



Adaptive Resilient Leadership, Challenges, and Opportunities: The Case for Ethiopian Airlines

BY

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ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS
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This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Mael Habte Aregay which is entitled “Adaptive Resilient Leadership: The Case for Ethiopian Airlines “submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Business Leadership complies with the regulations of the university and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

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Abstract

The global airline industry functions within a high-risk, rapidly changing environment where external shocks—ranging from pandemics and geopolitical tensions to technical failures—demand agile and resilient leadership. Two critical disruptions in the past decade—the COVID-19 pandemic and the Boeing 737 MAX grounding—caused widespread operational and reputational damage across the industry. Ethiopian Airlines, facing both crises firsthand, emerged as a unique case of resilience by not only maintaining operational continuity but also strategically adapting its business model. These dual disruptions—public health and technical—offered an ideal lens through which to explore adaptive leadership in real-world, high-stakes settings (Makoni, 2021; IATA, 2020; BBC, 2019).

This study investigates how adaptive resilient leadership is practiced within Ethiopian Airlines in response to systemic crises. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted global travel, while the 737 MAX crisis—following the crash of Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302—demanded strong institutional response and stakeholder communication. Examining both events allowed for a multidimensional understanding of leadership under pressure, combining emotional, strategic, and operational challenges unique to African carriers.

To explore this, the study employed a **qualitative case study design**, which is suitable for understanding human behavior and leadership within context (Yin, 2018). Data were collected using **semi-structured interviews** until **saturation was reached**, ensuring no new themes emerged and data collection was sufficient for thematic rigor (Guest, Bunce,

& Johnson, 2006). Thematic analysis using an inductive approach revealed recurring patterns of decision-making agility, cross-departmental collaboration, and systems thinking.

The findings show that adaptive resilient leadership at Ethiopian Airlines is not a fixed model but a dynamic, culturally embedded practice. Leaders responded to rapidly changing events through decentralization, moral clarity, operational improvisation, and institutional learning. These behaviors align with Duchek's (2020) conceptualization of resilience as a capability to anticipate, absorb, and adapt to disruptions.

This research addresses a critical gap in leadership literature by presenting a non-Western, empirical case of organizational resilience in the aviation sector. It reinforces the importance of systems thinking, emotional intelligence, and contextual agility for leaders operating in resource-constrained, high-pressure environments. The study recommends integrating resilience into formal leadership development, improving strategic flexibility, and codifying crisis playbooks within African aviation institutions.

Definition of Key Terms

Adaptive Leadership: A leadership approach that enables individuals and organizations to respond effectively to changing environments and emerging challenges. It involves diagnosing problems, regulating distress, and encouraging collective learning (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Resilient Leadership: The ability of a leader to absorb disturbances, stay focused, and guide the organization toward recovery and growth during adversity (Duchek, 2020; Coutu, 2002).

Adaptive Resilient Leadership: A synthesized form of leadership that integrates adaptability and resilience, enabling leaders to continuously reconfigure strategies and behaviors in response to prolonged crises (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Duchek, 2020).

Crisis Management: A structured process used by organizations to identify, assess, respond to, and recover from disruptions that threaten core functions or reputation (Coombs, 2007).

Organizational Resilience: The dynamic capability of an organization to anticipate threats, absorb shocks, adapt to change, and bounce forward stronger than before (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2017).

Systemic Crisis: A high-impact, multi-sectoral disruption that cascades through interconnected systems, often resulting in prolonged instability. Examples include pandemics or global financial collapse (Boin, Kuipers, & Overdijk, 2013).

Leadership Behavior: Observable actions and decision-making patterns used by leaders to influence organizational outcomes. It includes behaviors related to communication, motivation, and strategic alignment (Yukl, 2013).

Aviation Industry: The commercial sector responsible for transporting passengers and cargo by air, regulated by national and international bodies such as ICAO and IATA (IATA, 2021).

Qualitative Research: A methodological approach focused on understanding meaning, experience, and context through non-numerical data collection such as interviews, documents, and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Developing Country Context: Refers to nations with limited industrialization, infrastructure, and institutional capacity. These contexts often face unique governance and leadership challenges (World Bank, 2023).

