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Exploring Leadership Styles to Navigate Organizational Resilience in COVID-19: A Qualitative Inquiry into Thai Startups

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Abstract

This study explores how leadership styles contribute to organizational resilience among Thai startups during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed a multiple-case study approach, conducting semi-structured interviews with three startup CEOs and analyzing the data through thematic categorization to identify patterns and commonalities across cases. The findings reveal five themes: fostering strategic adaptation and organizational agility for business growth, promoting employee growth and empowerment, creating a flexible work environment, driving strategic communication, and customer-centricity. These five themes fit into six existing leadership styles: charismatic leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, adaptive leadership, mindful leadership, and entrepreneurial leadership. This study advances leadership and organizational resilience literature by illustrating how integrating multiple leadership styles—charismatic, transformational, servant, adaptive, mindful, and entrepreneurial—fosters proactive resilience in volatile environments like the COVID-19 pandemic. Practically, it offers startups actionable insights for embedding resilience into culture, aligning HR strategies with adaptability, and cultivating leadership capabilities essential for sustaining growth amid uncertainty.

Keywords: leadership styles, organizational resilience, Thai startups, COVID-19

Introduction

Organizational resilience has gained growing attention, integrating established fields like risk management, business continuity, leadership, and change management (Brown et al., 2017). Broadly, it reflects an organization's capacity to adapt, recover from shocks, and leverage challenges for growth. Building resilience involves strategic planning, crisis protocols, and identifying and capitalizing on opportunities during adversity, providing a long-term competitive advantage. Leadership actions during crises significantly impact an organization's recovery and future success (Bartuseviciene et al., 2024; Brown et al., 2017; Dogrusoz et al., 2022; Morales et al., 2019).

Santos et al. (2023) observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the most severe crises in modern history, Thai startups showcased impressive resilience, primarily

driven by adopting digital technologies. These technologies enabled business adaptation and transformation, aligning with Lanzolla et al.'s (2020) view that crises reveal how digital tools shape organizational learning and adaptability. The COVID-19 pandemic epitomized modern businesses' constant pressure, adding to past disruptions like natural disasters, terrorism, and financial crises—all of which threaten organizational survival (Raetze et al., 2021). In a world of technological disruptions and crises, resilience has become essential for business survival and growth (Bartuseviciene et al., 2023).

Startups, in particular, were pressured to quickly devise innovative solutions while managing supply chain disruptions and declining equity investments (Dragan et al., 2022).

Thailand's startup ecosystem emerged in the early 2000s and gained momentum in the mid-2010s with government support (Asian Development Bank, 2022). Thailand now ranks among the top 50 global startup ecosystems (Bangkok Post Public Company, 2021) and holds the 43rd position in the Global Innovation Index (National Innovation Agency, n.d.). Despite this progress, market limitations and a lack of deep tech innovation hinder further startup growth. Only 44 startups secured \$30 million in funding from government bank incubators (Thanapongporn et al., 2021).

Although startups significantly contribute to economic diversification and growth, little research explores how leadership styles impact resilience in these ventures (Hensellek et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2024). Understanding leadership's role in strengthening startup resilience is crucial for developing innovative, high-performing teams.

This study examines the leadership styles that foster organizational resilience in startups during the COVID-19 pandemic. Startups' reliance on disruptive models and rapid growth demands visionary leadership to navigate their uncertainties (Haase & Eberl, 2019).

Leadership theories have evolved, but traditional models like the Great Man Theory and Trait Theory were inadequate in addressing the complex leadership demands of the pandemic (Olkowicz & Jarosik-Michalak, 2022; Stewart, 2021). The crisis emphasized the need for adaptive, emotionally intelligent leadership focused on collaboration and resilience (Balasubramanian & Fernandes, 2022; Guillén, 2020). Thus, contemporary leadership theories are more relevant for understanding leadership in dynamic, crisis-driven contexts.

Conceptually, this study contributes to resilience research by highlighting the importance of adaptive routines and strategic leadership in startups. By understanding leadership's role, startups can better equip themselves to thrive amid ongoing uncertainty.

