

Leading Beyond the Presence: A Dual-Theory Framework of Transformational Leadership in Virtual and Digital Environment: A Conceptual/Theoretical Paper

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Abstract: *With the growing prevalence of virtual and hybrid working, the role of organizational leadership has been transformed; especially when it comes to transformational leadership, which is related both to follower motivation and performance. Though previous research has acknowledged the challenges presented by digital distance, it fails to provide a conceptual framework underpinning effective digital transformational leadership. In short, we proposed a Dual-Theory Framework of Digital Transformational Leadership (DTF-DTL), based on Digital Presence Compensation Theory and Asynchronous Inspiration Theory. The core argument is clear: Digital leadership is about more than simply establishing a Digital Leadership Presence (DLP) through intentional behavioral strategies and practices; they also need to leverage Modality-Calibrated Inspiration (MCI) to connect effectively across various communication channels. The theoretical framework suggests ten propositions that aim to address the structural, behavioral, and communicative dimensions of leadership in a virtual context, laying the groundwork for the theory and practice of transformational leadership amidst the shift to digital contexts.*

Keywords: transformational leadership, digital leadership, virtual teams, digital leadership presence, asynchronous communication, dual-theory framework

INTRODUCTION

Physical presence has long been the unspoken infrastructure of organizational leadership. Leaders set an example and inspire followers who can read their conviction in their posture. They establish a measure of trust via constant nearness. They are motivators by means of spontaneous, contextually responsive acts of recognition that co-location always makes possible. It is not some side-effect that we expect in leadership effectiveness; it is the way through which leadership operates underpinned by these. And for the first time in modern organizations' history they are no longer taken for granted.

The evolution and normalization of remote and hybrid work, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and based on increasing workforce expectations, has led to an industry wherein a significant and continuing percentage of leadership is held at digital distance (Chamakiotis et al., 2021; Newman & Ford, 2021). For transactional leadership — structured around task assignment, performance monitoring and contingent reward — this shift presents no theoretical challenge: these functions

readily find their way into task management platforms and scheduled performance reviews. Transformational leadership presents a challenge, however, that is not simply logistical but structural with that transition. Transformation takes the conditions of co-location. Digital environments cannot.

One the leadership literature has recently begun to recognize this structural challenge. Greimel, Kanbach and Chelaru (2023) consider virtual transformational leadership to be a neglected and largely un-researched area. Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) illustrate that hierarchical leadership structures lose effectiveness in virtual teams. Chamakiotis et al. (2021) urge to imagine e-leadership in the post-pandemic environment. But these contributions, while valuable, all share the same limitation: they act reactively rather than generatively. They detail what we lose in the digital transition but don't theorize what needs to be built in its place.

In contrast, this paper adopts a different stance. We argue that the central theoretical task is not to explain how co-located transformational leadership deteriorates in a virtual environment—though such an explanation is indispensable—but to theorize how excellent digital transformational leadership can look positive. That this paper's title implies that aspiration: leading beyond presence is not a matter of how to manage when there is no physical co-location involved. It's about building a leadership style that goes beyond the demand for it.

We further develop this argument with the introduction of the Dual-Theory Framework of Digital Transformational Leadership (DTF-DTL), which integrates two theoretical constructs — the Digital Presence Compensation Theory (DPCT) and the Asynchronous Inspiration Theory (AIT) — into an integrated picture on how transformational leaders can operate in the optimal way by virtue of their digital and virtual presence. DPCT illuminates structural challenge (the presence deficit) and behavioral response (compensatory leadership strategies through which Digital Leadership Presence is constructed). AIT elaborates the communicative challenge (modality sensitivity of inspirational motivation) and strategic response (Modality-Calibrated Inspiration with the purposeful integration of synchronous and asynchronous means). The two together make up an integrated causal framework connecting factors associated with leaders in a virtual environment-Leader behaviours; followers' psychological states-Individual/team performance results.

The paper contributes four main points. First, it posits the Digital Leadership Presence (DLP) as a theoretically derived concept — a constructed design with deliberate leader presence functionally equivalent to physical presence in influencing follower motivation and trust, although created as a function of behavioral strategy, not physical co-location. Second, it contributes to emerging knowledge about Modality-Calibrated Inspiration (MCI) - strategic use of synchronous and asynchronous communication to trigger complementary motivational cues – as a new dimension of inspirational leadership competency. Third, it establishes the DTF-DTL as an integrative system linking these constructs in a verifiable causality framework. Fourth, they produce ten propositions at the structural, behavioral, and communicative levels of analysis that constitute a research agenda, contributing to the empirical study of digital transformational leadership.