Case Study: A qualitative research design involving an in-depth examination of a bounded system—such as an organization or event—over time and within its real-life context (Yin, 2018).

Transformational Leadership: A leadership style that inspires and empowers followers to transcend their self-interest for organizational goals through vision, charisma, and individualized support (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Strategic Response: The coordinated set of decisions and actions implemented by leadership to navigate threats and ensure continuity and competitive advantage during a crisis (Pearson & Clair, 1998).

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Chapter One

1.1 Background of the Study

The global business environment in the 21st century is increasingly characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). This evolving landscape has amplified the challenges that organizations face in sustaining performance, maintaining operational continuity, and responding to both anticipated and unforeseen disruptions. These challenges are particularly pronounced in sectors that operate across international borders and rely heavily on interconnected systems and just-in-time delivery models. Among these, the aviation industry stands out due to its dependence on regulatory stability, global mobility, and consumer confidence.

Over the past two decades, the aviation sector has weathered a series of major disruptions—including terrorist attacks, geopolitical instability, oil price shocks, volcanic ash clouds, and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis alone represented the most significant global aviation disruption since the inception of commercial flight. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA, 2021), the airline industry reported a staggering net loss of \$137.7 billion in 2020 as international travel collapsed, aircraft fleets were grounded, and revenues dried up. This crisis revealed the fragility of even the most advanced aviation systems and underscored the importance of agility, innovation, and strong leadership to navigate high-impact events.

In response to such existential threats, the concept of organizational resilience has gained traction as a key area of both managerial practice and scholarly inquiry. Scholars such as

Duchek (2020) and Lengnick-Hall et al. (2011) argue that resilience is not merely the ability to absorb shocks but also encompasses anticipatory capacity, adaptive reconfiguration, and post-crisis transformation. However, there is considerable debate over how resilience is defined and operationalized in organizations. Some frameworks emphasize structural preparedness and redundancy, while others foreground behavioral dimensions such as leadership mindset, cultural cohesion, and decision-making under pressure (Williams et al., 2017). Despite these contributions, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning how resilience manifests in emerging markets and non-Western organizational contexts.

The African aviation industry has received comparatively limited scholarly attention, despite its strategic importance and unique operating conditions. Airlines in Africa face challenges including limited infrastructure, fluctuating currency exchange rates, political instability, and constrained financial markets. Yet amid these challenges, certain carriers have demonstrated extraordinary resilience. Ethiopian Airlines, the continent's largest and most profitable airline, provides a particularly compelling case. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the airline repurposed grounded passenger aircraft into freighters, maintained its international routes, and avoided laying off staff—an outcome in stark contrast with global trends. The airline's ability to adapt quickly, reconfigure operations, and communicate effectively positioned it as a model of resilient leadership in Africa and beyond (Ethiopian Airlines Group, 2021).

This study is situated within this empirical and theoretical landscape. It seeks to explore the mechanisms of adaptive resilient leadership as demonstrated by Ethiopian Airlines

during times of extreme crisis. In doing so, it not only contributes to the growing body of resilience literature but also addresses critical knowledge gaps concerning African organizational experiences. The study draws on conceptual insights from Ducheck (2020), who conceptualizes resilience as a three-stage process (anticipation, coping, and adaptation), and Heifetz et al. (2009), who frame adaptive leadership as a capacity to mobilize people to thrive in uncertainty. By analyzing Ethiopian Airlines' response strategies and leadership practices, the research aims to illuminate the interplay between structural resilience and leadership agility in high-pressure environments.

Ultimately, the introduction of this thesis frames the central argument that resilient leadership is not a passive trait but an active, adaptive process shaped by internal capabilities and external realities. Through this case study, the research offers insights relevant not only to scholars and practitioners of leadership and crisis management but also to policymakers, regulators, and stakeholders aiming to build resilience within aviation and other vulnerable sectors in developing regions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Though there is increasing recognition of resilience as a vital leadership trait, empirical research remains limited on how organizations in developing countries—particularly within the African aviation sector—practice and sustain resilient leadership during systemic crises. Existing literature tends to focus on Western corporate environments, with well-resourced institutions and formalized response systems (Williams et al., 2017; Duchek, 2020). However, the role of contextual variables such as limited infrastructure, regulatory unpredictability, and socio-political volatility remains largely underexplored. This creates a critical gap in understanding how resilience is interpreted and enacted in regions where uncertainty is both frequent and multi-dimensional.