Research Question

This study's research question was, "What leadership styles contribute to organizational resilience in startups during the COVID-19 pandemic?" It aims to explore the specific leadership behaviors that have enabled startups to navigate the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic.

Significance of the Study

This study reveals how combining charismatic, transformational, servant, adaptive, mindful, and entrepreneurial leadership styles build organizational resilience during crises. It provides startups with frameworks for employee empowerment, continuous learning, and strategic agility. By integrating these complementary approaches, organizations can foster innovation, sustain growth, and maintain competitive advantages in volatile environments.

Literature Review

Organizational Resilience

Organizational resilience is a dynamic, adaptive capability that defines how organizations respond, recover, and thrive amid disruptions. It encompasses more than endurance; it reflects an organization's ability to evolve and maintain critical functions despite volatile environments (Bartuseviciene et al., 2024; McEwen, 2022; Santos et al., 2023). Resilience involves a combination of strategies, processes, structures, and mindsets that enable organizations to anticipate, withstand, and navigate adversity, ranging from natural disasters and economic crises to technological disruptions and geopolitical shifts.

Several scholars offer complementary definitions. Denyer (2017, p.3) defines organizational resilience as “the ability of an organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions to survive and prosper.” Richardson (2002, as cited in Lee & Wang, 2017) describes resilience as a process of coping with adversity or opportunity that strengthens resilient qualities. Zautra et al. (2010) and Lee and Wang (2017) define resilience as bouncing back from trauma and achieving positive outcomes despite hardships. Other perspectives emphasize psychological stability. For instance, Santos et al. (2023) define resilience as maintaining stable, healthy psychological functioning following trauma. Lengnick-Hall and Beck (2005, as cited in Raetze et al., 2021) further argue that organizational resilience blends cognitive, behavioral, and contextual factors—including mindset, practiced behaviors, and interpersonal resources.

Despite its rising importance, organizational resilience remains underexplored within startup contexts. Existing studies primarily focus on large organizations, even though startups, operating in more uncertain environments, critically need resilience strategies for survival and success (Haase & Eberl, 2019).

Leadership and Organizational Resilience

Leadership has continuously evolved, reflecting the increasing complexity of organizational life and the need for adaptability in turbulent environments (Dinibutun, 2020). Effective leadership is now recognized as a driver of performance and a critical enabler of organizational resilience.

Charismatic leadership, rooted in Max Weber's early work, describes leaders who emerge in times of crisis by offering revolutionary visions that inspire and mobilize followers (Carson, 1987; Dinibutun, 2020). Charismatic leaders possess key traits, including articulating a compelling vision that connects current challenges to a better future, instilling a sense of purpose through vision statements, raising followers' self-efficacy by expressing belief in their capabilities, and engaging emotions through symbolic or unconventional behaviors (Choi, 2006; Jamal & Abu Bakar, 2017; Men et al., 2021). While charisma can have positive organizational effects, it carries ethical risks if misused for personal gain. In the context of resilience, charismatic leaders are particularly valuable as they instill optimism, mobilize collective energy, and create a shared sense of hope amidst adversity.

Transformational leadership emphasizes inspiring change by motivating followers to transcend self-interest for organizational goals (Dinibutun, 2020). Transformational leaders heighten awareness of collective missions, stimulate intellectual development, address individual growth needs, and model the behaviors they promote (Chaudhry et al., 2012; Piwowar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023). Shah (2023) highlights that transformational leaders achieve this by setting ambitious goals and mentoring followers towards achieving them. In resilience contexts, transformational leadership is crucial because it fosters adaptability, strengthens innovation capabilities, and fuels followers' intrinsic motivation.

Servant leadership offers a contrasting approach by placing the needs of followers above organizational ambitions, framing leadership as an act of service (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Spears, 2010). This leadership style emphasizes principles such as active listening, empathy, healing, stewardship, and the development of community (Mujeeb et al., 2021; Spears, 2010; Wahyuni et al., 2014). Servant leaders create supportive environments that nurture collaboration and empowerment (Eva et al., 2019). In organizational resilience, servant leadership proves invaluable by strengthening trust, enhancing social support networks, and cultivating collective responsibility for overcoming challenges. Unlike transformational leadership, which focuses on inspiring alignment with vision, servant leadership builds emotional and ethical foundations for resilience by centering the human experience.

