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

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Abstract: In the beginning of this decade, the worldwide impact of COVID-19 forced widespread changes, emphasizing the crucial role of leadership in shaping employee mindset and readiness to address challenges affecting their daily responsibilities and performance. This research examines the role of transformational leaders, in determining employees' readiness for change during the challenging circumstances of COVID-19, with employee attitude as a mediating factor. The study included 345 completed questionnaires from Saudi Arabian private companies. Exploratory factor analysis revealed the factor structure and regression analysis was conducted to investigate the direct impact of transformational leadership on employee readiness to change. The study also examined the mediating effect of employee attitude between transformational leadership and readiness to change. The findings of the research indicating a positive correlation between transformational leadership, employee attitude and readiness to change. Further, employee attitude significantly mediated the relationship between transformation leadership and readiness to change, indicating the support of all hypotheses of the study. Understanding how managers can foster a sense of the need for change is crucial. Therefore, future studies should expand to other nations and consider diverse leadership philosophies. This study supports managers in formulating policies to address employee related issues and facilitating acceptance of change during instances such as the COVID-19 outbreak. Saudi organizations and the government can utilize this knowledge to enhance future workplace resilience and crisis response strategies.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, employee mindset, readiness to change, global health crisis, viral outbreak, pandemic, crisis.

1 Introduction

Global health crises triggered unprecedented challenges, such as trade barriers, business closures, and shifts in investment priorities after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. With the majority forced into telecommuting, many lacked the necessary expertise, causing disruptions. Governments worldwide implemented safety measures, leading to a rapid shift from workplaces to homes. Remote work, despite its potential for erratic schedules, fostered empathy among managers, addressing individual responsibilities. The pandemic altered leadership approaches, emphasizing the need to assess employees' attitudes toward balancing personal and professional life, even as some countries witness partial improvement. Many organizations are yet to fully resume normal operations and profitability, highlighting the significance of Readiness for Change (RTC) to overcome huge competition and the ongoing pandemic affects. To avert impending disasters, management must adopt tactical and strategic measures, recognizing the evolving business landscape. Several researchers have studied the multifaceted phenomenon of crises across diverse scientific fields, including economics, history, politics, medicine, ecology, psychology, and human resources. However, the term "crisis" has come to denote a broad range of undesirable events. In a broader context, crisis denotes unwelcome, unforeseen, and virtually unimaginable conditions that evoke bewilderment and uncertainty [1].

The COVID-19 pandemic, originated in China in the winter of 2019 [2], has undeniably exerted a negative global impact, creating socioeconomic divisions. The worldwide economic market is in a state of flux, with regular crashes in the stock market. Various establishments, including factories, restaurants, hospitals, marketplaces, airplanes, hyper stores, malls, institutions, and colleges, have been

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compelled to shut their doors. Presently, companies confront additional challenges, navigating ambiguity while dealing with prevalent "grand challenges" that extend beyond typical political, commercial, or social boundaries. These crisis presents an extraordinary trial, compelling organizations to adapt to unprecedented changes by transforming their workforce in practical, physical, and socio-psychological ways. In the face of pandemic consequences, organizations must respond and adapt to profound global changes, balancing their workforce accordingly. The pivotal function of Human Resource Management (HRM) is to assist employees in various aspects and address challenges stemming from unforeseen workplace modifications [3]. Moreover, management significantly influences willingness to transform [4]. Transformational Leadership (TL), a form of leadership highlighted in various studies, plays a pivotal role in the success of organizations undergoing transformation [5]. Described as motivating followers to change their lives and pursue higher objectives, transformational leaders, as defined by Luthans [6], can alter followers' perceptions, enhance their inner selves, and inspire them to contribute their best to achieve organizational goals. Employee readiness for change reflects recipients' emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses to change, deemed critical for effective organizational transformation [7].

