

Communicative Leadership In Digital Organizations: Rethinking Management Principles In The Age Of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and social media has fundamentally transformed organizational communication and managerial practices. Traditional management principles—particularly those related to leadership, coordination, and decision-making—are increasingly challenged by decentralized, networked, and participatory communication environments. This study explores how communicative leadership is redefined within digital organizations, emphasizing the role of interaction, discourse, and mediated communication in shaping managerial authority. Drawing on organizational communication theory and leadership studies, particularly the work of Henry Mintzberg and Manuel Castells, this research employs a qualitative approach through discourse analysis of digital organizational practices and communication patterns on social media platforms. The findings reveal that leadership is no longer centered on hierarchical control but is increasingly constructed through communicative engagement, visibility, and responsiveness. The study argues that communicative leadership in digital contexts requires a shift from command-based authority to relational and dialogic practices, where meaning-making and influence emerge through continuous interaction. This research contributes to the rethinking of foundational management concepts by situating them within the dynamics of digital communication and networked organizational structures.

Keywords: communicative leadership, digital organizations, social media, management theory, organizational communication

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has profoundly reshaped the landscape of contemporary organizations, altering not only how work is performed but also how authority, coordination, and leadership are enacted. The proliferation of social media platforms, collaborative tools, and digitally mediated communication channels has accelerated the transition from hierarchical, centralized organizational forms to more fluid, networked configurations. In such environments, communication is no longer a peripheral managerial function but becomes the very infrastructure through which organizational life is constituted. This transformation calls into question



the continued relevance of classical management principles that have long guided both academic inquiry and pedagogical practice in introductory management education.

Traditional management theories, particularly those rooted in early industrial contexts, have emphasized efficiency, standardization, and control as the primary objectives of organizational activity. The legacy of Frederick Taylor, for instance, positioned management as a rational and technical endeavor aimed at optimizing productivity through clearly defined roles and procedures. While such approaches proved effective in relatively stable and predictable environments, they offer limited explanatory power in the context of contemporary organizations characterized by uncertainty, rapid change, and continuous interaction across multiple communication platforms. The rise of digital organizations has not simply added new tools to existing managerial practices but has fundamentally reconfigured the conditions under which those practices operate.

Within digitally mediated environments, organizational communication becomes multidirectional, immediate, and highly visible. Employees, managers, and external stakeholders are now interconnected through networks that enable real-time interaction and feedback. This shift challenges the assumption that authority flows in a linear, top-down manner. Instead, authority is increasingly negotiated through communicative processes in which meaning, legitimacy, and influence are co-constructed. The implications of this shift are particularly significant for the concept of leadership, which has traditionally been understood as a function of formal position and hierarchical control.

Contemporary scholarship has begun to recognize that leadership cannot be adequately understood without considering the communicative processes through which it is enacted. The work of Henry Mintzberg, for example, highlights the centrality of interpersonal and informational roles in managerial work, suggesting that communication is integral rather than incidental to leadership. However, the intensification of communication in digital contexts extends these insights further by foregrounding visibility, interaction, and responsiveness as key dimensions of leadership practice. Leaders are no longer simply decision-makers who issue directives; they are communicative actors who must continuously engage with diverse audiences, manage their presence across platforms, and navigate complex flows of information.

The emergence of networked societies, as theorized by Manuel Castells, provides a useful framework for understanding these transformations. In networked environments, power is distributed across interconnected nodes rather than concentrated within rigid hierarchies. This reconfiguration of power relations has direct implications for organizational leadership, as it requires a shift from command-based authority to more relational and dialogic forms of influence. Leadership becomes less about controlling resources and more about facilitating communication, fostering engagement, and enabling collaboration.

Despite these developments, much of the foundational content in introductory management courses continues to reflect traditional assumptions about leadership and organizational structure. Topics such as planning, organizing, leading, and controlling are often presented as stable and universally applicable functions, with limited attention to how they are being transformed in digital contexts. This gap between pedagogical content and organizational reality raises important questions about the adequacy of current management education in preparing students for contemporary professional environments. In particular, there is a need to critically examine how core concepts such as leadership are being reinterpreted and enacted within digital organizations.