In Africa's aviation industry, where financial constraints, geopolitical pressures, and public health emergencies converge, the concept of resilience takes on unique and urgent dimensions. Ethiopian Airlines' response to the COVID-19 crisis offers an important empirical case. Despite operating within a resource-limited and high-stakes environment, the airline managed not only to sustain its operations but to expand its cargo network, restructure internal protocols, and maintain workforce continuity (Ethiopian Airlines Group, 2021). This raises a pivotal question: What does adaptive resilient leadership look like in practice under conditions of persistent crisis in the Global South?

The central problem, therefore, is a lack of context-specific, evidence-based knowledge of how adaptive resilient leadership develops and operates in volatile industries—such as aviation—within emerging economies. Without such understanding, both academic theory and organizational practice risk being skewed toward assumptions that do not hold

in the real-world settings faced by developing nations (Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). This study seeks to address this gap by offering grounded insights into the lived leadership experiences at Ethiopian Airlines, thereby contributing to a more globally inclusive model of resilience.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1.2.1 General Objective:

The general objective of this paper is to explore and understand the role of adaptive resilient leadership in Ethiopian Airlines in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis.

1.2.2 Specific Objectives:

- To identify the key attributes of adaptive leadership resilience within Ethiopian Airlines.
- To examine the strategies used by Ethiopian Airlines to navigate post-COVID challenges.
- To assess the leadership practices that contributed to sustained performance and regional impact.

1.4 Research Questions

This study seeks to explore how adaptive resilient leadership is demonstrated within the operational and strategic practices of Ethiopian Airlines during periods of systemic crisis.

The guiding research questions and their supportive sub-questions are as follows:

1. How do leaders at Ethiopian Airlines define and understand adaptive resilient leadership within the context of crisis?

1.1. What traits and behaviors do leaders associate with resilience in crisis contexts?

1.2. How do leaders describe the meaning of “adaptive” leadership in their day-to-day responsibilities?

1.3. What role does past experience or institutional learning play in shaping leadership understanding?

2. What leadership behaviors and strategies were employed by Ethiopian Airlines to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and other recent disruptions?

2.1. What immediate actions were taken by leadership during the onset of the crisis?

2.2. How were decisions communicated internally across departments?

2.3. What innovations or workarounds emerged during the response?

3. How does the organizational context (e.g., resource limitations, cultural values, operational constraints) influence the practice of resilient leadership at Ethiopian Airlines?

3.1. In what ways did resource scarcity influence leadership decisions?

3.2. How did cultural or national values shape leaders' responses to uncertainty?

3.3. What constraints (regulatory, financial, operational) challenged adaptive responses?

4. What challenges and opportunities emerged for leadership in maintaining organizational continuity during the crisis period?

4.1. What were the most critical threats to operations identified by leadership?

4.2. How did leaders overcome resistance to change or decision fatigue?

4.3. What unexpected advantages or growth opportunities arose from crisis management?

5. In what ways do leaders at Ethiopian Airlines perceive their response as contributing to the organization's adaptive capacity and long-term sustainability?

5.1. How do leaders evaluate their performance and resilience after the crisis?

5.2. What systems or structures were developed to improve future readiness?

5.3. Do leaders believe that the experience has permanently changed how leadership is practiced at Ethiopian Airlines?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is important for several reasons. Academically, it adds to the scarce knowledge concerning resilient leadership in African aviation. From a practical perspective, it offers strategic implications for airline executives, policy-makers, and human resource managers on how to anticipate and deal with future crises. Moreover, it underscores resilience as an ongoing capacity, not just a one-off response, providing companies with a roadmap for sustained organizational resilience and innovation.

