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ADAPTING AGENTIC LEADERSHIP FOR REMOTE WORK: PERSPECTIVES OF HR MANAGERS IN PAKISTANI SMES

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Abstract

Today's widespread shift towards remote and hybrid work has influenced the ways of working in small and medium-sized enterprises and especially in developing economies, where technology and organizational means are limited. This study aims to find how Human Resource managers of Pakistani SMEs implement principles of agentic leadership in managing remote teams. The qualitative research design was applied and the semi-structured interview method was used for the six HR managers from the information technology, services and manufacturing SMEs. Participants' professional experience ranged from 5 to 10 years. The interview data was transcribed, coded and analyzed thematically, using NVivo software. Eight themes emerged: technical infrastructure challenges, communication challenges, team management and trust building, team cohesion and employee engagement, use of digital tools, SME-specific constraints, collaboration across time zones and adaptation of agentic leadership. The results indicate that all of these factors–unstable internet connection, power outages, low digital literacy, lack of budget, inappropriate home environment and communication gaps–affect the management of remote working teams. To meet this challenge, HR managers resort to Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Trello, shared calendars, ERP systems and centralized information repositories to maintain the level of coordination. At the same time, managers are more focused on autonomy, trust, transparency, empowerment and outcome measures, but still provide some structured guidance to ensure accountability. It is concluded that the agentic leadership in Pakistani SMEs is in a hybrid model which entails freedom of employees, well-defined expectations, digital coordination, and contextual control. The findings will help to continue the dialogue about remote leadership and offer a qualitative perspective within resource-poor and culturally hierarchical SME settings.

Keywords: *Agentic leadership, remote work, HR management, Pakistani SMEs, virtual teams, digital collaboration, employee engagement, leadership adaptation*

1. Introduction

Since the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has fast-tracked the transition from a traditional workplace to remote and hybrid working, the nature of work has transformed significantly. Employees are now able to work outside of the office using digital communication tools, cloud-based systems and greater internet connectivity. Henry et al. (2021) and Roy (2022) refer to this change as part of an overall restructuring of the organization of the workplace. Lukić (2023) also pinpoints digital technologies as a key pillar of remote working and Iogansen et al. (2024) find that the first wave of fully-remote working was followed by more stable hybrid working. The work model of remote work has gone beyond the situation of coping with crisis, turning into an organizational practice. According to Chinthala (2024), technological progress has transformed the contemporary work environment and helped organizations manage remote workforce. Hybrid work is also increasingly becoming a normal way of working for organisations post-pandemic as described by Marcus (2022). Organizations need to reconsider their leadership approach since it no longer involves direct supervision, informal face-to-face communication and physical presence of the employee.

Organisational advantages can be key with remote and hybrid working. Khatatbeh et al. (2023) link working remotely to increased flexibility, employee satisfaction, decreased commuting, and decreased organizational costs. With remote set up, companies have access to more talent as they are not restricted to hiring workers within a certain vicinity from their physical location. But, the benefits of these are dependent on effective co-ordination. Gajendran et al. (2015) demonstrate that there are communication challenges, social isolation and organizational culture issues with remote working as well. So, good management and leadership is extremely important for the effectiveness of telecommuting.

Leadership is crucial during physically remote situations on a team. The more traditional approach of visual monitoring and immediate face-to-face intervention by the manager is no longer the primary approach. Carroll and Conboy (2020) suggest that it is time for organizations working in the domain of digitally mediated working to shift from supervision-driven to trust, accountability, and outcomes-based management. It takes leaders to communicate expectations, to create dependable channels of communication, to give employees their independence, and keep them accountable without being too controlling.

The demands are in very close relationship with agentic leadership. The notion of agency is based on Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory which focuses on individual's capacity to act on their surroundings and on themselves. Agentic principles are applied to leadership and are related to autonomy, self-regulation, empowerment, initiative and responsibility. Lee, Willis and Tian (2020) demonstrate that empowering leadership can boost employee motivation and their contribution by giving employees more autonomy and setting clear targets and providing support. This seems especially pertinent to remote workers, who need to arrange their work on their own.

