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Reflective Leadership in Times of Change: The Mediating Role of Human Resource Management Strategies on Employee Engagement and Resilience

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Abstract Original Research Article

This study examines how leaders' critical reflection and Human Resource Management (HRM) strategies jointly shape employee engagement and resilience during organizational change. Using a qualitative multiple case study approach, data were collected from 30 employees across two Nigerian organizations experiencing transformation. Thematic analysis revealed that reflective leadership practices—marked by openness, learning, and shared sense-making—cultivated trust and psychological safety. Simultaneously, HRM strategies such as mentoring, coaching, and fostering a learning culture provided tangible support systems that helped employees adapt, maintain motivation, and sustain performance amid uncertainty. The interplay between reflective leadership and HRM practices created a reinforcing cycle, strengthening employees' confidence and commitment. The study contributes to theory by demonstrating that critical reflection is not merely an individual competency but a relational practice embedded in leader—follower interactions. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of integrating reflection training and developmental HR interventions to build organizational capacity for change. Future research should adopt longitudinal and mixed-methods designs to explore how these dynamics evolve over time and in different cultural contexts. Overall, this work underscores that reflective leadership and supportive HRM strategies are essential for fostering resilience and engagement in rapidly changing environments.

Keywords: Reflective Leadership, Human Resource Management, Employee Engagement, Resilience, Organizational Change, Mentoring, Coaching, Learning Culture, Psychological Safety, Qualitative Research.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Organizational change has become an essential capability for firms navigating highly dynamic and unpredictable business landscapes. Global competition, technological disruption, and shifting workforce expectations compel organizations to continually adapt their structures, processes, and strategies to remain competitive and relevant (Burnes & Jackson, 2011). Sustained adaptability is no longer an option but a necessity for survival.

While change is indispensable, it often generates considerable stress, uncertainty, and disengagement among employees. Frequent restructuring and evolving job demands can undermine employees' psychological safety, diminishing their commitment and resilience (Kotter, 2012). Engaged employees

are more likely to support transformation initiatives and maintain high performance, yet organizations frequently struggle to cultivate and sustain such engagement during prolonged or disruptive change (Bakker & Albrecht, 2018).

Problem Statement

Although leadership has been recognized as a crucial driver of successful change, there remains limited empirical research on how leaders' critical reflection—the practice of deliberately analyzing experiences, assumptions, and decisions—influences employees' engagement and resilience. Specifically, the mechanisms linking reflective leadership to positive employee outcomes during change have not been sufficiently explored (Raelin, 2001).



Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine whether Human Resource Management (HRM) strategies—particularly mentoring, coaching, and fostering a learning culture—mediate the relationship between leaders' critical reflection and employees' engagement during organizational change.

Research Questions

- 1. Does critical reflection by leaders predict employee engagement during organizational change?
- 2. Do HRM strategies mediate the relationship between leaders' critical reflection and employee engagement?

Significance of the Study

1. Contributions to HRM practices and change management literature

This research advances theoretical understanding by clarifying how reflective leadership interacts with specific HRM practices to influence engagement and resilience. It contributes to the broader literature on change management by offering an integrated perspective that links leadership reflection, HRM strategies, and employee outcomes.

2. Practical implications for leaders driving engagement

Findings from this study can guide leaders and HR professionals in designing interventions that leverage reflection and HRM practices to foster a culture of learning, adaptability, and sustained engagement. In doing so, organizations can better navigate the challenges of change while supporting employees' well-being and performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Critical Reflection

Critical reflection is defined as the intentional process through which individuals examine their assumptions, experiences, and actions to gain deeper insights and inform future decisions (Raelin, 2001). Unlike routine reflection, which often involves a superficial recounting of events, critical reflection challenges underlying mental models and beliefs that shape behavior. Within leadership, this capability helps individuals identify biases, assess the impact of their choices, and modify their practices to better align with organizational objectives and employee well-being (Trehan & Pedler, 2009). Empirical research consistently emphasizes the role of critical reflection in effective leadership. Raelin (2001) argues that reflective leaders are more likely to foster inclusive dialogue and co-create solutions, thereby cultivating trust and psychological safety. Coghlan and Brannick (2014) further demonstrate that structured reflection enables leaders to navigate complex, ambiguous environments by reconciling competing priorities and learning continuously. Enhanced selfawareness—a core outcome of critical reflection—also supports ethical decision-making and resilience (Day et al., 2009).