1.6 Scope and limitation of the Study

This study is geographically and institutionally delimited to Ethiopian Airlines, headquartered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It focuses specifically on the leadership practices and organizational responses undertaken by the airline during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022). The study does not include other African or international airlines, nor does it analyze government-level aviation policy responses outside of Ethiopian Airlines' operational jurisdiction.

The sectoral scope is limited to the aviation industry, with particular attention to a single flagship carrier operating in a developing economy. Ethiopian Airlines was selected due to its status as Africa's most successful and profitable airline, and for its documented resilience and operational continuity during one of the most severe global disruptions in aviation history. Its performance during the COVID-19 crisis—unlike many peers—offers a unique opportunity to understand adaptive leadership in a resource-constrained but high-performing African context.

Methodologically, the study is qualitative in nature, relying on semi-structured interviews, internal documentation, and secondary reports to explore leadership perspectives and decision-making processes. Quantitative analysis is outside the scope, as the research seeks to understand lived experiences, interpretations, and adaptive strategies rather than measure statistical correlations.

This deliberate delimitation allows for depth over breadth, aligning with the exploratory nature of the study and its aim to contribute to under-represented contexts in global leadership and crisis management literature. While this limits generalizability to other industries or regions, the focus on a single embedded case strengthens contextual validity and helps surface insights grounded in real-world complexity.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

Adaptive Leadership: A leadership approach that enables individuals and organizations to respond effectively to changing environments and emerging challenges. It involves diagnosing problems, regulating distress, and encouraging collective learning (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

Resilient Leadership: The ability of a leader to absorb disturbances, stay focused, and guide the organization toward recovery and growth during adversity (Duchek, 2020; Coutu, 2002).

Adaptive Resilient Leadership: A synthesized form of leadership that integrates adaptability and resilience, enabling leaders to continuously reconfigure strategies and

behaviors in response to prolonged crises (Lengnick-Hall, Beck, & Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Duchek, 2020).

Crisis Management: A structured process used by organizations to identify, assess, respond to, and recover from disruptions that threaten core functions or reputation (Coombs, 2007).

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Leadership Behavior: Observable actions and decision-making patterns used by leaders to influence organizational outcomes. It includes behaviors related to communication, motivation, and strategic alignment (Yukl, 2013).

Aviation Industry: The commercial sector responsible for transporting passengers and cargo by air, regulated by national and international bodies such as ICAO and IATA (IATA, 2021).

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Case Study: A qualitative research design involving an in-depth examination of a bounded system—such as an organization or event—over time and within its real-life context (Yin, 2018).

Transformational Leadership: A leadership style that inspires and empowers followers to transcend their self-interest for organizational goals through vision, charisma, and individualized support (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

Strategic Response: The coordinated set of decisions and actions implemented by leadership to navigate threats and ensure continuity and competitive advantage during a crisis (Pearson & Clair, 1998).

Chapter Two

2.1 Literature Review\

The global business environment has become increasingly complex and turbulent, marked by volatile economic conditions, geopolitical tensions, pandemics, and rapid technological change. Traditional leadership models—often rooted in command-and-control or transactional styles—have proven insufficient in addressing these unpredictable challenges (Grint, 2005; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2017). As a result, scholarly focus has shifted toward more flexible and robust leadership models, notably **adaptive leadership** and **resilient leadership**, which are viewed as essential for guiding organizations through crisis and transformation (Heifetz et al., 2009; Ducheck, 2020).

The aviation industry is particularly vulnerable to systemic shocks such as fuel price fluctuations, pandemics, natural disasters, cyberattacks, and geopolitical disruptions (IATA, 2021). In such an environment, the ability of leadership to anticipate, respond, and evolve becomes a strategic imperative. This is especially relevant in developing economies, where institutional fragility and resource limitations further constrain managerial options (Kamoche & Siebers, 2015).