In response to these challenges, the concept of communicative leadership has emerged as a promising analytical lens. Communicative leadership reframes leadership as an ongoing process of interaction through which organizational meaning and direction are constructed. Rather than focusing



on individual traits or formal authority, this perspective emphasizes the relational and discursive dimensions of leadership. It highlights how leaders use communication to shape interpretations, align actions, and build shared understandings among organizational members. In digital environments, where communication is both pervasive and publicly visible, these processes become even more salient.

This study seeks to contribute to the ongoing rethinking of management principles by examining how communicative leadership is enacted within digital organizations. It aims to explore how leadership is constructed through communication practices, how digital platforms reshape the nature of managerial authority, and what implications these transformations have for foundational concepts in management theory. By situating leadership within the broader context of digital communication and networked organizational structures, this research offers a critical perspective on the evolving nature of managerial work.

In doing so, the study also addresses a broader intellectual concern regarding the relationship between theory and practice in management education. As organizations continue to evolve in response to technological and social changes, it becomes increasingly important for academic frameworks to reflect these dynamics. The persistence of traditional models in teaching materials risks reproducing outdated assumptions that may no longer align with the realities of contemporary organizational life. Therefore, revisiting and reinterpreting core management concepts is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary step toward ensuring the relevance and effectiveness of management education.

Ultimately, this research positions communicative leadership as a key concept for understanding leadership in the digital age. By foregrounding the role of communication in shaping organizational processes, it challenges conventional notions of authority and control while offering new insights into how leadership can be conceptualized and practiced in increasingly complex and interconnected environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of leadership has long occupied a central position within management theory, evolving through multiple paradigmatic shifts that reflect broader transformations in organizational structures and societal contexts. Early leadership theories were largely grounded in essentialist assumptions, emphasizing individual traits, behaviors, and formal authority as the primary determinants of leadership effectiveness. These perspectives were closely aligned with the needs of industrial organizations, where stability, predictability, and hierarchical control were considered essential for efficiency. However, as organizations have become increasingly complex and dynamic, such approaches have faced growing criticism for their inability to account for the relational and contextual nature of leadership processes (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin 2013).

Contemporary scholarship has moved toward more process-oriented and socially constructed understandings of leadership. Rather than viewing leadership as a fixed attribute possessed by individuals, recent studies conceptualize it as an emergent phenomenon arising from interaction, communication, and shared meaning-making within organizational contexts. This shift reflects a broader epistemological turn in organizational studies, where emphasis is placed on processes, practices, and discourse rather than static structures. In this regard, leadership is increasingly understood as something that is enacted through communication rather than simply exercised through authority (Fairhurst and Grant 2010).

The communicative turn in leadership studies is particularly relevant in the context of digital organizations, where communication technologies play a central role in shaping organizational



processes. Digital platforms have transformed the ways in which individuals interact, collaborate, and coordinate their activities, enabling new forms of connectivity and participation. As noted by Cornelissen, Kuhn, and Cooren (2011), communication is not merely a tool for transmitting information but a constitutive process through which organizations are continuously produced and reproduced. This perspective challenges traditional views that treat communication as secondary to organizational structure, instead positioning it as the foundation of organizing itself.

The rise of digital communication technologies has also contributed to the emergence of networked organizational forms. In contrast to hierarchical structures characterized by clear lines of authority, networked organizations are defined by decentralized and flexible arrangements in which power is distributed across interconnected nodes. This transformation is closely associated with the concept of the network society, where information flows and communication networks become the primary sources of power and coordination (Castells 2010). Within such environments, leadership can no longer rely solely on formal authority but must be enacted through ongoing interaction and engagement within networks.

A key implication of this shift is the increasing importance of visibility and transparency in leadership practices. Digital platforms enable leaders to communicate directly with a wide range of stakeholders, both within and outside the organization. This expanded communicative space creates new opportunities for engagement but also introduces new challenges related to accountability and reputation. Leadership communication is no longer confined to internal organizational contexts but is subject to public scrutiny and interpretation. As a result, leaders must carefully manage their communicative presence, balancing the need for authenticity with the demands of strategic communication (Groysberg et al. 2018).