Leadership that is agentic doesn't mean there is no managerial structure. Even remote workers need guidance and access to all the tools, a clear line of communication, and an understanding of what is expected of them.

Good leaders thus establish environments where autonomy exists within parameters of objectives and accountability structures. This equilibrium is particularly significant for organisations where the traditional culture is that the authority rests on hierarchy. These attributes can help to determine how independent or dependent workers are likely to be on management for leadership.

The difficulties are even greater in small and medium enterprises. The value of the SMEs is that they are of economic importance as they help in employment and entrepreneurship and economic activity. However, they are often limited in their financial, technological and managerial resources compared to big corporations. The constraints in remote contexts can manifest as unreliable internet access, lack of access to certain high-tech items or software, poor formal systems, and lack of training. These constraints have been recognized in the original study as the core elements of HR managers' experience in the SMEs of Pakistan.

In this setting, HR managers play a strategically vital role as they are at the core of the employee policies, communication systems, performance practices, employee engagement, and organizational culture. Their experiences thus can expose the agentic leadership in practice in a resource-limited remote work environment. Much of the previous studies on remote leadership have been conducted in context and/or size of large organizations. The adaptation of autonomy, trust, empowerment and digital coordination in the context of the Pakistani SMEs has received less attention.

This paper fills this void by looking at the viewpoint of six HR managers working in SMEs in the information technology, services and manufacturing sectors. It explores both the operational issues they encounter and their communication methods, the importance of technology, how they build trust and engagement, how they work with team members in other time zones, and how they make agentic leadership work. The study has added a context specific perspective on empowerment of employees and control of the organization in case of remote working.

1.1 Research Objectives

To understand the issues HR professionals face when they manage the remote teams in Pakistani SMEs.

2. To gain knowledge of the impact technology has on the behavior of a leader in a remote work setting.

3. To review the practice to facilitate multi-temporal and cultural collaboration.

4. To examine the adaptation of the agentic leadership principles in the resource constrained SME environment by HR managers.

1.2 Research Questions

What are the HR challenges to manage remote workforces in SMEs in Pakistan?

2. What are the ways to overcome communication failures and misunderstandings in remote situations?

3. How do you maintain teamwork and develop trust when employees are spread out?

4. What are the most notable technologies to impact remote team management and monitoring?

5. What are some strategies for collaboration and continuity of a project across time zones?

6. What aspects of agentic leadership (autonomy, empowerment, trust) are relevant in managing a remote team?

2. Literature Review

The growing number of remote workers is driving changes in the organization.2.1 Remote work and Organisational change

On the one hand, the spatial organisation of work has changed as a result of the fast uptake of remote working, while on the other hand, there have been changes in managerial organisation. Roy (2022) and Henry et al. (2021) link this shift to improvements in the digital communication system and the unprecedented stress factors, which the pandemic has imposed. In many companies work from home was a forced measure, which eventually got integrated into more sustainable hybrid working arrangements. Iogansen et al. (2024) indicate that fully remote work saw a significant increase during the lockdowns and developed into a hybrid work model.

The technology that enables employees to communicate, share documents, monitor tasks and collaborate remotely or from different locations is cited as a key driver of remote/hybrid models (Chinthala, 2024). Marcus (2022) also states that hybrid working is a new reality of the current organization design. These findings suggest that the systems of work leadership that will be required in the future must be able to function when the worker is not constantly in view of the supervisor.

Working remotely can be beneficial for flexibility and cost savings, but can also present challenges for management. Khatatbeh et al. (2023) find that there are benefits that include employee satisfaction, flexibility in work-life, reduction in commutes, and reduction in environmental impact. Gajendran et al. (2015) on the contrary, suggest potential issues with communication, isolation and culture of the organization. Thus, the literature implies that the remote work is not necessarily good nor bad. Its effectiveness is related to support in organization, job design, leadership and communication systems.

