformational leadership in this relationship. The findings revealed a significant influence of leaders' emotional labor strategies on the emotional engagement of their subordinates. The emotional engagement of followers is adversely impacted by leaders' surface acting, while a favorable association is observed between deep acting and followers' emotional involvement.

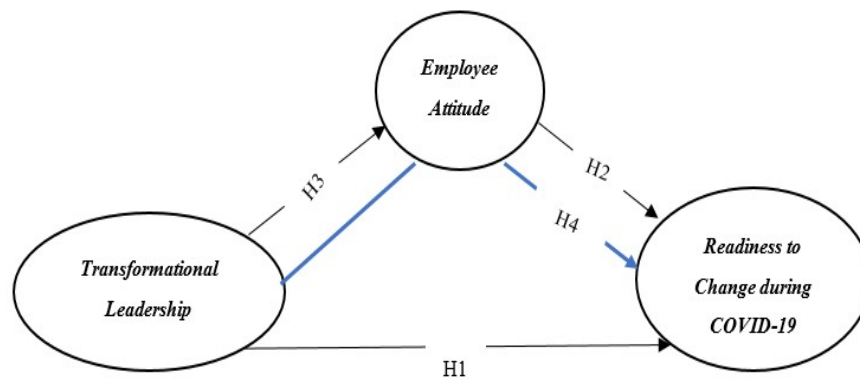


Fig. 1: Theoretical Framework.

3 Methodologies

3.1 Sample size and data collection procedure:

A sample, as defined by Sugiyono [67], is a group of objects or people used to draw conclusions about a larger whole with a certain number and traits that scholars have recognized and derived judgments about. Expecting a minimum of

five thousand employees in SME firms of Saudi Arabia, during the final stages of the pandemic, respondents were prompted to take part in an online data collection process. Sugiyono [67] suggested that the sample size and composition accurately reflected those of the population. This research employed a simple random sampling technique in which samples were selected at random without considering preexisting demographic subgroups. This technique can be best to utilize, when there is a moderate to low population size. Slovin's [68] formula was used to figure out how many people should be in the sample. According to Slovin's [68] method, the optimal sample size was calculated to be 370 for this investigation. Table 1 displays the distributional dispersion of the 386 participants drawn for this investigation.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

Where, n = Total Sample, N =Total Population, and e =Margin Error

Hence, after estimation n resulted to 370 respondents required for the sample size.

3.2 Development of measurement items:

The Table 2 displays the study's two primary elements, the independent variable and the dependent variable. Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration are the four items of transformative leadership, adopted from Bass & Ronald [69]. In this case, workers' attitudes serve as the study's second independent variable. The measures of this construct were employed from Rebeka & Indradevi [70]. Employee skill development, involvement in change, trust, fear of consequences due to change, career enhancement as five items of employee attitude. Also, employee readiness to change (RTC) is the dependent variable and measurement items were employed from Holt et al., [19]. RTC is measured from four items namely, change appropriateness, managerial support, self-efficacy, and personal benefits. In order to obtain the necessary information for this investigation, the survey questionnaires which was developed in English were distributed online to the participants across SME firms in Saudi Arabia. There are a total of 13 questions, and each one uses a 1–7 Likert scale, where 1 indicates extreme disagreement, 3 indicates neutrality, 5 indicates agreement, and 7 indicates solid agreement. Table 3 demonstrates that both the reliability and validity checks performed on the questionnaire indicate that the data collected in this study can be trusted. The author selects these analytic tools because they are most relevant to the questions we set out to answer, relying on the contributions of scholars like [4, 71, 72].

4 Results of Data Analysis

4.1 Respondents profile:

This study's respondents are employees of SEM firms in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. As presented in Table 1, most of them were males constituting about 61.1%, with many in the age range of 18 to 25 years (33.6%), next is the age range of 31 to 35 years of age (18.4%). With the level of respondents in terms of their university study are majorly holding bachelor's degree (57.2%) and 35.7% of them hold master's degree. Most of the respondents hold non-Saudi nationality which is 63.4% of total respondents.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics (n=386)

Variable	Categories	Frequency
Age	18 - 25 years	130
	26 - 30 years	62
	31 - 35 years	71
	36 - 40 years	56
	More than 40 years	67
Gender	Male	236
	Female	150
Education	Bachelors	221
	Masters	138
	Ph.D.	27
Experience	Less than 2 years	35
	2 to 5 years	133

Nationality	5 to 10 years	158
	10 to 15 years	60
	Saudi	141
	Non-Saudi	245

Source: Data Analysis.