Adaptive leadership, introduced by Heifetz et al. (2009), focuses on mobilizing people to tackle complex, value-laden challenges rather than technical problems. Adaptive leaders step back to observe broader system patterns, distinguish between technical and adaptive challenges, regulate stress levels to avoid paralysis, encourage open dialogue, and facilitate learning and behavioral adjustment (Cojocar, 2008; Khan, 2017; Pujianto et al., 2023). As Cote (2022) and Glover et al. (2002) argue, organizations cannot simply graft adaptability onto old structures; they must fundamentally transform their culture to prioritize continuous learning, agility, and self-renewal. During disruptions, adaptive leadership plays a central role by fostering experimentation, promoting collective intelligence, and building capacity for evolution rather than collapse.

Mindful leadership provides another key dimension of resilience. Mindful leaders practice present-moment awareness, emotional regulation, and relational attentiveness without

judgment (Levey & Levey, 2019; Schuh et al., 2019). They focus on immediate challenges, foster trust and openness, and create environments where innovation flourishes despite uncertainty (King & Badham, 2020). Research by Maruping et al. (2015) shows that leaders who effectively regulate their emotional states can reduce team stress contagion, strengthening group resilience. Mindful leadership supports resilience by building psychological safety, allowing employees to take risks, adapt creatively, and recover quickly from setbacks.

As defined by Renko et al. (2015), entrepreneurial leadership bridges traditional leadership with entrepreneurial behavior by directing team performance toward identifying and exploiting opportunities. Entrepreneurial leaders foster innovation, encourage calculated risk-taking, enhance dynamic capabilities, and create flexible organizational structures capable of rapid adaptation (Ataei et al., 2024; Joel & Oguanobi, 2024; Mars et al., 2024; Stoian, 2023; Tarabishy et al., 2005). Chen (2007) emphasized that in startups, where resources are limited and formal structures are loose, the leadership style of the founding entrepreneur significantly shapes organizational innovation and resilience. Entrepreneurial leadership is particularly relevant to resilience because it emphasizes seizing new market opportunities and adapting creatively to threats and disruptions (Zahoor et al., 2023). Leaders who cultivate a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and invest resources wisely (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015) position organizations for survival and regeneration amid uncertainty. Hensellek et al. (2023) and Nguyen et al. (2021) further stress that entrepreneurial leaders must create cultures that embrace change, empower employees, and foster flexible responses to external challenges.

In conclusion, charismatic, transformational, servant, adaptive, mindful, and entrepreneurial leadership styles uniquely contribute to building organizational resilience. Charismatic and transformational leaders inspire vision and commitment; servant and mindful leaders strengthen emotional well-being and collaboration; and adaptive and entrepreneurial leaders cultivate agility, experimentation, and proactive learning. Integrating these leadership approaches rather than relying on any single style is critical for achieving sustained resilience, innovation, and growth for startups operating in highly dynamic and uncertain environments.

Research Methodology

This study employed a multiple-case study approach to explore how startup CEOs in Thailand sustained business performance and employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focused on understanding leadership styles within the bounded context of Thai startups during the pandemic (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). This approach enabled a detailed description of the setting and individuals, followed by an analysis of data to identify themes across different cases (Creswell & Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Participants

Three startup CEOs were selected through purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 2008), each leading a company founded before 2019. Purposeful sampling was employed to establish

comparisons and illuminate differences between cases, a common strategy in multi-case qualitative studies (Maxwell, 2008). This criterion ensured participants had navigated the extreme challenges of COVID-19, reflected organizational resilience and providing a rich, in-depth exploration of each case within the specific context of Thai startups.

