

Leading Through Distance: Transformational Leadership and Internal Crisis Communication in Hybrid Work Models

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Received : May 18, 2025

Accepted : July 09, 2025

Published : July 31, 2025

Citation: Asmianur, R., (2025). Leading Through Distance: Transformational Leadership and Internal Crisis Communication in Hybrid Work Models. *Communica: Journal of Communication*, 3(3), 178-190.

ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the global adoption of hybrid work models and raised new challenges for internal crisis communication. This study examines how transformational leadership clarifies communication and strengthens employee engagement in multinational hybrid environments. A comparative qualitative case study of six firms was conducted through interviews, observations, and document analysis, with thematic analysis and triangulation applied. The findings show that transformational leadership improves clarity, trust, and engagement by fostering transparency, responsiveness, and empathy. Inclusive and adaptive strategies proved most effective in overcoming fragmented communication in hybrid models. The study also highlights that post-pandemic communication works best with flatter hierarchies, integrated digital tools, and feedback-rich systems, while transactional leadership often created gaps. This study contributes novelty by specifically examining transformational leadership in internal crisis communication within multinational hybrid environments, a topic rarely addressed in prior research. The research also underlines the relevance of Leader-Member Exchange and Situational Leadership theories in explaining effectiveness across industries. Limitations include qualitative subjectivity, small sample size, and fast-changing organizational contexts. Practically, the study suggests that organizations should equip leaders with empathetic and adaptive communication skills to sustain cohesion in hybrid settings.

Keywords: Hybrid Work, Leadership, Internal Communication, Crisis Communication, Organizational Alignment, Transformational Leadership, Qualitative Case Study.



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INTRODUCTION

The COVID 19 pandemic has catalyzed profound and lasting transformations in the global workplace, most notably the rapid and widespread expansion of hybrid work models. These models, which blend remote and in office arrangements, have significantly reshaped organizational norms, day to day operations, and long term strategic planning. Prior to the pandemic, only 35%

of organizations were seriously considering the adoption of hybrid work structures. However, this figure surged to 77% during and after the global health crisis, largely propelled by the urgent need for business continuity amid widespread lockdowns and enforced social distancing measures (Černiková & Karazijienė, 2023). Hybrid arrangements offer adaptability and work-life balance, yet they also create significant communication and coordination challenges, particularly during crises. Digital tools, though essential, often lack the nuance and immediacy of face-to-face interactions, leading to miscommunication, weakened relationships, and reduced morale (Katsande et al., 2022).

While hybrid models offer substantial advantages in terms of adaptability and work life balance, they also introduce a distinct set of communication and coordination challenges, particularly during periods of crisis. The reliance on digital communication tools, though convenient and often necessary, frequently lacks the immediacy, nuance, and emotional depth of in person interactions. These deficiencies can contribute to misunderstandings, weakened interpersonal relationships, and decreased morale among team members (Aziz, 2021). Research has consistently shown that employees in hybrid and remote environments struggle with building and maintaining strong workplace relationships, receiving clear and timely feedback, and fully understanding their roles and responsibilities within broader organizational objectives (Contreras et al., 2020). These challenges are further exacerbated by disparities in technological literacy, especially in large, diverse multinational firms, where employees may have differing levels of comfort and familiarity with digital tools. As a result, many organizations have been compelled to invest in comprehensive training programs and support systems aimed at bridging these gaps and fostering equitable participation (Donati et al., 2021).

Effective internal communication in hybrid work settings especially during times of crisis requires a strategic, multifaceted approach that integrates digital technologies with human centered leadership practices. It is not sufficient to merely deploy new communication platforms; rather, organizations must ensure that these tools are used in ways that support clarity, inclusivity, and psychological safety. Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping these communication environments. They must actively foster cultures in which employees feel heard, valued, and informed. Leadership in this context is not merely a top down directive function, but a relational and facilitative role that promotes trust, collaboration, and shared purpose (Putri et al., 2023).

Among the most critical impacts of hybrid work is the ambiguity it introduces into organizational alignment and role clarity. As employees oscillate between in office and remote settings, they may experience varying degrees of autonomy and accountability, potentially leading to blurred job boundaries, unclear performance metrics, and inconsistent expectations from supervisors (Sharma et al., 2023; Teng-Calleja et al., 2023). Such ambiguity can erode productivity and hinder team cohesion if not addressed through deliberate communication strategies. To mitigate these risks, organizations must develop robust frameworks that clearly define individual roles, responsibilities, and performance standards while simultaneously reinforcing collective goals. Central to this effort is the proactive involvement of leadership in facilitating transparent and consistent communication. Studies emphasize that leadership practices grounded in empathy, openness, and regular feedback are essential to maintaining alignment and minimizing confusion within hybrid teams (Oleksa-Marewska & Tokar, 2022).