3.1 Ethical and professional dilemmas related to the IT industry and its functions in society

Traditional leadership styles are based on the premise that supervisors and employees must interact frequently. The idea of that is undermined by remote working. Carroll and Conboy (2020) postulate that because of the digital nature of work, there's a need to start trusting, becoming more accountable, and coordinating with a focus on results. The manager must make clear what is to be expected and must provide enough latitude for the employee to do the job on his own.

There is also a need to account for a lack of informal interactions, when working remotely. In physical workplaces, clarification can happen rapidly and in an informal way, via the spontaneous conversation.

In virtual environments, misunderstandings can still occur when there's a delay in communication and/or when workers are choosing the wrong means of communication. As mentioned by Gajendran et al. (2015), remote setting up may lead to a communication barrier and social distance. Leaders thus need to be more intentional in their use of communication tools, making a note of decisions, and finding frequent opportunities to interact.

One of the employee engagement issues for leaders is another. Edwards (2018) correlates engagement to organizational performance, and HR.com (2019) discusses the impact of trust with leaders and in the relationship with direct supervisors. For remote workers, these findings are important as they could negatively affect their feelings of belonging to the organization. Leaders need to establish a system that maintains focus on, awards for, inclusion in and access to support.

2.3 Agentic Leadership

Agentic leadership is a conceptually-based approach to leadership based on Bandura's (2001) social cognitive theory. Agency is the ability to take action, have an impact, self-control and strive to achieve a goal. Agentic leadership in organisations is thus about empowering employees and getting them to take the initiative, to be autonomous, to feel self-efficacious and take responsibility, instead of having to be in control of all activities.

Empowering leadership can offer more value than other forms of leadership, by enabling employees to have more discretion and to participate, as illustrated by Lee et al. (2020). Agentic leaders set clear goals and offer employees the tools they need to do the job, while giving them some discretion in how to get the job done. Traditional leadership logic is applicable to remote working, as employees far away from the managers will often require decisions to be made without direct input from the leadership.

Another aspect of agentic leadership is that it places responsibility to employees. Autonomy is effective when they know the outcomes to expect, are capable and willing to be accountable.

When it comes to remote working, that's about leaders giving freedom and clarity. Staff can decide the order in which to do things and how, while manager sets deadlines, standards of performance, how to communicate and how to report progress.

2.4 Leadership for agentic teams remotely

The autonomy and trust have a higher practical value in a remote working scenario as managers cannot 'oversee' employees on a constant basis. Gibson et al. (2021) talk about the experience and electronic dependence in virtual work. Grant, Fried and Juillerat (2019) highlight 'autonomy' and 'job design' as factors affecting satisfaction and effectiveness. These ideas can be used to apply agentic principles in remote locations.

It is particularly crucial to have outcome-based performance management in virtual work. Managers who try to mimic monitoring in the office by constantly monitoring by digital means may erode trust and result in greater resistance. Agentic leadership, on the other hand, concentrates on completed work, agreed targets and accountability for results. The original study finds evidence that HR managers in SMEs in Pakistan are increasingly following this logic – freedom for employees and clear rules and monitoring of results.

Trust is thus not only a precondition of, but also a result of agentic leadership. Both employees must have faith that the leaders will communicate fairly and will support, and that the leaders will have faith in the employees to perform without constant supervision. The relationship of virtual teams can be strengthened with transparency, consistency, timely responses, and sharing of information.

2.5 Remote work in SMEs.

SMEs also help create jobs, are a source of entrepreneurship and are essential for economic development. In the source project, the importance of small enterprises is highlighted from the research of Hasan (2002), Lussier and Pfeifer (2001) and Qureshi et al. (2013).

But, smaller companies may find the shift to working from home more challenging since they tend to have less money and technology resources.

Ferrara, De Angelis and Borrelli (2022) report adaptation problems in the organisations due to the pandemic. This problem is translated by the source study to SMEs as being limited budgets, informal management, limited access to sophisticated digital tools and also lack of employee training. These limitations limit the ability of SMEs to offer top of the range devices, reliable systems or to have a dedicated technical support team.

