

# Leadership Identity Construction During Organizational Transformation in Computer Engineering Companies

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**Citation:** Dastjerdi, E. & Amini, T. (2025). Leadership Identity Construction During Organizational Transformation in Computer Engineering Companies. *Multidisciplinary Engineering Science Open*, 2, 1-15.

## Abstract

This study aimed to explore how managers construct, negotiate, and revise their leadership identities during organizational transformation processes. A qualitative research design was used to examine the lived and interpreted experiences of managers working in organizations undergoing structural, technological, strategic, or cultural transformation. Participants were selected through purposive sampling from public and private organizations in Tehran. The final sample included 24 managers, including senior managers, middle managers, and team leaders who had direct experience of leading employees during transformation initiatives. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 45–75 minutes. Interviews focused on participants' experiences of role change, leadership expectations, identity conflict, legitimacy, employee resistance, and personal meaning-making during transformation. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis with the support of NVivo software. Analysis generated four main categories: disruption of established leadership self-concepts, negotiation of legitimacy and recognition, identity work through relational sensemaking, and reconstruction of adaptive leadership identity. Participants reported that organizational transformation challenged their previous assumptions about authority, expertise, and control. Many managers experienced tension between inherited hierarchical leadership models and emerging expectations for participation, agility, transparency, and emotional support. Leadership identity was not constructed only through formal position, but through continuous interaction with employees, senior executives, peers, and organizational discourses of change. Participants described identity reconstruction as a gradual process involving uncertainty, self-questioning, experimentation, feedback, and redefinition of leadership effectiveness. The study suggests that organizational transformation is not only a structural or strategic process, but also an identity-forming experience for leaders. Managers construct leadership identity through a dynamic interaction between personal self-understanding, organizational expectations, relational recognition, and practical experiences of leading change. Supporting leaders during transformation therefore requires more than technical change management training; it requires reflective, relational, and identity-oriented development practices.

**Keywords:** leadership identity; organizational transformation; identity work; qualitative research; managerial identity; change management

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational transformation has become a defining condition of contemporary management. Organizations are increasingly required to redesign structures, digitize work processes, decentralize decision-making, respond to unstable environments, and revise cultural assumptions about authority, collaboration, and performance. Although transformation is often described in strategic, technological, or structural terms, it also produces profound identity consequences for those responsible for leading it. Managers who previously understood leadership through formal authority, expertise, supervision, and hierarchical coordination may find that transformation requires new forms of influence, relational legitimacy, emotional resilience, participatory decision-making, and adaptive sensemaking. In this context, leadership identity becomes a central issue because leaders must not only implement transformation but also reconstruct who they understand themselves to be as leaders.

Leadership identity refers to the extent to which individuals define themselves, and are recognized by others, as leaders. Contemporary leadership scholarship increasingly views leadership identity not as a fixed personal trait, but as a socially constructed and continuously negotiated process. DeRue and Ashford (2010) argued that leader and follower identities are co-constructed through social processes of claiming and granting, whereby individuals claim leadership and others either grant or withhold recognition. This perspective is especially relevant during organizational transformation because formal titles may remain unchanged while expectations surrounding leadership behavior shift significantly. A manager may still hold the same position, yet the meaning of effective leadership may be redefined by new organizational priorities, new technologies, new reporting relationships, or new cultural narratives of agility and empowerment.

Identity-based perspectives have expanded the understanding of leadership development by showing that leadership is not only a set of competencies but also a self-definition that evolves through experience. Lord and Hall (2005) conceptualized leadership development as involving changes in deeper cognitive and identity structures, while Day and Harrison (2007) emphasized a multilevel, identity-based approach in which individual, relational, and collective identities are central to leader development. This means that transformation affects leadership not only by requiring new skills, but also by challenging the internalized meanings through which managers interpret their role. When a transformation program redefines leadership from command to facilitation, from control to coordination, or from expertise to learning, managers may experience a disruption in their established leadership identity.

