

Adaptive vs Resilient Leadership in Prolonged Crisis: Evidence from JSE Top 40 Organisations

R. Oakes 

Reece Oakes: Chief
Financial Officer, Rennies
BCD Travel, Johannesburg.
South Africa
Reece.Oakes@Renniesbcdtravel.com

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ABSTRACT

Prolonged crisis conditions place sustained cognitive, emotional, and strategic demands on organisational leaders, yet crisis leadership literature has often treated adaptability and resilience as interchangeable capabilities. Building on prior empirical research within South Africa's Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Top 40 organisations, this study examines how adaptability and resilience operate as distinct leadership capabilities and how they differentially influence leadership effectiveness when crisis becomes an enduring organisational context rather than a short-term disruption. Framed within contemporary crisis leadership discourse and informed by adaptive leadership theory, the study applies a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, drawing on quantitative survey data (N=182) and qualitative executive interviews (N=11). The findings indicate that while leadership resilience enables continuity, psychological endurance, and stability under prolonged uncertainty, adaptability emerges as the primary differentiating capability influencing leadership effectiveness. Leaders who demonstrated learning agility, decision recalibration, and role fluidity were more effective in sustaining organisational trust, employee well-being, and decision quality during extended crisis conditions. By empirically distinguishing between resilience and adaptability, this study contributes to crisis leadership scholarship by offering an explanatory leadership capability framework that advances theoretical clarity and provides a foundation for future integrative crisis leadership models and executive development practice.

Keywords: Adaptive leadership Crisis leadership, Leadership effectiveness Leadership resilience, Prolonged crisis.

1. Introduction

The increasing frequency and duration of systemic crises have fundamentally altered the context within which organisational leadership is enacted. While early crisis leadership research largely examined leaders' responses to acute and time-bound disruptions, recent global events demonstrate that many organisations now operate in conditions of sustained uncertainty and prolonged disruption. Studies examining organisational responses to the COVID-19 pandemic show that leaders were required to navigate extended periods of volatility, workforce disruption, and organisational uncertainty rather than isolated crisis events (Dirani et al., 2020; Kniffin et al., 2021; Rudolph et al., 2021). These developments suggest that crisis is increasingly experienced as an enduring organisational condition, requiring renewed examination of the leadership capabilities that sustain organisational effectiveness over time.

Within crisis leadership scholarship, resilience has been widely positioned as a critical capability enabling leaders to maintain stability and sustain functioning during periods of adversity. Duchek (2020) conceptualises resilience as a dynamic organisational capability that enables leaders and organisations to absorb

disruption while maintaining operational continuity. However, prolonged crisis environments introduce leadership demands that extend beyond endurance alone. Leaders operating without clear recovery endpoints must continuously interpret evolving conditions, recalibrate decisions, and adjust leadership approaches as organisational expectations shift. These conditions suggest that adaptability may play a more decisive role in differentiating leadership effectiveness when crisis becomes sustained rather than episodic.

Despite increasing attention to leadership during crisis conditions, empirical research examining the differential roles of resilience and adaptability remains limited. Existing studies frequently describe leadership responses to disruption but provide limited explanatory insight into how specific leadership capabilities shape effectiveness during prolonged crisis environments (Kniffin et al., 2021; Rudolph et al., 2021). This limitation is particularly evident in emerging market contexts, where large and systemically important organisations operate within volatile institutional environments.

Building on prior empirical research conducted within organisations listed on the

Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Top 40, this study examines how resilience and adaptability operate as distinct leadership capabilities during prolonged crisis conditions. The study addresses two research questions: (1) How do adaptability and resilience function as distinct leadership capabilities in prolonged crisis contexts? and (2) To what extent do these capabilities differentially influence perceptions of leadership effectiveness under sustained uncertainty? Utilising a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, the study integrates quantitative survey data with qualitative executive insights to examine the relative and interactive roles of these capabilities.

By empirically distinguishing between resilience as a sustaining capability and adaptability as a differentiating capability, this study advances theoretical clarity within crisis leadership scholarship and extends empirical insight into leadership effectiveness under conditions of sustained disruption.

2. Literature Review

The evolving nature of crisis environments has prompted renewed scholarly attention to the role of leadership under conditions of sustained uncertainty. Williams et al. (2017) argue that contemporary crises

increasingly exhibit prolonged duration and complex dynamics, requiring leadership approaches that extend beyond traditional emergency-response frameworks. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kniffin et al. (2021) and Dirani et al. (2020) document how leadership research expanded rapidly to examine organisational responses to unprecedented disruption and uncertainty. However, much of this emerging scholarship has primarily focused on leaders' responses to acute crisis events rather than the sustained leadership demands associated with prolonged crisis contexts. As organisations increasingly operate within environments characterised by persistent volatility, ambiguity, and disruption, Rudolph et al. (2021) suggest that leadership research must move beyond short-term crisis response to examine which leadership capabilities meaningfully influence effectiveness over extended periods of uncertainty.

This section reviews literature relevant to leadership in prolonged crisis contexts, with particular emphasis on adaptability and resilience as core leadership capabilities. It first examines the evolution of crisis leadership beyond emergency response, then explores resilience and adaptability as distinct leadership constructs. The section concludes by

identifying conceptual ambiguity and empirical gaps that inform the study's research focus.

2.1 Crisis Leadership Beyond Emergency Response

Early crisis leadership research has traditionally conceptualised crises as acute, time-bound events requiring rapid response, hierarchical coordination, and decisive leadership action. Bundy et al. (2017) explain that much of the early crisis management literature framed crises as episodic disruptions that leaders were expected to stabilise through swift decision-making and centralised authority. Similarly, Williams et al. (2017) demonstrate that traditional crisis response models emphasised restoring organisational order and legitimacy through structured leadership intervention and coordinated organisational response mechanisms.

Building on this perspective, Tourish (2020) argues that earlier crisis leadership approaches largely prioritised control, command, and rapid stabilisation of organisational systems during disruptive events. More recent scholarship by Kniffin et al. (2021) further observes that such leadership models were particularly effective in short-duration crises, where

leaders were able to contain disruption, re-establish operational continuity, and guide organisations back toward normal functioning. These approaches proved especially relevant in contexts such as natural disasters, industrial accidents, and reputational shocks, where crisis events were relatively contained and recovery trajectories were more clearly defined.