Limitation of SMEs also influences on behavior of leadership. In the absence of formal systems, managers can be more inclined to use personal communication and flexible problem-solving. This can get out of balance when employees work remotely, as they are physically isolated. Hence, simple but reliable digital routines need to be developed, commensurate with available resources, to be effective leaders.

Leadership is understood as a cultural phenomenon in Pakistan and is viewed in the context of Islamic leadership.

National and organizational culture can have an impact on leadership. According to Aycan et al. (2000), cultural values can influence the HR practices and expectations with regard to authority. The source project describes that in Pakistan organizations, there is hierarchical decision making, where the decision making power is centralized at higher levels. This can lead to conflicts with leadership styles that include a high level of freedom for employees.

Agentic leadership can thus need to be adapted to the context. The project mentions Abbas et al. (2022) in the context of the relevance of participative and psychologically supportive leadership in organisations.

In countries with a high power distance, workers might want to be empowered, but they are also in need of direction. Leaders may have to slowly ease their way into the concept of autonomy but make sure there is a structure in place for communication and clear expectations for performance.

This cultural equilibrium is fairly apparent in the results of this study. The HR managers did not talk of total decentralisation. Rather they indicated that they allowed employees freedom to manage, within the boundaries of clear guidelines. A hybrid approach to leadership which enables autonomy while maintaining accountability and managerial leadership.

2.7 Gap in the Research and Conceptual Positioning

There has been some research which extensively discusses remote work, empowering leadership, virtual teams and digital collaboration. But the Source project determines that there is gap in context. The empirical literature has been built up in western countries or large companies, and there is a lack of research in SMEs in developing countries.

Pakistani SMEs integrate a number of contextual characteristics which can impact remote leadership. These range from a lack of technological tools, to a lack of electricity, to varying levels of digital literacy, budgets, and the more hierarchical nature of organizational expectations. A consideration of the agentic leadership in this context can reveal direct or modified uptake of principles of autonomy, trust and empowerment.

The conceptual standpoint of the study is located in the middle of agentic leadership in the remote teams' management.

Communication practices, digital tools and trust building mechanisms are key processes in which leadership influences team engagement and collaboration.

These processes are influenced by technical infrastructure issues, limited resources and SMEs and Pakistani cultural context. So, effective outcomes of remote teams are seen as being the result of the interplay between leadership, technology, communication, trust and context.

3. Methodology

In order to understand the experiences and perceptions of HR managers handling remote/hybrid teams in SMEs in Pakistan, the study used a qualitative research design. A qualitative design was appropriate as the study was not interested in making statistical estimations but rather in the practices of leadership, communication strategies, organizational challenges and managerial interpretations.

The main method of data collection was semi-structured interviews. This format enabled the researcher to ask the same types of questions of all the participants as well as follow-up questions when participants reported on additional experiences that were relevant to the question. The interview guide targeted issues related to remote leadership, communication failures, building trust, team culture, digital tools, time zone challenges and using autonomy and empowerment.

HR managers and HR heads working in SMEs in Pakistan were the population for the study. Participants were chosen from the information technology, services and manufacturing industry. The range of participant experience was from 5-10 years. 100% of the respondents were directly involved in the management of remote or hybrid teams and in executing HR or leadership practices in their companies.

The studying aimed to involve people who have direct knowledge on the phenomenon being studied; therefore, the sampling approach adopted was purposive.

HR managers were chosen for their past experience working with virtual teams and organizational leadership. The aim was to gain information-rich descriptions, not to produce a statistically representative sample.

It is noted that the interviews were recorded, with the consent of the participant, and verbatim transcriptions were made of the recorded interviews. The project suggests that the transcripts were placed in NVivo for qualitative coding. Phrases, statements and ideas were given descriptive codes if they were important. These codes were then clustered together into more general themes. The resulting thematic structure was connected with the research questions to account for challenges, strategies, technologies, trust-building practices and adaptation of agentic leadership.

Ethical Guidelines were followed during the study. The study was voluntary, informed consent was obtained and participants were told that they could withdraw from the study. No names of people or organisations were given. The participants were coded as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6; the interview materials were used for academic purposes.