Here is the flow of the remainder of this paper. In Section 2, we review the theoretical predecessors of the DTF-DTL: Transformational leadership theory; virtual team leadership literature; social presence theory; and elaboration likelihood model. Section 3 develops DPCT further, introducing presence deficit construct as well as Digital Leadership Presence. Section 4 extends AIT, presenting modality-calibrated inspiration and the craftsmanship model of asynchronous communication. Section 5 integrates DPCT and AIT into the DTF-DTL, introducing a third-level proposition series on

framework-level interactions. All propositions are summarized in Section 6. Theoretical and practical implications are further developed in Section 7. Section 8 concludes.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PREDECESSORS

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership, as described in its foundational formulation (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985), is characterized by a leadership style that raises the motivational state of followers, from purely material self-interest to coherence with shared values, a collective identity, and visionary purpose. The behavioral architecture of this elevation is structured into four dimensions: idealized influence, whereby leaders model for followers the values and commitments they want them to emulate; inspirational motivation, wherein they describe convincing visions that make the current endeavor meaningful in relation to a desired future; intellectual stimulation, whereby they unsettle followers' cognitive assumptions and foster creativity in problem-solving; and individualized consideration, whereby they respond through specific attention to each follower's unique developmental needs with the mentoring and coaching attentiveness (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Deng et al., 2023).

In our case, three aspects of this behavioral architecture have theoretical centrality. For one, every dimension relies on a leader's ability to sense the motivational state of followers and react in situ—responsiveness that needs the availability of information that virtual settings reduce (Bakker et al., 2023). Second, the mechanisms that underlie transformational influence — emotional contagion, social modeling, relational trust-building — are most profoundly stimulated with face-to-face interaction (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2015). Third, the cumulative impact of transformational leadership does not emerge from one dramatic action but is produced through repeated enacting of transformational behavior in a range of human interactions over time — a dynamic that virtual environments make structurally challenging (Balthazard et al., 2009).

Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory

Two communication theories offer critical theoretical foundations for the DTF-DTL. The theory of social presence (Short et al., 1976) refers to the extent to which a communication channel is experienced as though other persons are directly present. High social presence media — in-person communication — convey the full spectrum of the interpersonal cues that indicate engagement, authenticity, and investment in others. The effect of low social presence media — text-based asynchronous channels — is to transmit only an informational linguistic product while eliminating the nuances that lead interpersonal warmth and rapport to exist.

Media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) builds on this investigation by proposing that media channels vary in processing ambiguous, complex information. Rich media — with their potential for immediate feedback, multiple cues, natural language, and personal focus — are tailored to equivocal tasks that entail subtle relational negotiation. Lean media — narrow on these dimensions — do the average level of informational exchange well, but not the deeper relational work it takes to lead a transformational team.

Thus combined, these theories argue that the digital communication contexts within which virtual leaders act are structurally lean — lacking the social presence and media richness ideal for transformational leadership. But neither theory exemplifies a response — in particular towards

behavioral and communicative strategy, as a response to structural leanness — that leaders can employ. And this is the theoretical space occupied by DPCT and AIT.

Virtual Team Leadership Research

The virtual team leadership literature substantiates the theoretical claims we make in the work mentioned in this paper with a broader empirical base. Boies, Fiset, and Gill (2015) determined that quality of communication and trust are the major mediating mechanisms between leadership and virtual team performance - that is, poor communication in low social presence environments will tend to have a direct impact on performance. Maduka et al. (2018) present a particular set of competencies that lead to effective virtual team leadership with regard to purposeful communications planning and trust-building activities. Mutha and Srivastava (2023) find that employee engagement within virtual teams is more strongly associated with leader communication behavior as compared to co-located environments where ambient organizational variables carry the motivational load.

