

Triadic Leadership in Remote Teams: A Qualitative Case Study of a Sustainability Initiative in L'Oréal China

by

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Abstract

As sustainability initiatives expand across global organizations, effective leadership is increasingly vital for managing remote, cross-regional teams. This study examines how servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership styles helped a remote team deal with problems in a real project. Using a qualitative case study of L'Oréal China's Biotherm "Empty Bottle Refill" project, the paper explores how leadership responses mitigated information gaps, trust deficits, psychological disengagement, and coordination inefficiencies. Data were gathered through project documents, semi-structured interviews (six interviews, 50–60 minutes each), and internal communications, and analyzed using thematic coding. Findings include three main propositions: (1) servant leadership fosters psychological safety and team cohesion in remote, cross-functional projects; (2) transformational leadership strengthens mission alignment and stimulates local innovation; and (3) adaptive leadership enables fast, localized experimentation and iterative learning. These styles functioned as a mutually reinforcing leadership system tailored to distributed, sustainability-focused initiatives. The study contributes a pragmatic triadic leadership framework and offers concrete recommendations for managers designing remote projects that must balance trust, purpose, and agility across regions and functions.

Keywords: servant leadership; transformational leadership; adaptive leadership; remote team management; sustainability

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Introduction

Remote work has transformed how global organizations manage teams, particularly in mission-driven sectors where coordination spans geographies, disciplines, and regulatory contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this trend, but even post-pandemic, remote and hybrid collaboration remain central to project execution in large multinational corporations (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). While virtual teamwork offers operational flexibility, it also introduces structural and behavioral challenges: communication gaps, reduced psychological safety, weakened trust, and difficulty in performance oversight (Golden, Veiga, & Dino, 2008; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Edmondson, 1999). These difficulties are amplified in sustainability projects, where timelines are tight, stakeholder pressure is high, and cross-functional input is essential.

Leadership plays a critical role in mitigating such challenges. However, traditional hierarchical leadership models often fall short in remote environments where authority is dispersed, interactions are mediated, and cultural diversity is heightened (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In response, scholars have emphasized more human-centric, flexible leadership approaches. Among them, servant leadership has emerged as a promising model that emphasizes empathy, empowerment, and the well-being of team members (Greenleaf, 2013; Eva et al., 2019). In remote settings, its relational focus may help offset the lack of informal interaction and foster psychological engagement. Yet on its own, servant leadership may not suffice to meet the complexity and dynamism of high-stakes sustainability initiatives.

To address strategic vision and continuous adaptation, complementary leadership models are needed. Transformational leadership offers mission-driven direction and motivation through idealized influence and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Riggio, 2006), while adaptive leadership promotes learning, experimentation, and context-responsive decision-making (Heifetz et al., 2009). Scholars have recently proposed integrative models that combine these styles to enhance leadership flexibility in turbulent environments (Denison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995; Yukl & Mahsud, 2010). However, empirical evidence on how such styles interact in real-world remote sustainability projects remains limited.

This study responds to that gap by examining a concrete case: the “Empty Bottle Refill” project launched under the Biotherm brand by L’Oréal China, a cross-regional initiative aimed at promoting circular economy practices aligned with China’s national “dual carbon” goals. The project was implemented entirely through remote collaboration among marketing, IT, supply chain, and sustainability teams across multiple cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. Using this case, the paper explores the following research question: How do servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership styles function -individually and interactively - in managing remote teams executing sustainability initiatives?

To answer this, the study adopts a qualitative case study design, using semi-

structured interviews, project documentation, and internal communication records as primary data. The analysis is guided by thematic coding derived from leadership theory, contextualized within the dynamics of remote teamwork.

By offering empirical insight into how a triadic leadership model operates in a distributed, sustainability-oriented initiative, this study contributes both to the academic understanding of leadership flexibility and to practical guidance for managing remote teams in high-complexity environments.

Literature Review Servant Leadership in Remote Contexts

The concept of servant leadership, as first introduced by Greenleaf (1977), prioritizes the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first, forming a foundation of trust, empathy, and empowerment in leadership practice. It encourages leaders to focus on enabling followers to grow, develop, and contribute meaningfully to the organization.