3.1 Participant Profile

Participant	Position	Industry	Experience
P1	HR Manager	IT	8 years
P2	HR Manager	Services	6 years
P3	HR Head	Manufacturing	10 years
P4	HR Manager	IT	7 years
P5	HR Manager	Services	5 years
P6	HR Manager	Manufacturing	9 years

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4. Findings

4.1 Technical Infrastructure Challenges

One of the most ongoing problems of working with a remote team was technical infrastructure. The problems mentioned by the participants were an unstable Internet connection, weak 3G / 4G coverage, interrupted phone calls and delays in completing the task. One of the main problems was internet connectivity as P2 said, meetings were disrupted and work was delayed. Internet connectivity wasn't the only issue. At P3, load shedding was reported to be 4-6 hours which had a direct impact on employee productivity.

The issue of digital literacy exacerbated these infrastructure issues. P5 said that many employees had no problem using WhatsApp, but found using things like Zoom or ERP systems difficult. This resulted in extra work for HR managers as organisations could not take for granted that everyone had the technical ability to be able to digital collaborate. This is why the informal training role of the managers was an included element in remote leadership where managers facilitated the learning of the basic digital tools by employees. These results indicate that some factors are outside of the control of the leader that are important in their effectiveness.

It's impossible to be effective at work remotely without a reliable power source, network availability and the ability to operate digital systems. Thus, within SMEs, agentic leadership foresees leaders should be flexible in terms of expectations whilst developing strategies to support them practically.

4.2 Communication Challenges

Very high frequency concern identified: Communication. Understandings and delayed responses, unclear instructions and lack of face to face cues were reported. P1 said that sometimes instructions were not understood as staff were not physically in contact. Thus, more emphasis was needed on communicating expectations about the task and more thorough precision was needed when communicating remotely.

The response included choosing communication channels based on the need and purpose. For urgent matters, P6 said they used WhatsApp, but for something more serious, they would use video calls and for something more formal, they would use email. P4 reported immediate follow up of WhatsApp in case there was a non-response from a team member. This channel selection approach assisted with the managers minimising delays with maintaining documentation of matters of importance.

The results show that, to be a good remote leader, it's necessary to have a communication architecture rather than just exchanging messages. Leaders must determine what is information to be shared forthwith, what information is to be formally recorded and what information is to be shared in a more interactive manner. This scheduled, structured communication tool use helps to make up for that lack of spontaneous, office conversation.

4.3 Management of the team and building of trust.

The role of trust came to the fore as a key component of remote leadership. P3 said that there was transparency and rules set from the outset.

P2 cited consistency, speed of response and reliability as practices that help to foster trust. Because of how these behaviors affect the workplace, they are important when employees are working at home and need to make decisions without the presence of their manager.

Performance monitoring remained but there was a change in the form of monitoring. Participants talked about the usage of teams and ERP systems to monitor work, and not physically. This helps to develop accountability and minimizes need for constant monitoring. Managers could keep track of progress, deadlines and outputs with no need to track the time spent by employees.

This evidence thus indicates a key element of agentic leadership. Staff have more freedom in their work, leaders have clear expectations and access to performance information. Trust does not take the place of accountability. Rather, a combination of trust and formal monitoring systems work.

Team Cohesion & Employee Engagement 4.4

It was also a key role of leadership to keep people connected. P4 have regular Virtual Meetings and check-ins with one another. These interactions enabled managers to learn about issues, keep in touch with individuals and delivered a personalised support. P5 talked about activities planned to be conducted online each month to keep those at work engaged.

But, not all engagement practices were positive. P6 commented that it was uncomfortable if the online social activities were forced, and that not everyone liked it. This is significant since team building exercises can become counterproductive if employees feel like it is an "act" or a "must do".

The results indicate that responsiveness to employee preferences is a key part to engagement. Frequent communication, identification and one-on-one check-ins seem to be more effectively utilized than mandated entertainment.