Adaptive resilient leadership, as explored in this study, refers to the combined capability of leaders to adjust behavior dynamically in uncertain contexts (adaptability) while absorbing and recovering from shocks (resilience). The concept is gaining traction as organizations seek to balance stability with agility during times of upheaval

(Lengnick-Hall et al., 2011; Ducheck, 2020; Heifetz et al., 2009). However, empirical research on how this hybrid leadership style operates in African contexts—particularly in state-owned enterprises like Ethiopian Airlines—is still limited.

This chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical literature related to adaptive and resilient leadership. It begins with the **theoretical frameworks** underpinning the study, followed by **conceptual clarifications** of key terms. The chapter then explores **models of adaptive-resilient leadership**, discusses **empirical studies**, and identifies **literature gaps** to be addressed in this research.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

In a post-pandemic global economy marked by disruptions, volatility, and institutional fragility, the theoretical lenses used to examine leadership must go beyond traditional command-and-control models. Particularly in high-risk sectors like aviation, which operate in complex environments, leaders must combine behavioral adaptability with organizational resilience. This study draws upon two contemporary theoretical foundations—Adaptive Leadership Theory and Organizational Resilience Theory—to conceptualize the hybrid construct of Adaptive Resilient Leadership. These frameworks support the exploration of how Ethiopian Airlines successfully navigated the COVID-19 crisis and sustained performance under extreme external pressures.

2.2.1 Adaptive Leadership Theory

Adaptive leadership, in its most current understanding, is not merely about responding to change, but facilitating deep learning, shifting mental models, and realigning systems during ambiguity and distress (Hannah & Lester, 2022). In volatile environments, adaptive leaders are distinguished by their ability to balance competing priorities, decentralize authority, and cultivate collective problem-solving among stakeholders. These capabilities are essential for surviving non-linear threats like pandemics, technological disruption, and geopolitical shocks.

According to Korn Ferry Institute (2021), modern adaptive leaders:

- Foster **psychological safety** that enables risk-taking and feedback.
- Encourage **distributed leadership**, tapping insights across organizational levels.
- Exhibit **cognitive agility**, allowing rapid re-prioritization and reframing.
- Operate with **moral clarity** and situational awareness in times of uncertainty.

For Ethiopian Airlines, adaptive leadership was evident in its strategic pivot from passenger to cargo transport, real-time operational reconfigurations, and alignment with public health mandates—all of which required high-level coordination and creative improvisation beyond hierarchical decision-making. As Raetze, Mueller, and Widjaja (2022) argue, such leadership reflects an "agility mindset" embedded in both individual and organizational behavior.

In line with Snowden and Boone's (2022) updated Cynefin framework, the COVID-19 crisis would be categorized as a "**complex domain**", where best practices do not exist,

and leaders must probe, sense, and respond through experimentation rather than rule-following.

2.2.2 Organizational Resilience Theory

The concept of organizational resilience has evolved significantly over the past decade. While early definitions focused on the ability to "bounce back" from shocks, recent scholarship emphasizes transformative resilience—the capacity not just to survive crises but to emerge stronger through systemic adaptation and innovation (Burnard & Bhamra, 2021; Duchek, 2020).

Duchek (2020) provides a dynamic capability framework for resilience involving:

- Anticipation – Monitoring trends and weak signals for early threat detection.
- Coping – Absorbing shocks through resource flexibility and decentralization.
- Adaptation – Reconfiguring operations and learning from crises to build future robustness.

This model is especially applicable to state-owned enterprises like Ethiopian Airlines, which must remain competitive while navigating public accountability and operational complexity. During the pandemic, the airline showed resilience by converting passenger jets to freighters, forming global logistics partnerships, and preserving employment—highlighting its ability to adjust while continuing core functions (Reeves et al., 2021).

In addition, Lengnick-Hall and Beck (2022) argue for viewing resilience as “organizational learning under duress”, where feedback loops, reflection, and improvisation become central mechanisms for transformation.

2.2.3 Synthesizing Adaptive and Resilience Theories: Toward Adaptive Resilient Leadership

While adaptive leadership explains how leaders behave during uncertain times, and resilience theory explains how systems endure and evolve, the intersection of these models enables a broader understanding of leadership during crisis—termed here as Adaptive Resilient Leadership. This hybrid construct is defined as: The strategic and behavioral capacity of leaders to guide organizations through systemic crises by facilitating collective adaptation, absorbing disruptions, and fostering long-term transformation under constraints.