Evidence from applied settings reinforces this view. For instance, Wainwright et al. (2010) found that reflective practices among healthcare leaders improved their ability to manage ambiguity and lead quality improvement initiatives. Other scholars have observed that reflective leaders model learning-oriented behaviors, inspiring employees to innovate, share knowledge, and stay engaged despite uncertainty (Ashkanasy & Dorris, 2017). Collectively, these findings suggest that critical reflection is a strategic capability with tangible organizational benefits.

2.2 Employee Engagement and Resilience

Employee engagement is commonly described as a positive, fulfilling state of work-related well-being characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Engaged employees bring energy, persistence, and enthusiasm to their work. Resilience, in contrast, is the capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from stress or adversity (Luthans, 2002). Together, engagement and resilience enable employees to remain effective in the face of ongoing change. Change initiatives frequently impose higher demands, role ambiguity, and increased pressure that can undermine wellbeing and performance (Kotter, 2012). However, engagement has been shown to buffer employees against these stressors, fostering adaptive coping and sustained effort (Bakker et al., 2014). Engaged employees are more likely to interpret change as an opportunity for growth, taking proactive steps such as seeking feedback, suggesting improvements, and supporting colleagues (Rich et al., 2010).

The benefits of engagement and resilience are well-documented. Salanova et al. (2010) demonstrated that engaged employees exhibit greater commitment, provide higher-quality customer service, and contribute to innovation. Similarly, resilient employees maintain performance under pressure, adapt effectively to setbacks, and accelerate recovery (Kuntz et al., 2017). In dynamic environments, these qualities are essential for sustaining organizational adaptability and performance.

2.3 HRM Strategies

Human Resource Management (HRM) strategies play a pivotal role in creating the conditions that enable engagement and resilience. Among the most impactful are mentoring, coaching, and fostering a learning culture.

Mentoring: Facilitating Learning and Support

Mentoring involves a developmental relationship in which a more experienced colleague provides guidance, feedback, and psychosocial support to a less experienced employee (Kram, 1985). During organizational change, mentoring helps employees make sense of new expectations, build confidence, and access critical resources (Allen et al., 2004). Research shows mentoring relationships are positively associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and career advancement (Eby et al., 2013). Moreover, mentoring fosters a sense of belonging and trust, which is vital



for sustaining engagement in turbulent contexts (Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Coaching: Developing Skills and Adaptive Capacity

Coaching is a structured process that focuses on enhancing performance and developing specific skills through goal setting and feedback (Grant, 2014). While mentoring often encompasses broader psychosocial support, coaching is typically performance-oriented. Studies have demonstrated that coaching improves self-efficacy, resilience, and goal attainment (Theeboom et al., 2014). In change environments, coaching provides employees with problem-solving tools and reinforces a growth mindset (Grant, 2017), increasing their capacity to adapt and remain engaged.

Learning Culture: Embedding Continuous Improvement and Shared Learning

A learning culture refers to an organizational environment that values experimentation, knowledge sharing, and continuous improvement (Senge, 1990). Such cultures encourage employees to reflect, collaborate, and learn collectively. Psychological safety—a shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks—is an essential component (Edmondson, 1999). Organizations with strong learning cultures have been found to be more innovative, adaptive, and engaged (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). By normalizing reflection and shared learning, these cultures help employees develop both resilience and commitment during change.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical frameworks underpin this study's conceptual model:

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory posits that workplace relationships are shaped by reciprocal exchanges of support and trust (Blau, 1964). When leaders engage in critical reflection and invest in employees' development, they signal their commitment to the workforce. Employees, in turn, are likely to reciprocate with engagement and discretionary effort (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). HRM strategies such as mentoring and coaching reinforce this exchange by providing tangible support and strengthening employees' sense of loyalty.

Resource-Based View

The Resource-Based View suggests organizations achieve competitive advantage by developing resources that are valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate (Barney, 1991). Reflective leadership and supportive HRM practices represent strategic resources that enhance human capital and learning. When leaders foster reflection and development, they create organizational capabilities—such as engaged and resilient teams—that are not easily replicated (Wright et al., 2001).