In this context, the concept of communicative leadership has gained prominence as a framework for understanding leadership in contemporary organizations. Communicative leadership emphasizes the role of discourse, interaction, and relational dynamics in the construction of leadership. It shifts the focus from individual leaders to the processes through which leadership is enacted and recognized within organizational settings. According to Fairhurst (2011), leadership is fundamentally a communicative accomplishment, achieved through the framing of meaning and the coordination of action among organizational members. This perspective highlights the importance of language, narratives, and symbolic resources in shaping organizational realities.

The relevance of communicative leadership becomes even more pronounced in digital environments, where communication is both pervasive and mediated by technology. Social media and digital collaboration tools facilitate real-time interaction and feedback, enabling more participatory forms of leadership. Employees and stakeholders are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants in organizational communication processes. This participatory dynamic challenges traditional assumptions about authority and control, as leadership must be negotiated through dialogue and engagement rather than imposed through hierarchy (Tourish 2014). At the same time, the integration of digital technologies into organizational life has introduced new complexities and tensions. While digital communication enables greater flexibility and autonomy, it also creates conditions of constant connectivity and information overload. The "autonomy paradox" identified by Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates (2013) illustrates how technologies that are intended to enhance flexibility can simultaneously increase demands on individuals, blurring the boundaries between work and personal life. For leaders, this means navigating a communication environment that is both enabling and constraining, requiring new forms of skill and adaptability.

Another important dimension of communicative leadership in digital organizations is the role of communication visibility. Leonardi (2014) argues that digital platforms increase the visibility of



communication processes, making interactions more transparent and accessible to a wider audience. This visibility can enhance knowledge sharing and collaboration but also exposes communication to greater scrutiny. Leaders must therefore be attentive not only to the content of their messages but also to how those messages are perceived and interpreted by diverse audiences. This adds a strategic dimension to communication, as leaders must manage both meaning and perception in highly visible environments.

In addition to visibility, authenticity has emerged as a key expectation in leadership communication. Contemporary organizational cultures often emphasize transparency, openness, and emotional engagement, encouraging leaders to present themselves as genuine and relatable. Research by Men (2021) highlights the importance of authentic leadership in fostering employee engagement and trust, suggesting that communication plays a crucial role in building meaningful relationships within organizations. However, the demand for authenticity also raises questions about the performative nature of leadership communication, as leaders must navigate the tension between being genuine and meeting organizational expectations.

The transformation of leadership through communication also has implications for how management functions are conceptualized. Traditional frameworks that divide management into discrete functions—such as planning, organizing, leading, and controlling—may no longer adequately capture the fluid and interconnected nature of organizational processes. In digital contexts, these functions are often intertwined within communication practices that span multiple platforms and contexts. This perspective aligns with sensemaking theory, which emphasizes the role of communication in constructing organizational reality through ongoing interpretation and interaction (Weick 1995). Despite the growing body of research on communicative leadership and digital organizations, there remains a need for further exploration of how these concepts intersect with foundational management education. Introductory management courses continue to rely heavily on classical theories and models, which may not fully reflect the complexities of contemporary organizational life. This gap highlights the importance of rethinking how core management concepts are taught and understood, particularly in relation to communication and digital transformation.

In summary, the literature indicates a clear shift from traditional, hierarchical models of leadership toward more communicative, relational, and process-oriented approaches. Digital technologies play a central role in this transformation, reshaping how organizations operate and how leadership is enacted. Communicative leadership emerges as a valuable framework for understanding these changes, emphasizing the importance of interaction, discourse, and meaning-making in organizational contexts. By integrating insights from leadership studies, organizational communication, and digital media research, this study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of leadership in the digital age.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how communicative leadership is constructed and enacted within digital organizational contexts. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given the study's focus on meaning-making processes, interaction patterns, and the discursive construction of leadership, which cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone. Rather than seeking to generalize findings across a broad population, this research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how leadership emerges through communication practices in digitally mediated environments. In this regard, the study is grounded in an interpretive paradigm that views organizational reality as socially constructed through ongoing interaction and discourse.