In this post pandemic era, leadership must evolve beyond traditional command and control paradigms to embody transformational qualities. These include the ability to inspire and motivate, foster inclusion, and engage team members in meaningful ways. Transformational leaders create environments characterized by psychological safety, shared vision, and open dialogue, which are especially critical in decentralized and often isolated hybrid work settings. They contribute to employee engagement by being transparent about organizational challenges, soliciting input from diverse team members, and acting on that input in visible ways (Ameel, 2022; Leonard et al., 2022). This form of leadership not only enhances morale but also strengthens team resilience, adaptability, and commitment to organizational goals. Empirical studies further demonstrate that transformational leadership significantly improves employees' sense of belonging, emotional well-being, and overall performance (K. S. Khan et al., 2023).

The theoretical foundations linking leadership behavior to internal communication effectiveness are well established and multifaceted. For example, Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory emphasizes the importance of high quality relationships between leaders and their subordinates in fostering effective communication, trust, and mutual respect (Rattner et al., 2023). In addition, the principle of symmetrical internal communication, which promotes two way information exchange and continuous feedback loops, has been shown to significantly enhance organizational commitment and employee satisfaction outcomes that are especially valuable in hybrid work environments where employees may otherwise feel disconnected or marginalized (Mikkelsen et al., 2023). These frameworks underscore the dynamic interplay between leadership style and communication strategy, highlighting the need for adaptable, responsive, and inclusive leadership in navigating the complexities of hybrid workplace communication (Islam et al., 2021).

This study investigates how leadership behaviors influence internal crisis communication effectiveness in hybrid work settings. Specifically, it explores how transformational leadership clarifies communication, strengthens employee engagement, and supports organizational alignment. Using comparative case studies of six multinational firms, the research contributes by (1) addressing a rarely studied context multinational hybrid environments, (2) extending leadership theories such as Leader-Member Exchange and Situational Leadership to hybrid crisis communication, and (3) offering practical insights for organizations seeking to build resilient and inclusive workplaces in the post-pandemic era.

METHOD

This study employs a comparative qualitative case study design to explore the role of leadership in shaping internal crisis communication within hybrid work settings across multinational corporations. Qualitative case studies are particularly suited for research in complex and culturally diverse organizational environments, allowing for in depth, context sensitive analysis. As Shiri and Bergbom (2023) emphasize, tailoring research strategies to local cultural and linguistic contexts is essential in multinational settings, where a one size fits all approach may overlook critical nuances. This design is intended to produce rich, contextual insights that illuminate how leadership communication practices vary across firms and influence internal outcomes.

The study includes six multinational firms selected based on three key criteria: (1) active implementation of hybrid work models, (2) presence of formalized crisis communication protocols, and (3) geographical and sectoral diversity to capture variation across contexts. The selected firms operate in industries including technology, finance, logistics, manufacturing, consulting, and healthcare. Following Rao (2016) observations on HRM practices, this approach acknowledges the necessity of benchmarking local practices within global frameworks to better understand context specific leadership strategies.

Data were collected from three sources: (a) 42 semi-structured interviews with executives, leaders, and employees; (b) observations of virtual town halls and briefings; and (c) internal documents (protocols, memos, newsletters). This triangulation improved validity and provided a holistic view of communication practices, as discussed by Amoah & Eweje (2021), who demonstrated how using diverse sources in studies of institutional behavior enhances validity and insight.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, organize, and interpret patterns in the qualitative data. This flexible approach allows for responsiveness to the particularities of each organization and case context, a strength noted in organizational communication research by Fisher & Hamer (2020). Codes were derived both inductively and deductively, with themes refined iteratively through comparative analysis. The method's application is consistent with its use in health policy and organizational studies, where it supports the integration of diverse stakeholder perspectives into coherent thematic narratives (Fagerlin & Löfstål, 2020).

To ensure the credibility and rigor of findings, triangulation methods were applied at several levels: data source (interviews, documents, observations), investigator (multiple researchers conducted and coded interviews), and theoretical (drawing on LMX theory and symmetrical communication frameworks). This multi-tiered triangulation mirrors strategies used in studies of environmental and organizational governance (Amoah & Eweje, 2021) and aligns with recommendations from Chaudhuri et al. (2018) and Dutta et al. (2022) advocating for mixed methods integration where appropriate. By comparing results across multiple cases, the study aims to uncover commonalities and divergences in leadership communication practices that are both context specific and generalizable.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Communication Clarity in Hybrid Teams

Communication clarity remains a key concern in hybrid workplaces, where physical and digital interactions converge. The study revealed that communication clarity is best understood as a multidimensional construct that includes the precision of language, the effectiveness of feedback loops, and the stability of message consistency across varied platforms. These dimensions were assessed through a combination of Likert scale survey responses and qualitative interviews. Ling et al. (2016) emphasized the utility of structured surveys to capture employee perceptions of message comprehensibility and adequacy. However, Enwereuzor et al. (2020) advocate for qualitative follow ups to understand experiential nuances particularly those influenced by contextual or interpersonal dynamics.