The responses, convictions, and attitudes exhibited by individuals undergoing change, indicative of their preparedness for change [8], significantly influence the success of change initiatives [7]. The mental readiness for change acts as a preliminary factor influencing one's inclination towards either opposing or endorsing change initiatives [9]. Employees' perceptions, attitudes, and intentions regarding the necessity of modifications and the organization's ability to effectively implement desired transformations reflect their readiness for change. Elias, [10] defines employees' overall positive or negative evaluative assessment of a transformation effort within their organization as attitudes toward organizational change. Examining strategies to enhance readiness for transformation is crucial for preparing personnel for business shifts. Addressing impediments to transition and fostering employee readiness to embrace changes are two vital aspects for organizations [11]. Organizational commitment may contribute to adaptability. This research aids managers in comprehending employee attitudes (EAT) and adjusting them to embrace change during crises. There exists a gap in understanding how challenges specific to industries, organizational structures, and cultural contexts during the pandemic may uniquely shape these dynamics. To achieve this, the study focuses on understanding how a leadership style characterized by transformational qualities affects employee perspectives and their level of readiness to embrace organizational changes. Research is essential to unravel the nuances in the roles of employee attitudes and leadership styles in diverse organizational settings, providing practical insights for tailored interventions in the evolving work landscape.

2 Literature and Hypotheses Development

The positive impact of a transformational managerial style on workforce adaptability is evident. Deyreh's [12] research indicates that perceived fairness from leaders reduces fatigue, tension, and resentment. Effective leadership correlates with increased employee consent, willingness, and commitment to change [13,14]. In challenging times, well-guided workers are more likely to adopt attitudes and behaviors facilitating smooth transformation [14]. Transformational leaders enhance employee adaptability, receptivity to change, cooperation, and satisfaction [15,16]. Avolio & Bass [17], emphasize that fostering a favorable sense of shift increases employees' willingness to embrace transformation. Research from a wide range of sources [13,14,1516,17,18] demonstrate the beneficial effects of transformative leadership on opinions of others.

2.1 Transformational leadership and employee's readiness to change

As per Bass and Avolio's research [13], transformational leaders spend time in understanding their followers and present them with intellectual challenges. These leaders focus on their team, reshaping perspectives, motivating individuals to surpass expectations for collective success [13,14]. Subordinates working under such leaders find them rewarding and productive [19]. Transformational leaders adapt actions at each transformation phase, altering the organizational landscape [13]. If current practices prove ineffective, leaders create a fresh vision for the future, combining strategy and inspiration [20]. According to Bass & Steidlmeier [15] and Bass et al., [16], transformational leaders are prone to seizing opportunities based on past leadership roles. The foundational theory of transformational leadership is rooted in Bass's work [21,22], emphasizing intellectual stimulation and encouraging subordinates to generate new leadership ideas. Through motivational inspiration and personal care, leaders create a perception of support for their subordinates [23]. Transformational leaders shape organizations with their forward thinking vision, as noted by Kim [17]. The commonly displayed traits include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and personalized [22]. Contrary to prior research Susyanto and Bisnis [18], some evidence suggests that transformational leadership significantly impacts an organization's readiness for change [4]. Additional studies support leadership's positive and substantial influence on RTC [18,24,25]. Based on these findings, researchers have formulated the following hypotheses.

H1: A positive correlation exists between transformational leadership and employees' readiness to adapt amid the challenges of COVID-19.