What the virtual team leadership literature has not yet produced is a coherent theoretical account of the causal pathways that take place from leader communication behavior to follower psychological states in virtual environments — namely a theory of what constructs mediate this relationship and which leader behaviors most strongly activate them. The DTF-DTL gives an account of this precisely.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model and Self-Determination Theory

AIT's account of asynchronous inspirational communication is based on two strands of psychological theory. The elaboration likelihood model (ELM; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that persuasive messages are processed along two pathways: the central route, meaning a deliberate and effortful elaboration of the message content, and the peripheral route, meaning the processing of heuristics based on surface cues. Central route processing leads to more lasting, durable attitude change, more likely to withstand counter-persuasion, and a stronger antecedent of behaviour than peripheral route processing.

AIT theorizes that high-craftsmanship asynchronous inspirational communication triggers central route processing — the deep, elaborative engagement with message content that results in lasting motivational states — in ways synchronous communication that takes place simultaneously and under cognitive stress is not capable of effectively facilitating. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) also underpins this account, as it has proved that intrinsic motivation – the strongest and most persistent motivational force – is most strongly facilitated when communication makes an explicit connection between work and the follower's core values and sense of autonomous purpose. Asynchronous messages crafted to activate this connection between values and work, processed through central route elaboration, generate motivational states that are qualitatively different from and more durable than the affective arousal of synchronous inspiration.

The Digital Presence Compensation Theory (DPCT)

The Presence Deficit: A Structural Account

The presence deficit we define is the degree of systematic decreased social presence and media richness in virtual work environments by followers, leading to a structural attenuation of the relational, sensory, and temporal conditions that transformational leadership needs in order to be enacted and received in its full motivational force.

A deficit in presence is made up of deficits at three channels. The sensory channel deficit relates to the loss of the nonverbal communication bandwidth — facial expression, gesture, gaze, vocal prosody, spatial proximity — through which transformational leaders communicate conviction, emotional investment, and authentic care. In co-located environments, this bandwidth is continuously available and requires no deliberate management; in virtual environments, it is partly or wholly unavailable and must be reconstructed through deliberate behavioral strategy.

The spontaneity channel deficit also describes the absence of the spontaneous and informally occurring relational exchanges within which substantial quantities of transformational influence are mobilized in co-located locations. The literature on dyadic interaction (Lehmann-Willenbrock et al., 2015) consistently reflects that some of the most impactful leader behaviors — for example, the timely recognition of a follower's effort, the reframing of a setback as a learning opportunity, the expression of confidence in a follower's capacity — occur in spontaneous, contextually responsive moments rather than in formally scheduled interactions. In virtual environments, where meetings are designed around scheduled meetings and task-oriented asynchronous communication, these moments are largely eliminated as an in-the-moment leadership resource.

The ambient channel deficit is a description of the disruption of the unbroken continuity, low-intensity presence co-located leaders provide of being there through visible, accessible, and proximate presence within working hours throughout the day. Followers in co-located environments experience the presence of their leader as an environmental constant in their environment, whereas virtual followers experience it as an episodic event, punctuated by silences, which might be perceived as indifference, disengagement, or unavailability. For the idealized influence dimension of transformational leadership — one that depends on followers forming a sustained and deeply held sense of the leader as an admirable, trustworthy, and committed figure — this ambient deficit is especially significant; the ambient presence is how followers generate and sustain a sustained, deeply held sense of the leader.

Digital Leadership Presence: The Constructive Response

DPCT holds out a central theoretical position that effective virtual transformational leaders do not merely solve that absence of presence - a framing that presents digital leadership deficit as necessarily inferior to its co-located counterparts. They build on a qualitatively different form of leader presence, one which is practically equivalent to physical presence in relational and motivational effects, even if structurally different.

To account for this performance of accomplishment, we propose the concept of Digital Leadership Presence (DLP). DLP is characterized as a follower's continual cognitive appraisal that the leader is attentive, committed, and relationally accessible, produced not via physical co-location but through the enactment of intentional digital leadership behaviors, which reconstitute the operational equivalent of presence across sensory, spontaneity, and ambient pathways.