Liden et al. (2008) operationalized the servant leadership model through multidimensional constructs such as emotional healing, creating value for the community, and putting subordinates first. In remote environments, where informal interaction is minimal, this leadership style becomes particularly valuable. Eva et al. (2019) argued that servant leaders are uniquely positioned to foster psychological safety and employee well-being in distributed teams by focusing on emotional healing, empathy, and listening. According to the authors, servant leadership is well suited to virtual teams because it emphasizes interpersonal connection and relational trust.

Liden et al. (2014) also highlight that servant leadership can promote a serving culture that supports performance at both individual and unit levels, especially when support resources are provided consistently across the organization. In remote contexts, these principles translate into communication rituals, recognition practices, and knowledge-sharing platforms that strengthen emotional bonds and reduce professional isolation.

However, while servant leadership helps build trust and engagement, it may not be sufficient to provide direction or agility during uncertainty. This calls for integrating more strategic or change-oriented leadership approaches to complement the servant model.

Transformational Leadership and Vision Alignment

Transformational leadership was defined by Bass (1985) as a leadership style that elevates followers by broadening and elevating the interests of the employees, creating commitment beyond transactional exchange. As described by Bass and Riggio (2006), this leadership style includes four key dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

This approach has been found to be especially effective in distributed or cross functional teams. Morgeson, DeRue, and Karam (2010) observed that transformational leadership enhances virtual team outcomes when leaders translate strategic goals into

emotionally resonant symbols and narratives that promote cohesion and shared vision. Similarly, Elenkov, Judge, and Wright (2005) found that transformational leaders significantly influence innovation by encouraging followers to question assumptions and reframe problems.

In remote sustainability projects, these characteristics become critical. According to Bass and Riggio (2006), transformational leaders foster higher levels of intrinsic motivation by linking follower needs with organizational goals, which can be instrumental in engaging employees with abstract or long-term sustainability visions. The symbolic and motivational power of this leadership style often compensates for the lack of physical presence, helping teams feel connected to a common purpose.

However, transformational leadership may encounter limitations in highly dynamic or uncertain environments where rapid adaptation is required. Its emphasis on vision and alignment must be balanced by responsiveness to emergent conditions.

Adaptive Leadership for Complexity and Change

Adaptive leadership, a concept advanced by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009), responds to problems that require new learning, innovation, and changes in values, beliefs, or behavior. Unlike technical leadership that focuses on problem-solving through existing expertise, adaptive leadership invites experimentation and co-created solutions through inclusive engagement. Heifetz et al. (2009) further assert that leaders must get on the balcony to observe patterns, assess conflicts, and identify deep-rooted issues that conventional leadership may overlook. These capabilities are especially important in remote teams managing sustainability projects, where unexpected changes in policy, consumer behavior, or technical feasibility are common.

Edmondson and Harvey (2017) emphasize that “psychologically safe failure” is a hallmark of adaptive leadership, enabling team members to learn from mistakes without fear of blame. Their research indicates that when leaders promote structured experimentation, such as sprints or iterative feedback, innovation becomes more likely. In remote teams, these mechanisms can be supported by digital tools such as experiment logs, real-time analytics, and asynchronous discussion boards.

Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2007) extend this perspective through complexity leadership theory, which recognizes that in complex adaptive systems, leadership is less about control and more about enabling emergent, adaptive responses to context. They argue that effective leaders alternate between enabling, administrative, and adaptive roles to manage complexity in knowledge-intensive environments.

Thus, adaptive leadership allows organizations to respond flexibly to context while maintaining alignment with evolving goals, making it a powerful complement to both servant and transformational styles.