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2.2 Employee attitude and employee Readiness to change

Change, uncertainty, and ambiguity elicit active responses from individuals in the workplace, rather than passive reactions [26]. The readiness to embrace change is determined by an individual's conviction in the positive outcomes of a carefully planned change endeavor [27] and their mental, psychological, or physical readiness to contribute to organizational growth initiatives [28]. Employee attitudes serve as reliable predictors of organizational change readiness; hence, assessing and aligning workers' attitudes is crucial for successful change initiatives [29]. Transformation aims to overcome internal and external influences affecting organizational efficiency and overall growth, playing a dynamic role in driving economic progress [30]. Change, being unpredictable and emotional, leads to a significant shift from the familiar to uncertainty [31]. In the context of unexpected disasters, employees wield the greatest impact, generating a range of attitudes, emotions, and actions [32]. Soumyaja et al., [33] explored this construct across three dimensions viz., individual, process, and contextual levels evaluating intellectual ability, decision-making effectiveness, leadership credibility, and change history. However, their study did not directly predict employees' readiness to change; instead, it explored the mediation of commitment to change at emotional and social norm levels. Employees' acceptance of change is influenced by the perceived commitment and support of leadership or administration behind proposed improvements. When employees witness the company's dedication and support for implementing changes, their faith in management increases, leading to adherence to the company's change management strategies. Trust in management's rationale for changes prompts individuals to evaluate the efficiency and alignment of the transformation with the overall mission. If employees are confident in their competence, they align their behavior with organizational goals, including the pursuit of improvement. Workers' trust is pivotal for the effective execution of strategic initiatives [34], demonstrating a substantial and well established link between employee attitude and their preparedness for administrative transformation. Consequently, research propose:

H2: The positive outlook of employees significantly contributes to their readiness for change amidst the challenges of COVID-19.

2.3 Transformational leadership and Readiness to Change

An employee's perspective on a change can be considered their overall assessment of the implemented shift within the organization, as stated by Elias, [10]. The adaptability of an employee to a new situation is influenced by their internal condition [35]. Emotional stability, reflecting the psychological consistency in responding to surrounding stimuli, plays a crucial role. The dynamic business landscape, marked by expansion, heightened challenges, and technological advancements, necessitates the revision of corporate policies and strategies [36]. Factors such as competitiveness, technological progress, mergers and acquisitions, quality assurance, workforce productivity, rapid organizational growth, transformative leadership changes, future challenges, and organizational support collectively contribute to the challenges faced by businesses [37]. Successful corporate transformation hinges on leaders and stakeholders considering employees' willingness to embrace these changes at the organizational level [38]. Corporate level transformation, representing a shift from employees' expectations to the unknown, is a valuable tool for assessing the effectiveness of management, staff, and the overall workplace. Certain studies have explored the potential adverse effects on employee perceptions [39]. Creating a conducive and optimistic work environment is crucial for the triumph of transformational initiatives [40]. Karyn's [41] research highlights the difficulty of organizational shifts and transformations, emphasizing the necessity of an environment open to innovation. Resistance to transformation, often rooted in personality, psychological influences, prevailing norms, customs, integration, and supportive conditions, is a common challenge, as noted by Vakola & Nikolaou, [42]. Aversion to workplace transformation can also stem from occupational stress, especially when work is demanding or unfairly compensated, leading to resistance to the transformational process. Building on this theoretical discussion, it is proposed as below.

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

An individual's inclination towards embracing change tends to develop gradually. This research centers on the impact of workers' attitudes on their likelihood to initiate a prepared response to change and explores how this insight can be applied in a business context, influencing people's choices and behaviors. In psychological studies, the term "attitude" refers to a person's favorable or unfavorable feelings toward a specific task, issue, or organization. Attitude research has generated various meanings, including the inclination to favor or oppose an emotional object and control over situations, as per Thurstone [43]. Strategic transformation should be a perpetual focus for organizations, assisting personnel in adapting to new circumstances by increasing awareness of the necessity for change and providing a clear strategy [44]. The study delves into a spectrum of attitudinal contexts, encompassing behavioral and cognitive readiness, preplanned experiences, and attitudes influenced by peer pressure.

