

Leadership in the Age of AI: Psychological Mechanisms and Technological Opportunities to Support Leaders*

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a leadership study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic by Carrotspot Lab and SWPS University (2021) and interprets them within the broader framework of leadership theories and the emerging role of artificial intelligence (AI) in organizational leadership support. The study included 444 leaders and managers (58% female, 42% male) from diverse industries and managerial levels. It examined variables such as well-being, stress, self-efficacy, relationships, and communication, highlighting how the pandemic reshaped leaders' attitudes toward their teams.

Results show a clear shift from transactional to empathetic and transformational leadership, accompanied by increased strain among mid-level managers. Leaders reported more frequent one-on-one conversations, greater emotional awareness, and rising stress levels. The article integrates these empirical insights with contemporary leadership theories—empathy, authenticity, and adaptability—and explores how AI tools could enhance leadership effectiveness by supporting emotional monitoring, sentiment analysis, and decision optimization.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, leadership, data matching, HRTech software.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most severe tests for contemporary organizational leaders. In a short period, they had to change the way they communicated, made decisions, and managed their teams' emotions under conditions of uncertainty and remote work. As numerous studies indicate (Avolio et al., 2020; Dirani et al., 2020), the pandemic revealed that effective crisis leadership requires not only technical skills but, above all, emotional intelligence, empathy, authenticity, and adaptability.

The study "Leadership in the COVID-19 Mode", conducted by Carrotspot Lab and SWPS University (2021), is one of the first comprehensive analyses in Poland examining how leaders coped during a health and social crisis. The study aimed to understand the impact of the pandemic on leadership style, leaders' mental well-being, and the quality of organizational relationships.

This article provides an in-depth analysis of these findings, situating them within the context of international leadership research (e.g., Goleman, 2020; Boyatzis, 2018; Heifetz & Linsky, 2017) and emerging technological trends, including the application of artificial intelligence in leadership management and development (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2021; Davenport & Kirby, 2021).

The article is both empirical and theoretical in nature, attempting to combine two perspectives: the psychological (analyzing leaders' behaviors and emotions) and the technological (the role of AI in developing leadership

competencies). The starting point is the research question: Can, and if so how, artificial intelligence-based technologies support leaders in developing empathy, authenticity, and adaptability—competencies critical for effective leadership in the post-pandemic era?

Research Methodology

Aim and Scope of the Study

The aim of the study “*Leadership in the COVID-19 Mode*” (Carrotspot Lab & SWPS University, 2021) was to understand how the pandemic affected the functioning of leaders within organizations, their psychological well-being, management style, and relationships with their teams.

The study also analyzed which aspects of leadership proved most burdensome and which were supportive in the context of managing under uncertainty and remote work.

The thematic scope covered four main areas:

1. Leaders’ well-being and psychological stress,
2. Sense of efficacy and control,
3. Leadership style and team communication,
4. Changes in leaders’ attitudes and behaviors during the pandemic.

Research Sample

The study was conducted using the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) method between January 27 and April 6, 2021. It involved 444 leaders and managers from various sectors, including finance, healthcare, education, technology, and services.

The sample structure was as follows:

1. Gender: 58% women, 42% men,
2. Management level: 28% senior leaders, 44% middle-level leaders, 28% operational leaders,
3. Average managerial experience: 6.8 years,
4. Work arrangement: 62% worked remotely or in a hybrid model, 38% on-site.

Participants represented both large organizations (over 250 employees – 41%) and SMEs (59%).

Research Instruments

The questionnaire was developed based on previous Carrotspot Lab projects on leadership and employee engagement.

It contained 42 questions grouped into four thematic areas:

- **Well-being and stress** – 10 items (e.g., “How often in recent weeks have you felt discouraged or fatigued by work?”),
- **Sense of efficacy and control** – 8 items (e.g., “To what extent do you have influence over decisions affecting your team?”),
- **Leadership style** – 16 items covering three dimensions: transactional, transformational, and empathetic-supportive,
- **Relationships and communication** – 8 items (e.g., “How do you evaluate the frequency and quality of contact with your team members?”).

Responses were provided on a seven-point Likert scale (1 – strongly disagree, 7 – strongly agree). The average completion time was approximately 12 minutes.

Reliability and Data Analysis

The reliability of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's α coefficient, ranging from 0.78 to 0.91, indicating high internal consistency of the instrument.