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the belief that it is safe to express ideas, questions, and concerns without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). Leaders who model critical reflection are more likely to create psychologically safe environments where employees feel respected and heard. Combined with HRM practices that encourage learning, this safety promotes experimentation and sustained engagement (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009).

2.5 Conceptual Model Synthesis

Drawing together the literature reviewed, this study proposes an **integrated conceptual model** in which **critical reflection by leaders is a foundational practice** that shapes employees' experiences through multiple pathways. Reflective leadership is theorized to:

- 1. Cultivate **psychological safety**, enabling employees to voice concerns and learn without fear (Edmondson, 1999).
- 2. Encourage adoption of **HRM strategies**—mentoring, coaching, and learning culture—that provide relational and developmental support (Grant, 2017; Kram, 1985).
- 3. Strengthen **engagement and resilience** by signaling that employees are valued and supported (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

This model positions HRM strategies as key mechanisms translating reflective leadership into sustained engagement and adaptability. The integration of Social Exchange Theory, the Resource-Based View, and psychological safety frameworks helps explain why these practices are effective and highlights their importance for managing change in contemporary organizations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **qualitative**, **multiple case study design** to explore how leaders' critical reflection influences employee engagement and resilience during organizational change. A qualitative approach was selected to gain a rich, contextual understanding of participants' lived experiences in Nigerian organizations (Creswell, 2014). The multiple case study design facilitated in-depth comparison across two distinct organizational contexts and enhanced the credibility of findings (Yin, 2018).

3.2 Sample and Participants

The research focused on **two organizations based in Abuja, Nigeria**:

- i. A **healthcare provider** implementing a new electronic patient management system to improve service delivery.
- ii. A **technology company** undergoing large-scale restructuring aimed at repositioning its market strategy.



These cases were selected purposefully to capture variation in organizational type and change context.

Participants included **30 employees and managers**, with 15 respondents drawn from each organization. Eligibility criteria required participants to:

- Be full-time employees.
- Have worked in their organization for at least six months.
- Have been directly involved in the ongoing change initiatives.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify individuals who could provide rich insights into leadership practices, HRM strategies, and employee engagement. The sample included senior managers, HR practitioners, and frontline employees to ensure a diversity of perspectives.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through **semi-structured**, **in-depth interviews**. An interview guide was developed to cover the following topics:

- i. Experiences with leadership reflection and openness during change.
- ii. Perceptions of mentoring, coaching, and learning culture in their organization.
- iii. Factors influencing their engagement and resilience.
- iv. Specific examples of practices or events that shaped their perceptions.

Each interview lasted approximately **45–60 minutes** and was conducted face-to-face at participants' workplaces in Abuja or via secure video conferencing, depending on their preference and convenience. All interviews were **audio-recorded with prior consent** and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection commenced. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and they retained the right to withdraw at any stage without consequence.

3.4 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using **thematic analysis** as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved:

- 1. **Familiarization** with the data through repeated reading of transcripts.
- 2. **Generating initial codes** related to critical reflection, HRM strategies, engagement, and resilience.
- 3. **Searching for themes** that captured patterns across participants and organizations.

- 4. **Reviewing and refining themes** to ensure internal consistency and clarity.
- 5. **Defining and naming themes** that succinctly represented the data.

NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to organize the codes and support systematic analysis. Coding was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' accounts while also being informed by relevant theory.

To enhance **trustworthiness and credibility**, three strategies were applied:

- 1. **Triangulation** of data across roles and organizations to compare perspectives.
- Member checking, where preliminary themes were shared with a subset of participants for feedback and validation.
- 3. **Peer debriefing** with academic colleagues to review interpretations and reduce bias.

3.5 Limitations

While this approach provided rich and nuanced insights, several limitations should be noted. Findings are not statistically generalizable beyond the two selected organizations in Abuja, Nigeria. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. Finally, the cross-sectional design limits understanding of how these dynamics may change over time (Creswell, 2014).

4. FINDINGS

This section presents the themes that emerged from interviews with 30 participants across a healthcare organization and a technology firm in Abuja. Analysis revealed **three overarching themes**:

- 1. Reflective Leadership as a Driver of Trust and Clarity
- 2. HRM Strategies as Practical Support Systems
- 3. The Synergistic Effect of Reflection and HRM Practices on Engagement and Resilience

4.1 Reflective Leadership as a Driver of Trust and Clarity

Participants described **critical reflection by leaders** as a key factor that established trust and reduced **uncertainty** during organizational change. Employees repeatedly emphasized that leaders who shared their thought processes and acknowledged uncertainty were perceived as more authentic and approachable.