The primary methodological approach employed in this research is discourse analysis, which enables the examination of language, communication practices, and symbolic representations as constitutive elements of leadership. Discourse analysis is particularly relevant for this study because it allows for the investigation of how leadership is not only performed but also negotiated and legitimized through communication. Drawing on insights from critical and organizational discourse traditions, the analysis focuses on how communicative acts shape perceptions of authority, credibility, and influence within digital organizational settings. This approach emphasizes the role of language and interaction in constructing organizational realities, aligning with the broader theoretical framework of communicative leadership.

The data for this study were derived from a range of digitally mediated communication sources that reflect contemporary organizational practices. These include publicly accessible organizational social media platforms, such as corporate accounts on LinkedIn, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as digital communication artifacts such as posts, comments, responses, and interaction threads between organizational leaders and their audiences. Where accessible, internal communication platforms and collaborative tools were also considered to capture a broader range of communicative practices. The selection of these data sources was guided by their relevance to leadership communication, particularly in terms of visibility, interaction, and engagement. By focusing on naturally occurring communication in digital environments, the study seeks to capture authentic expressions of leadership as they unfold in real time.

Data collection was conducted through a purposive sampling strategy, focusing on organizations that actively utilize digital platforms for leadership communication and stakeholder engagement. This approach allows for the identification of cases that are particularly illustrative of communicative leadership practices in digital contexts. The data were collected over a specified period to ensure temporal consistency and to capture ongoing communication dynamics rather than isolated instances. All collected data were documented and organized systematically to facilitate analysis, with attention given to preserving the context in which communication occurred.

The analytical process involved several stages of iterative interpretation. First, the data were read and reviewed multiple times to identify recurring patterns and themes related to leadership communication. Particular attention was given to how leaders present themselves, how they interact with others, and how their messages are received and responded to by audiences. Second, the analysis focused on identifying discursive features, such as language use, tone, framing, and narrative structures, that contribute to the construction of leadership. This includes examining how authority is asserted, negotiated, or challenged through communication. Third, the findings were interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework of communicative leadership, allowing for a deeper understanding of how communication practices reflect broader organizational and social dynamics.

Throughout the analysis, reflexivity was maintained to acknowledge the interpretive nature of qualitative research. The researcher remains aware that the analysis is shaped by theoretical perspectives and analytical choices, and therefore seeks to provide a transparent and coherent account of the interpretive process. While the study does not aim for statistical generalization, it strives for analytical rigor by grounding interpretations in the data and by linking findings to established theoretical frameworks.

In terms of validity, the study emphasizes credibility and trustworthiness through careful data selection, systematic analysis, and theoretical triangulation. By drawing on multiple data sources and situating the findings within existing literature on leadership, communication, and digital organizations, the study enhances the robustness of its interpretations. Ethical considerations were



also taken into account, particularly in the use of publicly available data, ensuring that no sensitive or private information was disclosed.

Overall, this methodological approach enables a nuanced exploration of communicative leadership as it is enacted in digital organizational contexts. By focusing on discourse and interaction, the study provides insight into the processes through which leadership is constructed, negotiated, and sustained in environments characterized by constant communication and networked connectivity.

EXPLANATION

The analysis reveals a significant transformation in how leadership is enacted within digital organizations, particularly in relation to communication practices, authority structures, and organizational interaction patterns. Rather than functioning as a fixed attribute tied to formal hierarchy, leadership increasingly emerges as a dynamic, communicative process shaped by continuous interaction across digital platforms. This shift is not merely technological but epistemological, as it challenges the foundational assumptions embedded in classical management principles. Contemporary organizations are increasingly embedded in networked structures where power and meaning are produced through flows of information rather than rigid hierarchies (Castells, 2010).