Positionality

With expertise in HR and organizational development, the author brought a deep understanding of leadership, culture, and resilience to the research. While this expertise added depth to interpretation, it also introduced potential biases, especially regarding assumptions about effective leadership practices. The research process emphasized these qualities to maintain rigor, reflexivity, and transparency.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture CEOs' narratives about challenges, strategies, leadership roles, and employee engagement. An open-ended interview guide allowed natural conversation flow. Each interview lasted 45-55 minutes, averaging 50 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted through categorization and interpretation of data in terms of common themes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). Themes were analyzed for each case and across different cases to identify patterns and commonalities (Creswell & Creswell, 2009). This cross-case analysis yielded unified descriptions and categories that conceptualized the data from all cases, resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the leadership styles that contributed to organizational resilience during the pandemic (Merriam, 2009).

Participant Profile:

All three startup CEOs work in three industries established before COVID-19, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Interview Participant Profile

Participants	Position	Type of Business	Year of establishment of the company	Number of Employees
#A	CEO	Marketing Communication Agency	2016	15
#B	CEO	Education and Employer Branding	2014	22

Participants	Position	Type of Business	Year of establishment of the company	Number of Employees
#C	CEO	Digital Solutions and Software	2013	43

Results and Discussion

According to the interviews with the three startup CEOs, the common themes and sub-themes reflecting leadership styles and strategies are categorized as follows.

1. Theme#1: Foster strategic adaptation and organizational agility for business growth

With their keen adaptability, all three CEOs have emphasized adjusting their organizational strategies to the ever-changing markets and clients. This strategic flexibility ensures business continuity and drives growth through digital transformation. There were two sub-themes under this overarching theme.

Sub-theme 1.1: Pivot business model

Through interviews, all CEOs emphasized that during COVID-19, they tremendously adjusted their business models in response to changing circumstances and customer behaviors. CEO#1 mentions, “I changed the offline marketing platform to an online one even though my team and I had no idea what to do or how to do it. However, I realize from my experience and discussion with my network that all clients potentially go to online platforms since the country had been locked down,” while CEO#2 emphasized that “Due to country lock-down, all education-related such as Open-house events had to be canceled; hence, we need to move forward to virtual events.” For CEO#3, even though his company had not been negatively affected by platform changes since they operated in virtual programs and applications due to software company, he and his senior management colleagues did apply agile methodology and application as “It is right time to shift my company to apply the agile way of working since this is one of the best solutions to survive all of us.”

Sub-theme 1.2: Sustain and drive business growth

With their proactive approach, all three CEOs closely monitored business performance, issues, and trends to ensure stable growth. They also mentioned that despite everyday business practices, they significantly emphasized ensuring winning projects and progressing business development. CEO#1 noted, “I had back-to-back calls and online meetings with existing and prospective clients almost daily. Even though many of my existing clients paused marketing campaigns, I kept contacting them and sometimes offered some advice, eventually assigning my team to projects in the next few months.” This is aligned with what CEO#2 worked with clients, mentioning that “We were the first few companies in Thailand that introduced promoting employer branding in the virtual platform as we foresaw the global employer

branding trends, the next generation workforce, etc. Then, we think that COVID-19 is a great time to initiate the virtual employer branding here.”

2. Theme#2: Promote employee growth and empowerment

All CEOs asserted that despite struggles with financial challenges and workforce management and planning during COVID-19, they consider employee development and empowerment as key focuses, as two sub-themes - unlocking employees’ potential and encouraging empowerment.

Sub-theme 2.1: Unlock employees’ potential

All of them enhanced the capability of their employees, including fostering future-ready skills such as digital literacy, embracing learning agility, encouraging direct feedback, and career development. CEO#2 indicated, “My executive teams and I learned the new digital skills with my staff. Also, we let them plan their career development and proposed a co-creating approach. Then, we offer the learning solutions and projects that broaden their skill sets and mindsets.” Furthermore, CEO#3, who steadily expands his startup IT firm, strengthened their team’s capability by “I provided constructive feedback and encouraged them to develop people management skills, recognizing that they play a crucial role in building the people foundation essential for our company’s growth. I realized some challenges at first, especially their mindset and interpersonal skills, in handling individual and team performance. However, now my business partners and I appreciate that they are growing in team management.”