For example, a senior nurse in the healthcare organization explained:

"When our director talked about what she was learning and admitted she didn't have all the answers, it made us feel like we were part of finding solutions."



Similarly, employees in the technology company described how leaders' reflective practices, such as openly discussing project failures and lessons learned, encouraged transparent communication. One software engineer noted:

"Instead of blaming people when targets slipped, our manager invited us to talk about what could be done differently next time. It made the environment feel less tense."

Across both organizations, reflective leadership behaviors were closely associated with employees' willingness to speak up and contribute ideas.

4.2 HRM Strategies as Practical Support Systems

A consistent theme was that mentoring, coaching, and a learning culture provided essential support to help employees cope with change-related stress and complexity. Mentoring was frequently described as a stabilizing influence. In the healthcare organization, less experienced staff highlighted the value of having trusted mentors to guide them through new procedures:

"My mentor checked in with me every week and helped me prioritize what to focus on. It made the changes feel less overwhelming."

Coaching was especially prominent in the technology firm, where structured coaching sessions were implemented to help employees set goals and track progress during restructuring. A project coordinator explained:

"The coaching sessions helped me stay focused on what I could control, even when so much was uncertain."

Learning culture was evident in both organizations, though expressed differently. In healthcare, it included team huddles and regular debriefs. In technology, it involved knowledge-sharing platforms and peer training sessions. Employees linked these practices to increased confidence and adaptability.

4.3 The Synergistic Effect of Reflection and HRM Practices on Engagement and Resilience

Participants described a **reinforcing cycle between reflective leadership and HRM strategies**, which together created an environment where engagement and resilience could flourish.

Several respondents noted that reflective leaders were more likely to champion mentoring and coaching programs and to encourage open dialogue about development needs. A manager in the technology company remarked:

"Because our leaders were transparent about what they were learning themselves, it made it easier for us to admit when we needed support."

In both settings, employees emphasized that reflective leadership and HRM practices combined to promote psychological safety. This sense of safety allowed them to take initiative, experiment with new ideas, and maintain motivation during uncertainty.

4.4 Summary of Themes

The analysis of interviews revealed three main findings:

- i. Leaders' critical reflection fostered trust, clarity, and psychological safety during change.
- ii. HRM strategies such as mentoring, coaching, and learning culture acted as practical supports that strengthened engagement and resilience.
- iii. The interaction between reflective leadership and HRM practices created conditions that empowered employees to adapt proactively and sustain commitment.

These insights illustrate how leadership behaviors and HR practices interconnect to shape employees' experiences of organizational transformation.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

This study explored how leaders' critical reflection and HRM strategies interact to shape employee engagement and resilience during organizational change in two Abuja-based organizations. The findings indicate that reflective leadership is a pivotal influence on trust, psychological safety, and sustained commitment.

Participants consistently described leaders' openness to questioning assumptions and sharing learning experiences as critical to building credibility. This is consistent with recent research showing that reflective practices enhance transparency and relational trust in contemporary work environments (Hibbert, Sillince, Diefenbach, & Cunliffe, 2016).

The role of HRM strategies—including mentoring, coaching, and learning culture—emerged as a **central mechanism translating reflective leadership into positive employee experiences**. For example, mentoring relationships provided clarity and emotional support that buffered change-related stress, echoing findings that developmental relationships strengthen engagement and adaptability in uncertain conditions (Eby, Allen, Hoffman, Baranik, Sauer, Baldwin, Morrison, Kinkade, Maher, Curtis, & Evans, 2015). Similarly, coaching interventions in the technology company helped employees maintain focus and build problem-solving confidence, aligning with evidence that coaching supports resilience and proactive coping (Grover & Furnham, 2016).

The study further revealed that **reflective leadership and HRM strategies are mutually reinforcing**: leaders who modeled learning and self-examination were more likely to sponsor HR practices and create a culture that legitimized experimentation and growth. This dynamic aligns with recent frameworks highlighting the interplay between leadership behaviors and HR systems in shaping psychological safety and engagement (Newman, Round, Wang, & Mount, 2020).