Thus, agentic leadership can help create engagement by helping to keep employees 'in' and helping to preserve their autonomy.

Use digital tools and technology to represent and explain ideas, processes, tasks, and knowledge to enhance learning.

Digital tools were crucial to the functioning of remote teams. The participants mentioned that they use Zoom, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Trello, Google Drive, ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) and shared information repositories. P1 identified Zoom, Teams and WhatsApp as the essential communication tools. P2 said that Trello is useful to assign and track tasks. P6 highlighted the need to use shared drives, which will make information more accessible.

There were a number of leadership roles that technology was used for. Meetings and daily updates on communication platforms supported. Task-assignment and progress monitoring systems were provided by project-management systems. Collaborative drives and shared databases helped miti with the fragmentation of information. These tools thus provided the base on which the remote leadership was carried out.

Leadership didn't go out the window with the technology. Even then, managers had to choose tools, set expectations, call for involvement, and make sense of the performance data. The results reveal that, using digital platforms, autonomy, coordination, transparency and accountability become more achievable across distance, thus allowing for agentic leadership.

4.6 SME-Specific Constraints

The SME context has a number of constraints as described by the participants. P3 said that there was only enough money to provide higher end devices to some of the workers. P5 commented that many workers did not have the appropriate home working environment. P4 talked about the time it took to educate employees with some basic zoom functions.

This is because SMEs are not necessarily as well-equipped with IT resources as larger companies, and may not have their own IT departments, standard equipment or formal remote work systems. Managers are forced to use more basic tools and to tackle operational problems first-hand due to resources restrictions. Improvisation and Prioritization, therefore, are the key words in leadership in this context.

Employee circumstances also need to be taken into account for agentic leadership. If an employee doesn't have the best connectivity or best equipment, that changes how much flexibility they might need, compared to an employee with strong home connectivity. Just because it's fair in remote management, doesn't mean it has to be the same. May need to make adjustments to support due to practical issues.

4.7 Collaborate Across Time Zones

Some participants supervised their colleagues or project partners in other regions and/or time zones. This caused problems of scheduling, delay of responses and continuity of the project. P2 stated that they used shared calendars that had overlapping working hours. P6 spoke of a centralised database and logs made.

These practices are related to decrease in the use of synchronous communication. Shared calendars can be used to find a time when someone can meet, and centralized systems can provide access to the information when people aren't online. This is particularly relevant if projects carry on beyond schedules.

The management of time-zone, therefore, gives added importance for structured autonomy. Employees will be able to work on their own for different hours, with schedules of these hours agreed upon, shared information and documented responsibilities.

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4.8 Adaptation of Agentic Leadership

The last theme was directly related with agentic leadership. P1 said that staff were set free in their job with a clear set of guidelines. P3 said that the concern was not to monitor all of the activities, but to look at the results. P6 referred to it as "empowerment with structure.

All these answers suggest that agentic leadership is not used in its pure and unconstrained form. Managers allow autonomy, initiative, and responsibility, but maintain rules, expectations of communication, and performance systems. This hybrid form seems to be appropriate in the context of the culture and organization of Pakistani SMEs.

The results also indicate the digital systems act as a reinforcement of agentic leadership. Leaders are able to view outputs, follow up on tasks, view shared documents and communicate as needed, making autonomy more manageable. Thus, technology is supporting managers to move from managing by supervision to managing for results.

5. Discussion

The results indicate that the concept of remote leadership in Pakistani SMEs is influenced by the interplay of leadership philosophy and limitations of operation. Agentic principles can be seen in the focus on autonomy, trust, empowerment, transparency and performance based on outcomes. Meanwhile, managers are working in an environment of internet connectivity failures, power failures, low levels of digital literacy and low budgets. Adapting, not just adopting a universal model is required in the case of effective leadership.

The technical difficulties mentioned by the participants corroborate the overall theme that telework demands the proper digital infrastructure. Lukić (2023) notes that digital technology is key to working from a distance and Chinthala (2024) highlights the importance of technology for maintaining geographically separated work.