There are three major theoretical implications to this definition. First, DLP is a follower perception — one that exists at the follower's appraisal level of the leader only, not in the behavior of the leader itself. Leader behaviors generate DLP only insofar as they are perceived and interpreted by followers as signals of attentiveness and commitment. Accordingly, DLP is shaped by follower-level moderators such as relational history with the leader, patterns of individual differences in digital communication preferences, and cultural norms around leader accessibility. Second, DLP is not natural, it's constructed — it relies on concerted, sustained behaviour from the leader that is distinct from the physical presence of a leader. This is both the challenge and the opportunity: because DLP is made, it can be designed,

quantified and built through training in ways that spontaneous co-located presence cannot. Third, DLP is akin to physical presence in practical terms as it elicits the same follower outcomes (trust, motivational engagement, identity alignment with organizational vision), but through distinct behavioral pathways.

Table 1 maps the four dimensions of DLP to their behavioral expressions and their co-located equivalents.

DLP Dimension	Behavioral Expression	Co-located Equivalent
Attentive Availability	Rapid, consistent digital responsiveness; transparent scheduling; asynchronous acknowledgment protocols	Open-door policy; hallway accessibility; visible presence in shared spaces
Affective Legibility	Video-first communication norms; expressive written tone; deliberate use of voice notes and recorded messages to convey emotional engagement	Facial expression; vocal tone; body language; spontaneous laughter
Relational Continuity	Systematic memory of follower circumstances; personalized follow-up across sessions; developmental conversation threads	Organic relational memory built through daily physical proximity
Visionary Persistence	Permanently accessible digital vision artifacts; consistent integration of vision language across all communication channels	Spontaneous vision-linking in corridor conversations; visual artifacts in shared physical spaces

Table 1. Dimensions of Digital Leadership Presence (DLP) and Their Behavioral Expressions

The Default Drift Hypothesis

DPCT furthers the Default Drift Hypothesis; that in the absence of conscious DLP construction, virtual settings act as a structural force driving organizational leader behavior toward transactional patterns irrespective of leader dispositional transformational orientations. This hypothesis builds on the notion that transactional leadership behaviors — such as task assignment, performance monitoring, exception management, and contingent reward — are structurally compatible with digital communication environments. These can be performed using task management platforms and scheduled video meetings without requiring the relational infrastructure or communication bandwidth that transformational behaviors demand.

Transformational behaviors, by contrast, demand that conditions — spontaneity, relational attunement, high-bandwidth communication — are actively built in virtual environments. Default drift is thus not

a matter of leadership character but a structural consequence of environmental design. For a transformational disposition leader without active DLP construction, that is, one who does not intentionally create DLP, the digital environment then increasingly steers their behavior to transactional flows — not because they intend to lead transactionally, but rather because the environment does not afford them any natural path for their leadership to flow.

P1

The presence deficit mediates the relationship between virtual work intensity and transformational leadership behavior enactment, such that higher virtual work intensity produces greater presence deficit, which in turn reduces the frequency and quality of transformational leader behaviors, controlling for dispositional transformational orientation.

P2

In the absence of deliberate DLP construction behaviors, leaders in virtual environments will exhibit progressive behavioral drift toward transactional leadership patterns over a 90-day deployment period, irrespective of dispositional transformational orientation measured at baseline.

P3

Follower-rated Digital Leadership Presence (DLP) mediates the relationship between leader compensation behavior enactment and follower motivational engagement in virtual environments, such that compensation behaviors affect motivation only to the extent that they generate perceived DLP.

P4

The four dimensions of DLP — Attentive Availability, Affective Legibility, Relational Continuity, and Visionary Persistence — function as a compensatory system rather than independent additive components, such that deficiency in any single dimension substantially undermines the motivational impact of the remaining three.

The Asynchronous Inspiration Theory (AIT)

The Modality Sensitivity of Inspirational Motivation

Inspirational motivation is the transformational leadership dimension most immediately vulnerable to the constraints of virtual environments — and potentially, as AIT argues, the dimension most capable of transcending them. The vulnerability arises from the fact that synchronous inspirational communication — the model that implicit leadership theory and popular understanding treats as paradigmatic — depends on conditions that virtual environments attenuate: immediate emotional contagion, embodied energy, and the shared temporal experience of being moved together in real time (Hatfield et al., 1993).

The opportunity arises from a theoretical insight that the transformational leadership literature has not yet articulated: inspiration as a psychological state is not produced exclusively by synchronous communication, and asynchronous communication, when strategically crafted, may produce forms of inspiration that are more durable, more cognitively integrated, and more behaviorally consequential than anything synchronous communication alone can achieve. This is the central claim of AIT.