Shared and Distributed Leadership

Another perspective relevant to remote and cross-functional projects is shared or distributed leadership. Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone (2007) defined it as “an emergent team property that results from the distribution of leadership influence across multiple team members” (p. 1218). In this model, leadership is not concentrated in a single formal manager but is enacted collectively as team members take initiative according to context and expertise. For remote projects, this approach has clear advantages because different individuals can step forward with servant, transformational, or adaptive behaviors depending on the team’s needs. For example, servant leadership may appear when colleagues offer emotional support, transformational leadership may come from a middle manager who communicates vision, and adaptive leadership may emerge when local staff test solutions under uncertainty. Introducing shared leadership into the triadic framework highlights how leadership behaviors can be fluid, distributed, and situational, which is an important consideration in understanding how the Biotherm project achieved flexibility and responsiveness.

Integration of Styles: Toward a Behaviorally Complex Leader

Given the distinct contributions of servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership, a growing body of research has emphasized the importance of behavioral complexity, which is the leader’s ability to deploy multiple styles based on situational demands (Denison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995). These authors argue that leaders who exhibit behavioral complexity are more effective because they can switch roles, functions, and priorities in response to changing circumstances.

Yukl and Mahsud (2010) reinforce this notion by stating that flexible leadership involves shifting emphasis among different leadership behaviors as conditions change. Their findings suggest that organizations operating in fast-paced, uncertain environments benefit most from leaders who can fluidly integrate people-oriented, task-oriented, and change-oriented leadership. In the context of remote sustainability initiatives, such integration becomes crucial. Servant leadership lays the groundwork for trust and psychological safety; transformational leadership provides a motivating vision; and adaptive leadership facilitates learning and responsiveness. These models can function synergistically rather than competitively, forming a “leadership repertoire” suited to virtual and volatile conditions (Denison et al., 1995). This study builds on these insights by empirically examining how leaders in a large multinational sustainability project deploy and sequence these three styles to manage the demands of a remote, high complexity environment.

Research Design and Methodology Research Design

This paper uses a qualitative single-case study approach, which is commonly applied when researchers aim to understand complex social processes in a real-world context. According to Yin (2009), a case study is useful when the research question asks “how” and “why,” and when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly defined. In this study, the main question is: How do different leadership styles - servant, transformational, and adaptive - interact in a remote sustainability project? This makes a case study method both appropriate and effective.

Case Selection

The case selected is the “Empty Bottle Refill” project under the Biotherm brand of L’Oréal China. The project started in 2021 as part of the company’s response to China’s “dual carbon” goals. It encouraged consumers to bring empty skincare bottles to stores for refill, promoting circular economy practices. The project involved remote collaboration among marketing, sustainability, IT, and supply chain teams located in different cities including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.

One important reason for selecting this case is the rich presence of different leadership behaviors in a fully remote, high-stakes context. The project also offered a clear timeline, a diverse team structure, and observable outcomes. These features made it ideal for examining leadership styles in action.

Author’s Role and Reflexivity

The author served as Director of Marketing, Sustainability & Partnerships at L’Oréal China during the project period, which gave direct access to internal meetings, documents, and team communications. This participant observer position strengthened the depth of available data but also introduced risks of bias in observation and interpretation. To address this, reflexivity was practiced throughout data collection and analysis: rich and thick descriptions via field notes are separated from analytic memos, used verbatim quotations to anchor interpretations, and triangulated interview data with project documents and experiment logs. Key interpretations were shared with team members for validation (member-checking), and coding decisions were documented in an audit trail. Where possible instances where author’s actions could unduly shape the account (e.g., author did not rely on his internal emails as primary evidence of team sentiment). These steps helped mitigate, but cannot fully remove, the influence of the researcher’s role.

Data Sources

The study used triangulation to enhance validity by collecting data from multiple sources. These included:

- Internal project documents: These included meeting slides, email summaries, technical guidelines, and project milestone trackers.
- Semi-structured interviews: A total of six interviews were conducted with team members involved in the project - two from marketing, two from IT, one from supply chain, and one from project leadership. Each interview lasted 50 to 60 minutes. All participants were informed of the research purpose, and anonymity was preserved.
- Internal digital communications: Slack discussions, team newsletters, and virtual event recordings were reviewed to understand how leaders communicated and how the team responded.

This multi-source design allowed the researcher to cross-check statements, behaviors, and leadership practices across different data types.