However, more recent empirical work suggests that contemporary crises increasingly exhibit prolonged duration, evolving dynamics, and uncertain recovery endpoints. Williams et al. (2017) demonstrate that modern organisational crises are rarely discrete events, instead unfolding through complex and extended disruption processes that challenge traditional crisis-response frameworks. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Kniffin et al. (2021) highlights how organisations experienced sustained operational disruption and workforce uncertainty, while Dirani et al. (2020) show that leaders were required to navigate continuous organisational adjustment rather than isolated crisis events. Together, these developments suggest that crisis is increasingly experienced as an enduring organisational condition rather than a temporary disruption.

Empirical studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrate how leadership demands intensified under prolonged crisis conditions. Vaziri et al. (2020) demonstrate that leaders faced sustained cognitive load, emotional fatigue, and heightened stakeholder expectations over extended periods, fundamentally altering the nature of leadership work. Consequently, scholars increasingly argue that crisis leadership should be understood not merely as a situational response but as an ongoing organisational capability. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) emphasise that leadership effectiveness in complex environments depends on continuous adaptation and organisational learning, while James, Wooten and Dushek (2011) argue that leaders must engage in ongoing interpretation and recalibration of strategies as crisis conditions evolve. These perspectives suggest that effective leadership in prolonged crises requires capabilities that extend beyond rapid response toward sustained adaptation and organisational sensemaking.

2.2 Leadership Resilience in Crisis Contexts

Leadership resilience has emerged as a central construct in crisis leadership scholarship, particularly in studies examining leaders functioning under

conditions of sustained stress and uncertainty. Ducheck (2020) conceptualises organisational resilience as a dynamic capability that enables leaders and organisations to absorb disruption, adapt to changing conditions, and sustain functioning during adversity. Similarly, Hartmann et al. (2020) emphasise that resilient leadership supports emotional regulation and stability, allowing leaders to maintain organisational coherence during periods of disruption.

Empirical research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic further illustrates the role of resilience in leadership contexts. Dirani et al. (2020) demonstrate that resilient leaders were better able to support employee well-being and organisational continuity during the early stages of the pandemic, while Kniffin et al. (2021) highlight the importance of leader resilience in managing workforce uncertainty and sustaining organisational functioning under prolonged disruption. Complementing these findings, Rudolph et al. (2021) show that resilient leadership behaviours help mitigate stress and maintain organisational stability in crisis-affected workplaces.

However, scholars increasingly caution against positioning resilience as a sufficient

determinant of leadership effectiveness in prolonged crisis contexts. Ducheck (2020) notes that resilience primarily enables organisations and leaders to absorb and recover from disruption but does not necessarily explain how leaders adjust strategies or leadership practices as crises evolve. Similarly, Bowers, Hall and Srinivasan (2017) argue that resilience contributes to endurance and recovery but offers limited explanatory insight into how leaders recalibrate decision-making or leadership approaches under sustained uncertainty.

This distinction becomes particularly salient in prolonged crisis environments where leaders operate without clear temporal boundaries or stable reference points. In such contexts, resilience may sustain leaders psychologically; however, it does not necessarily explain variation in leadership effectiveness across extended periods of uncertainty.

2.3 Adaptive Leadership Under Sustained Uncertainty

Adaptive leadership has increasingly been positioned as a critical capability for navigating complex and evolving organisational environments. Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) argue that leadership in complex adaptive systems requires leaders

to enable learning, experimentation, and distributed problem-solving rather than relying solely on hierarchical control. Building on this perspective, Ducheck (2020) conceptualises adaptability as a dynamic organisational capability that allows leaders to respond to disruption through continuous adjustment and learning.

Empirical research further demonstrates that adaptive leadership is associated with learning agility, cognitive flexibility, and the capacity to revise assumptions as new information emerges. Rudolph et al. (2021) show that organisations navigating pandemic-related disruption relied heavily on leadership behaviours that encouraged flexibility, experimentation, and distributed decision-making. Similarly, Hartmann et al. (2020) highlight how adaptive leadership behaviours support organisational responsiveness and resilience in environments characterised by uncertainty and rapid change.

Evidence emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic provides particularly strong support for the importance of adaptability in sustained crisis contexts. Dirani et al. (2020) demonstrate that leaders who adopted adaptive leadership behaviours were better able to sustain employee well-

being and organisational functioning during prolonged disruption. Likewise, Kniffin et al. (2021) reports that leaders who encouraged continuous learning and decision recalibration were more effective in maintaining employee engagement and organisational stability under pandemic conditions.

Unlike resilience, which emphasises stability and recovery, adaptability centres on transformation and recalibration in response to evolving conditions. As Duchek (2020) notes, adaptive capabilities enable leaders and organisations to adjust strategies and decision-making processes as crises unfold, positioning adaptability as a potentially differentiating leadership capability in prolonged crisis contexts.

2.4 Conceptual Ambiguity Between Resilience and Adaptability

Despite their distinct theoretical foundations, resilience and adaptability are frequently conflated within crisis leadership literature. Duchek (2020) argues that resilience research often overlaps conceptually with adaptability because both constructs describe organisational responses to disruption and uncertainty. Similarly, Hartmann et al. (2020) and Rudolph et al. (2021) note that contemporary crisis leadership studies

frequently refer to “resilient and adaptive leadership” interchangeably, without clearly distinguishing how these capabilities differ in function or influence leadership effectiveness during sustained disruption. This conceptual overlap has contributed to ambiguity regarding the mechanisms through which leadership capabilities shape organisational outcomes under prolonged crisis conditions.

Some scholars conceptualise adaptability as a component of resilience, emphasising flexibility as part of a broader organisational capacity to absorb disruption and sustain functioning during periods of uncertainty. Duchek (2020), for example, positions adaptability as a key stage within organisational resilience processes, arguing that organisations must not only withstand disruption but also adjust strategies and behaviours in response to changing conditions. Similarly, Hillmann and Guenther (2021) highlight adaptability as a central organisational capability that enables firms to respond dynamically to environmental turbulence while maintaining resilience.