This study focuses on investigating the role of attitude as a mediator between TL and RTC. Given the reasons outlined, attitude was selected as a mediator, employees' overall positive or negative assessments of their organization's change efforts are termed attitudes toward organizational change [10]. Positive attitude adjustments are

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crucial for achieving corporate goals and successfully implementing change initiatives. Employee resistance to transformation is linked to the development of negative attitudes toward change and remains a significant factor in the failure of transformation programs. Employee attitudes regarding change can impact self-esteem, performance, and turnover [45]. Aligning with previous research, Baron & Kenny [46] suggest introducing a mediating variable when the association between time predictor and criterion variables is weak or inconsistent. Additionally, this study proposes attitude as a mediator in the contingency theory framework, enhancing understanding and preventing misinterpretations of contingency relationships by introducing attitude as a mediator between two variables.

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

Manzoor et al., [47] explored how transformational leadership influences job performance, introducing corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a mediator. The study's results revealed a noteworthy and positive correlation between transformational leadership and job performance. Notably, CSR emerged as a substantial mediating factor, highlighting its role in influencing the impact of transformational leadership on job performance. These findings emphasize the pivotal significance of transformational leadership, job performance, and CSR within organizational contexts. Hongdao et al., [48] conducted a study with the aim of investigating the intricate connections among transformational leadership, employee job performance, and CSR. Their research proposed a hypothesis affirming a robust association between transformational leadership, work performance, and CSR. Furthermore, the study suggested that CSR acts as a mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership and job performance. Similarly, Nisar et al., [49] delved into leaders' strategies in managing emotional labor and their subsequent impact on followers' emotional engagement, considering the mediating role of perceived transformational leadership. The findings revealed a significant influence of leaders' emotional labor strategies on subordinates' emotional engagement. Specifically, surface acting had an adverse effect on emotional involvement, while deep acting showed a positive association with followers' emotional engagement. Based on the theoretical assumptions, the below theoretical framework as shown in figure 1 was developed for the study.

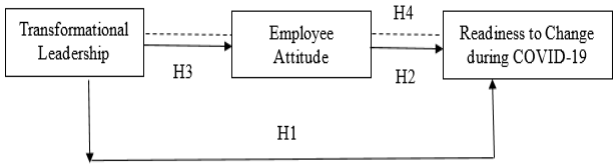

Fig.1: Theoretical Framework

3 Research Methodology

In this section, the development of survey instrument, data collection procedure, and statistical analysis are presented.

3.1 Survey Instrument and Development of Measurement Items

The study focuses on two vital elements: the independent variable, transformational leadership and employee attitude and the dependent variable, employee readiness to change (RTC). Drawing from Bass & [50] model, transformative leadership includes idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Workers' attitudes, the second independent variable, draw measures from Rebeka & Indradevi [51], covering employee skill development, involvement in change, trust, fear of consequences due to change, and career enhancement. Employee readiness to change (RTC) serves as the dependent variable, with measurement items adapted from Holt et al., [52], encompassing change appropriateness, managerial support, self-efficacy, and personal benefits. To collect data, survey questionnaires was developed in English and distributed online to the participants in SME firms in Saudi Arabia, comprising a total of 13 questions. Each question utilized a 1–7 Likert scale, where 1 indicated extreme disagreement, 3 indicated neutrality, 5 indicated agreement, and 7 indicated strong agreement. The reliability and validity checks on the questionnaire assure the trustworthiness of the collected data which are discussed in later sections. The selection of these analytical tools aligns with the study's questions and draws on contributions from scholars such as [53,54].

3.2 Sample Size and Data Collection Procedure

A sample, as defined by Sugiyono [55], refers to a group of objects or individuals used to make conclusions about a larger population with specific characteristics. In the final stages of the pandemic, respondents were invited to participate in an online data collection process. Sugiyono [55] emphasized that the sample size and composition accurately represent the population. Simple random sampling, without considering existing demographic subgroups was employed in this research, particularly suitable for moderate to low population sizes. Table 1 illustrates the distributional dispersion of the 345 participants selected for this investigation.