The concept of identity work provides an important theoretical lens for examining this process. Identity work refers to the ongoing efforts through which individuals form, repair, maintain, strengthen, or revise their sense of self in relation to social expectations and organizational contexts. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) showed that managerial identity is



often marked by struggle, ambiguity, fragmentation, and the need to reconcile personal self-narratives with organizational discourses. Brown (2015) similarly described identities in organizations as subjectively constructed understandings of who people were, are, and wish to become. In organizational transformation, such identity work becomes more intense because transformation destabilizes familiar meanings. Managers are required to interpret what the organization is becoming and what kind of leader they must become within it.

Organizational transformation can also generate identity threat. Petriglieri (2011) defined identity threat as an experience appraised as potentially harmful to the value, meaning, or enactment of an identity. For leaders, transformation may threaten identity when previous sources of credibility lose relevance. A technically expert manager may feel threatened when transformation demands digital fluency or collaborative facilitation rather than technical control. A senior manager accustomed to authority may feel vulnerable when employees expect transparency, dialogue, and psychological support. A middle manager may feel identity tension when senior executives demand rapid implementation while employees expect protection from uncertainty. These experiences show that leadership identity construction during transformation is not a simple developmental process; it may involve anxiety, resistance, defensiveness, experimentation, and gradual reorientation.

Ibarra's (1999) concept of provisional selves is particularly useful for understanding how leaders adapt to changing roles. In her study of professional adaptation, individuals experimented with provisional selves by observing role models, trying possible identities, and evaluating these experiments through internal standards and external feedback. During organizational transformation, managers may similarly test new leadership behaviors before fully internalizing them. For example, a manager may begin to use more participatory meetings, transparent communication, coaching conversations, or cross-functional collaboration without yet feeling fully comfortable with these behaviors. Over time, repeated practice and social feedback may allow these behaviors to become part of a revised leadership identity.

Another important dimension is the relationship between individual identity and organizational identity. Organizational identity concerns members' understandings of what is central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization. However, research has shown that organizational identity is not necessarily fixed; it may be fluid and adaptive during change. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) argued that instability in organizational identity can support adaptation, while Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, and Corley (2013) reviewed how organizational identity formation and change are shaped by internal self-definitions and external pressures. This is relevant because leaders construct their own identities in relation to the organization's changing identity. If the organization presents itself as innovative, agile, customer-centered, digital, or learning-oriented, managers may feel pressure to align their self-understanding with these new institutional narratives.

Identity regulation is also significant in transformation contexts. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argued that organizations exercise control not only through rules and structures, but also by encouraging employees to develop particular self-images. Transformation programs often contain explicit or implicit identity prescriptions: leaders should be agile, resilient, visionary, collaborative, empowering, data-driven, or entrepreneurial. These prescriptions may support adaptation, but they may also create tension when managers perceive a gap between who they are and who the organization expects them to become. Therefore, leadership identity construction during transformation involves both agency and constraint. Managers actively interpret and negotiate their identities, but they do so within organizational discourses that define desirable leadership.

The relational nature of leadership identity is equally important. Leadership identity does not become stable simply because a manager privately sees themselves as a leader. It requires recognition by others. Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, and Lord (2017) emphasized that leadership and followership identity processes operate across individual, relational, and collective levels. During transformation, recognition may become uncertain. Employees may resist a manager's change role, peers may compete for influence, and senior executives may redefine expectations. As a result, managers must repeatedly negotiate legitimacy. They may ask themselves: Do employees still trust me? Do senior leaders see me as capable of leading change? Do I recognize myself in this new leadership role? Such questions illustrate why transformation is a powerful context for examining leadership identity construction.