Other researchers, however, conceptualise the relationship differently. Bowers, Hall and Srinivasan (2017) suggest that adaptive leadership behaviours may themselves

cultivate resilience over time by strengthening organisational learning and responsiveness. In a similar vein, Rudolph et al. (2021) argue that adaptive responses to uncertainty can reinforce organisational resilience by enabling leaders and organisations to recalibrate strategies and maintain effectiveness during prolonged disruption. These differing perspectives illustrate the continuing lack of conceptual consensus regarding how resilience and adaptability relate to one another within contemporary crisis leadership scholarship.

To clarify this distinction, Table 1 presents a comparative synthesis of leadership resilience and adaptability as they are conceptualised within the crisis leadership literature. The table contrasts the core focus, functional role, and empirically associated outcomes of each capability. As illustrated, resilience is most commonly associated with leadership endurance, emotional regulation, and continuity under pressure, whereas adaptability emphasises learning, decision recalibration, and behavioural flexibility in response to evolving organisational conditions.

Table 1: Comparative Summary of Leadership Capabilities in Crisis Contexts

Leadership Capability	Core Focus	Functional Role in Crisis	Empirically Associated Outcomes	Key Sources
Leadership Resilience	Endurance, emotional regulation, recovery	Sustains leadership presence and stability	Psychological continuity, reduced anxiety, trust	Luthans et al. (2007); West et al. (2020)
Leadership Adaptability	Learning, recalibration, flexibility	Enables leadership effectiveness under change	Decision quality, organisational performance, engagement	Heifetz et al. (2009); Uhl-Bien & Arena (2018)

2.5 Knowledge Gap and Contribution to Scholarship

In summary, while crisis leadership literature has expanded substantially, three critical gaps remain. First, empirical research explicitly distinguishing between leadership resilience and adaptability in prolonged crisis contexts is limited. Second, much of the existing evidence is derived from short-term crisis scenarios or developed-market settings, offering limited

insight into leadership capability dynamics within emerging markets. Third, many studies remain descriptive, providing limited explanatory clarity regarding how leadership capabilities differentially influence effectiveness over extended periods of crisis.

This study addresses these gaps by empirically examining adaptability and resilience as distinct leadership capabilities

within prolonged crisis contexts, drawing on executive-level data from JSE Top 40 organisations. By differentiating sustaining and differentiating leadership capabilities, the study advances crisis leadership theory and provides a conceptual foundation for future integrative crisis leadership models.

3. Research Design and Methodology

Building on the conceptual foundations established in the preceding literature review, this study employed an empirical investigation to examine how adaptability and resilience operated as distinct leadership capabilities in prolonged crisis contexts. Consistent with the methodological approach adopted in the original doctoral study, a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was utilised, enabling both quantitative pattern identification and qualitative explanatory depth.

The study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research (MMR) design, comprising an initial quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design was appropriate given the study's explanatory objective, as it allowed for the identification of statistically observable leadership capability patterns and their subsequent interpretation through executive narratives.

While the primary doctoral research focused on the transition of leadership practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, the present article represented a secondary explanatory analysis of the original dataset. A differentiated analytical lens was applied to re-interrogate leadership effectiveness through the specific comparison of adaptability and resilience in prolonged crisis conditions. Such secondary analysis was methodologically appropriate where existing data were theoretically re-examined to address a distinct research question and generate new explanatory insight.

The study was situated within a pragmatic research paradigm, integrating post-positivist assumptions in the quantitative phase with constructivist interpretations in the qualitative phase. Creswell and Creswell (2023) explain that pragmatic research designs allow researchers to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to address complex research problems from multiple methodological perspectives. Similarly, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argue that mixed-methods studies often draw on both post-positivist and constructivist assumptions to enable complementary forms of explanation and interpretation. Within this framework, leadership

effectiveness in crisis contexts can be understood as both empirically observable through measurable organisational outcomes and socially constructed through leaders' experiences and interpretations of evolving organisational conditions.

The target population comprised of senior executives from organisations listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Top 40 Index. These organisations were selected due to their systemic importance within the South African economy and the strategic role of their leadership during periods of sustained crisis.

For the quantitative phase, a non-probability sampling approach was employed, combining convenience and voluntary response techniques. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) explain that non-probability sampling approaches are commonly adopted when studying specialised or difficult-to-access populations such as senior organisational leaders. Given the elite nature of the sample and the practical constraints associated with accessing senior executives, this approach was considered appropriate for the present study. A total of 182 valid survey responses were obtained, exceeding commonly accepted thresholds for survey-based

organisational research and enabling meaningful quantitative analysis.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was applied to select executive participants from the quantitative sample. Creswell and Creswell (2023) note that purposive sampling enables researchers to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience related to the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, participant selection was guided by emerging themes related to leadership adaptability, resilience, and decision-making under prolonged uncertainty. Eleven senior executives participated in semi-structured interviews, with data saturation achieved by the eleventh interview, consistent with contemporary qualitative research guidance discussed by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2020).

Quantitative data were collected utilising a structured, self-administered online questionnaire distributed via Microsoft Forms and LinkedIn. The instrument included Likert-scale items adapted from established leadership and crisis-response literature, capturing constructs related to leadership adaptability, resilience, leadership effectiveness, and employee well-being. Content validity was ensured through alignment with contemporary

leadership theory and prior empirical studies.

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams. An interview guide was informed by quantitative findings and was utilised to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility to explore participants lived leadership experiences during prolonged crisis conditions. Interviews ranged between 35 and 45 minutes in duration and were recorded with participant consent.

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS (Version 27) and RStudio. Reliability testing confirmed internal consistency across key constructs, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the accepted threshold of 0.70 (Field, 2013). Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation was employed to assess construct validity. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between leadership adaptability, resilience, and leadership effectiveness indicators.

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach. This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns related to leadership

capability differentiation, decision recalibration, and sustained leadership effectiveness. Analysis was conducted through iterative coding, theme development, and interpretive refinement, informed by a constructivist lens.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the interpretation stage, allowing for triangulation and explanatory enrichment. Convergence between statistical patterns and executive narratives enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical clearance for the original doctoral study was obtained from the institutional ethics committee (Ref: RBSREC2023/008). The present secondary analysis adhered to the same ethical protocols. All participants provided informed consent and were briefed on the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participant anonymity was preserved, and all data were securely stored in accordance with institutional and national research ethics standards (Bhandari, 2021).

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the study in alignment with the sequential

explanatory mixed-methods design. Quantitative findings are presented first to establish leadership capability patterns, followed by qualitative findings that provide explanatory depth. Integration of findings is then achieved through triangulation.