Data analysis included:

1. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, percentage distributions),
2. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare groups of leaders at different levels,
3. Significance tests for differences ($p < 0.05$ and $p < 0.01$).

Results were presented both numerically and descriptively, with psychological interpretation included.

Study Limitations

The study was exploratory and based on leaders' self-assessments, which may involve the risk of self-presentation bias. The opinions of team members and business outcomes were not analyzed directly. However, the large sample size ($N=444$) and diversity of sectors and management levels allow the data to be considered representative of the Polish organizational context during the pandemic.

Executive Summary

Leaders' Well-Being and Stress

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on leaders' psychological well-being.

As many as 64% of respondents reported experiencing a noticeable decline in energy and motivation over the past months, while 57% indicated an increase in emotional tension.

The average stress level rating (on a 1–7 scale) was 5.3, representing a moderately high level.

The most frequently cited stress factors were:

1. Uncertainty about the team's future (72%),
2. Increase in administrative responsibilities (64%),
3. Difficulty maintaining work-life balance (59%),
4. Responsibility for team morale (53%).

Change in Leadership Style

One of the key findings of the study was a shift toward a more empathetic and relational leadership style. A comparison of leadership styles before and during the pandemic showed the following:

Leadership Style	Average Before Pandemic	Average During Pandemic	Change
Transactional	5.1	4.3	↓ -0.8
Transformational	4.9	5.4	↑ +0.5
Empathetic/Supportive	4.5	5.7	↑ +1.2

Source: Own study based on results from the Carrotspot Lab.

As seen, leaders clearly reduced their focus on control, tasks, and results, while increasing the frequency of one-on-one conversations, emotional openness, and flexibility in decision-making.

Notably, middle-level leaders exhibited the greatest change: their score on the empathetic dimension rose from 4.4 to 5.9, suggesting that they played a key buffering role between senior management and teams.

Communication and Team Relationships

During the pandemic, leaders reported a significant increase in communication activity:

1. 78% acknowledged conducting more frequent one-on-one conversations with team members,
2. 65% organized regular informal online meetings (e.g., virtual coffee chats),
3. 56% introduced new communication tools (Teams, Slack, Carrotspot).

The quality of relationships was rated on average at 5.6/7, but 62% of leaders admitted that it was more difficult to gauge team moods and emotions in a remote work setting.

The most frequently reported challenge was maintaining authentic contact and preventing employee isolation.

Differences Between Leader Groups

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences in well-being and leadership style among the groups:

1. Senior leaders reported a higher sense of control ($M = 5.9$; $SD = 0.8$) than middle-level leaders ($M = 4.7$; $SD = 1.2$), $F(2, 441) = 6.14$, $p < 0.01$.
2. Middle-level leaders had the highest empathy and relationality scores ($M = 5.9$; $SD = 0.9$), $F(2, 441) = 5.38$, $p < 0.01$.
3. Operational leaders more often reported emotional burnout ($M = 5.5$) alongside a low sense of influence ($M = 4.1$).

The interpretation of these results suggests that middle management became the “emotional buffer” in organizations, protecting teams from stress while experiencing overload themselves.

Despite the increased stress, 48% of leaders simultaneously reported a sense of purpose and engagement in their work, suggesting a high level of psychological resilience and intrinsic motivation.

Change in Perception of the Leader’s Role

The vast majority of respondents (82%) admitted that the pandemic permanently changed the way they think about the role of a leader.

The most frequently cited reflections included:

- “A leader is not someone who controls, but someone who provides a sense of security.”
- “I realized that talking about emotions is as important as talking about results.”
- “Empathy is not a soft skill; it is a team’s survival strategy.”

Composite Indicators of Well-Being and Effectiveness

Based on the results, two composite indicators were developed:

- **Leader Well-Being Index (LWI)** – the average of stress, energy, sense of purpose, and control variables;
 - Mean = 4.9, SD = 0.7
- **Relational Effectiveness Index (REI)** – the average of empathy, communication, and trust variables;
 - Mean = 5.6, SD = 0.8

A significant positive correlation was observed between LWI and REI ($r = 0.62$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that leaders with higher well-being were more likely to exhibit empathetic and supportive behaviors.

Psychological Mechanisms of Leadership in Times of Crisis

Empathy as a Tool for Team Survival and Development

The study's results clearly show that the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the importance of empathy and relational skills in leadership. The increase in the empathetic dimension score (from 4.5 to 5.7) suggests that leaders had to develop a new way of understanding others' emotions and responding to their team's psychological needs.