The current results add to this by providing evidence that the reliability of infrastructure can have a direct influence on leadership practice. Managers should be flexible with deadlines, communication and monitoring when connectivity and electricity is not consistent.

The communication results also correspond with the literature of remote-work. Communication and isolation are considered to be important factors in the telecommuting situation according to Gajendran et al. (2015). The HR managers in this study counter-responded and managed to allocate various functions to various channels. For immediacy, WhatsApp was used, for records via email, and discussion in video calls for more involved discussions. The suggestion here is that more technology doesn't equal better remote communication, rather it's about using technology purposefully.

The findings are related to trust and accountability. Carroll & Conboy (2020) contend that there is a need to shift from direct supervision and instead believe in and coordinate by outcomes in a digitally mediated working world. This is confirmed by evidence gathered in the interviews. Monitoring was not discontinued, but rather its nature was altered. The staff were in control of what they were doing each day and the managers were able to track progress through teams, ERP systems and trello.

Results also lend to conceptual relevance of agentic leadership. Bandura (2001) defines agency as 'intentional action' and 'self-regulation'. Empowering leadership has been demonstrated to be one of the most important factors for helping employees contribute, as demonstrated by Lee et al., (2020).

In the present study, participants indicated that employees were trusted to take initiatives to perform tasks within clearly defined boundaries.

This balance has agentic principles, as the employees have discretion with their tasks, which is considered meaningful, and they are responsible for the agreed

results.

A critical qualification is the team engagement findings. One-on-one check-ins and virtual meetings were generally accepted while mandatory social activities were not always accepted. This indicates that leaders need to differentiate engagement and meaningfulness. Wherever practicable, employees' autonomy should be extended to their social participation. Communication will be more successful if it is relevant, respectful, and responsive to employee preferences, which will ensure engagement is more likely to be sustained.

What is context for the SME? Ferrara et al. (2022) speak about how to adapt the organization to working remotely, but smaller businesses may not be able to spread out costs of technology, nor formal support. The current study reveals that HR managers can end up wasting a considerable amount of time supporting employees who are having trouble using basic tools, due to the lack of technological support. Managerial versatility is hence one of the factors affecting the effectiveness of leadership in SMEs. HR managers turn into coordinators, trainers, problem solvers and culture carriers.

Another explanation for the hybrid type of agentic leadership is the cultural context. According to Aycan et al. (2000), the cultural expectations affect the organizational practices. In a more hierarchical setting autonomy might not be encouraged and staff may look for directive leadership even though autonomy is desired. This condition manifests itself in the focus placed by the participants on freedom in the context of clear guidelines. Managers are given structure to ensure accountability, but have more and more opportunities for independence in decision making.

Digital tools are a "mediating mechanism" between leadership intentions and team outcomes. You can interact using Zoom and Teams. With systems like Trello and ERP, you can gain visibility into tasks. Cooperation can be achieved across time zones with shared calendars and centralized databases. Shared drives enhance the ability to access information. These technologies help to foster trust, as they decrease uncertainty regarding tasks and progress and do not require constant direct supervision.

The study thus adds a practical knowledge of agentic leadership as a context-sensitive leadership configuration. The concept of complete decentralization is not seen in Pakistani SMEs. It seems like a compromise, only employees get the freedom to carry out their tasks and managers get clarity, transparency, communication processes and outcome monitoring. The mix is especially suited to contexts in which organisational culture, infrastructure and/or resource constraints make it challenging to have unrestricted autonomy.

6. Practical Implications

Continuous monitoring of activities should not be the focus, but rather clear outcomes defined by SME managers. Workers in the field must have a clear understanding of what is expected, how, when and what level of quality they should meet. After these expectations have been made, employees should be provided enough autonomy in structuring their work.

A simple, yet standard communication should be used by organizations. Things that need to be dealt with urgently can be placed on instant messaging, while anything that needs to be discussed formally can be put in the e-mail, and anything that needs to be discussed in detail and sensitive can be put in video. A protocol like that can minimize confusion and prevent valuable information from being disseminated in a number of places.