Two Mechanisms, Two Profiles

AIT makes a critical distinction between two motivational mechanisms that are induced through alternative communication modalities. Synchronous communication — presented in real-time, verbally interacting with the other person in one's presence, through live digital channels, in real time — enables emotional contagion (Hatfield et al., 1993): the fast, largely involuntary transfer of emotional states from leader to follower elicited by exposure to the leader's vocal prosody, expressed enthusiasm, and visible conviction. Emotional contagion evokes an instant affective response — increased arousal, heightened engagement, decreased perceived effort — which is felt to be motivating at the moment of reception.

Emotional contagion, however, is temporally finite. Its motivational state is conditioned by the social context in which it is triggered and fades as the follower moves back to independent work. The motivational gain elicited through synchronous inspiration, which should be reinforced, has a decay function: is very high after contact, and declines to a relatively constant state in hours or days.

This decay is the inherent limitation of synchronous-only inspirational leadership in virtual environments with lower frequency of structured live synchronous interaction compared to co-located settings. Asynchronous means of communication—recorded video, written messages, digital vision statements or anything other than real-time communication—reactivate a different mechanism, cognitive elaboration (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In contrast to emotional contagion, elaboration is an active and effortful process where the follower generates meaning from the message content by combining it with their current knowledge, value orientation, and motivational framework.

It leads to motivational states that are more cognitively integrated, more closely related to the follower's actual identity, and thus more resilient against decay that characterizes synchronous activation states, as elaboration is characterized by creating rather than being transmitted. We name this difference Motivational Half-Life (MHL) — the time that communication-generated motivational elevation lasts above the follower's pre-communication baseline without reinforcement. AIT suggests that a high-craftsmanship asynchronous inspiration elicits substantially more MHL than synchronous inspiration, but not because asynchronous communication is more emotionally potent at the moment of reception, only that cognitive elaboration generates motivational states that are more firmly grounded in the follower's sense of self.

Modality-Calibrated Inspiration (MCI)

AIT proposes the concept of Modality-Calibrated Inspiration (MCI) – the purposeful, orchestrated use of synchronous and asynchronous channels of communication to turn on complementary motivational mechanisms as appropriate to followers' developmental states and performance situations. MCI is not mere preference for communication or style, but is instead a leadership proficiency that demands the leader know which mechanism each of them activates, when each mechanism is best utilized, and how the two can be sequenced to elicit sustained motivation that neither modality alone might elicit.

Three strategic propositions under are advanced in the MCI framework. The Activation-Anchoring Sequence considers synchronous communication to be the source and activator of arousal states, and asynchronous communication as the anchor that extends and integrates those states cognitively. Good MCI requires synchronous events — live video calls, team meetings, and spontaneous audio messages — to build peaks of emotional activation and then to flow, with asynchronous content of high-constructed quality, that encourages cognitive elaboration of the same inspirational contents.

According to the Craftsmanship Imperative, asynchronous content reaches its motivational half-life benefits only when deliberately designed to possess personalization (specific recognition of the recipient's circumstances, contributions or journey of development), values-salience (explicit link of what a follower does to core personal and organizational values) and vision-connectivity (anchoring followers' present work to larger organizational purpose and direction). Asynchronous messages bereft of such properties pass through the peripheral route of the ELM, leading to low elaboration and short MHL — effectively a broadcast memo.

The Complementarity Principle characterizes synchronous and asynchronous modalities as non-substitutable complements instead of alternatives along a medium-choice continuum. Synchronous communication (without asynchronous anchoring) yields motivational peaks that decay; asynchronous communication (without synchronous activation) generates cognitive engagement but no affective energy necessary for continuing an extraordinary effort. As a deliberate system, the most successful digital transformational leaders leverage both modalities.

P5

Asynchronous inspirational communication produces significantly greater Motivational Half-Life (MHL) — operationalized as motivational elevation above baseline at 7-, 14-, and 21-day post-communication assessments — than synchronous-only inspirational communication, when controlling for message content equivalence.

P6

The MHL advantage of asynchronous communication is moderated by craftsmanship quality such that high-craftsmanship messages (high personalization, high values-salience, high vision-connectivity) produce 2–3 times the MHL of low-craftsmanship asynchronous messages, consistent with the differential elaboration hypothesis.