Sub-theme 2.2: Encourage empowerment

All CEOs regarded empowerment as crucial for people and organizational development. CEO#1 emphasized, “As I believe in my self-efficacy that makes me succeed in career and business, I strongly encourage my team to build their self-efficacy, and one effective approach is to empower them to make decisions and propose solutions. I saw that they become more confident, and now they can facilitate the sessions with clients and validate their ideas with me. I also delegate some authorization to them so the business can grow efficiently.” This idea is aligned with what CEO#2 mentioned: “Since we offer employees the co-creation approach to design their career growth, we allow them to initiate ideas and make decisions at certain levels. As startups, we have less hierarchy; hence, we can quickly propose and discuss ideas with me or my business partners. We found that the solutions can respond to our clients’ target groups more promptly and successfully.”

3. Theme#3: Create a flexible work environment

All CEOs were committed to fostering a supportive workplace environment that encouraged flexibility, acknowledging that an adaptable work culture is crucial for employee well-being and organizational success.

To support flexibility, they implemented policies such as remote work options, flexible hours, and role adjustments to accommodate employees’ personal and professional needs.

These measures enabled employees to balance their work-life responsibilities while maintaining productivity. Additionally, they provided non-financial support, including well-being initiatives, mental health resources, and access to skill development programs.

CEOs demonstrated concern for their staff by providing various forms of support, which are non-financial interventions. CEO#1 stated, “We have executed remote and flexible working hours since COVID-19.” Furthermore, CEO#2 mentioned, “Beside flexible working hours that we allow the start and end working time to the employees so that they can manage their time between our company and their life, we implemented supportive policies such as free food delivery e-vouchers and allowed employees to take on second jobs such as freelance graphic design, selling food, dessert, or product online, etc. We understood that they must earn more for themselves and their family; some of their family members were affected by COVID-19 in terms of jobs, income, etc. Moreover, we utilized the Talent Pool approach to mobilize talent nationwide. We get the seasoned graphic designer based in Chiang Mai and the digital content editor from Southern Thailand.” CEO#3 also emphasized that “We supported employee wellbeing through flexible working hours and necessary safety measures, such as Personal Protective Equipment, such as masks, alcohol gels. Employee safety comes first.”

4. Theme#4: Drive strategic communication

Effective communication is critical for leaders to enact change, ensure alignment with their team, and boost morale (Sammy, A., 2021). Hence, during a pandemic, all CEOs drive strategic communication to deliver critical business goals and difficult decisions and foster a culture of a growth mindset and entrepreneurial spirit. There are two subthemes: communicating goals and tough decisions, and instilling a growth mindset and entrepreneurial spirit.

Subtheme 4.1 Communicate goals and challenging decisions

All CEOs focus on communicating business goals and making tough decisions. CEO#1 mentioned, “Since the country had been locked down, I called a virtual meeting with all my teams and informed them of the financial status and my commitment to take everyone together to overcome this challenge. There would not be a salary cut for a certain period. However, I am open to anybody who would like to explore opportunities outside the company. I had another important meeting when we had issues with toxic employees. I called for a meeting since I thought I needed to align and boost the morale of the rest of the employees.” Furthermore, CEO#3 emphasized the importance of communication: “We communicate the new business goals to the team lead and emphasize the importance of a way of working and thinking to help drive growing business challenges. We understand that this decision might make some of us uncomfortable and feel difficult at first, yet with this approach, we can survive and grow.”

Sub-theme 4.2: Foster two-way and open communication

All three CEOs emphasized the importance of two-way communication, especially during the pandemic, a period of confused and unclear information about safety. They stressed that startups must run and survive in business, and effective communication is critical. CEO#2 shared, “Since we are small teams, I encourage them to share ideas and feedback, as I always have a call to talk about life and work. I found that it increased trust, engagement, and productivity.” CEO#3 highlighted, “We utilize a platform that facilitates easy and efficient communication among members. Firstly, they were not familiar with the platform. However, when I joined the online platform and shared information or updated performance, our staff interacted more and had further discussions.” This emphasis on two-way communication makes everyone feel connected and involved in the business.