Interview Design

The interview questions were designed to explore how team members experienced leadership during the project. Sample questions included:

- “How did your team leader support you during remote collaboration?”
- “Can you describe a moment when you felt motivated, trusted, or uncertain?”
- “How were project decisions made and shared with your team?”
- “What kind of feedback or learning mechanisms were used during the project?”

All interviews were recorded (with permission) and transcribed manually. The language used was simple and open to encourage participants to share freely. When needed, questions were clarified or rephrased to avoid misunderstandings.

Data Analysis

Transcripts and documents were analyzed using thematic coding. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe this method as identifying patterns or themes that appear across the dataset. The researcher first developed a list of codes based on existing theory, such as “empathy,” “psychological safety,” and “experimentation”, and then added new codes that emerged from the interviews, like “technical misunderstanding” or “emotional distance.”

The coding process followed these steps:

- a) Reading transcripts and documents carefully
- b) Highlighting keywords and phrases related to leadership behavior
- c) Grouping codes into larger categories
- d) Matching categories to leadership styles

Coding was done in Microsoft Excel for simplicity. Two themes were confirmed when at least three participants mentioned them independently. Contradictory or unclear statements were excluded to avoid bias.

Ethical Considerations

This research followed basic ethical standards. Participation in interviews was voluntary, and all individuals were assured that their responses would be anonymized. As the researcher was part of the organization, extra care was taken not to pressure any colleagues to participate. The study did not involve any sensitive personal data, financial information, or customer records.

Limitations of Methodology

There are some limitations. The single-case design limits generalizability. Also, the interview sample size was small. However, as Flyvbjerg (2006) argues, case studies can still provide valuable insight when they are based on “critical cases” with rich detail and unique access. The goal here is not to generalize, but to explore patterns and generate propositions for future research.

Case Background

In 2021, L'Oréal China launched the “Empty Bottle Refill” project under the Biotherm brand as part of its broader sustainability strategy. This initiative responded directly to China’s “dual carbon” policy goals, which aim to peak carbon emissions by 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. The project’s main objective was to promote circular economy behavior by encouraging consumers to return empty skincare bottles for in-store refilling. Instead of disposing of plastic packaging, customers were rewarded for bringing bottles back to specific refill points, reducing waste and promoting responsible consumption.

The project was developed and managed entirely by remote teams across different functions and cities. Key departments involved included marketing, sustainability, IT, supply chain, and store operations, with team members located in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, and other regional hubs. All collaboration took place online through tools like Zoom, Slack, and internal dashboards. At no point did the full cross-functional team meet in person, due to travel restrictions and cost-saving policies.

As a sustainability innovation, the refill program required tight coordination between multiple moving parts. First, a refill system had to be designed and piloted in flagship stores. The IT team worked on integrating real-time refill tracking into the customer app, while the supply chain team managed back-end logistics for handling returned bottles and restocking refill stations. Marketing and sustainability teams cocreated educational materials, organized influencer campaigns, and monitored customer feedback.

One notable feature of this project was its rapid rollout cycle. From planning to pilot launch, the project moved from concept to execution in under four months. This required teams to work with incomplete information, adapt quickly to regional differences, and test new formats without guaranteed success. For instance, certain cities had higher participation rates, while others needed additional marketing incentives or clearer instore guidance.

Leadership played a central role in overcoming these challenges. There was no formal project hierarchy; instead, team members rotated responsibility for weekly alignment meetings and decision-making. Although there was a designated project lead, leadership behaviors were distributed across different roles depending on the phase and problem at hand. For example, the IT lead often acted as a facilitator during technical issue resolution, while the sustainability lead took the initiative in coordinating regional store feedback.

From a leadership perspective, three key challenges emerged during the project:

- a) *Communication across silos*: Each function had its own priorities and metrics. Servant leadership behaviors, such as active listening, shared documentation, and “virtual coffee chats”, were used to reduce misunderstandings and build psychological safety.

- b) *Vision alignment*: As refill was not a common consumer behavior in China, the project relied on a strong internal narrative to keep teams motivated. Transformational leadership behaviors appeared during online town halls, where senior managers emphasized the project's connection to L'Oréal's long-term sustainability commitments.
- c) *Agility and responsiveness*: Several parts of the project were adjusted in real time. Adaptive leadership was reflected in how the teams used A/B testing to experiment with refill incentives and how weekly dashboards were updated to reflect learning from previous actions.