4.2 Assessment of measurement model:

The study's measurement and structural model were analyzed using Smart PLS-SEM version 4. Accordingly, the software can handle non-normality assumptions that are typical of survey research in fields like social science [73]. As suggested by Agbonifoh et al., [74] and Hair et al., [75], the authors first investigated the likelihood of Common Method Bias by examining the whole interdependence of the study variables in order to address issues of interdependence or collinearity of our single source data. With this approach, each variable undergoes regression on an established variable, thus if the VIF value is less than 3.3, there is no bias resulting from using merely one source of data. Given that the computation produced a variance estimation factor (VIF) of below 3.3, single-source bias does not pose a significant problem with the data as in Table 2 below. To establish common method variance, a thorough collinearity test was conducted using the PLS-SEM methodology, which was regarded by [75] to be superior to the Harmon Single Factor method. Additionally, Web power Multivariate Kurtosis or Univariate and Multivariate skewness and kurtosis computation was carried out in accordance with Kock and Lynn, [76] on the data normalcy.

The results suggest that all the variables were univariate normal having their skewness and kurtosis values between 1 and not more than 7 with multivariate normality using Kock, [77] rule of thumb showed a multivariate skewness greater than 3 and the multivariate kurtosis also exceeded 20 with a Mardia's multivariate skewness ($\beta = 67.2832, p < 0.01$) and Mardia's multivariate kurtosis ($\beta = 127.253, p < 0.01$). Data is therefore judged abnormal, which justifies the usage of the PLS bootstrapping method.

Table 2: Testing for Full Collinearity.

TL	EAT	RTC
3.405	2.145	3.581

Source: Data Analysis.

4.3 Validity and reliability:

Due to the absence of typical method bias in the data, we conducted further analyses to determine the validity and reliability of the instruments used. The loadings for each of the study variable's items were checked in accordance with [73] requirements to ensure that items load above the acceptable value of 0.5. The variables' dependability was also investigated using a composite reliability (CR) value that ranged from 0.846 to 0.936, above the minimum value of 0.70 as per [73]. The study also looked at the measuring items' convergent validity, which is defined as occurring when the average variance extracted (AVE) value is more than 0.50, as shown in Table 3. As demonstrated in Table 3 with AVE values ranging from 0.685 to 0.754, an excellent AVE rating indicates that the construct accounts for more than fifty percent of the variation among its indicators. This study was successful in achieving reliability, validity, and convergent validity.

Table 3. Reliabilities of Study Variables

Construct	Items	Factor Loadings	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Transformational Leadership	TL1	0.810	0.936	0.726
	TL2	0.917		
	TL3	0.909		
	TL4	0.897		
Employee Attitude	EAT1	0.878	0.846	0.685
	EAT2	0.774		

	EAT3	0.882		
	EAT4	0.845		
	EAT5	0.772		
Employee Readiness to Change	RTC1	0.883	0.900	0.754
	RTC2	0.907		
	RTC3	0.859		
	RTC4	0.846		

Source: Data Analysis.

4.4 Discriminant validity:

We investigated the discriminant validity of the assessment items in order to confirm the validity and reliability of the study variables. By applying the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) criterion, it was determined that the discriminant validity values for the research variables were reasonable, as shown in Table 4 below. The Cain et al., [78] reliability criterion has been criticized, hence the MTMT matrix approach was used to evaluate discriminant validity using the HTMT ratio of correlations [79]. According to the research, there is a difficulty with discriminant validity when the HTMT value is more than HTMT 0.85 value of 0.85 or HTMT 0.90 value of 0.90 [79, 80]. Therefore, as indicated in Table 2, all values passed the HTMT 0.90 and no variables additionally had an HTMT value of 1, indicating discriminant validity presence in the constructs [77]. As a result, the row and column values are greater compared with AVE's both vertically and horizontally, proving the statistical significance of the study's assessments.

Table 4: Discriminant Validity using HTMT ratio

Constructs	TL	EAT	RTC
Transformational Leadership (TL)	0.864		
Employee Attitude (EAT)	0.726	0.785	
Readiness to Change (RTC)	0.789	0.771	0.774

Source: Data Analysis.

4.5 Structural model of the tested hypotheses:

The study model was considered adequate after the measuring process, which looked at the constructs' validity and reliability as well as dealt with problems with data normality. The model produced appropriate findings, which allowed for a bootstrapping approach evaluation of the structural model on the 386 respondents. The tested direct and indirect hypotheses are shown in Tables 5 and 6 below along with the study's structural model as seen in Figure 1.

As further demonstrated, we used a 5,000-resample PLS bootstrapping approach and followed the recommendations of Leclercq et al., [73] and other related studies. The tested hypotheses have been presented using path coefficients, p-values, t-values, standard errors for the structural model, which both supports and responds to earlier criticism [81, 82]. More importantly, testing study outcomes using more than just the significant t-values and p-values of the given hypotheses is thought to increase their reliability. Table 5 demonstrates the study's tested direct hypothesis based on how current research ought to present their hypotheses.