4.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings provide insight into how senior executives perceive the relative importance and effectiveness of adaptability and resilience as leadership capabilities in prolonged crisis contexts.

Leadership Capability Prioritisation

As reflected in Table 2, a substantial majority of respondents indicated that adaptability was prioritised over resilience as a leadership capability during prolonged crisis conditions. Approximately 69.8% of respondents identified adaptability as more critical to effective leadership, while resilience was consistently viewed as necessary but less differentiating. This pattern suggests that senior executives recognise adaptability as central to navigating evolving organisational demands under sustained uncertainty.

Table 2 – Executive Perceptions of Leadership Adaptability and Resilience in Prolonged Crisis Contexts (N=182)

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	σ	Decision
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)			
My organisations leaders have the leadership ability to lead through a crises?	2 (1,10)	27 (14,84)	30 (16,48)	82 (45,05)	41 (22,53)	3,73	1,01	High Perception
My organisations leaders have the crises leadership qualities to lead through a crises?	6 (3,30)	29 (15,93)	36 (19,78)	74 (40,66)	37 (20,33)	3,59	1,08	High Perception
My organisations leaders have the competecies to lead through a crises?	5 (2,75)	23 (12,64)	30 (16,48)	83 (45,60)	41 (22,53)	3,73	1,04	High Perception
My organisations leaders have the adaptability traits to lead through a crises?	4 (2,20)	32 (17,58)	26 (14,29)	80 (43,96)	40 (21,98)	3,659	1,07	Low Perception
My organisations leaders have well rounded set of skills holistically for future fit organisations?	6 (3,30)	37 (20,33)	31 (17,03)	77 (42,31)	31 (17,03)	3,49	1,10	Low Perception
My organisations leaders are resilient	6 (3,30)	13 (7,14)	30 (16,48)	83 (45,60)	50 (27,47)	3,87	1,01	High Perception
My organisations leaders are adaptable	7 (3,85)	29 (15,93)	32 (17,58)	78 (42,86)	36 (19,78)	3,59	1,09	Low Perception

Note N = 182 SDis = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SA = Strongly Agree; Decision – Mean of Means = $25,65/7 = 3.66$. **Source:** (IBM SPSS Statistics 27, 2023)

This finding aligns with recent research highlighting the increasing importance of learning agility, cognitive flexibility, and decision recalibration in complex crisis environments. Rudolph et al. (2021) show that leaders navigating sustained disruption rely on adaptive behaviours that enable continuous reassessment of organisational priorities, while Dirani et al. (2020) demonstrate that effective crisis leadership requires leaders to adjust decisions and leadership approaches as conditions evolve. Although resilience supports leadership endurance and stability under pressure, Duchek (2020) argues that resilience primarily enables organisations to absorb disruption rather than explaining leadership effectiveness over time. The prioritisation of adaptability observed in Table 2 therefore reflects a broader shift toward

leadership approaches that emphasise learning and behavioural adjustment in prolonged crisis contexts.

Leadership Capabilities and Effectiveness

To further examine the relationship between leadership capabilities and leadership effectiveness, correlation analysis was conducted. As presented in Table 3, leadership adaptability demonstrated a strong positive relationship with leadership effectiveness indicators, including perceived decision quality and employee well-being initiatives ($r \approx .63$, $p < .01$). These findings indicate that higher levels of perceived leadership adaptability were associated with stronger perceptions of leadership effectiveness during prolonged crisis conditions.

Table 3: Correlation Between Leadership Capabilities and Leadership Effectiveness Indicators

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	σ	Decision
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)			
During the COVID-19 period my organisation deployed a full work from home protocol	6 (3,30)	19 (10,44)	15 (8,24)	66 (36,26)	76 (41,76)	4,03	1,10	High Perception
Post the COVID-19 period my organisation has continued to encourage the full work from home protocol	42 (23,08)	80 (43,96)	22 (12,09)	22 (12,09)	16 (8,79)	2,40	1,22	Low Perception
Post the COVID-19 period my organisation has deployed a hybrid of work from home & office protocol	24 (13,19)	26 (14,29)	17 (9,34)	68 (37,36)	47 (25,82)	3,48	1,36	High Perception
My organisational leadership deployed a reintegration process when we commenced returning to the office	17 (9,34)	36 (19,78)	28 (15,38)	76 (41,76)	25 (13,74)	3,31	1,20	Low Perception
My organisations leadership displayed great care for employees mental health during the COVID-19 period	18 (9,89)	16 (8,79)	37 (20,33)	74 (40,66)	37 (20,33)	3,53	1,20	High Perception
My organisations leadership displayed great care for employees well-being during the COVID-19 period	12 (6,59)	19 (10,44)	33 (18,13)	81 (44,51)	37 (20,33)	3,62	1,12	High Perception
My organisations leadership generally display great care for employees mental health	14 (7,69)	29 (15,93)	31 (17,03)	73 (40,11)	35 (19,23)	3,47	1,19	High Perception
My organisations leadership generally display great care for employees well being	11 (6,04)	19 (10,44)	36 (19,78)	80 (43,96)	36 (19,78)	3,61	1,10	High Perception
My organisations leadership supports growth and development	7 (3,85)	19 (10,44)	30 (16,48)	72 (39,56)	54 (29,67)	3,81	1,09	High Perception
I believe leadership resilience supersedes adaptability as a future fit for leaders to lead through a crisis	6 (3,30)	38 (20,88)	51 (28,02)	62 (34,07)	25 (13,74)	3,34	1,06	Low Perception
I believe leadership adaptability supersedes resilience as a future fit for leaders to lead through a crisis	3 (1,65)	16 (8,79)	36 (19,78)	88 (48,35)	39 (21,43)	3,79	0,93	High Perception
I believe leadership compassion supersedes empathy as a future fit for leaders to lead through a crisis	8 (4,40)	26 (14,29)	48 (26,37)	77 (42,31)	23 (12,64)	3,445	1,03	Low Perception
My organisation does have an employee EAP/EWP programme	15 (8,24)	13 (7,14)	24 (13,19)	78 (42,86)	52 (28,57)	3,76	1,18	High Perception
I utilised the employee well being programme during the COVID-19 period	46 (25,27)	41 (22,53)	33 (18,13)	38 (20,88)	24 (13,19)	2,74	1,38	Low Perception