Leadership style was found to be a critical determinant of clarity. Organizations led by transformational and servant leaders exhibited higher clarity scores. These leaders emphasized transparency, proactive feedback, and accessible language. In contrast, firms with transactional or authoritarian leaders demonstrated more communication breakdowns and increased employee confusion, as suggested by (Babu et al., 2023). Employees under transformational leadership reported feeling confident in asking for clarification and actively contributing to feedback loops (Kim et al., 2023)Özdemir et al., 2023).

Clarity outcomes also varied by work model. In fully remote setups, structured digital communication protocols helped standardize message delivery and increase traceability (Mehta et al., 2020). Hybrid models struggled more with consistency, especially when informal information exchanges happened spontaneously among on-site employees but were not communicated to remote colleagues (Quek et al., 2021). On site teams had the advantage of immediacy but lacked documented records of exchanges (Jiang & Luo, 2018).

Technology proved instrumental in enhancing or hindering clarity. Platforms like Slack, Teams, and Zoom offered multiple modalities for real time and asynchronous exchange, improving inclusivity (Lusianingrum & Santoso, 2022). Collaboration tools such as shared drives and document repositories increased message permanence and transparency, aligning with Hsieh & Wang (2015) findings on communication documentation.

Leadership Engagement and Crisis Response

Leadership engagement during crises was identified as a major predictor of employee trust and perceived organizational stability. Respondents consistently highlighted the importance of leaders being both visible and empathetic. Babu et al. (2023) and Memon et al. (2020) note that leadership presence demonstrated through consistent updates, open door digital policies, and visible concern substantially elevates employee morale. Authentic leadership traits, such as emotional intelligence and transparency, were particularly valued (Lau et al., 2021).

Leaders who communicated regularly, acknowledged uncertainties, and demonstrated accountability were more successful in building trust. Practices such as weekly check ins, crisis dashboards, and anonymous feedback channels proved effective in fostering psychological safety (Mutha & Srivastava, 2021). Conversely, long communication gaps or overly sanitized updates diminished credibility.

The frequency and tone of leadership communication were crucial. Employees interpreted frequent communication as attentiveness and strategic control, while infrequent messages bred speculation and anxiety (Khalil & Siddiqui, 2020). Even when new information was unavailable, employees appreciated being informed of ongoing assessments or pending decisions (Siyal, 2023).

Conceptual models such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and the Organization Trust Relationship Model were useful for interpreting observed behaviors. SCCT suggests tailoring response strategies to crisis types and perceived responsibility, while the latter

emphasizes the role of transparency and message quality in reinforcing organizational trust (Coxen et al., 2016).

Organizational Alignment and Role Clarity

Role clarity was a recurring theme across all case studies, especially during organizational shifts related to hybrid implementation. Clarity was evaluated based on how well employees understood their responsibilities, task interdependencies, and contribution to strategic goals. Structured assessment tools and feedback systems such as Junaidi (2023) role clarity assessments and performance review templates were key enablers.

Organizations with embedded leadership routines weekly planning meetings, real time feedback, and transparent goal setting demonstrated stronger alignment. These routines helped synchronize individual efforts with organizational priorities (Eslahchi, 2023). Participants also emphasized the importance of leaders reiterating shared goals and illustrating how individual contributions fit within the bigger picture.

Communication fragmentation emerged as a barrier to alignment. Isolated messaging, departmental silos, and platform redundancy contributed to confusion and inefficiency (Jeong et al., 2016). Leadership interventions aimed at consolidating channels and encouraging cross functional dialogues were more successful in promoting alignment (Helsloot & Groenendaal, 2017).

Longitudinal perspectives revealed that organizations with sustained clarity efforts recovered more quickly from transitional dips. Hidayat & Nasution (2023) and Enticott et al. (2020) report that consistency in role articulation and clarity monitoring over time helps recalibrate employee expectations and rebuild alignment.

The findings of this study underscore the indispensable role that leadership plays in mitigating the multilayered complexities introduced by hybrid work environments. As hybrid models become the default operational structure in many multinational firms, challenges related to communication clarity, team cohesion, and trust building have emerged as critical areas of concern. Consistent with Kiljunen et al. (2021), this study confirms that effective leaders act as essential mediators of these challenges by ensuring equitable access to resources and information, fostering inclusive communication environments, and leveraging digital tools to maintain consistent engagement. The growing reliance on digital communication platforms necessitates a strategic approach where leaders act not only as managers but also as facilitators of culture and interpersonal connection across spatial divides.