Table 5: Direct Effect of Tested Relationships

Hypotheses	Effect	β	SE	T-Stat	P Value	Decision
H1	TL \rightarrow RTC	0.443	0.035	6.645	0.001	Supported
H2	EAT \rightarrow RTC	0.239	0.068	2.309	0.009	Supported
H3	TL \rightarrow EAT	0.656	0.015	9.489	0.000	Supported

Source: Data Analysis.

The tested hypotheses have been reported based on their path coefficients, the standard errors, t-values, p-values. As

shown in table 5, TL showed a significant effect with RTC and EAT. TL →RTC is 0.443; $p < 0.001$; $t = 6.645$; EAT → RTC is 0.239; $p < 0.01$; $t = 2.309$ and TL → EAT is 0.656; $P < 0.000$; $t = 9.489$. In brief and as shown in Table 5 above, TL → RTC, EAT →RTC, and TL → EAT were statistically significant.

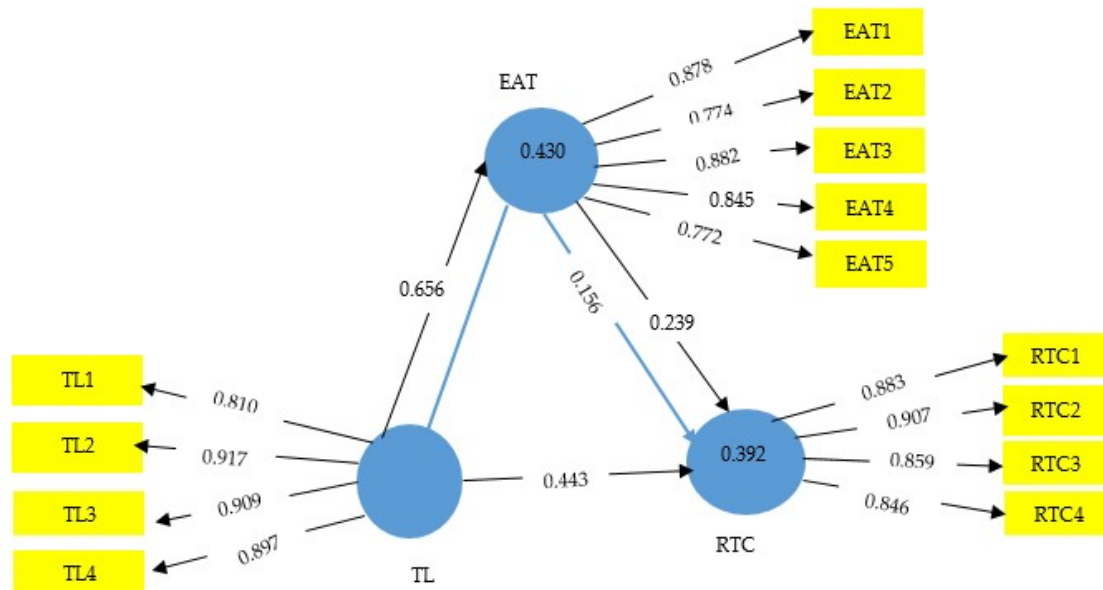


Fig. 2: PLS-SEM Hypothesized Structural Model using Bootstrapping.

Table 6: Indirect Effect of Tested Relationships.

Hypothesis	Effect	β	SE	T Stat	P Value	Decision
H4	TL → EAT → RTC	0.156	0.064	2.264	0.018	Supported

Source: Data Analysis.

Table 6 denotes the tested indirect or mediating effect of employee attitude on the relationship between transformational leadership and employee readiness to change. As illustrated, there exists a mediating effect of employee attitude (EAT) between TL and RTC. The outcome suggests a significant mediating effect of the fourth hypothesis; H4, TL->EAT->RTC ($\beta=0.156$, $t=2.264$, $p=0.018$).

5 Discussions

The research confirmed robust positive associations when examining the direct influence of TL on EAT and RTC. The study also looked into how EAT can play an intermediary role between TL and RTC. While TL does have positive effects on RTC, it was found that EAT significantly mediated these effects. The results of this study expand our knowledge on how transformational leadership can help encourage workers to adapt new circumstances at work, which is especially important during times of crisis like pandemic. According to the research, transformational leaders have an idealistic effect on their teams by helping people see the big picture and the significance of the organization's objective, especially in the face of adversity. In keeping with this, supervisors offer their staff a wide range of learning support and resources to help them improve their skills on the job. If needed, transformational leaders provide individualized support to workers by addressing their concerns and offering constructive feedback. Majority of employees felt more at ease with the remote working approach, and many participants said they were more willing to take on new projects because of the additional focus and inspiration they received during the rigorous pandemic time by their leaders. Supporting hypotheses H1, H2, and H3, the findings of the smart PLS route modeling showed a positive correlation between transformational leadership, employee attitude, and employee readiness to change. In line with social psychological theories that predict attitude-

behavior consistency, this study's findings corroborate those of [83], who found that change readiness was linked to actions supporting change. According to Faghihi et al., [46], an optimistic outlook on change is correlated with a workforce that is well-prepared for it.