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4 Results

4.1 Demographic profile

The study respondents are the employees of SME firms in Riyadh region. As depicted in Table 1, the majority were male, accounting for approximately 64.9%. The predominant age group was 18 to 25 years (35.9%), followed by the age range of 31 to 35 years (23.7%). Regarding educational accomplishment, a significant portion have a bachelor's degree (57.3%), and 36.5% had a master's degree. A majority of the respondents, totaling 61.4%, were of non-Saudi nationality.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics (n=345).

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18 - 25 years	124	35.9
	26 - 30 years	67	19.5
	31 - 35 years	82	23.7
	36 - 40 years	44	12.7
	More than 40 years	28	8.2
Gender	Male	224	65.0
	Female	121	35.0
Education	Bachelors	198	57.4
	Masters	126	36.5
	Ph.D.	21	6.1
Experience	Less than 2 years	33	9.5
	2 to 5 years	119	34.5
	5 to 10 years	136	39.5
	10 to 15 years	57	16.5
Nationality	Saudi	133	38.5
	Non-Saudi	212	61.5

Source: Data Analysis.

4.2 Exploratory Factor Analysis

There are two stages in this study. The dimensions of the items were first determined by an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation. SPSS (version 21.0) and then used the statistical tool for data analysis and hypothesis testing. The consistency of findings from a summated scale measurement tool over several trials is assessed through reliability evaluation. Summated scales usually consist of linked questions intended to measure underlying constructs, but it is important to determine whether the same set of items consistently evokes responses when asked again. Scale reliability is measured by Cronbach's α coefficient, which should be greater than or equal to 0.7 [56] for acceptability when combined with corrected item-total correlations that are greater than 0.3 [57]. Finding out if the scale accurately measures the desired underlying component is another goal of validity testing.

Thirteen measuring items were used in a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) using varimax rotation in order to condense the data and discover construct dimensions. The result is shown in Table 2 illustrates the mean, standard deviation and reliability conditions, where in table 3 illustrates the factor structure of three constructs with eigenvalues greater than one are obtained, and all items are correctly loaded under these constructions. The factorability conditions were confirmed by the Kaiser- sphericity ($p < 0.001$).

The predictors of the factors were EAT (5 items), RTC (4 items), and TL (4 items). The Cronbach's α coefficients as a measure of the factors were 0.869, 0.942, and 0.874, respectively, and the item-total correlation was more than 0.3 for each factor. For use in multiple regression analysis, factor scores were calculated from the analysis results.

4.3 Hypotheses Testing

Table 4 exhibits the correlation values between the variables. Results demonstrated a moderate to strong positive correlation among all the variables. TL → EAT is 0.624, $p < 0.001$; TL → RTC is 0.454, $p < 0.001$ and EAT → RTC is 0.304, $p < 0.01$. vThe developed hypotheses were tested using the multiple regression analysis method. The dependent variable is derived as:

Dependent variable (Y) = f (multiple independent variables) which can be expressed as

$Y = f(\beta 1X1 + \beta 2X2 + \beta 3X3)$

Therefore, $f(EAT) = \beta 0 + \beta 1TL + €$

$f(RTC) = \beta 0 + \beta 1TL + \beta 2EAT + €$

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Where β_0 is the intercept, β_1, β_2, are the coefficients representing the respective impacts of TL and EAT. € is the error term accounting for unexplained variance.

Table 2. Reliability Results.

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Transformational Leadership	15.84	4.248	0.874
Employee Attitude	19.54	4.201	0.869
Readiness to Change	20.46	4.122	0.942

Source: Data Analysis

Table 3. Rotated Component Matrix.

Constructs	Items	Components		
		1	2	3
Transformational Leadership	TL1	0.789		
	TL2	0.845		
	TL3	0.913		
	TL4	0.874		
Employee Attitude	EAT1		0.764	
	EAT2		0.824	
	EAT3		0.847	
	EAT4		0.795	
	EAT5		0.804	
Readiness to Change	RTC1			0.798
	RTC2			0.884
	RTC3			0.820
	RTC4			0.867
	Initial Eigen Values	4.561	3.454	2.842
	% of Variance	25.674	18.641	16.548
	Cumulative %	25.674	44.315	60.863

Source: Data Analysis.