The project outcome was considered a success internally. Over the first six months, refill participation exceeded projections by 22%, and customer engagement scores improved in stores with refill stations. The refill model was later expanded to other brands within the company. More importantly, the leadership strategies observed in this project provided useful lessons on managing complex, cross-functional teams in a remote environment.

This case is relevant not only because of its sustainability focus, but also because it highlights how multiple leadership styles can be combined in a real-world setting. Unlike traditional hierarchical leadership models, this project used a more fluid and situational approach. Servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership behaviors were all present at different times, depending on the team's needs. These behaviors did not come from one person but were distributed across the team, sometimes even unintentionally. Because the project was fully remote, leadership behaviors had to be visible through digital communication, task management, and meeting facilitation. This makes the case especially useful for understanding how leadership functions in the absence of face-to-face contact and how organizations can build culture, trust, and momentum through non-traditional channels.

In summary, the Biotherm Refill project offers a rich, real-world example of how servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership styles interact in a remote, high stakes, sustainability-focused initiative. The following section presents the findings and propositions developed from this case study.

Findings

This section presents the key findings from the case study, organized into three main propositions. Each proposition corresponds to one of the three leadership styles explored in the literature review: servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership. The findings show that these styles were not applied separately but worked together as part of a flexible leadership system. The data suggests that different leadership behaviors became more or less visible depending on the stage of the project, the type of challenge faced, and the individuals involved.

Proposition 1: Servant leadership helps build trust and stability in remote teams.

The first pattern observed was that servant leadership behaviors created a strong emotional foundation for the team. In interviews, participants described moments when

they felt supported, heard, and respected by their colleagues or project leads. One team member from marketing said, “Even though we were remote, I felt our lead was always listening. She asked how we were doing before every meeting and made sure no one was left behind.”

Several interviewees noted that small rituals, such as regular check-ins, sharing success stories, or having “virtual tea breaks”, helped reduce stress and make people feel part of the team. These actions match Liden et al.’s (2008) model of servant leadership, especially the dimensions of emotional healing and putting others first.

In project communications, servant leadership also appeared in the way knowledge was shared. For example, team members created a shared FAQ sheet and helped others troubleshoot technical problems, even when it was outside their direct role. This behavior showed a culture of service and support.

These findings support the idea that servant leadership can help reduce isolation, increase psychological safety, and create a sense of belonging in remote teams, especially during high-pressure projects.

Proposition 2: Transformational leadership motivates alignment and innovation.

The second theme related to how transformational leadership helped the team stay aligned and motivated, especially when tasks were complex or unclear. In interviews, multiple participants described how the project’s larger purpose was constantly emphasized. A member of the IT team shared, “Every time we had doubts, the project lead reminded us that this was about more than just refill stations. It was about changing behavior and making a difference.”

The team lead organized virtual “vision roadshows” to share progress, customer feedback, and long-term goals. These sessions were open to all departments and often included storytelling and visuals that connected individual tasks to the company’s sustainability mission.

Interviewees said these events made them feel proud of their work and more engaged. One supply chain participant explained, “Normally, I just do my part and move on. But this time I felt like I was part of something bigger.”

These behaviors match the “inspirational motivation” and “idealized influence” elements of transformational leadership described by Bass and Riggio (2006). They also helped break silos and encouraged team members to suggest improvements beyond their assigned roles. For example, a member from store operations proposed a nighttime refill bonus program after one vision meeting. The idea was later piloted in two cities.

In this case, transformational leadership behaviors helped maintain focus, commitment, and innovation despite the lack of in-person connection.

Proposition 3: Adaptive leadership enables real-time learning and local responsiveness.

The third finding showed how adaptive leadership allowed the team to deal with uncertainty and adjust plans in real time. The project involved testing a new consumer behavior (refilling instead of repurchasing), and many unknowns had to be addressed quickly.