This phenomenon is supported by the research of Goleman (2020) and Boyatzis (2018), who indicate that empathy—understood as consciously attuning to the emotions of others—is one of the key components of a leader's emotional intelligence.

Empathetic leaders more frequently build trust, strengthen team engagement, and create conditions for open communication. In situations of uncertainty and stress, they serve as a stabilizing factor, protecting employees from burnout and anxiety.

From a psychological perspective, a leader's empathy functions as a regulatory mechanism, enabling the interpretation of team emotions and translating them into appropriate organizational responses. In the *emotional contagion* model (Hatfield et al., 2014), leaders with high empathy more effectively mitigate team emotions, reducing group tension and conflict.

Authenticity and Trust as the Foundation of a New Psychological Contract

The study showed that leaders increasingly perceive their role not in terms of hierarchy but in terms of authentic presence and transparency.

This phenomenon aligns with the concept of *authentic leadership* (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Ilies et al., 2013), where the key factor is the alignment between a leader's stated values and their actual behavior.

In remote work conditions, where opportunities for control and observation are limited, trust has become an organizational currency.

Leaders who communicated openly, admitted mistakes, and shared their own emotions fostered a greater sense of psychological safety within their teams (Edmondson, 2019).

Conversely, a lack of authenticity led to reduced trust and increased emotional distance between leaders and teams. Data from the Carrotspot Lab study indicate that leaders with lower trust levels also had lower well-being scores ($r = 0.48$; $p < 0.01$), confirming the reciprocal nature of this relationship.

Adaptation and Cognitive Flexibility

The study also revealed an increased importance of adaptability—the ability to respond quickly to changing work conditions, technologies, and team expectations.

As many as 71% of leaders admitted that the pandemic forced them to change their management and decision-making approach. This trend aligns with the concept of *adaptive leadership* (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017), in which an effective leader can “regulate the temperature of change,” balancing stability with flexibility.

From a cognitive psychology perspective (Scott, 2020), a leader's adaptation is associated with *cognitive flexibility*, i.e., the ability to shift thinking perspectives and redefine goals in situations of uncertainty.

In practice, this manifested in shortened decision-making cycles, involving teams in co-decision processes, and openness to experimentation. According to Carrotspot Lab data, leaders who reported high levels of adaptability more frequently applied transparent communication and participatory decision-making ($r = 0.52$; $p < 0.001$).

The Psychological Cost of Leadership

At the same time as empathy and authenticity developed, leaders' emotional overload increased.

Middle-level leaders, who most often served as the “emotional buffer,” exhibited the highest levels of burnout ($M = 5.5$) and stress ($M = 5.7$). This confirms the observations of Bakker and Demerouti (2017), who note that high emotional engagement without systemic support can lead to *emotional exhaustion*.

The psychological cost of leadership highlights a paradox in modern organizations: leaders who best support others often experience the greatest burden themselves.

In this context, the question arises about the potential for technological support for leaders—through tools for emotion analysis, mood monitoring, and prediction of professional burnout.

New Leadership Competencies in the AI Era

The collected data and theoretical insights lead to the conclusion that the pandemic acted as a catalyst for the evolution of leadership models. A modern leader should integrate three perspectives:

1. **Empathetic** – understanding people's emotions and their impact on decisions,
2. **Analytical** – the ability to use data and technology,
3. **Reflective** – the capacity for learning and self-observation.

This model can be described as the *Human–AI Leadership Balance Model*, in which humans and technology do not compete but collaborate. AI can support leaders in analyzing data on team well-being and communication, but humans retain the capacity to interpret emotions and make ethical decisions (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2021).

The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Supporting Leaders (Analogies from e-Health and AI-Assisted Therapy)

Introduction: AI as a New Partner in Leadership

In recent years, there has been a rapid increase in the use of artificial intelligence in people management and leadership development. AI systems are no longer merely analytical tools; they increasingly function as “digital advisors” to leaders, providing information on team emotional states, burnout risks, engagement, and organizational mood (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021; Haenlein & Kaplan, 2021).

This approach has direct analogies in the development of e-health and digital therapeutic tools, where AI supports psychologists and therapists. In both cases, the goal is not to replace humans but to enhance their cognitive and emotional capacities by providing accurate data and recommendations.