As a result, the mediating effect of attitude on the relationship between TL and RTC has been recognized, and previous researches also have confirmed the findings, as Smollan and Morrison [84] research states that TLs offer social backing for workers. Such assistance might lessen the weight of tough jobs and communicate to recipients that they are not unaccompanied, which has the ability to lower employees' anxious sentiments as well as raise their favorable attitudes about organizational transformation, resulting in H4 acceptance. Furthermore, this study can help organizations in Saudi Arabia to help prepare their employees for readiness to change and also modify their attitudes towards change during the time of a global crisis such as COVID-19. Employees' attitudes and their readiness for change were also studied in order to evaluate the results of transformational leadership. Thus, it is clear that transformational leadership affected these factors greatly. These results indicate that transformational leadership has a good impact during a pandemic crisis and encourages workers to adapt to new circumstances.

In addition to expanding organizational behavior theories, the study offers significant theoretical implications of exploring Employee Attitude as a mediator between Transformational Leadership Style and Employees' Readiness to Change during COVID-19 lie in advancing organizational behavior theories. Understanding the interplay between leadership, attitude, and readiness to change contributes to refining existing models and frameworks. It may deepen insights into how leadership influences employee attitudes, shaping their adaptability in times of crisis. Practically, identifying Employee Attitude as a mediator sheds light on strategic interventions for leaders navigating change during the pandemic. Organizations can develop targeted leadership training programs emphasizing transformational styles and fostering positive attitudes among employees to enhance their preparedness for change. Practical implications extend to HR practices, emphasizing the importance of selecting and developing leaders with transformational skills, particularly in turbulent times. This research may also guide organizational policies during crises, aiding in the formulation of strategies that consider the psychological aspects of employees. By recognizing the mediating role of attitudes, companies can tailor communication and support mechanisms to align with the transformational leadership approach, promoting a more resilient and adaptive workforce during the challenging circumstances imposed by COVID-19.

6 Limitations and future research directions

The results of the study suggest that there are little limitations on its practicality. To begin, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across Saudi Arabia provided the majority of the study's essential data. The researchers were unable to fully investigate the multiple contexts of leading with COVID-19 in a single firm, including organizational culture and job engagement, due to the sample methodology used. Second, while this investigation was limited to a single style of leadership, future studies may expand their scope to include other leadership styles, such as transactional and charismatic approaches. In addition to attitude, other mediating elements like demographics, employee perception, and beliefs can be investigated. Third, the perspective of Saudi leaders was the only one considered when analyzing the transformational leadership style. Therefore, it is suggested to conduct studies involving different cultures by gathering information from other countries. Also, amid these difficult times of COVID -19, it is important to guide the staff emotionally. While the willingness of leaders and employees to adapt to change was highlighted, no consideration was given to either group's emotional intelligence.

7 Conclusions

This study examined the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on institutional change to examine the relationship between transformational leadership and employees' attitudes and preparedness for transition. The purpose of this study was to investigate how leaders' personal encounters might inspire paradigm shifts in leadership across an organization and improve its ability to deal with complexity. This research showed that optimistic attitudes among workers mediated the relationship between transformational leadership and adaptability. This study's finding that workers with good attitudes are more adaptable is encouraging given the power of attitude in affecting behavior. Positive causal relationships were also found to exist among the three variables examined in the study. We also contend that attitudes mediate the link between transformative leadership and employees' openness to change. The findings indicated that leaders needed to shift their focus from processes and procedures to being more flexible in order to accommodate the unique conditions that arose during COVID-19. In addition, the findings indicated that a transformational leadership style is most suited to consciously create an environment that boosts trust, helps employees grow professionally, and lessens resistance to change. Leaders encourage their followers by making necessary adjustments and providing them with personal rewards,

especially during challenging pandemic circumstances. Employees found to be dedicated by fighting collectively to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the fact that some firms have reduced salaries in tandem with reduced office hours. This is because employees have judged that the working atmosphere supports a sense of well-being and openness. This study provides empirical proof that transformative leaders affect employee perceptions of their own abilities favorably.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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