Despite increasing attention to leadership identity, there remains a need for more qualitative research on how managers experience identity construction during organizational transformation. Much leadership development research focuses on competencies, outcomes, or formal programs, while less attention is given to the subjective, relational, and narrative processes through which managers reconstruct their leadership selves during change. This gap is important because transformation initiatives often fail not only because of poor strategy or weak implementation, but also because leaders themselves struggle to embody the identities required by the new organizational order. Understanding these identity processes can help organizations design more humane and effective transformation support systems.

The present qualitative study addresses this gap by exploring the experiences of managers in Tehran organizations undergoing transformation. Tehran provides a valuable context because many organizations operate under conditions of environmental uncertainty, technological change, resource constraints, regulatory pressure, and evolving workforce expectations. These conditions intensify the identity demands placed on leaders. Managers must simultaneously maintain operational continuity, communicate change, manage employee emotions, interpret strategic ambiguity, and redefine their own leadership roles. By focusing on their narratives, this study seeks to reveal how leadership identity is disrupted, negotiated, and reconstructed during transformation.



The aim of this study was to explore how managers construct leadership identity during organizational transformation, with particular attention to identity disruption, relational recognition, sensemaking, and the reconstruction of adaptive leadership self-understanding.

## 2. Methods and Materials

This study used a qualitative research design to explore leadership identity construction during organizational transformation. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the purpose of the study was not to measure predefined variables, but to understand how managers interpreted, narrated, and made meaning of their leadership experiences during transformation. The study focused on managers working in organizations located in Tehran that had recently experienced or were currently experiencing transformation processes such as digitalization, restructuring, strategic repositioning, cultural change, process redesign, merger-related change, or transition toward more network-based and participatory forms of management.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: having at least three years of managerial or supervisory experience, direct involvement in an organizational transformation process during the previous three years, employment in an organization located in Tehran, and willingness to participate in a semi-structured interview. Participants who had no direct responsibility for leading or implementing change were excluded. The final sample consisted of 24 participants. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews no longer generated substantially new categories or insights. The sample included 13 men and 11 women. In terms of managerial level, 6 participants were senior managers, 11 were middle managers, and 7 were team leaders or unit supervisors. Participants came from information technology, banking and financial services, healthcare administration, manufacturing, education, and professional service organizations. Their ages ranged from 31 to 57 years, and their managerial experience ranged from 4 to 22 years.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was selected because it allowed the researcher to explore common topics across participants while also giving each participant space to describe personal experiences, emotions, and interpretations in depth. The interview guide included open-ended questions about participants' experiences of transformation, changes in leadership expectations, moments of uncertainty or identity conflict, relationships with employees and senior executives, sources of legitimacy, and personal definitions of leadership before and after transformation. Examples of interview questions included: "How did the transformation process change your understanding of yourself as a leader?", "Can you describe a moment when your previous leadership style no longer seemed effective?", "How did employees respond to your leadership during the change process?", and "What helped you reconstruct confidence in your leadership role?"

Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. All interviews were conducted in a private setting or through secure online communication, depending on participant preference. Before

each interview, participants received information about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned codes from P1 to P24, and identifying organizational details were removed from transcripts. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual impressions, emotional tone, and preliminary analytic reflections.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed an iterative process involving familiarization with the data, initial coding, development of preliminary categories, review of categories across transcripts, refinement of themes, and final interpretation. NVivo software was used to organize transcripts, manage codes, compare categories, and retrieve coded segments. Analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to gain a holistic understanding of participant narratives. Initial codes were assigned to meaningful units of text related to leadership self-understanding, identity tension, legitimacy, emotional experience, relational recognition, role experimentation, organizational expectations, and adaptation.

After initial coding, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. The researcher moved continuously between individual transcripts and the emerging category structure to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participant accounts. Categories were refined by comparing similarities and differences across managerial levels, sectors, and transformation experiences. Analytical memos were used to document interpretations and decisions during coding. To enhance trustworthiness, the study used prolonged engagement with the data, peer review of selected coded transcripts, member checking with five participants, and an audit trail of coding decisions. Credibility was strengthened by using direct quotations from participants, while dependability was supported through systematic documentation of data collection and analysis procedures.