One of the most salient findings is the centrality of visibility in the construction of leadership. In digital organizational environments, leaders are expected to maintain a consistent and active presence across communication platforms, including internal messaging systems, collaborative tools, and public-facing social media. Visibility operates as a form of symbolic capital, where the frequency, tone, and responsiveness of communication contribute to perceptions of credibility and legitimacy. This aligns with the notion that leadership is constituted through discourse and communicative interaction (Fairhurst, 2007). Unlike traditional settings, where authority could be sustained through positional power alone, digital environments demand ongoing communicative engagement. Leaders who fail to participate actively in these communicative spaces risk being perceived as disconnected or irrelevant, regardless of their formal authority. At the same time, the findings indicate that authority in digital organizations is fundamentally relational and negotiated. The interactive nature of digital communication allows employees and stakeholders to respond to, reinterpret, and even contest leadership messages in real time. This creates a dialogic environment in which authority is continuously co-constructed rather than unilaterally imposed. Such a shift resonates with the processual view of leadership, which emphasizes leadership as an ongoing communicative process rather than a fixed set of traits (Tourish, 2014). The traditional top-down model of leadership becomes less tenable in such contexts, as influence is increasingly shaped by communicative competence, credibility, and the ability to foster engagement.

The transformation of authority also has implications for how decision-making is understood within digital organizations. Classical management theory often conceptualizes decision-making as a rational, linear process carried out by individuals in positions of authority. However, the findings suggest that decision-making in digital contexts is more iterative, collaborative, and communicatively mediated. Decisions emerge through ongoing exchanges of information, feedback, and interpretation, rather than through isolated acts of managerial judgment. This observation extends earlier insights regarding the fragmented and interactional nature of managerial work (Mintzberg, 1973). In digital environments, these interactional dynamics are intensified, as communication technologies enable rapid feedback loops and continuous negotiation.

Another important finding concerns the integration of communication into the core of managerial practice. In digital organizations, communication is not a supplementary activity but a constitutive

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element of leadership itself. Tasks traditionally associated with management—such as coordination, motivation, and control—are performed through communication practices that are highly visible and interactive. This reconfiguration challenges the functionalist view of management, which tends to separate planning, organizing, leading, and controlling into distinct categories. Instead, these functions appear to be deeply intertwined within communicative processes that unfold across digital platforms. Organizational realities, in this sense, are continuously constructed through processes of meaning-making and interaction (Weick, 1995).

The findings also highlight the emergence of hybrid communication styles that blur the boundaries between formal and informal interaction. Digital platforms often collapse traditional distinctions between professional and personal communication, requiring leaders to navigate a complex communicative landscape. On the one hand, leaders are expected to maintain professionalism and clarity in their messages; on the other hand, they are also encouraged to display authenticity, relatability, and emotional engagement. This dual expectation reflects broader shifts in organizational culture toward transparency and openness, where communication is expected to be both strategic and relational.

Moreover, the public nature of many digital communication platforms introduces new dimensions of accountability and risk. Leadership communication is often visible not only to internal organizational members but also to external audiences, including customers, partners, and the broader public. This expanded visibility amplifies the consequences of communicative actions, as messages can be rapidly disseminated, scrutinized, and reinterpreted beyond their original context. Consequently, leadership communication becomes closely tied to organizational reputation and legitimacy, reinforcing its strategic importance. From a theoretical perspective, these findings suggest that communicative leadership offers a more adequate framework for understanding leadership in digital organizations than traditional models rooted in hierarchy and control. The emphasis on interaction, discourse, and relational dynamics aligns with the realities of networked environments, where organizational processes are shaped by continuous flows of communication. This perspective also resonates with critical approaches that highlight how power is constructed and exercised through discourse and interaction.