In resource-limited and institutionally constrained contexts like Ethiopia, this model reflects the real-world leadership challenge—operating without extensive slack resources or pre-existing contingency playbooks. Adaptive resilient leaders:

- Enable feedback-rich cultures.
- Translate ambiguity into coordinated action.
- Sustain morale while reinventing structures.
- Link short-term recovery to long-term opportunity.

Reeves et al. (2021) assert that the most resilient firms during the COVID-19 crisis were those led by individuals capable of navigating complexity with humility and flexibility, not those with rigid contingency plans. For Ethiopian Airlines, such leadership enabled rapid mobilization and system-wide coordination that ensured survival in a globally disrupted aviation sector.

2.3 Conceptual Clarification

This section offers a critical clarification of the foundational concepts informing this study. As the global aviation sector faces multifaceted risks—ranging from pandemics to geopolitics—the call for leadership models that incorporate both **adaptability** and **resilience** has grown significantly (Reeves et al., 2021). This study introduces and explores the construct of **Adaptive Resilient Leadership (ARL)** as a synthesis of adaptive leadership theory and organizational resilience, especially relevant in developing country contexts such as Ethiopian Airlines. Each key concept is defined below, with scholarly grounding and empirical relevance.

2.3.1 Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is a contemporary leadership framework that centers on enabling people and organizations to thrive amid changing circumstances (Heifetz et al., 2009; Hannah & Lester, 2022). In contrast to technical leadership—where problems have known solutions—adaptive leadership engages with complex, value-laden challenges without predefined answers.

Recent contributions by Hannah and Lester (2022) emphasize the following capabilities:

- **Diagnostic intelligence:** Leaders assess whether a challenge is technical or adaptive.
- **Mobilization capacity:** Leaders engage diverse stakeholders in collaborative learning processes.
- **Holding environments:** Psychological spaces where discomfort can lead to learning and change.
- **Regulated disequilibrium:** Maintaining tension to stimulate transformation without organizational breakdown.

In the context of Ethiopian Airlines, adaptive leadership manifested when the airline rapidly **converted grounded passenger aircraft into cargo planes**, securing new revenue streams and fulfilling humanitarian missions during COVID-19 lockdowns. This decision required challenging long-held mental models about commercial aviation and reflected an understanding of adaptive leadership’s call for **innovation through pressure**.

“Adaptive leadership is not about authority—it is about the courage to experiment, learn, and guide others through uncertainty.”— Hannah & Lester (2022)

2.3.2 Organizational Resilience

Organizational resilience is the dynamic capability of an organization to absorb disturbance, adapt to stressors, and emerge stronger from crisis (Duchek, 2020; Lengnick-Hall & Beck, 2022). Rather than viewing resilience as reactive recovery, recent perspectives define it as a **proactive, strategic process** grounded in organizational learning and systemic renewal.

Duchek (2020) conceptualizes resilience in three integrated stages:

- **Anticipation:** Preparing in advance for potential shocks through scenario planning and environmental scanning.
- **Coping:** Managing the immediate impact through flexible resource allocation and decentralized decision-making.
- **Adaptation:** Learning from the event and institutionalizing new routines to prepare for future disruptions.

Burnard and Bhamra (2021) add that resilient organizations exhibit structural redundancy, cultural openness, and distributed leadership networks. These features enable them to sustain operations and pivot strategies in real time.

Ethiopian Airlines demonstrated this resilience by:

- Maintaining operational capacity when global aviation networks collapsed.
- Scaling up its cargo division to lead Africa's medical supply logistics.
- Collaborating with government bodies and international partners across regulatory and logistical domains.

The resilience of Ethiopian Airlines was not spontaneous—it was embedded in **prior investments in training, digital systems, and cargo infrastructure**, proving that resilience can be intentionally built.