### 3. Findings

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that the final sample included 24 managers from Tehran-based organizations. Thirteen participants were male and 11 were female. Regarding age, 5 participants were between 30 and 35 years old, 8 were between 36 and 45 years old, 7 were between 46 and 50 years old, and 4 were above 50 years old. In terms of managerial position, 6 participants were senior managers, 11 were middle managers, and 7 were team leaders or supervisors. Regarding organizational sector, 6 participants worked in information technology and digital services, 5 in banking and financial services, 4 in healthcare administration, 3 in manufacturing, 3 in education and training organizations, and 3 in consulting or professional services. Managerial experience varied from 4 to 22 years; 7 participants had less than 7 years of managerial experience, 10 had between 7 and 15 years, and 7 had more than 15 years. All participants had direct experience of at least one organizational transformation initiative, including digital transformation, restructuring, process redesign, strategic change, or cultural transformation.





The first main category was disruption of established leadership self-concepts. Participants described organizational transformation as a period in which their previous understanding of leadership became insufficient or unstable. Many had developed their leadership identity around expertise, authority, problem-solving, and the ability to provide clear answers. However, transformation created ambiguity, accelerated decision cycles, and introduced expectations that leaders should facilitate learning rather than merely control execution. One participant explained, “Before the transformation, I felt I was a good manager because I knew the answers. During the change, I realized that sometimes I had to lead while I was also learning” (P7). Another participant stated, “My identity was built around control. I checked everything, approved everything, and people expected that from me. But the new structure required delegation, and at first it felt like losing part of myself” (P12). This disruption was not only behavioral but also emotional. Participants reported feelings of uncertainty, inadequacy, and vulnerability when old sources of leadership confidence no longer worked. For some, the transformation challenged the symbolic meaning of being a leader. They moved from seeing leadership as certainty to seeing it as the capacity to remain credible under uncertainty.

The second main category was negotiation of legitimacy and recognition. Participants repeatedly emphasized that leadership identity during transformation depended on whether others recognized them as legitimate change leaders. Formal position alone was not enough to secure legitimacy. Employees often questioned the purpose of transformation, resisted new processes, or doubted whether managers had enough authority to protect them from negative consequences. Middle managers especially experienced pressure from both senior executives and employees. One participant said, “Top management expected me to defend the transformation, but my team expected me to defend them from the transformation. I was standing between two identities” (P4). Another participant explained, “I had the title, but I did not always have recognition. People watched whether I believed in the change, whether I could explain it honestly, and whether I was still on their side” (P18). This category shows that leadership identity was constructed through relational recognition. Participants gained legitimacy when they communicated transparently, acknowledged uncertainty, listened to employee concerns, and demonstrated consistency between words and actions. Conversely, legitimacy weakened when employees perceived managers as merely transmitting senior management orders. Therefore, leadership identity during transformation emerged as a negotiated social status rather than a fixed organizational role.

The third main category was identity work through relational sensemaking. Participants described identity reconstruction as occurring through conversations with employees, peers, senior executives, mentors, and sometimes family members. These conversations helped managers interpret what transformation meant and what kind of leadership was required. Many participants reported that they did not immediately understand how to act as leaders in the new context. They made sense of their role by listening to employee reactions,

comparing themselves with other managers, and reflecting on feedback. One participant stated, “I understood my new role in conversations. When employees asked difficult questions, I discovered what kind of leader I wanted to be—someone who does not hide behind slogans” (P9). Another participant noted, “My peers helped me see that I was not weak because I was uncertain. We were all trying to create a new language for leadership” (P15). Relational sensemaking also included emotional labor. Managers had to manage their own anxiety while helping employees interpret change. Participants emphasized that identity work became possible when they could narrate the transformation in a meaningful way. They reconstructed leadership identity by linking organizational change to personal values such as responsibility, fairness, growth, and service.