AI in a Supportive Role (Lessons from e-Health)

In clinical psychology and therapy, systems have been developed that use AI to analyze mood, emotional language, and changes in patient behavior. For example, *Woebot* – a chatbot based on a cognitive-behavioral model – conducts supportive conversations with individuals experiencing depression and anxiety, monitoring emotional patterns and providing automated interventions (Fitzpatrick et al., 2017). Similar solutions are used in e-health applications such as *Wysa* and *Youper*, which analyze users' tone of voice and vocabulary to suggest emotion regulation strategies. Translating this model to organizations, one can envision AI leadership assistants capable of:

1. Analyzing team communication language (e.g., on Slack or Teams),
2. Detecting early signs of stress or isolation,
3. Providing leaders with insights on group mood and recommended supportive actions.

In both therapy and leadership, AI functions as an empathetic mirror system: it does not feel but learns to recognize emotional patterns and translate them into actionable guidance.

AI in Managing Emotions and Team Relationships

The Carrotspot Lab & SWPS (2021) study found that 62% of leaders had difficulty recognizing team emotions in remote work, significantly reducing their relational effectiveness. This area represents the greatest potential for AI in leadership. Sentiment analysis tools, language models (LLMs), and systems monitoring communication dynamics can provide leaders with information on:

1. Team engagement levels,
2. The balance of positive and negative emotions,
3. Changes in the frequency of interactions among team members.

When combined with HR data (e.g., ERP and HRM systems, including BI databases), it is possible to create an emotional profile of the team, enabling leaders to respond appropriately to tensions, overloads, or morale drops. Unlike traditional KPI systems, these solutions do not evaluate work performance but the emotional climate of the organization, representing a new generation of tools supporting *human-centered leadership* (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2022).

Psychological and Ethical Aspects of AI in Leadership

Integrating artificial intelligence into leadership processes raises important ethical and psychological questions. First, there is a risk of overinterpreting emotional data, which could lead to incorrect decisions affecting employees. Second, maintaining leader autonomy is crucial. AI should support rather than replace reflective thinking and human empathy. The literature emphasizes the need to introduce principles of *augmented leadership* (Daugherty & Wilson, 2018), in which technology functions as a cognitive assistant rather than a decision-maker. In this model, the leader remains responsible for interpreting and ethically using information, while AI supports prediction, analysis, and recommendation processes.

From e-Health to e-Leadership: Integrating Psychology and Technology

Analogous to AI-assisted therapy, the effectiveness of systems for leaders depends on combining quantitative and qualitative data – what is measurable (mood, sentiment, communication) – with what is subjective (empathy, reflection, meaning). This gives rise to a new research domain: *AI-Augmented Leadership Psychology*, where technological tools support the development of the leader as a person, not just as a process manager.

According to the Carrotspot Lab & SWPS (2021) study, 82% of leaders reported that the pandemic permanently changed their approach to working with people. This provides a natural starting point for implementing systems that support the development of empathetic, data-informed leadership.

In this sense, AI is not a threat to the humanistic dimension of management; on the contrary, it can become its ally, provided a balance is maintained between technological cognition and emotional understanding.

Summary and Practical Implications

Synthesis of Findings

The Carrotspot Lab & SWPS (2021) study revealed a profound transformation of leadership styles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders shifted from task-oriented and transactional approaches toward empathetic, authentic, and transformational leadership. Quantitative analyses (ANOVA) showed that middle-level leaders – serving as a bridge between executive management and operational teams – experienced the highest emotional overload and stress, while simultaneously exhibiting the highest levels of empathy and cognitive flexibility.

These findings confirm that in crisis situations, a leader's effectiveness depends not only on managerial competencies but, above all, on emotional and relational skills. Empathy, authenticity, and adaptability served as psychological “filters” that protected teams from destabilization and helped leaders maintain a sense of purpose.