All CEOs also emphasized the importance of fostering a positive work environment, identifying it as a key factor in surviving COVID-19 through trust, collaboration, and open communication. Implementing transparent leadership, mental health support, and recognition programs ensured employees felt valued and engaged, which helped sustain morale, productivity, and organizational resilience during uncertain times. CEO#2 mentioned, “We have daily catch-up calls as everyone can share any concerns. When they are open to raising the flags, we quickly brainstorm to identify the root causes and solutions. This is one of the key success factors for our company’s survival.” Moreover, CEO#3 provided tools and resources, “We strongly implemented a virtual work platform where everyone can proactively update their tasks online, and leaders can monitor and follow up. They significantly used this platform to suggest using new applications or tools that are reasonable to make them work more efficiently.”

Furthermore, two CEOs mentioned that to keep a positive organization, they must handle toxic employees who express negative opinions when they know the company has transformed their business due to COVID-19. CEO#1 mentioned, “When I announced that our company was in crisis, some employees immediately informed in the meeting that they would resign and asked for severance pay. However, they created a rumor about the unstable financial status of the company and asked many key employees to resign. However, with my sincerity, perseverance, and effort from the remaining employees, some still engaged with us until the company recovered the business.” For CEO#3, despite the different business opportunities created by COVID-19, there were some team leads. Employees who made the rumor about a new management direction change that probably affected job security, “After analyzing the situation, I worked with the management team and HR to take intervention to those employees and do communication meeting to all staff to ensure that we are on great track record and they are valuable for company success.”

5. Theme#5: Customer-centricity

During COVID-19, all three CEOs shifted their business operations from providing the service as their specific scope of work to broadening the services and solutions end-to-end to benefit clients. CEO#1 mentioned, “We partner with many event agencies to propose the comprehensive marketing campaign and holistic marketing communication plan and execution. With this approach, we got positive feedback. We continued the following projects with many clients.” For CEO#3, “we worked closely with clients to identify their real needs and then study harder on the solutions by starting asking key questions ‘How does our end-to-end solution differentiate us from competitors in the market?’ or ‘Are there any gaps in our current service offerings that we must address to meet the client’s needs comprehensively?’. By such questions, we came up with more holistic and pragmatic solutions and received great feedback from them.”

Discussion

This study explored how leadership styles contribute to organizational resilience in Thai startups during the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the experiences of three CEOs, five leadership themes emerged, reflecting strategies that helped their organizations adapt and thrive.

Theme 1: Foster Strategic Adaptation and Organizational Agility

In volatile markets, leaders must realign internal operations with external shifts while balancing risk, cash flow, cost control, and innovation (Glover et al., 2002). Adaptive leaders react to change and proactively anticipate trends (Cote, 2022; Pujianto et al., 2023).

Sub-theme 1.1: Pivot Business Models

The CEOs’ ability to pivot, embracing digital transformation and new business models, aligns with adaptive leadership principles (Heifetz et al., 2009) and entrepreneurial leadership’s emphasis on opportunity-seeking during crises (Nguyen et al., 2021; Renko et al., 2015).

Sub-theme 1.2: Sustain and Drive Growth

Monitoring performance and seizing new opportunities demonstrate the combined influence of adaptive and entrepreneurial leadership. The CEOs exemplified both by aggressively pursuing growth while safeguarding stability (Renko et al., 2015).

Theme 2: Promote Employee Growth and Empowerment

Leaders recognized that developing employees was essential to resilience, even amid financial strain.

Sub-theme 2.1: Unlock Employees’ Potential

Charismatic and transformational leadership drive employee motivation by inspiring higher-order needs, fostering innovation, and reshaping organizational processes to align with personal and collective goals (Choi, 2006; Dinibutun, 2020; Shah, 2023).

Sub-theme 2.2: Encourage Empowerment

The CEOs' empowerment practices reflect charismatic, servant, and entrepreneurial leadership principles—building trust, promoting autonomy, and encouraging proactive opportunity-seeking behavior (Eva et al., 2019; Jamal & Abu Bakar, 2017; Renko et al., 2015).