The fourth main category was reconstruction of adaptive leadership identity. Over time, participants began to redefine leadership in more flexible, relational, and developmental terms. Rather than returning to their previous leadership identity, they constructed a revised identity that combined authority with humility, direction with participation, and confidence with openness to learning. One participant said, “Now I think leadership is not pretending to be certain. It is creating enough trust so people can move even when the future is not fully clear” (P21). Another participant explained, “I became less attached to being the person who gives orders. I started to see myself as someone who creates conditions for others to act” (P2). This reconstructed identity was not uniform across participants, but several common elements appeared: acceptance of uncertainty, emphasis on communication, willingness to delegate, attention to employee emotions, and a stronger orientation toward learning. Some participants described this as a more mature leadership identity. Others described it as a painful but necessary adaptation. The reconstruction of adaptive leadership identity was strongest among participants who received feedback, engaged in reflection, and had opportunities to experiment with new leadership practices. In contrast, participants who experienced transformation as imposed, unclear, or politically unsafe reported more fragmented and defensive identity narratives.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study explored how managers construct leadership identity during organizational transformation. The findings showed that transformation disrupted established leadership self-concepts, required managers to negotiate legitimacy and recognition, intensified relational sensemaking, and eventually led many participants toward a reconstructed adaptive leadership identity. These findings support the view that leadership identity is not fixed or purely individual, but socially constructed through interaction, organizational expectations, role experience, and self-reflection. In this study, organizational transformation functioned as an identity-disrupting context because it altered the meaning of effective leadership. Participants who had previously associated leadership with control, expertise, decision authority, and certainty were required to adopt more facilitative, participatory, and adaptive forms of leadership. This finding aligns with DeRue and Ashford’s





(2010) theory that leadership identity is co-constructed through claiming and granting processes. Participants did not become change leaders simply because they held managerial titles; they had to claim a revised leadership role and receive recognition from employees, peers, and senior executives.

The first finding, disruption of established leadership self-concepts, is consistent with identity work literature showing that organizational contexts can destabilize self-understanding. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) argued that managerial identity often involves struggle between personal narratives and organizational discourses. In the present study, transformation created precisely this kind of struggle. Participants' previous leadership narratives were challenged by new organizational demands for agility, transparency, delegation, and emotional support. This also supports Ashforth and Schinoff's (2016) argument that identity construction in organizations often involves sensebreaking, sensegiving, and sensemaking. Transformation produced sensebreaking by weakening familiar assumptions about what it meant to be a competent leader. Managers then engaged in sensemaking to reconstruct a situated leadership identity that could fit the new context.

The experience of identity disruption also reflects Petriglieri's (2011) concept of identity threat. Participants often experienced transformation as threatening when it reduced the value of previously important identity resources, such as technical expertise, hierarchical authority, or control over decisions. For some managers, the demand to delegate or facilitate rather than command was experienced as a loss of status. For others, uncertainty threatened their self-image as competent and reliable decision-makers. These findings suggest that resistance to transformation among managers may not always reflect opposition to change itself. Instead, it may reflect attempts to protect valued leadership identities. This interpretation is important because organizations frequently treat managerial resistance as a behavioral or motivational problem, while the present findings suggest that it may also be an identity protection response.

The second finding, negotiation of legitimacy and recognition, confirms the relational nature of leadership identity. Participants repeatedly stated that formal authority was insufficient during transformation. Employees evaluated whether managers were honest, competent, supportive, and credible. This supports Epitropaki et al.'s (2017) multilevel review of leadership and followership identity processes, which emphasized that leadership identity operates at individual, relational, and collective levels. In the present study, managers' private self-understanding as leaders had to be validated through relational recognition. When employees granted recognition, managers experienced stronger identity confidence. When employees resisted, distrusted, or questioned them, managers experienced identity instability. This finding also aligns with Marchiondo et al. (2015), who empirically emphasized the relational nature of leadership identity construction and the importance of claiming and granting processes.