Table 4. Correlations of Variables.

Variables	TL	EAT	RTC
TL	1	0.624***	0.454***
EAT		1	0.304**
RTC			1

Note: *** Correlation is significant at 0.001 level; ** Correlation is significant at 0.01

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Table 5 represents the model summary of the regression model of all the variables. R value is 0.785 with R square 0.634 and F change 87.54 which is significant. Table 6 shows the value of determinant of coefficient 0.584, which indicates the two independent variables (TL and EAT) together explains 63.4% of variance in RTC. The F value 11.541 is statistically significant, explaining all the independent variables have an overall influence on RTC.

Table 5. Model summary of regression analysis between RTC, TL and EAT.

Model	R	R2	Adjusted R2	Std error of the estimate	F Change	Sig. F change
1	0.785[a]	0.634	0.584	1.1603	87.54	0.003

Note: [a.] Predictor: (Constant), TL, EAT Dependent Variable: RTC

Table 6. ANOVA.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	414.486	4	121.51	11.541	0.000
	Residual	1324.064	137	9.426		
	Total	1751.541	142			

Table 7. Coefficients.

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		β	Std. Error	β			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	12.566	1.324		8.541	0.000		
	TL	0.654	0.121	0.424	6.245	0.001	0.425	4.371
	EAT	0.458	0.142	0.345	4.562	0.003	0.342	3.241

VIF: Variance inflation factor. RTC: Readiness to change
Dependent variable: RTC

Table 8 represents the model summary of the regression model of RTC. This shows the mediating effect of EAT. R value is 0.624 with R square 0.438 and F change 62.34 which is significant. Table 9 presents the coefficients model summary of RTC. The results illustrates the mediating effect of EAT.

Table 8. Model summary of RTC.

Model	R	R2	Adjusted R2	Std error of the estimate	F Change	Sig. F change
1	0.624[a]	0.438	0.351	0.264	62.34	0.009

Note: [a.] Predictor: (Constant), EAT Dependent Variable: RTC

Table 9. Coefficients – model summary of RTC[a].

	Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
		β	Std. Error	β			Tolerance	VIF
1	(Constant)	11..416	1.021		2.641	0.000		
	EAT	0.458	0.235	0.106	1.662	0.015	0.334	3.206

VIF: Variance inflation factor. RTC: Readiness to change
[a] Dependent variable: RTC

5 Discussion

The study established strong positive relationships in examining the direct impact of TL on EAT and RTC. Additionally, the investigation delved into the potential mediating role of EAT between TL and RTC. While TL demonstrated positive effects on RTC, it was observed that EAT significantly mediated these effects. These findings contribute to the understanding of how transformational leadership fosters employees' adaptation to new work circumstances, particularly crucial during crises like a pandemic. The research highlights the transformative impact of leaders who guide their teams to perceive the broader organizational goals, especially in challenging times. Transformational leaders offer extensive learning support and resources, personalized assistance, and constructive feedback to address individual concerns. During the pandemic, remote work was embraced more comfortably by

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the majority of employees, who expressed greater willingness to undertake new projects due to the focused and inspirational leadership they received. Supporting hypotheses H1, H2, and H3, the Smart PLS route modeling revealed positive correlations between transformational leadership, employee attitude, and employee readiness to change. Aligning with social psychological theories predicting attitude-behavior consistency, this study's findings echo previous research indicating that change readiness corresponds to actions supporting change. According to Faghihi et al., [29], a positive outlook on change is associated with a workforce that is well prepared for it. The study underscores the multifaceted role of transformational leadership in fostering positive employee attitudes and readiness for change, especially in navigating challenging circumstances such as the pandemic.