Theme 3: Create a Flexible Work Environment

Supporting flexible work arrangements strengthened resilience by meeting employees' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, as cited in Men et al., 2021).

Leadership during and after COVID-19 requires compassion, adaptability, and empathy (Stoian, 2023). These CEOs created flexible environments using strategies grounded in:

- Charismatic leadership (building trust and engagement) (Men et al., 2021),
- Transformational leadership (promoting autonomy) (Piwovar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023),
- Servant leadership (prioritizing well-being) (Eva et al., 2019),
- Adaptive leadership (adjusting organizational culture) (Heifetz et al., 2009),
- Mindful leadership (being attuned to emotional needs) (Schuh et al., 2019),
- Entrepreneurial leadership (resourceful problem-solving) (Renko et al., 2015).

Theme 4: Drive Strategic Communication***Sub-theme 4.1: Communicate Goals and Tough Decisions***

Clear, transparent communication during uncertainty reflects transformational leadership's ability to align teams around visions (Chaudhry et al., 2012) and adaptive leadership's role in steering organizations through change (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Sub-theme 4.2: Foster Two-Way Communication

The CEOs' emphasis on open dialogue highlights the emotional connection of charismatic leadership (Men et al., 2021) and the psychological safety cultivated by mindful leadership (Schuh et al., 2019).

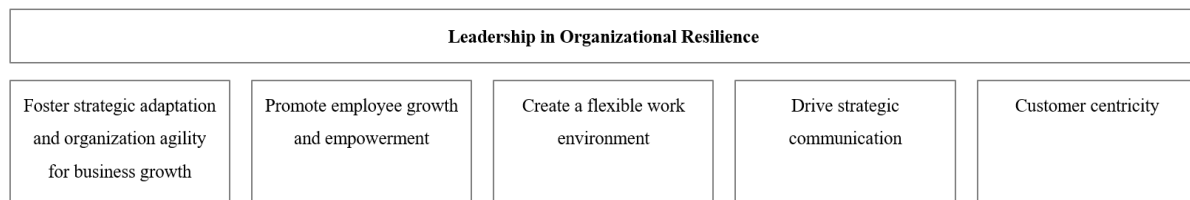
Theme 5: Customer-Centricity

Entrepreneurial leadership demands constant adaptation to market needs, customer expectations, and digital transformation (Hensellek et al., 2023; Joel & Oguanobi, 2024). These CEOs broadened their service scope and deepened customer relationships, showcasing the agility and proactive problem-solving critical for long-term resilience (Mars et al., 2024; Stoian, 2023).

The conceptual model is shown in Table 2 and Model 1 based on the research findings and discussion of six leadership theories.

Table 2*Leadership Characteristics and Theme and Sub-theme*

Theme	Sub-theme	Charismatic Leadership	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership	Adaptive Leadership	Mindful Leadership	Entrepreneurial Leadership
1. Foster strategic adaptation and organization agility for business growth	1.1: Pivot business model				✓		✓
	1.2: Sustain and drive business growth				✓		✓
2. Promote employee growth and empowerment	2.1 Unlock employee's potential	✓	✓				
	2.2 Encourage empowerment			✓			✓
3. Create a flexible work environment		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Drive strategic communication	4.1 Communicate goals and challenging decisions		✓		✓		
	4.2 Encourage two-way communication	✓				✓	
5. Customer centricity							✓

Figure 1*Leadership in Organizational Resilience and Themes*

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study reveals that integrating multiple leadership styles—charismatic, transformational, servant, adaptive, mindful, and entrepreneurial—significantly enhances organizational resilience in Thai startups during COVID-19. The findings demonstrate that collective leadership approaches enable effective crisis navigation through strategic adaptation, employee empowerment, flexible work environments, and customer-centricity.

Theoretical Implication

This study expands the leadership and organizational resilience literature by revealing how multiple leadership styles foster resilience in highly volatile environments like the COVID-19 pandemic, going beyond traditional single-style models. First, the findings extend adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz et al., 2009), illustrating how startup leaders proactively pivot business models and embrace digital transformation. Unlike earlier works portraying adaptability as reactive, this study emphasizes anticipatory, opportunity-driven adaptation.