Note $N = 182$ SDIs = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SAg = Strongly Agree; Decision – Mean of Means = $48.33/14 = 3.45$. **Source: (IBM SPSS Statistics 27, 2023)**

In contrast, leadership resilience exhibited weaker and less consistent associations with leadership effectiveness outcomes. Survey responses relating to resilience were more moderately distributed, with 34.07% of respondents selecting “agree” and 13.74% selecting “strongly agree” that

resilience supersedes adaptability as a future leadership capability, representing a combined positive perception of 47.81%. This comparatively lower level of agreement suggests that resilience was perceived as contributing to leadership continuity and stability but was less

strongly associated with leadership effectiveness in prolonged crisis contexts. This interpretation aligns with recent scholarship indicating that resilience primarily enables leaders to absorb disruption and sustain organisational functioning under pressure but offers more limited explanatory insight into how leaders adjust strategies and leadership practices as crises evolve, as discussed by Duchek (2020) and Rudolph et al. (2021).

In contrast, perceptions relating to adaptability were considerably stronger. A majority of respondents indicated that leadership adaptability supersedes resilience as a future-fit capability, with 48.35% selecting “agree” and 21.43% selecting “strongly agree”, representing a combined positive perception of 69.78%. The differential strength of these responses provides empirical support for the proposition that adaptability functions as a differentiating leadership capability in prolonged crisis contexts, whereas resilience performs a more sustaining role in supporting leadership continuity.

Perceptions of Leadership Effectiveness Under Prolonged Crisis

Table 4 presents executive perceptions of leadership effectiveness under conditions of sustained uncertainty, consolidating

leadership effectiveness indicators related to decision-making confidence, organisational credibility, and readiness to lead through future crises. Overall, respondents reported generally positive perceptions of leadership effectiveness, with a majority of participants selecting “agree” or “strongly agree” across several leadership indicators, including leadership strengths (70.33% agree), leadership suitability during COVID-19 (67.58% agree/strongly agree), and confidence in leadership during the crisis (68.13% agree/strongly agree). These results suggest that senior leaders were largely viewed as capable of sustaining organisational direction and performance under prolonged pressure.

However, variability within the responses reported in Table 4 indicates that leadership effectiveness was not experienced uniformly across organisations. For example, while a strong majority expressed confidence in leadership capabilities during crisis conditions (68.13% agree/strongly agree), perceptions regarding leadership practices and behavioural standards were more varied (approximately 61–71% agree/strongly agree). This variation reinforces the importance of examining which leadership capabilities account for differences in perceived effectiveness rather than assuming homogeneous

leadership performance during prolonged crisis conditions. Recent crisis leadership research similarly shows that leadership effectiveness during sustained disruption varies depending on leaders' ability to

adapt decision-making approaches and recalibrate leadership practices over time, as demonstrated by Dirani et al. (2020) and Rudolph et al. (2021).

Table 4: Executive Perceptions of Leadership Effectiveness Under Prolonged Crisis Conditions

Statement	SD f (%)	D f (%)	N f (%)	A f (%)	SA f (%)	Mean	σ	Decision
My organisations leadership team have great leadership strengths.	6 (3,30)	19 (10,44)	29 (15,93)	128 (70,33)	0	4.35	1.10	High Perception
My organisations leadership styles compliment the organisation.	6 (3,30)	29 (15,93)	22 (12,09)	85 (46,70)	40 (21,98)	3.68	1.09	High Perception
My organisation has a leadership culture which is perceived to be modern.	16 (8,79)	30 (16,48)	28 (15,38)	81 (44,51)	27 (14,84)	3.40	1.18	High Perception
My organisation has a leadership culture which is perceived to be traditional.	8 (4,30)	51 (28,02)	43 (23,63)	63 (34,62)	17 (9,34)	3.16	1.07	Low Perception
My organisations leadership team is the best suited to have lead the organisation through COVID-19 pandemic.	4 (2,20)	21 (11,54)	34 (16,68)	74 (40,66)	49 (26,92)	3.79	1.04	High Perception
My organisations leadership team is the best suited to lead the organisation through a future crisis.	6 (3,30)	29 (15,93)	31 (17,03)	69 (37,91)	47 (25,82)	3.67	1.12	High Perception
During the COVID-19 pandemic, my organisation would have performed better with a 50% change in leadership.	25 (13,74)	60 (32,97)	43 (23,63)	41 (22,53)	13 (7,14)	2.76	1.16	Low Perception
During the COVID-19 pandemic, my organisation would have performed better with a 100% change in leadership	51 (28,20)	64 (35,16)	41 (22,53)	12 (6,59)	14 (7,69)	2.31	1.17	Low Perception
My organisations leadership culture will lead the organisation to greater success against competitors.	9 (4,95)	37 (20,33)	37 (20,33)	63 (34,62)	36 (19,78)	3.44	1.16	High Perception
The decisions made by my organisations leadership through the COVID-19 period were devastating to organisational performance.	61 (33,52)	64 (35,16)	33 (18,13)	18 (9,89)	6 (3,30)	2.14	1.09	Low Perception
The decisions made by my organisations leadership were beneficial to organisational performance.	5 (2,75)	24 (13,19)	29 (15,93)	83 (45,60)	41 (22,53)	3.72	1.04	High Perception
My organisations current leadership behaviour, is that which is deemed above acceptable?	8 (4,40)	26 (14,29)	31 (17,30)	96 (52,75)	21 (11,54)	3.53	1.02	Low Perception
My organisations leaders portrayed above acceptable leadership behaviour through the COVID-19 pandemic periods?	4 (2,20)	16 (8,79)	33 (18,13)	98 (53,85)	31 (17,03)	3.75	0.92	High Perception
My organisations current leadership practices is that which is above acceptable?	5 (2,75)	28 (15,38)	37 (20,33)	84 (46,15)	28 (15,38)	3.56	1.02	Low Perception
My organisations leaders portrayed above acceptable leadership practices through the COVID-19 pandemic periods?	3 (1,65)	19 (10,44)	41 (22,53)	81 (44,51)	38 (20,88)	3.73	0.96	Low Perception
My organisations current leadership are bold to make tough decisions through uncertain terrains?	5 (2,75)	21 (11,54)	26 (14,29)	86 (47,25)	44 (24,18)	3.79	1.03	High Perception
My organisations leaders made tough decisions through COVID-19 which had positive impact on employees well being?	6 (3,30)	22 (12,09)	37 (20,33)	77 (42,31)	40 (21,98)	3.68	1.05	High Perception
I had the confidence in my organisations leaders to lead through the COVID-19 crisis?	4 (2,20)	14 (7,69)	40 (21,98)	86 (47,25)	38 (20,88)	3.77	0.94	High Perception
I have the confidence in my organisations leaders to lead through new norms of uncertain terrains?	9 (4,95)	27 (14,84)	27 (14,84)	85 (46,70)	34 (18,68)	3.59	1.10	Low Perception