The use of basic digital capabilities should be considered an organisational requirement. SMEs should train the tools they are using such as video conferencing, task management, shared documents, information systems and so on, as a practical training. Training should be around regular tasks which help to boost confidence and productivity.

Managers need to use trust in conjunction with open performance systems. Tools and centralized information systems for project-management can offer visibility without too much surveillance. Constant monitoring of employee activity is more like a manager's job and is less consistent with agentic leadership, whereas outcome-based tracking is more agentic.

Aim to have meaningful interactions in remote engagement. One on one check-ins, public recognition, accessible leadership and team meetings about relevant issues might be more helpful than required online social events. Employee preferences should be a guide for managers when developing engagement initiatives.

SMEs need to develop back-up plans for an unreliable infrastructure. Smart scheduling, asynchronicity, fall-back communication options and realistic deadlines can minimize impact of internet down time and power outages.

For organizations operating in different time zones, it's important to set up overlapping times, common calendars and any project records in a central location. These practices help to continue the process without relying on specific memory or informal communication when staff are not all able to be present at the same time.

7. Theoretical Contribution

The study is a valuable addition to the literature by demonstrating the agentic leadership in a developing economy context of SMEs. Autonomy and empowerment are still in the forefront, and are dependent on infrastructure, organizational resources and cultural expectations.

The results also contribute to the discussion of remote leadership, beyond communication tools, by demonstrating the use of digital tools. They are used to achieve autonomy, transparency, coordination and accountability as mechanisms. Through technology, agentic leadership principles can thus be translated into day-to-day leadership.

One more is the description of hybrid agentic leadership. There is a balance between freedom and clear instructions and systems put in place by managers. This kind of adaptation offered a more context-specific approach to empowerment than one that assumes autonomy is an adaptation that can be achieved without regard to the organizational and cultural context.

The limitations and future research are discussed.

The study is limited to six HR managers and so does not seek to be statistically generalizable. The participants are from 3 sectors and it is not possible to include all kinds of Pakistani SMEs in the sample. In future qualitative studies, other industries and geographical areas can be added.

The study is based on the HR managers' viewpoints. What is meant by autonomy, trust, communication and monitoring might vary among employees. Further studies could be conducted to determine the difference between manager and employee perceptions and determine percentages of agreement/disagreement.

The study is based on a qualitative approach. Further studies with larger samples could examine the relationships between agentic leadership, trust, digital capability, communication quality, engagement, and remote-team performance, which were assessed in the current study. Comparative studies may also focus on organizational size differences and/or national differences. Longitudinal studies would be helpful as the nature of remote work practices is constantly evolving.

Future research can investigate whether there is a relationship between increased digital experience of employees and increased agentic leadership, and between increased institutionalization of hybrid work and increased agentic leadership.

9. Conclusion

In this study the idea of adaptation of agentic leadership style among HR managers of remote teams of Pakistani SMEs was investigated.

The results indicate that remote work can have an impact on the leadership style of the remote worker, both in terms of technological constraints and organizational environment. There are ongoing challenges like internet connectivity, power failure, lack of digital knowledge, lack of resources, inadequate domestic conditions and lack of understanding.

Amidst these challenges, HR managers are preparing actionable solutions to the leadership challenge. They coordinate employees and keep track of work using digital communication platforms, project-management systems, shared drives, ERP systems, shared calendars and centralized information repositories. They also have regular meetings and one-on-one check-ins to help build trust and team cohesions.

The most crucial leadership approach is autonomy and structure. Staff are left with autonomy to work, with managers setting expectations, being open with communication and assessing results. This is an agentic form of leadership as it is based on empowerment, responsibility, self-regulation and yet holds agents accountable.

The study delivers a conclusion that the agentic leadership, as it is presented in the study is applicable in the context of remote work in SMEs in Pakistan, but it needs to be adapted in the context.

Hybrid trust and autonomy models — which provide a balance of trust and autonomy, digital coordination and clear guidance — seem to better work in the context of resource-poor and culturally hierarchical settings than do models of strict supervision or full employee autonomy.

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