Weekly project reviews were used to reflect on recent data and adapt the strategy. In one instance, a refill station in a Tier 2 city had very low usage. Instead of pushing harder on marketing, the team ran a quick A/B test comparing signage formats. Within one week, the improved sign led to a 35% increase in participation. This kind of rapid adjustment reflects what Heifetz et al. (2009) call adaptive leadership - solving problems not through authority but through experimentation and feedback.

Several interviewees mentioned that they were encouraged to speak up and suggest changes, even if they were not the official decision-makers. One IT member recalled, “I flagged a user experience problem in the app. I didn’t know if it was my place to say something, but the lead thanked me and asked others to test it too.”

These actions helped create a learning culture, where ideas were tried and adjusted quickly. The team kept an internal “experiment log” where results were shared across functions. This open and iterative process allowed the team to stay flexible and responsive to both internal and external signals.

Combined Leadership Impact

Although each leadership style played a distinct role, the real strength came from how they worked together. Servant leadership created a safe and inclusive environment. Transformational leadership gave the project energy and direction. Adaptive leadership allowed the team to move quickly and learn from feedback.

Importantly, these leadership behaviors were not concentrated in one person. They were shared across the team. Different individuals stepped into leadership roles depending on the challenge. This flexible, shared leadership model allowed the project to meet its goals while also supporting team growth and innovation.

To summarize how these leadership styles manifested during the project, Table 1 provides an overview of key behaviors observed and real-life examples drawn from interviews and internal documentation. These examples further illustrate how leadership behaviors were not isolated, but worked in combination to meet different team needs at various stages of the project.

Table 1
Leadership Styles, Key Behaviors and Project Examples

Leadership Styles	Key Behaviors Observed	Examples from the Biotherm Refill Project
Servant	Emotional support, team check-ins, inclusive communication	“Virtual tea breaks,” shared FAQ docs, leaders asking about well-being
Transformational	Vision sharing, symbolic communication, encouraging initiative	Online “vision roadshows,” pride in sustainability impact
Adaptive	Fast experimentation, openness to suggestions, learning from feedback	A/B testing signage, experiment log, user experience improvements

Note: Synthesized by the author based on interview and documentary data

The next section discusses the implications of these findings and reflects on how this triadic leadership system could be applied to other remote projects.

Discussion

This study explored how servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership styles were applied—both individually and together—during the Biotherm Refill project, a fully remote sustainability initiative by L’Oréal China. The findings support earlier research suggesting that these leadership styles are useful in virtual settings, but also add new insight: they appear to be most effective when used together, with flexibility based on the needs of the moment.

Leadership Flexibility in Remote Teams

The findings highlight that remote sustainability projects require leadership agility. Leaders and team members did not rely on one fixed style but shifted behaviors depending on the situation. Servant leadership behaviors were more visible when the team needed emotional support, transformational leadership became important for motivation and alignment, and adaptive leadership appeared when rapid adjustments were required. This supports Yukl and Mahsud’s (2010) argument that flexible and adaptive leadership is essential in uncertain environments. It also aligns with Denison, Hooijberg, and Quinn’s (1995) concept of behavioral complexity, where successful leaders move between roles rather than staying within one style.

Shared Leadership and Role Fluidity

One important observation was that leadership was not fixed in one person. Instead, different team members showed leadership behaviors depending on the challenge. This reflects the concept of shared or distributed leadership, which has been increasingly studied in virtual team settings (Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007).

In the Biotherm Refill project, the IT lead sometimes took charge during technical problem-solving. At other times, the store operations team introduced new customer engagement ideas. This fluidity allowed the team to stay responsive without being dependent on a single leader.

While shared leadership can sometimes lead to confusion, it worked well in this case because the team had a clear mission, regular communication, and high levels of mutual respect. These factors created the psychological safety needed for team members to take initiative, even outside their formal roles.

Cultural Context and Power Distance

It is also worth considering how cultural factors influenced leadership behaviors. China has traditionally been seen as a high-power distance culture, where subordinates may hesitate to question authority (Hofstede, 2011). However, this case showed that when leaders used servant or adaptive behaviors, like listening, involving others in decisions, or encouraging experimentation, team members were willing to speak up.