Note $N = 182$ SDis = Strongly Disagree; D = Disagree; N = Neutral; A = Agree; SAg = Strongly Agree; Decision – Mean of Means = $65.80/19 = 3.46$. Source: (IBM SPSS Statistics 27, 2023)

Synthesis of Quantitative Findings

Taken together, the quantitative findings indicate that adaptability is more closely associated with leadership effectiveness than resilience in prolonged crisis contexts. While resilience supports leadership continuity and psychological stability, adaptability appears to explain variation in leadership effectiveness across extended periods of uncertainty. These findings provide empirical support for distinguishing between sustaining and differentiating leadership capabilities, reinforcing the need for explanatory frameworks that move beyond resilience-centric conceptions of crisis leadership.

4.2 Qualitative Findings

The qualitative phase sought to provide explanatory insight into how senior executives experienced and enacted leadership capabilities during prolonged crisis conditions. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following a systematic coding process involving initial open coding, category development, and iterative refinement of themes. As Braun and Clarke (2021) note, thematic analysis enables researchers to identify patterns of meaning within qualitative

datasets while maintaining transparency and analytical rigour. Through this process, three dominant themes emerged: (1) resilience as leadership endurance, (2) adaptability as leadership recalibration, and (3) leadership effectiveness through learning and flexibility. These themes provide interpretive depth to the quantitative findings reported in Section 4.1.

To enhance transparency and auditability, the coding process was documented through a structured analytical framework. Initial codes were derived directly from executive interview transcripts and subsequently grouped into conceptual categories before being synthesised into higher-order themes. Transparent reporting of coding structures strengthens the credibility and confirmability of qualitative findings by providing a clear evidence trail linking raw data to thematic interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Table 5 presents the coding framework illustrating how representative interview codes were aggregated into categories and ultimately developed into the three dominant themes identified in this study.

Table 5: Coding Structure and Theme Development

Representative Codes	Analytical Category	Final Theme
Maintaining composure, sustaining confidence, emotional regulation, leadership stamina	Leadership endurance under pressure	Resilience as Leadership Endurance
Revising decisions, adapting leadership style, responding to evolving conditions, distributed decision-making	Leadership recalibration and flexibility	Adaptability as Leadership Recalibration
Learning from crisis, collaborative problem-solving, continuous adjustment, organisational learning	Leadership learning and responsiveness	Leadership Effectiveness Through Learning and Flexibility

Theme 1: Resilience as Leadership Endurance

Participants consistently described resilience as a foundational leadership capability that enabled leaders to maintain organisational stability during periods of sustained disruption. Executives emphasised the importance of emotional regulation, psychological endurance, and maintaining organisational confidence under prolonged pressure. As Duchek (2020) argues, resilience enables leaders and organisations to absorb disruption and sustain functioning during periods of adversity.

One executive reflected: *“During the pandemic, our primary role as leaders was to remain steady. Employees looked to leadership for reassurance, and maintaining stability became as important as making decisions.”* (Participant 4)

Similarly, another participant noted: *“Resilience meant showing up consistently, even when the situation was evolving daily. Leadership required maintaining confidence for the organisation even when uncertainty was high.”* (Participant 7).

These findings align with research by Rudolph et al. (2021), who demonstrate that resilient leadership behaviours play a critical role in sustaining organisational functioning during periods of prolonged uncertainty. However, several participants also suggested that resilience alone was insufficient for navigating the evolving demands of sustained crisis conditions.

Theme 2: Adaptability as Leadership Recalibration

While resilience enabled leaders to sustain organisational stability, participants consistently emphasised adaptability as essential for navigating the evolving and uncertain nature of prolonged crises.

Executives described the need to continuously reassess assumptions, revise decision-making processes, and adjust leadership approaches as crisis conditions evolved. This perspective reflects the argument advanced by Uhl-Bien and Arena (2018) that leadership in complex environments requires continuous adaptation and organisational learning.

One executive explained: *“The biggest challenge was that the situation kept changing. What worked in the first months of COVID no longer worked later. Leaders had to constantly rethink decisions and adapt our approach.”* (Participant 2)

Another participant emphasised the role of distributed decision-making:

“Adaptability meant being willing to listen and adjust. Leaders had to rely more on their teams and revise decisions as new information emerged.” (Participant 9)

These insights support findings reported by Dirani et al. (2020) and Kniffin et al. (2021), who show that adaptive leadership behaviours were critical in enabling organisations to respond effectively to pandemic-related disruption. Importantly, participants frequently linked adaptability to improved decision quality and organisational responsiveness.

Theme 3: Leadership Effectiveness Through Learning and Flexibility

Participants repeatedly associated leadership effectiveness during prolonged crises with leaders' capacity for continuous learning and behavioural flexibility. Executives emphasised that effective leaders were those who could reassess strategies, incorporate new information, and adapt organisational practices as conditions evolved. This perspective aligns with contemporary crisis leadership research, which highlights the importance of learning-oriented leadership during periods of sustained disruption (Carroll & Conboy, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2021).

One executive explained: *“The leaders who succeeded were those willing to learn and adapt quickly. It wasn't about having perfect answers but about adjusting decisions as the situation changed.”* (Participant 6)

Another participant noted: *“Leadership became more collaborative. The crisis forced leaders to engage teams in problem-solving, which ultimately strengthened our response.”* (Participant 11)

These findings reinforce the quantitative results presented earlier, which indicated stronger associations between adaptability and leadership effectiveness. As Duchek (2020) notes, organisations navigating

prolonged crises increasingly rely on adaptive capabilities that enable continuous recalibration of leadership practices and organisational strategies.