Consequently, the acknowledgment of the mediating role of attitude in the connection between TL and RTC aligns with previous research findings. Smollan and Morrison's [58] study affirms that TLs provide social support to employees, potentially alleviating the challenges of demanding tasks and reassuring individuals that they are not alone. This support has the capacity to reduce employees' feelings of anxiety while fostering positive attitudes toward organizational transformation, thereby supporting the acceptance of hypothesis H4. Moreover, this research offers valuable insights for organizations in Saudi Arabia, aiding them in preparing employees for change readiness and positively influencing their attitudes toward change amid global crises like COVID-19. The examination of employees' attitudes and readiness for change underscores the substantial impact of transformational leadership on these factors, emphasizing its positive influence in facilitating adaptation to new circumstances during a pandemic crisis.

Beyond contributing to the expansion of organizational behavior theories, this study holds significant theoretical implications by investigating employee attitude as a mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership style and employees' readiness to change amid COVID-19. This exploration advances existing organizational behavior theories, offering insights into the intricate dynamics of leadership, attitude, and readiness to change. The findings contribute to the refinement of models and frameworks, providing a deeper understanding of how leadership influences employee attitudes and shapes their adaptability during crises. On a practical level, recognizing employee attitude as a mediator informs strategic interventions for leaders navigating change in the pandemic. Organizations can design targeted leadership training programs emphasizing transformational styles to cultivate positive attitudes among employees, enhancing their preparedness for change. These practical implications extend to HR practices, emphasizing the selection and development of leaders with transformational skills, particularly in turbulent times. Additionally, the research offers guidance for organizational policies during crises, facilitating the formulation of strategies that address employees' psychological aspects. Recognizing the mediating role of attitudes enables companies to tailor communication and support mechanisms in alignment with the transformational leadership approach, fostering a more resilient and adaptive workforce amidst the challenges posed by COVID-19.

6 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The study's findings indicate minimal limitations on practical applicability. Primarily, the data relied heavily on SMEs in Saudi Arabia, limiting the exploration of varied contexts within a single firm, such as organizational culture and job engagement. Secondly, while the focus was on a specific leadership style, future research could broaden its scope to include other styles like transactional and charismatic approaches. Additionally, beyond attitude, exploring other mediating factors such as demographics, employee perceptions, and beliefs could enhance understanding. Thirdly, the analysis of the transformational leadership style was confined to the perspective of Saudi leaders, prompting the suggestion for cross-cultural studies involving diverse countries. Notably, emotional guidance for staff during the challenging times of COVID-19 was underscored, yet the study did not consider the emotional intelligence of leaders and employees, an aspect deserving attention.

7 Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on organizational change, specifically examining the connection between transformational leadership and employees' attitudes and readiness for transition. The aim was to explore how leaders' personal experiences might instigate shifts in organizational leadership paradigms, enhancing the organization's capacity to navigate complexity. The research revealed that optimistic attitudes among employees served as a mediating factor in the relationship between transformational leadership and adaptability. The encouraging finding indicates that individuals with positive attitudes demonstrate greater adaptability, underscoring the significant impact of attitude on behavior. Positive causal relationships were identified among the three variables examined in the study. Furthermore, the study proposed that attitudes play a mediating role in the association between transformative leadership and employees' openness to change. The results highlighted the need for leaders to shift their focus from rigid processes to increased flexibility, particularly during the unique conditions brought about by COVID-19. The study emphasized that a transformational leadership style is particularly effective in consciously creating an environment that fosters trust, promotes professional growth among

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employees, and reduces resistance to change. Leaders, in response to the challenging pandemic circumstances, were observed to motivate their followers by making necessary adjustments and providing personalized rewards. Despite some companies reducing salaries and office hours, employees exhibited dedication by collectively combating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This dedication stemmed from employees' perception that the working environment supported their well-being and openness. The study contributes empirical evidence supporting the notion that transformative leaders positively influence employees' perceptions of their own capabilities.

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