Second, it enriches transformational and servant leadership literature (Piwovar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023; Spears, 2010). Startup leaders not only aligned employees with organizational goals (transformational) but also fostered co-creation and individual growth (servant), highlighting the decentralized, collaborative nature of resilience-building in startups (Eva et al., 2019).

Third, this study highlights the role of charismatic leadership by demonstrating how leaders' articulation of compelling visions and emotional engagement with employees helped build collective motivation and optimism in the face of adversity (Choi, 2006; Men et al., 2021). Charismatic leadership reinforced resilience by fostering trust and inspiring teams to navigate uncertainty with renewed purpose.

Fourth, the findings emphasize the contribution of mindful leadership, showing that leaders who maintained present-moment awareness and emotional regulation created psychologically safe environments that enabled employee adaptability and innovative problem-solving (Levey & Levey, 2019; Schuh et al., 2019). Mindful leadership practices reduced organizational stress levels and enhanced relational trust, which is critical for sustaining resilience during the pandemic.

Finally, it contributes to entrepreneurial leadership (Dweck, 2006; Renko et al., 2015)

by showing how leaders cultivated a growth mindset alongside opportunity-seeking behavior. Crisis-driven entrepreneurial leadership emphasizes proactive market engagement, adaptability, and fostering team resilience (Hensellek et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2021), extending traditional views of entrepreneurship beyond innovation to include crisis navigation.

Practical Implication

This study offers key insights for startups aiming to build organizational resilience. First, embedding resilience into culture is crucial. Leaders should empower employees, promote agility, and foster continuous learning. Human Resource and Organization Development (HROD) professionals can enhance resilience by decentralizing decision-making, using digital collaboration tools for transparency, and cultivating innovation-driven environments. Second, aligning HR strategies with business continuity efforts is vital. Talent mobility programs, cross-functional collaboration, and tracking resilience metrics can ensure workforce adaptability during crises. Finally, employee well-being must be a strategic priority. Leaders emphasizing mental health, work-life integration, and flexible arrangements drive higher engagement and productivity. HROD teams should shift from traditional performance reviews toward continuous feedback models focused on resilience, innovation, and collaboration. Well-being programs such as counseling and mindfulness initiatives are critical for employee motivation.

Integrating charismatic, servant, adaptive, transformational, mindful, and entrepreneurial leadership styles is vital for startups navigating today's complexities. This collective leadership approach supports business adaptation, employee development, cultivating a positive workplace culture, strategic communication, and organizational resilience. Charismatic leadership is critical, as it rallies teams around compelling visions even when resources are limited, inspiring confidence and motivation in challenging circumstances (Dinibutun, 2020). Transformational leadership complements this by promoting agility and fostering innovation, enabling organizations to pivot quickly in fast-changing markets (Chaudhry et al., 2012). Adaptive leadership further strengthens startups by emphasizing continuous learning, flexibility, and the ability to respond effectively to evolving external pressures (Northouse, 2016). Mindful leadership enhances focus and emotional clarity, helping leaders maintain composure and guide their teams thoughtfully amid uncertainty (Maruping et al., 2015). Entrepreneurial leadership encourages calculated risk-taking and proactive problem-solving, essential for driving innovation and ensuring survival in highly competitive environments (Shah, 2023). By effectively leveraging these complementary leadership styles, startups can sustain growth, foster continuous innovation, and build a competitive edge in dynamic and unpredictable environments.

Recommendation

Building on the findings, this study recommends two future research directions. First, further exploration is needed on strategies for embedding and sustaining customer-centric mindsets within startups. Since customer-centricity strengthens employee engagement and organizational resilience during crises, future studies should examine how startup leaders can internalize customer-focused practices among their teams. Second, maintaining a growth mindset in dynamic startup environments requires deeper investigation. Future research should explore how empowerment, intrinsic motivation, and resilience interact over time. Understanding these mechanisms can guide startups in fostering a culture where employees embrace challenges, innovate, and thrive despite uncertainty for long-term resilience in startups (Tran et al., 2024).

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