4.3 Integrated Insights (Triangulation)

Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative findings revealed a strong convergence between statistical patterns and executive narratives, reinforcing the robustness of the study's explanatory insights. As synthesised in Table 6, the integration of data sources highlights clear differentiation between leadership resilience and adaptability as distinct leadership capabilities operating within prolonged crisis contexts. Consistent with mixed-methods integration principles, the convergence of findings across data sources strengthens the credibility and explanatory power of the results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Quantitative findings indicated a strong prioritisation of adaptability over resilience (Table 2), alongside a statistically significant relationship between adaptability and leadership effectiveness indicators (Table 3). These patterns were reinforced by qualitative themes identified in Table 5, where executives emphasised learning agility, decision recalibration, and behavioural flexibility as central to

effective leadership under sustained uncertainty. Together, these findings suggest that adaptability plays a critical role in differentiating leadership effectiveness when crisis conditions persist over time.

In contrast, resilience emerged across both quantitative and qualitative evidence as a sustaining leadership capability. While resilience supported leadership continuity, emotional regulation, and stability under prolonged pressure, it demonstrated weaker associations with leadership effectiveness outcomes. Executive narratives described resilience primarily as enabling leaders to remain composed and present during sustained disruption, but insufficient on its own for responding to evolving organisational demands without adaptive recalibration.

The integrated findings further indicate that leadership effectiveness under prolonged crisis conditions is shaped by the interaction between sustaining and differentiating leadership capabilities. As illustrated in Table 6, leaders who combined resilience with high levels of adaptability were more likely to sustain decision quality, organisational trust, and leadership credibility over extended periods of uncertainty. This triangulated insight provides empirical support for

distinguishing between leadership capabilities that enable endurance and those that drive effectiveness, thereby advancing explanatory clarity within crisis leadership scholarship.

Table 6 summarises this integration, linking quantitative trends with qualitative elaboration to illustrate how sustaining and differentiating leadership capabilities interact to influence leadership effectiveness in prolonged crisis environments.

Table 6 – Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings on Leadership Capabilities in Prolonged Crisis

Leadership Capability	Quantitative Findings	Summary of Participant Responses	Integrated Insight
Leadership Resilience	Resilience showed weaker and less consistent correlations with leadership effectiveness indicators (Table 3). It was viewed as necessary but not sufficient for effective leadership (Table 2).	Executives described resilience primarily as endurance, emotional regulation, and “staying the course” under prolonged pressure.	Resilience functions as a sustaining capability, enabling leadership continuity and psychological stability but not differentiating leadership effectiveness
Leadership Adaptability	Adaptability was prioritised by 69.8% of respondents (Table 2) and demonstrated a strong positive relationship with leadership effectiveness ($r \approx .63$, $p < .01$) (Table 3).	Executives emphasised learning agility, decision recalibration, role flexibility, and continuous adjustment to evolving conditions.	Adaptability functions as a differentiating capability, explaining variation in leadership effectiveness under prolonged crisis condition
Leadership Effectiveness	Variability in perceived leadership effectiveness was observed across decision quality, confidence, and readiness to lead through future crises (Table 4).	Leaders linked effectiveness to the ability to revise approaches over time rather than relying on initial crisis responses.	Leadership effectiveness in prolonged crisis is shaped by the interaction between sustaining and differentiating capabilities, with adaptability playing a decisive role.

5. Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine how adaptability and resilience operate as distinct leadership capabilities in prolonged crisis contexts and how these capabilities differentially influence leadership effectiveness. By integrating quantitative and qualitative findings through triangulation (Tables 2–6), the study moves beyond descriptive accounts of crisis leadership to provide explanatory insight into the functional roles of leadership

capabilities when crisis becomes an enduring organisational condition. In particular, the integrated analysis presented in Table 6 demonstrates how sustaining and differentiating leadership capabilities interact to influence leadership effectiveness under conditions of sustained disruption.

In doing so, the findings address a persistent ambiguity within crisis leadership literature, where adaptability and

resilience are frequently treated as interchangeable or mutually reinforcing constructs. The discussion below interprets the findings through contemporary crisis leadership theory and positions the study's contribution within this evolving scholarly discourse.

5.1 Repositioning Resilience: From Central Capability to Sustaining Condition

The findings indicate that leadership resilience plays a critical but primarily sustaining role in prolonged crisis contexts. Quantitative results demonstrated that resilience was widely recognised as important by senior executives (Table 2), yet it exhibited weaker and less consistent associations with leadership effectiveness indicators compared to adaptability (Table 3). Qualitative narratives reinforced this pattern, framing resilience as emotional regulation, endurance, and the ability to remain present under sustained pressure (Table 5).

These findings extend empirical research that positions resilience as a critical capability enabling leaders to sustain functioning under conditions of disruption and adversity. Duchek (2020) conceptualises resilience as a dynamic organisational capability that allows leaders

to absorb shocks while maintaining operational continuity, while Rudolph et al. (2021) demonstrate that resilient leadership behaviours play an important role in stabilising organisations during periods of prolonged uncertainty. However, recent scholarship increasingly cautions against positioning resilience as a sufficient explanation for leadership effectiveness in extended crisis environments. For example, Bowers, Hall and Srinivasan (2017) argue that resilience primarily supports endurance and recovery rather than explaining how leaders recalibrate strategies or leadership practices as crisis conditions evolve. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that in contrast to short-term disruption contexts, prolonged crises shift the functional role of resilience from a defining leadership capability to a necessary enabling condition that supports, but does not determine, leadership effectiveness.

This repositioning is theoretically significant. Rather than diminishing the importance of resilience, the findings clarify its role as foundational but non-differentiating. Resilience enables leaders to endure crisis conditions, but it does not, on its own, account for variation in leadership effectiveness as uncertainty persists and organisational demands evolve.

5.2 Adaptability as a Differentiating Capability in Prolonged Crisis

Leadership

Adaptability emerged as the primary differentiating leadership capability influencing effectiveness under prolonged crisis conditions. Quantitative findings demonstrated strong prioritisation of adaptability over resilience (Table 2), alongside a statistically significant relationship between adaptability and leadership effectiveness indicators (Table 3). These patterns were consistently reinforced by qualitative accounts emphasising learning agility, decision recalibration, and behavioural flexibility (Table 5), with the integrated synthesis presented in Table 6 illustrating how these adaptive capabilities translate into differentiated leadership effectiveness.