This suggests that leadership behavior can shape how power distance plays out in practice. Even in cultures with strong hierarchical norms, a trust-based and inclusive leadership style can invite participation and reduce hesitation. This supports the findings of Eva et al. (2019), who argue that servant leadership can be effective across different cultural contexts when applied with sensitivity.

Practical Implications

This study gives several lessons for managers who lead remote, cross-functional projects, especially in sustainability and innovation. First, make servant leadership a team habit. Short, agenda-free check-ins, peer-support groups, and open praise for supportive actions can lower isolation and build safety. These behaviors should not only come from leaders but also from all team members, so care and support become normal in daily work.

Second, keep the transformational vision alive online. In remote work, people can lose sight of the bigger goal. Leaders should use simple storytelling and visuals in regular “vision talks,” and share milestones or customer feedback with everyone. This keeps energy high and shows how small tasks connect to the bigger impact.

Third, plan for adaptive leadership. Agility does not happen by chance. Managers can use tools such as quick A/B testing, shared logs of what worked and what failed, and giving frontline staff the power to test solutions without waiting for many approvals. This speeds up learning and response.

Finally, design for shared leadership. Remote projects are stronger when leadership shifts based on who has the right skills. Managers can rotate meeting chairs, set clear decision rules, and build teams with different strengths. This lets servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership appear from different people when needed.

Together, these steps show that good remote leadership is not about one ideal leader. It is about building trust, vision, and agility into the whole team.

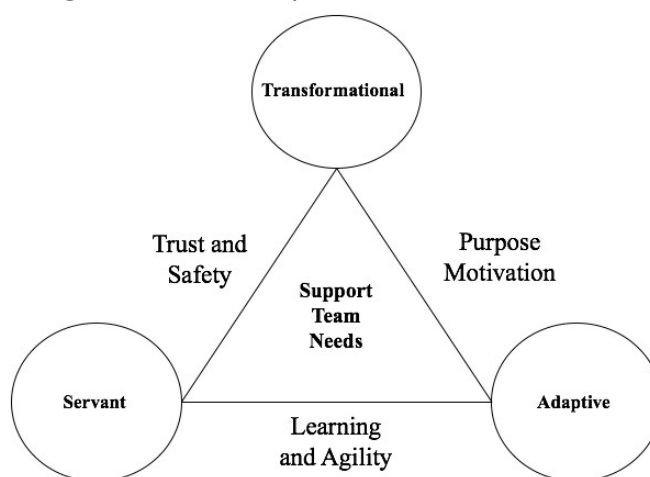
Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes to leadership theory by showing how a triadic leadership model, combining servant, transformational, and adaptive elements, can function in remote, high-complexity environments. While each of these styles has been studied individually, there is less research on how they work together in practice, especially in virtual sustainability initiatives.

This paper adds to that discussion by providing empirical evidence of how these styles complement each other in different stages of a project. It also shows that leadership behaviors can be distributed, not just embodied by formal managers. In doing so, the paper builds a bridge between theory and practice, offering a realistic view of how leadership actually unfolds in modern, decentralized teams.

To summarize the leadership dynamics observed in this study, Figure 1 presents an integrated model showing how servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership behaviors supported the remote team's success. Each style contributed uniquely: servant leadership fostered trust and safety, transformational leadership provided purpose and motivation, and adaptive leadership enabled learning and agility. Together, they created a flexible leadership system that responded effectively to evolving team needs.

Figure 1
Integrated Leadership Model in Remote Teams



Note: A triadic system combining servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership behaviors to support trust, motivation, and agility in virtual sustainability projects.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any single-case qualitative study, this research has limitations. While the findings provide insight into how servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership styles work together in a remote project context, they are based on one specific case inside a single company. The goal was not to generalize to all remote leadership environments, but to develop deeper understanding within a real-world setting. While

findings are context-bound, they offer transferable insights for multinational remote teams. Future research can build on this foundation by studying other cases across different industries and cultural contexts.