Middle managers in this study experienced legitimacy negotiation most intensely because they occupied an intermediary position between senior executives and employees. They were expected to represent strategic transformation while also responding to employee anxiety. This finding resonates with organizational change literature showing that change implementation depends heavily on those who translate strategic decisions into daily practices. Stouten, Rousseau, and De Cremer (2018) emphasized the importance of evidence-based change processes, including communication, participation, leadership alignment, and support. The present findings add that these practices are not only implementation mechanisms; they are also identity mechanisms. Through communication and participation, managers do not merely explain change; they construct themselves as credible leaders of change.

The third finding, identity work through relational sensemaking, shows that leadership identity construction during transformation is narrative and conversational. Participants reconstructed their leadership identities through dialogue with employees, peers, executives, mentors, and other social actors. This finding is consistent with Brown's (2015) view that identity work in organizations involves ongoing interpretation of who individuals are and wish to become. It also aligns with Ibarra's (1999) concept of provisional selves. Participants experimented with new forms of leadership, such as participatory meetings, transparent communication, coaching, and delegation, before fully internalizing these behaviors as part of their leadership identity. Through feedback, reflection, and repeated practice, provisional behaviors gradually became more stable identity claims.

Relational sensemaking was also emotionally demanding. Participants had to manage their own uncertainty while helping employees interpret transformation. This suggests that leadership identity construction is inseparable from emotional labor. During transformation, leaders are expected to embody confidence even when they experience ambiguity. However, the findings indicate that participants gradually moved away from an identity based on invulnerability toward an identity based on honest and responsible presence. This finding contributes to leadership identity literature by showing that adaptive leadership identity may include the capacity to acknowledge uncertainty without losing legitimacy. In this sense, transformation expanded participants' definitions of strength, credibility, and authority.

The fourth finding, reconstruction of adaptive leadership identity, indicates that many managers eventually developed a more flexible and relational understanding of leadership. This reconstructed identity included acceptance of uncertainty, openness to learning, delegation, communication, and attention to employee emotions. This finding is consistent with Day and Harrison's (2007) identity-based approach to leadership development, which suggests that leadership development involves changes in individual, relational, and collective identity. It also aligns with Lord and Hall's (2005) view that leadership development includes deeper changes in cognitive and identity structures. Participants did not merely acquire new change management techniques; they revised the meaning of being a leader.



The reconstruction of adaptive leadership identity also supports Miscenko, Guenter, and Day's (2017) finding that leader identity can change dynamically over time. In the present study, change occurred not through a formal leadership development program but through lived experience of organizational transformation. This suggests that transformation itself can function as an informal leadership development context. However, development was not automatic. Participants who had access to feedback, reflection, psychological safety, and meaningful communication reported more integrated identity reconstruction. Participants who experienced transformation as imposed, ambiguous, or politically unsafe showed more defensive or fragmented identity patterns. This distinction is important for organizations because it suggests that transformation can either develop leaders or damage leadership identity, depending on how it is managed.

The findings also contribute to research on organizational identity and change. Gioia et al. (2013) argued that organizational identity formation and change are shaped by internal and external pressures. The present study shows that individual leadership identities are closely linked to changing organizational identity. When organizations redefined themselves as agile, innovative, digital, or collaborative, managers felt pressure to align their leadership identities with these new organizational narratives. This process may support transformation when leaders identify with the new direction, but it may create identity tension when the new organizational discourse conflicts with personal values or established professional self-concepts.

In addition, the findings extend Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) concept of identity regulation. Transformation initiatives often define the "ideal leader" through official language, competency models, workshops, and executive messages. Participants in this study encountered expectations to become more agile, empowering, resilient, and transparent. These expectations created opportunities for growth, but they also functioned as normative pressures. Managers were not simply free to become any kind of leader; they were encouraged to become leaders who matched the organization's transformation narrative. Therefore, leadership identity construction during transformation involves both personal agency and organizational control.