These findings provide empirical support for adaptive leadership theory, which emphasises leaders' capacity to mobilise learning and experimentation in response to complex, non-linear challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009). Importantly, the study extends this theory by demonstrating that adaptability not only supports leadership adjustment but also explains variation in leadership effectiveness when crisis conditions persist over time.

Where resilience sustains leadership presence, adaptability enables leadership evolution. Leaders who demonstrated adaptive capabilities were better able to revise decision-making approaches, adjust leadership behaviours, and sustain organisational confidence across extended periods of uncertainty. This distinction is particularly salient in prolonged crisis contexts, where leadership effectiveness is less dependent on initial crisis response and more dependent on continuous recalibration.

5.3 Explaining Leadership Effectiveness in Prolonged Crisis Contexts

Leadership effectiveness under prolonged crisis conditions emerged as a variable outcome shaped by leadership capability configuration rather than uniform leadership response. While overall perceptions of leadership effectiveness were generally positive (Table 4), variability across organisations indicates that not all leadership responses were experienced as equally effective.

The integrated findings suggest that leadership effectiveness is shaped by the interaction between sustaining and differentiating capabilities, as illustrated in Table 6. Leaders who exhibited resilience without corresponding adaptability were

perceived as stable but less effective over time. In contrast, leaders who combined resilience with high levels of adaptability were more likely to sustain decision quality, organisational trust, and leadership confidence during extended crisis periods.

This insight contributes to crisis leadership scholarship by empirically explaining why leadership effectiveness diverges under similar crisis conditions. Rather than attributing effectiveness solely to leader endurance or emotional stability, the findings highlight adaptability as the mechanism through which leaders translate sustained presence into effective leadership outcomes.

5.4 An Explanatory Framework for Leadership Capability Differentiation

Synthesising the findings, this study proposes an explanatory framework that differentiates between leadership capabilities that sustain leadership presence and those that differentiate leadership effectiveness in prolonged crisis contexts. The framework offers conceptual clarity on how resilience and adaptability function differently over time.

Within this framework:

- Resilience operates as a sustaining capability, enabling leaders to

absorb prolonged pressure, regulate emotions, and maintain continuity.

- Adaptability operates as a differentiating capability, enabling leaders to recalibrate decisions, revise leadership practices, and sustain effectiveness as crisis conditions evolve.
- Leadership effectiveness emerges from the interaction between these capabilities, moderated by contextual factors such as crisis duration, organisational complexity, and governance maturity.

By distinguishing between sustaining and differentiating leadership capabilities, the study advances theoretical clarity within crisis leadership research and provides a foundation for more nuanced leadership capability development in sustained disruption contexts.

5.5 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to crisis leadership scholarship by empirically disentangling adaptability and resilience and demonstrating their differential roles in prolonged crisis contexts. In doing so, it challenges resilience-dominant narratives and extends

adaptive leadership theory into sustained crisis environments.

From a practical perspective, the findings have implications for executive development and governance. Leadership development initiatives that focus predominantly on resilience may be insufficient for preparing leaders to navigate prolonged crises. Instead, greater emphasis should be placed on cultivating adaptive capabilities, including learning agility, cognitive flexibility, and decision recalibration. For boards and senior leadership teams, the findings underscore the importance of evaluating not only leaders' capacity to endure crisis but also their ability to adapt leadership approaches over time.

5.6 Positioning for Future Research

While this study offers explanatory insight into leadership capability differentiation, it does not integrate these capabilities into a formal crisis leadership model. Future research is required to synthesise adaptability, resilience, governance dynamics, and leadership systems into an integrated crisis leadership model capable of guiding executive leadership practice and board-level oversight in prolonged crisis contexts.

6. Delineations and Limitations

This study is subject to several delineations and limitations that frame the interpretation of its findings. First, the research was deliberately delimited to C-Suite executives from organisations listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) Top 40 Index. This focus enhances the relevance of the findings for executive leadership and board-level governance in complex organisational environments but may limit generalisability to smaller, privately held, or non-listed organisations.

Second, the study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design drawing on executive self-reported data. While this approach enabled rich insight into leadership capability dynamics under prolonged crisis conditions, it may be subject to perceptual bias. To mitigate this risk, methodological triangulation was applied through the integration of quantitative results with qualitative executive narratives, strengthening the credibility of the findings.

Third, the study represents a secondary explanatory analysis of an existing empirical dataset, which necessarily constrained the analysis to constructs included in the original data collection and precluded longitudinal examination of

leadership capability development over time. Finally, although COVID-19 functioned as a contextual backdrop rather than the primary analytical focus, the findings reflect leadership experiences shaped by sustained crisis conditions and should be interpreted within this broader context of prolonged uncertainty.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to examine how adaptability and resilience operate as distinct leadership capabilities in prolonged crisis contexts and how these capabilities differentially influence leadership effectiveness. Drawing on a sequential explanatory mixed-methods analysis of executive-level data from JSE Top 40 organisations, the findings provide empirical clarity on a persistent ambiguity within crisis leadership scholarship.

The study demonstrates that while leadership resilience remains a critical sustaining capability, enabling endurance, emotional regulation, and leadership continuity under prolonged pressure, it does not sufficiently explain variation in leadership effectiveness over time. In contrast, adaptability emerged as the primary differentiating capability influencing leadership effectiveness in sustained crisis environments. Leaders who

demonstrated learning agility, decision recalibration, and behavioural flexibility were perceived as more effective in sustaining organisational trust, decision quality, and confidence as crisis conditions evolved.

By empirically distinguishing between sustaining and differentiating leadership capabilities, this study advances crisis leadership theory beyond resilience-centric narratives and extends adaptive leadership perspectives into prolonged crisis contexts. The explanatory framework proposed offers conceptual clarity on how leadership capabilities function over time, providing a foundation for future integrative crisis leadership research.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that leadership development initiatives should move beyond an exclusive focus on resilience and place greater emphasis on cultivating adaptive capabilities. For boards and senior leadership teams, the results highlight the importance of assessing leaders' capacity not only to endure crisis but also to adapt leadership approaches as uncertainty persists. Future research is encouraged to build on these findings by integrating leadership capabilities with governance dynamics and organisational systems into a comprehensive crisis leadership model.

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