Transformational leadership was shown to improve communication clarity, engagement, and alignment through transparent updates, regular feedback, and visible empathy. These findings extend theories such as LMX and Situational Leadership by showing how trust and psychological safety are cultivated in hybrid teams. Practical implication: organizations should provide leaders with training in empathetic digital communication, regular feedback mechanisms, and adaptive use of collaborative technologies to sustain morale and alignment. This supports earlier claims by Chafi

et al. (2021) and Wojtkowiak et al. (2022), who argue that transformational leaders serve as anchoring figures capable of reducing the alienation often reported in hybrid settings. The integration of leadership visibility through regular check ins, transparency in decision making, and the provision of platforms for upward communication contributes significantly to sustaining morale and reinforcing team alignment in these decentralized contexts.

Furthermore, this study reinforces the applicability of existing theoretical frameworks, including Situational Leadership Theory and Leader Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, across industry boundaries. As highlighted by Kemell & Saarikallio (2023), adaptable leadership strategies those which are responsive to the competence, needs, and expectations of team members produce superior communication outcomes. The data show that high quality LMX relationships, characterized by mutual trust and open dialogue, promote psychological safety and facilitate the alignment of individual and organizational objectives (Henke et al., 2022). These dynamics were especially critical in industries facing high operational volatility, such as logistics and healthcare, where leadership responsiveness and emotional regulation were identified as essential traits. The evidence suggests that while certain principles of effective leadership are universal, the contextual demands of specific industries necessitate tailored applications of these models (Pamula & Zalewska-Turzynska, 2023).

The evolution of communication structures in global firms post pandemic has been significant. With the normalization of hybrid work, organizations have adopted more dynamic communication systems that blend synchronous and asynchronous tools, including Slack, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom (S. Khan et al., 2022). These platforms not only facilitate day to day operations but also serve as infrastructures for maintaining organizational culture and continuity. Findings from this study echo Palmer et al. (2022) and Herbert et al. (2023), who highlight a paradigm shift toward flatter, more inclusive communication hierarchies. Decision making processes have become more participatory, with increased emphasis on transparency and employee voice. Notably, the integration of bi directional feedback mechanisms, such as pulse surveys, open Q&A sessions, and anonymous suggestion boxes, has been instrumental in improving communication responsiveness and organizational agility (Onnis & Pryce, 2015).

However, despite these encouraging developments, the study is not without limitations. One major concern pertains to the subjectivity inherent in qualitative thematic analysis. As noted by Putri et al. (2023), researcher bias can inadvertently shape the identification and interpretation of themes. Although triangulation was employed to mitigate this effect, and coding was collaboratively reviewed, interpretive differences remain a constraint. Additionally, the relatively small sample size, albeit purposively selected for diversity, limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader corporate population (Toscano et al., 2022). The rapid pace at which hybrid communication norms are evolving further complicates the retention of relevance over time a concern also expressed by Prodanova & Kocarev (2021), who warn of the obsolescence of cross sectional qualitative data in periods of organizational flux.

The methodological challenges of qualitative inquiry also include a frequent lack of standardized frameworks for data collection and analysis. Unlike quantitative research, which benefits from replicable metrics and controlled environments, qualitative methods often depend on the

researcher's interpretive skill and contextual immersion. Adisa et al. (2021) emphasize the need for greater methodological transparency to enhance replicability and academic rigor. This study attempts to address that gap through explicit articulation of its coding procedures, data sources, and analytical frameworks. Nevertheless, the inherent flexibility of qualitative design, while a strength in capturing nuance, can also serve as a limitation in ensuring consistent reproducibility.

In sum, this study advances knowledge on leadership and communication in hybrid contexts by combining multi-source qualitative data and sectorally diverse case studies. For practice, organizations should invest in leadership development programs that emphasize communicative competence, emotional intelligence, and cross-cultural digital skills. These investments are essential for sustaining resilience and engagement in hybrid workplaces.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes novelty by specifically examining how transformational leadership shapes internal crisis communication in multinational hybrid environments—a context rarely addressed in previous research. Findings confirm that leaders who demonstrate transparency, empathy, and inclusivity are more effective in clarifying messages, sustaining trust, and aligning teams across dispersed settings. By linking these results to frameworks such as Leader-Member Exchange and Situational Leadership, the study extends theoretical understanding of how leadership behaviors support resilience and engagement in times of organizational uncertainty.

From a practical perspective, organizations should equip leaders with empathetic communication training, adaptive digital skills, and structured feedback systems to ensure cohesion in hybrid workplaces. While this qualitative approach offers rich insights, limitations include subjectivity, small sample size, and the rapidly evolving nature of hybrid practices. Future research should adopt mixed-method or longitudinal designs to validate these findings, test interventions across industries, and track how leadership practices evolve as hybrid models become an enduring feature of global work.

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