P7

Teams receiving MCI — a strategically sequenced combination of synchronous activation and high-craftsmanship asynchronous anchoring — will demonstrate significantly greater sustained performance, follower identification with organizational vision, and intrinsic motivation over a 90-day period compared to teams receiving either modality exclusively.

The Dual-Theory Framework of Digital Transformational Leadership (DTF-DTL)

Framework Architecture

DPCT and AIT are not parallel theories that happen to share a domain. They are structurally interdependent components of a unified theoretical system that operates at two levels of a common causal sequence. DPCT operates at the structural-behavioral level: it explains how virtual environments alter the conditions for transformational leadership and specifies the behavioral strategies through which leaders reconstruct those conditions. AIT operates at the communicative-psychological level: it explains how the inspirational dimension of transformational leadership must be reconceived as a modality-sensitive process and specifies the communication strategies that activate its most durable motivational effects.

The interdependence of the two theories is sequential and functional. Sequential interdependence means that DLP construction (DPCT) must precede effective MCI (AIT): a follower who does not perceive their leader as attentive, committed, and relationally present — the central outputs of DLP construction — will not elaborate the leader's asynchronous messages through the central route of the ELM. Trust is a prerequisite for elaboration; DLP generates trust; MCI exploits elaboration's motivational advantages. Functional interdependence means that the two theories address distinct but complementary aspects of the same performance challenge: DLP addresses the relational conditions for influence, MCI addresses the motivational content of that influence.

Table 2 summarizes the key distinctions and complementarities between DPCT and AIT:

Dimension	DPCT	AIT
Level of Analysis	Structural-behavioral	Communicative-psychological
Core Problem Addressed	Presence deficit across sensory, spontaneity, and ambient channels	Modality-specific degradation of inspirational motivation
Central Mechanism	Deliberate compensatory behavior by the leader	Strategic craftsmanship of asynchronous message content
Key Construct	Perceived Leader Visibility (PLV)	Motivational Half-Life (MHL)
Risk Without Application	Default drift toward transactional leadership	Motivational decay and uninspired task compliance
Primary Outcome	Sustained transformational behavior enactment	Durable follower motivation and elevated performance
Modality Relevance	All digital channels — synchronous and asynchronous	Primarily asynchronous channels, complemented by synchronous
Theoretical Ancestors	Leadership substitutes theory; social presence theory	Elaboration likelihood model; self-determination theory

Table 2. DPCT and AIT: Comparative Framework Analysis

The Causal Model

DTF-DTL postulates the following causal chain: Virtual work arrangements produce a presence deficit across sensory, spontaneity, and ambient channels. Without intentional response from the leader, this deficit sets the stage for default drift toward transactional leadership behavior and leader invisibility within followers' perceptual field. Those leaders who respond with DLP construction—representing Attentive Availability, Affective Legibility, Relational Continuity, and Visionary Persistence through intentional digital behaviors—create DLP perceived by followers that result in trust, motivational engagement, and openness to leader influence. Leaders who deploy MCI simultaneously — synchronous activation to create affective arousal, high-craftsmanship asynchronous anchoring to produce cognitive elaboration — create followers where they have the motivational energy and the motivational durability to sustain high performance over time. This is where DLP and MHL jointly mediate follower outcomes — and this is our central prediction: leader behavior does not alone produce the benefits expected of the proposed digital transformational leadership, but rather the co-occurrence of perceived relational presence and cognitively elaborated motivation.

Framework-Level Propositions

The following propositions address the framework as an integrated system, beyond the individual theories that constitute it:

P8

The joint mediation model — in which leader DLP construction behaviors affect follower performance through the serial mediation of perceived DLP and Motivational Half-Life — will demonstrate superior fit to the data compared to either single-mediation model (DLP alone or MHL alone), consistent with the sequential interdependence hypothesis of the DTF-DTL.

P9

Digital transformational leadership competence — operationalized as the composite of DLP construction proficiency and MCI strategic deployment — will predict virtual team performance over and above dispositional transformational leadership orientation (as measured by the MLQ-5X), demonstrating that digital TL competence is a distinct construct and not reducible to general transformational leadership orientation.