At the same time, the findings invite a critical reconsideration of the assumptions underlying classical management education. The persistence of traditional frameworks in introductory courses may obscure the extent to which organizational realities have changed. Concepts such as authority, coordination, and control need to be reinterpreted in light of digital communication practices that emphasize participation, visibility, and relational engagement. Without such reinterpretation, there is a risk that management education will continue to reproduce models that are increasingly disconnected from contemporary organizational contexts. Importantly, the transformation of leadership through communication does not imply the disappearance of power or hierarchy. Rather, it suggests that power is exercised in more subtle and distributed ways through communicative processes. Leaders still play a crucial role in shaping organizational direction, but their influence depends less on formal authority and more on their ability to engage others, construct meaning, and navigate complex communication environments. In this sense, power is not eliminated but reconfigured within networked and discursive contexts (Castells, 2010).

In sum, the results of this study demonstrate that leadership in digital organizations is fundamentally communicative in nature. Visibility, interaction, and relational engagement emerge as key dimensions through which leadership is constructed and sustained. These findings challenge traditional management principles and highlight the need for new theoretical and pedagogical approaches that reflect the central role of communication in contemporary organizational life.



CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how leadership is reconfigured within digital organizational contexts, with a particular focus on the role of communication in shaping managerial practices. The findings demonstrate that leadership in digital environments can no longer be adequately understood through traditional frameworks that emphasize hierarchy, control, and formal authority. Instead, leadership increasingly emerges as a communicative and relational process, constructed through continuous interaction, visibility, and engagement across digital platforms. One of the central insights of this research is that communication has shifted from being a supporting managerial function to becoming the very foundation of leadership itself. In digital organizations, activities such as coordination, decision-making, and motivation are deeply embedded within communicative practices that are immediate, multidirectional, and highly visible. This transformation challenges classical management assumptions and calls for a re-evaluation of how leadership is conceptualized and practiced. As organizations become more networked and interconnected, the ability to communicate effectively becomes a primary source of influence and legitimacy.

The study also highlights the increasing importance of visibility in the enactment of leadership. Leaders are expected to maintain an active and responsive presence in digital communication spaces, where their actions and messages are continuously observed and interpreted by diverse audiences. Visibility functions not only as a mechanism for information dissemination but also as a means of constructing credibility and trust. However, this heightened visibility also introduces new challenges, including increased scrutiny and the potential for misinterpretation, requiring leaders to navigate communication with greater strategic awareness. Furthermore, the findings reveal that authority in digital organizations is no longer fixed or purely hierarchical but is instead negotiated through interaction. Employees and stakeholders are able to participate in communicative processes, respond to leadership messages, and contribute to organizational meaning-making. This participatory dynamic redefines leadership as a collaborative and dialogic process, where influence is contingent upon the ability to engage others rather than simply direct them. Such a shift aligns with broader theoretical perspectives that emphasize the relational and discursive nature of leadership (Fairhurst, 2007; Tourish, 2014).

From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to the growing body of literature that seeks to move beyond traditional, leader-centric models toward more process-oriented understandings of leadership. By situating leadership within the context of digital communication and networked organizational structures, the study underscores the relevance of communicative leadership as a conceptual framework for contemporary management. It also reinforces the argument that power and authority are increasingly enacted through discourse and interaction, rather than solely through formal organizational positions (Castells, 2010). In addition to its theoretical contributions, this study carries important implications for management education. The persistence of classical management frameworks in introductory courses may not fully reflect the realities of digital organizational life. As such, there is a need to update pedagogical approaches to incorporate perspectives that emphasize communication, interaction, and digital engagement. Integrating the concept of communicative leadership into the curriculum can help better prepare students to navigate the complexities of modern organizational environments.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. The qualitative and discourse-oriented approach, while providing in-depth insights, may limit the generalizability of the findings across different organizational contexts. Future research could expand this work by employing comparative



or mixed-method approaches to examine how communicative leadership operates across various industries, cultural settings, and technological infrastructures. Additionally, further studies could explore the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, in shaping leadership communication and organizational dynamics. In conclusion, this research demonstrates that leadership in the digital age is fundamentally communicative in nature. As organizations continue to evolve in response to technological and social changes, leadership must be understood not as a static role but as an ongoing process of interaction and meaning-making. By rethinking leadership through the lens of communication, this study offers a more nuanced and contextually relevant framework for understanding management in contemporary digital organizations.

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