Implications for Leadership and HR Development

Based on the results, several practical directions for developing leadership competencies in the AI era can be identified:

1. **Digital Empathy Training** - modern organizations should develop training programs that teach leaders to recognize emotions in online environments (e.g., messaging platforms, remote meetings). Such training can combine elements of neuropsychology of emotions with AI-driven analysis of interaction dynamics in teams.
2. **Integration of Analytical Tools and Psychological Reflection** - AI can help leaders diagnose mood, stress, or engagement, but the leader must interpret these data in the context of relationships and trust. Systems combining *empathy + data* can therefore merge emotional insight with analytical reports.
3. **Burnout Prevention Programs for Middle-Level Leaders** - As the results show, this group is most exposed to stress and overload. Organizations should provide supervision, mentoring, and psychological support tools, as well as access to predictive AI systems that alert them to declines in well-being.
4. **Building a Human–AI Collaboration Culture** - In modern leadership structures, technology does not replace humans but complements them. AI can support decision-making, diagnose communication risks, and help monitor team dynamics, while ethical and emotional decisions remain the responsibility of humans.

Directions for Future Research

The analyses highlight several areas that require further exploration:

- **Impact of prolonged AI use on leaders' well-being:** Do analytical systems supporting leaders increase effectiveness, or can they also amplify control pressure and cognitive load?
- **Interactions between AI and leadership style:** Do leaders with high empathy and self-awareness use technology differently than transactional leaders?
- **Ethics of emotional data:** What boundaries should be set in monitoring team emotions and communication to maintain a balance between efficiency and privacy?

Future research should also consider mixed-method approaches, combining quantitative analysis with in-depth qualitative interviews to understand leaders' internal cognitive and emotional processes.

Final Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that leadership is primarily an emotional competence, not a hierarchical function. Empathy, authenticity, and adaptability today form the foundation of effective management.

When applied ethically and reflectively, artificial intelligence can become a human ally in developing these qualities, supporting leaders in understanding emotions, anticipating risks, and building trust within remote teams. As in AI-assisted therapy, the key in leadership is collaboration between humans and technology, not competition. A modern leader thus becomes a “digital humanist” – someone who uses data to better understand people and technology to support relationships rather than replace them.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented test for leaders, revealing not only the limitations of organizational structures but, above all, the importance of psychological aspects of leadership. From the perspective of leadership attribute theory (Stogdill, 1974; Northouse, 2021), this crisis clearly showed that a leader's effectiveness does not derive solely from formal position or authority but from a unique combination of traits and competencies such as empathy, emotional resilience, the ability to motivate others, and adaptability.

The *Leadership in COVID-19 Mode* study conducted by Carrotspot Lab and SWPS University (2021) confirmed that these attributes have a tangible impact on team performance under uncertainty. Leaders who maintained trust-based communication exhibited higher well-being and were more effective in motivating their employees. It is worth noting that the greatest challenges affected middle-level leaders, who often acted as intermediaries between strategic decisions and team emotions. This group experienced the highest levels of stress ($p < 0.01$) and the lowest well-being.

From the perspective of contemporary leadership theories, including the Leader–Member Exchange model (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), a leader's effectiveness depends on the quality of relationships with team members rather than hierarchical structure. During the pandemic, and now in the era of hybrid work and distributed teams, building bonds based on mutual trust and communication becomes crucial. Leaders who developed social and emotional competencies were able to maintain engagement despite physical distance and uncertainty.

With the development of artificial intelligence, a new perspective emerges: the possibility of supporting leadership through technologies that analyze data on team mood, communication, or workload. AI-based tools can assist leaders in decision-making and monitoring the emotional condition of teams. However, as Goleman (2020) and Boyatzis (2018) emphasize, none of these tools can replace leadership capabilities grounded in self-awareness and empathy.

In this sense, AI development is not a threat but an opportunity to expand leadership competencies. Psychology and technology, working complementarily, can enhance leaders' ability to respond to human needs, create motivating work environments, and manage distributed teams with greater precision and attentiveness. Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid development of artificial intelligence highlight two sides of the same process: the redefinition of leadership. On one hand, empathy, authenticity, and relational skills remain its psychological core. On the other, data analysis, prediction, and decision support become its technological reinforcement. The future belongs to leaders who can bridge both worlds – understanding humans while using technology to serve them better.

Summary

COVID-19 highlighted that effective leadership relies on emotional competence, including empathy, authenticity, and adaptability. Ethically applied artificial intelligence can assist leaders in understanding team emotions, predicting risks, and enhancing trust in remote settings. By integrating data matching and HRTech software, leaders act as “digital humanists,” combining emotional intelligence with technological tools to support relationships and decision-making. The pandemic, alongside AI evolution, redefines leadership: a psychological core reinforced by AI-driven insights. Future leaders will excel by bridging human and technological capabilities.

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