P10

The DTF-DTL's causal model will demonstrate greater explanatory power for outcomes in high-virtual-intensity work environments (predominantly remote, asynchronous-heavy) than in low-virtual-intensity environments (predominantly co-located), consistent with the theoretical claim that digital TL competence is context-activated and becomes progressively more critical as virtual work intensity increases.

Consolidated Propositions

Table 3 provides a consolidated reference for all propositions advanced in this paper:

Prop.	Theory	Dimension	Statement
P1	DPCT	Presence Deficit Mediation	<i>Higher virtual work intensity produces greater presence deficit, reducing transformational leader behavior enactment, controlling for dispositional orientation.</i>
P2	DPCT	Default Drift	<i>Leaders without deliberate DLP construction behaviors will drift toward transactional patterns over 90 days, irrespective of baseline dispositional orientation.</i>
P3	DPCT	DLP as Mediator	<i>Follower-rated DLP mediates compensation behavior effects on motivational engagement — behaviors affect motivation only through perceived DLP.</i>
P4	DPCT	DLP System Effect	<i>The four DLP dimensions function as a compensatory system; deficiency in any single dimension substantially undermines the motivational impact of the remaining three.</i>
P5	AIT	Motivational Half-Life	<i>Asynchronous inspirational communication produces significantly greater MHL than synchronous-only communication at 7-, 14-, and 21-day follow-up.</i>
P6	AIT	Craftsmanship Moderation	<i>High-craftsmanship asynchronous messages produce 2–3x the MHL of low-craftsmanship messages, consistent with the differential elaboration hypothesis.</i>
P7	AIT	Complementarity / MCI	<i>MCI-receiving teams demonstrate greater sustained performance, vision</i>

			<i>identification, and intrinsic motivation over 90 days vs. single-modality conditions.</i>
P8	DTF-DTL	Serial Mediation	<i>The joint serial mediation model (DLP → MHL → performance) fits data significantly better than either single-mediation model alone.</i>
P9	DTF-DTL	Digital TL as Distinct Construct	<i>Digital TL competence predicts virtual team performance over and above MLQ-5X dispositional orientation.</i>
P10	DTF-DTL	Context Activation	<i>The DTF-DTL model demonstrates greater explanatory power in high-virtual-intensity environments than in low-virtual-intensity environments.</i>

Table 3. Summary of All Theoretical Propositions — DTF-DTL

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes four significant theoretical contributions. The first and most basic is the introduction of Digital Leadership Presence (DLP) as a theoretically distinct construct. In particular, DLP goes further than the vague idea of virtual leader visibility or digital communication quality, defining the psychological content of presence as a follower perception, the behavioral pathways that characterize this content, and its mediating action between leader behavior and follower outcomes. It is also particularly significant to distinguish DLP from physical presence: it moves digital leadership research away from a deficit framing – what is lost – to a constructive framing – what can be built – which is more structurally fruitful and practically applicable.

Second contribution is the design of Modality-Calibrated Inspiration (MCI) as a leadership communication competency. Transformational leadership theory has examined inspirational motivation as a universal construct elicited by leader's charisma and vision articulation but has not considered the structural disparities in motivational processing generated by different modes of communication. MCI's account of synchronous activation and asynchronous anchoring as complementary mechanisms offers a more theoretical foundation for understanding why certain virtual leaders create enduring engagement and others temporary enthusiasm (which communication can enable sustained engagement) and how this is done.

The third is the Default Drift Hypothesis, which reshapes the problem of virtual leadership as a question of structure more than capacity for leadership (or lack thereof). The real question isn't whether someone can lead with transformation in a virtual context, but about whether the context of the virtual environment in which we work has been designed, and the leader has been equipped, to help avoid the structural magnetic force driving transactional default. This reframing brings crucial implications for

how organizations approach leadership selection, leadership preparation and environmental design in the context of deployment in virtual settings.

The fourth contribution is the infusion of DPCT and AIT into the DTF-DTL into a consistent, multi-level causal framework. The systematic specification of the sequential and functional interdependence of the two theories and evolution of framework-level propositions (P8–P10) for tests of the integrated model enables this paper to provide a research architecture that allows for generating cumulative knowledge across empirical studies rather than isolated empirical tests and tests of single effects.