5.2 Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to contemporary theory in several important ways.

First, it demonstrates that **critical reflection is an essential relational leadership practice** that shapes employees' sense of safety and inclusion (Hibbert et al., 2016). While prior work has often treated reflection as an individual skill, these findings



support the view that reflection is embedded in leader–follower interactions and signals authenticity and care (Cunliffe, 2016). Second, the research extends understanding of how HRM strategies operate as **strategic resources** that amplify leadership effectiveness (Boon, Eckardt, Lepak, & Boselie, 2018). By illustrating the reinforcing connections between reflection, HRM practices, and engagement, this study supports integrative models of HR systems and leadership as complementary drivers of employee outcomes.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of **psychological safety as a mediating process** through which leadership behaviors and HRM practices foster resilience. This is consistent with recent evidence that psychological safety is a critical precondition for employee voice and adaptability in rapidly changing environments (Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan, & Vracheva, 2017).

5.3 Practical Implications

The results have several actionable implications for practitioners:

1. Develop Reflective Leadership Programs

Organizations should provide structured reflection training—such as action learning sets, peer coaching, and facilitated debriefs—to help leaders cultivate habits of self-examination (Hibbert et al., 2016).

2. Institutionalize Mentoring and Coaching

The observed benefits of mentoring and coaching suggest the need to embed these practices formally within HR strategies. Clear guidelines, mentor/coach development, and measurement frameworks will strengthen their impact (Grover & Furnham, 2016).

3. Promote a Learning Culture

Creating an environment that normalizes reflection, experimentation, and dialogue requires alignment between leadership practices and HR policies. Organizations can achieve this through regular team reflection sessions and recognition of learning behaviors (Newman et al., 2020).

5.4 Limitations

While this research provides valuable insights, several limitations merit consideration. First, the focus on two Nigerian organizations may limit transferability to other cultural or sectoral contexts. Second, reliance on participant self-reports introduces the potential for social desirability bias, though triangulation and member checking were used to mitigate this (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Finally, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to examine how reflection and HR practices evolve over time.

5.5 Future Research

Future studies should explore these dynamics longitudinally to better understand the evolution of reflective

practices and HRM strategies during change. Additional research could also examine moderators such as organizational culture, national culture, or leadership style (Newman et al., 2020). Finally, mixed-methods designs could enhance understanding of the quantitative impact of reflective leadership and HRM strategies on engagement and resilience.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how leaders' critical reflection and HRM strategies interact to support employee engagement and resilience during organizational change in two Abuja-based organizations. The findings demonstrate that **reflective leadership is a foundational practice that establishes trust, psychological safety, and clarity**, all of which are essential for employees navigating uncertainty (Hibbert et al., 2016; Frazier et al., 2017).

By modeling openness and shared learning, leaders created environments where employees felt safe to voice concerns and participate in problem-solving. This aligns with contemporary perspectives that reflection is not solely an individual competency but a **relational behavior that shapes collective perceptions of credibility and care** (Cunliffe, 2016).

In parallel, HRM strategies—including mentoring, coaching, and fostering a learning culture—emerged as powerful tools for translating reflective leadership into everyday practices. These developmental supports enhanced employees' confidence, adaptability, and commitment. The interplay between reflective leadership and HRM practices formed a **self-reinforcing cycle**, whereby leaders who demonstrated reflective behaviors were more likely to champion mentoring and coaching programs, further strengthening engagement (Newman et al., 2020).

This research makes several important contributions. Theoretically, it extends the literature on relational leadership and HRM integration by demonstrating how these domains interact to build organizational capacity for change (Boon et al., 2018). Practically, it underscores the need for organizations to invest not only in technical change management processes but also in leadership development and HRM systems that center reflection and relational support (Grover & Furnham, 2016).

For future research, longitudinal and mixed-method studies are needed to explore how these dynamics evolve over time and across cultural contexts. Additional work could also investigate **moderating factors**, such as organizational structure or national cultural values, that may shape the effectiveness of reflection and HRM practices (Newman et al., 2020).

Overall, this study highlights that **critical reflection and supportive HRM strategies are not optional in modern organizations—they are essential capabilities** for fostering engagement, resilience, and sustainable performance amid continuous transformation.

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