Overall, the study suggests that leadership identity construction during organizational transformation is a four-part process: disruption, negotiation, sensemaking, and reconstruction. First, transformation disrupts established leadership self-concepts by making familiar behaviors and assumptions less effective. Second, managers negotiate legitimacy through relational recognition from employees, peers, and senior executives. Third, they engage in identity work through relational sensemaking, experimentation, and reflection. Fourth, some managers reconstruct a more adaptive leadership identity that integrates uncertainty, participation, learning, and relational responsibility. This process is not linear for all leaders, but it provides a useful framework for understanding how managers experience transformation at the level of self-definition.

This study has several limitations. First, the study was conducted with managers from Tehran-based organizations, which may limit transferability to other geographical, cultural, or institutional contexts. Organizational transformation in Tehran may be shaped by specific economic, regulatory, labor market, and cultural conditions that differ from other regions. Second, the study relied on self-reported interview data. Although interviews provided rich insight into participants' interpretations, they may also reflect retrospective reconstruction, social desirability, or selective memory. Third, the study included managers from several sectors, which increased diversity but limited the possibility of deep sector-specific analysis. Fourth, the study focused on managers' perspectives and did not include direct interviews with employees, senior executives, or external consultants. Therefore, the findings represent leadership identity construction from the managerial viewpoint rather than a complete multi-actor account of transformation.

Future research should examine leadership identity construction during transformation in different cultural, industrial, and institutional contexts. Comparative studies could explore whether managers in public, private, start-up, and multinational organizations experience identity disruption differently. Longitudinal qualitative research would be especially valuable because leadership identity construction is a process that unfolds over time. Following managers before, during, and after transformation would provide deeper insight into how identity claims emerge, stabilize, or collapse. Future studies could also include employees' perspectives to examine whether managers' self-perceived leadership identities are recognized by followers. In addition, mixed-methods research could develop and test models linking identity disruption, legitimacy, psychological safety, leadership behavior, and transformation outcomes.

Organizations should recognize that transformation is not only a technical or strategic process but also an identity transition for leaders. Managers need spaces for reflection, dialogue, peer learning, and emotional processing during transformation. Leadership development programs should move beyond generic change management skills and include identity-oriented components, such as reflective journaling, coaching, narrative work, feedback conversations, and discussion of identity tensions. Senior executives should also communicate transformation expectations clearly while allowing managers to adapt these expectations authentically rather than forcing a single idealized leadership model. Organizations can support leadership identity reconstruction by creating psychological safety, legitimizing uncertainty, encouraging participatory leadership, and recognizing managers who build trust during change rather than only those who deliver short-term implementation metrics.

## 5. Conclusion

This qualitative study explored leadership identity construction during organizational transformation among managers in Tehran organizations. The findings showed that transformation disrupts established leadership self-concepts, challenges traditional sources



of legitimacy, intensifies relational sensemaking, and can lead to the reconstruction of adaptive leadership identity. Participants' narratives demonstrated that leadership identity is not produced by formal position alone. Rather, it is constructed through the interaction between personal self-understanding, organizational expectations, employee recognition, peer comparison, and practical experience of leading change. Organizational transformation therefore represents a critical identity context in which managers must reinterpret who they are, what leadership means, and how they can remain credible under uncertainty.

The study contributes to leadership and organizational change literature by showing that transformation should be understood as an identity-forming process for leaders. Managers do not simply implement change; they are changed by the process of leading it. Their ability to support employees, communicate uncertainty, delegate authority, and participate in organizational renewal depends partly on whether they can reconstruct a leadership identity that fits the emerging organizational context. For practice, the study highlights the need for identity-sensitive leadership development during transformation. Organizations that support reflection, recognition, psychological safety, and relational learning are more likely to help managers construct adaptive and sustainable leadership identities.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

### **Acknowledgments**

Authors thank all who helped us through this study.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors report no conflict of interest.

### **Funding/Financial Support**

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

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