Relationship to Prior Theory

The DTF-DTL advances previously established theory in three key ways. It goes beyond transformational leadership theory by transforming the construct from context-neutral to context-sensitive, and making clear that the behavioral mechanisms of transformation are not portable to communication across communicative contexts without deliberate adaptation. In comparison to social presence theory and media richness theory, it goes beyond diagnosis towards prescription: where these theories address what is structurally impoverished in regard to digital communication, the DTF-DTL provides an account of how leaders can strategically enrich it. Regarding the elaboration likelihood model, it generalizes ELM from a persuasion theory to a leadership motivation theory, and implements its central route/peripheral route distinction to meet the specific motivational challenge of inspirational leadership in asynchronous communication channels.

Practical Implications

For institutions, the DTF-DTL yields three dimensions of practical relevance. From the standpoint of individual leaders, the framework prescribes a set of behavioral competencies – DLP construction behaviors and MCI strategic communication skills – that are core to leadership training programs on virtual and hybrid experiences. These competencies can be separated from more generalized transformational leadership orientation (as proposed empirically in P9) — that is, high potential leaders as located in traditional assessment may still need focused digital leadership development.

At the organizational design level, the Default Drift Hypothesis suggests that even the most adept transformational leaders may perform poorly in virtual environments if those environments are not constructed such that DLP construction and MCI deployment are possible. Organizational communication policies, platform designs, and ways you hold meetings are not leadership agnostic: they either facilitate or inhibit the behavioral strategies through which digital transformational leadership occurs. Organizations should review their virtual working experience design using the DTF-DTL, asking whether current structures allow the leaders to leverage their existing opportunities and channels to construct DLP and appropriately deploy MCI.

At the workforce level, the DLP complementarity proposition (P4) assumes that follower readiness for digital transformational leadership is a relevant one (e.g., norms of digital communication, expectations of leader availability, and preferences for synchronous vs. asynchronous engagement) which organizations will consider in implementing virtual leadership arrangements. DLP is a co-constructed perception and its generation requires those who can identify and address the behavioral signals for digital leaders to express their presence.

Limitations and Future Directions

The DTF-DTL is an abstract model that is still in development. It is predicated in logic and theory but not empirically grounded and there are several boundary conditions and measurement challenges to be

addressed by later research. The notion of Motivational Half-Life, though fruitful from a theoretical perspective, needs to be operationalized and validated; the current measures are not constructed to reflect the decay-related process underlying AIT. Similarly, Digital Leadership Presence needs to be designed on a scale that caters to its multi-dimensional, follower-perceptual character.

The cultural generalizability of the framework is a major open question. DLP construction behaviour and MCI strategy is described at an abstraction level; culture may need to be calibrated when applied: Attentive Availability in high-context, high-power-distance culture is not necessarily representative of Attentive Availability in low-context, low-power-distance culture. This calls for future research: whether or not DTF-DTL core relationships are moderated culturally.

The framework is primarily concerned with the formal leader-follower dyad, which does not fully respond (or acknowledge) peer leadership, shared leadership or emergent leadership dynamics evident in self-managing virtual teams (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). Future theoretical work is needed to adopt distributed and shared leadership designs with DLP and MCI to construct constructs of the DTF-DTL that may co-exist across the team members rather than deployed out independently by a single designated leader.

CONCLUSION

The change of organizational leadership in virtual and digital environments is more than an adjustment waiting for normalcy to return. It is a permanent structural change and needs a theoretical response commensurate with its importance. The current paper has made an answer through the development of the Dual-Theory Framework of Digital Transformational Leadership — a theoretical architecture that breaks down, at multiple levels of analysis, how transformational leadership can be performed with excellence in a moment devoid of any physical presence.

Its central insight is captured well in its title: leading beyond presence does not mean leading without presence. It means building a new form of presence — Digital Leadership Presence — via intentional behavioral strategy and giving inspiration through a new form of wisdom — Modality-Calibrated Inspiration — that seeks to capitalize on rather than lament the unique characteristics of digital communication. Leaders who master these competencies do not lead despite the digital environment. They lead through it.

Transformational leadership became a theoretical framework because scholars realized that the most powerful and effective leadership was more than the control of transactions — it raised followers up to higher purposes than themselves. That ability to move upward doesn't diminish with digital distance. In light of this, the research agenda generated in this paper exists to help prove it.

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