One key limitation is the sample size. The study included six interviews across four functional teams. Although the interviews were in-depth and supported by rich documentation, more interviews might have revealed additional leadership dynamics, especially from other team members such as junior staff, store associates, or external partners. However, the triangulation of interviews, documents, and communications helped reduce bias and provided reasonable saturation for a case study of this scale.

Another limitation is researcher bias, since the author had direct involvement in the project. While this provided unique access and insight, it also raises the possibility of selective memory or interpretation. Steps were taken to reduce this bias, for example, by separating observation from interpretation, validating findings with colleagues, and relying on direct quotes and documents whenever possible. Still, future studies would benefit from involving an external researcher to allow for a more neutral viewpoint.

A third limitation is the focus on perceived behaviors rather than objective performance outcomes. While team members described their experiences with leadership styles, the study did not measure how these styles directly influenced project KPIs such as cost efficiency, employee retention, or long-term customer engagement. The link between leadership behavior and team performance was observed through patterns, not statistical evidence. Further studies could combine qualitative and quantitative methods, for example, comparing leadership styles with performance metrics over time, to strengthen the causal argument.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study focused on only three leadership styles. Other relevant models, such as authentic leadership, inclusive leadership, or distributed leadership, were not fully explored, even though some related behaviors may have appeared in the data. This opens opportunities for future research to compare multiple frameworks or develop hybrid models based on real project needs.

In terms of cultural context, the case took place in China, where work culture is often described as high in power distance and low in uncertainty tolerance (Hofstede, 2011). Yet the project showed that servant and adaptive leadership could work well even in such a setting, when applied with care. It would be useful to see whether similar leadership flexibility is possible in other cultural environments, such as in Western, Scandinavian, or Southeast Asian settings, where leadership expectations may differ.

Future research can extend this study in several directions each linked to the triadic framework developed here. First, longitudinal studies could track projects across different phases to see how servant, transformational, and adaptive behaviors shift over time. For example, servant leadership may be more important in early trust-building, while adaptive leadership may dominate during execution. Second, comparative research across industries and cultures could test whether the triadic balance changes depending

on context. In high power-distance settings like China, servant behaviors may be less expected, while in low power-distance cultures they may be more natural. Cross-cultural analysis could clarify how each style contributes in different environments. Third, mixed-methods studies could combine qualitative insights with performance metrics to assess how these leadership styles influence measurable outcomes such as employee retention, innovation rates, or customer satisfaction. This would test the practical impact of the triadic model. Finally, intervention-based research could explore how organizations might intentionally train teams to share and shift leadership roles. This could include leadership development programs that cultivate servant, transformational, and adaptive capabilities across multiple members, enabling a distributed triadic system. Together, these directions can help scholars and practitioners refine the triadic leadership model and better understand how it operates across different organizational and cultural contexts.

Conclusion and Call to Action

This study set out to investigate how servant, transformational, and adaptive leadership styles function in the complex reality of a remote sustainability project. The findings reveal that their power lies not in isolated application, but in their dynamic interplay. The Biotherm Refill project demonstrates that effective leadership in such environments is a fluid, collective system rather than a static attribute of a single individual. Servant leadership established the foundational trust, transformational leadership provided the compelling direction, and adaptive leadership enabled the necessary agility, with different team members stepping forward to provide each style as the situation demanded.

The primary theoretical contribution of this research is the articulation of a triadic leadership model for remote teams, which extends the concept of behavioral complexity by showing how it can be a shared, collective capacity. This model provides a more nuanced framework for understanding leadership in modern, decentralized organizations than single-style approaches.

For practitioners, the fundamental takeaway is that building a successful remote team requires moving beyond a search for the "ideal" leader. Instead, the focus should be on cultivating a team culture and implementing project structures that naturally encourage a balance of supportive, visionary, and adaptive behaviors from all members. As the nature of work continues to evolve towards hybrid and remote models, the ability to foster this kind of flexible, triadic leadership will be a critical determinant of success in tackling complex, cross-boundary challenges like sustainability. While this study is limited to one case, it provides a foundation for future research to test and refine the triadic model across different contexts.

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