2.3.4 Crisis Leadership

Crisis leadership refers to the immediate, decisive, and emotionally intelligent actions taken by leaders in high-stakes, volatile situations, typically characterized by urgency,

uncertainty, and severe consequences (James et al., 2022). Unlike adaptive leadership, which unfolds over time and focuses on long-term evolution, crisis leadership is about navigating short-term turbulence while laying the foundation for resilience and recovery.

Key Characteristics of Crisis Leadership

According to contemporary literature, effective crisis leadership includes:

- **Rapid situational assessment:** Leaders must interpret rapidly changing environments with incomplete data (Boin et al., 2021).
- **Psychological containment:** Reassuring teams, managing panic, and restoring psychological safety is central (James et al., 2022).
- **Clarity and speed in communication:** Messaging must be timely, accurate, and transparent (Heifetz & Linsky, 2020).
- **Moral reasoning under pressure:** Decisions made during crises often carry ethical and reputational weight.

Leaders must balance short-term operational continuity with long-term credibility and learning, often requiring a degree of improvisation and emotional agility not demanded in routine leadership scenarios.

Application to Ethiopian Airlines

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ethiopian Airlines exhibited textbook crisis leadership under the direction of its executive leadership. Within weeks of widespread lockdowns and fleet groundings across the globe, the airline:

- Converted passenger aircraft into cargo jets, prioritizing essential medical supply logistics. (Collins, 2020; Harper, 2021; Reuters, 2020; WHO, 2020).

- Developed strategic partnerships with African governments, the African Union, and international health agencies like WHO and the Africa CDC. (WHO, 2020)
- Maintained frequent, transparent updates to employees and stakeholders to manage uncertainty and morale. (Dentons LinkedIn, 2023)

These actions reflect what James et al. (2022) describe as the “quadruple imperative” of crisis leadership: sense making, decision-making, meaning-making, and learning.

Moreover, the airline’s leadership avoided reactive downsizing or disbanding of units, opting instead for retraining and redeployment—an approach that not only mitigated layoffs but also reinforced institutional loyalty and long-term adaptability.

Crisis Leadership vs. Adaptive Leadership

While overlapping in practice, the distinction between crisis leadership and adaptive leadership is crucial. Crisis leadership is episodic, acute, and reactive, while adaptive leadership is systemic, continuous, and proactive. However, crisis leadership often acts as a catalyst that forces adaptive practices to emerge.

“Crisis leadership is about making imperfect decisions in imperfect conditions. But done well, it becomes the seedbed of adaptive growth.”— Boin et al. (2021)

In this thesis, crisis leadership is treated as both:

1. A **reactive dimension** of ARL, activated during peak disruption.
2. A **precursor** to adaptive behaviors, initiating the transformation phase after the initial shock.

2.3.5 Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is a leadership approach that views organizations not as isolated components but as dynamic, interconnected systems characterized by feedback loops, emergent behaviors, and nonlinear causality (Snowden & Boone, 2022). In contrast to reductionist thinking, systems thinking enables leaders to navigate complexity by understanding how parts influence the whole—a foundational skill in environments marked by uncertainty, disruption, and cascading crises.

Core Principles of Systems Thinking in Leadership

Systems thinking involves several core competencies critical to adaptive resilient leadership:

- **Holistic diagnosis:** Seeing problems as symptoms of systemic issues rather than isolated incidents (Meadows, 2020).
- **Causal loop mapping:** Identifying feedback cycles that amplify or dampen changes across the organization.
- **Interdisciplinary coordination:** Aligning departments and stakeholders based on shared goals and dependencies.
- **Scenario modeling:** Projecting long-term outcomes based on interaction between internal and external variables (Vial, 2021).

These capabilities allow leaders to anticipate unintended consequences, design more robust strategies, and respond adaptively to multifactorial disruptions.

Systems Thinking in the Context of Ethiopian Airlines

The ability of Ethiopian Airlines to sustain operations during COVID-19 reflected more than just resourcefulness—it demonstrated **systems-level strategic thinking**:

- The airline restructured its logistics network, activating secondary hubs in Lomé, Abidjan, and Johannesburg to support supply distribution across Africa. (Ethiopian Airlines Website)
- It reintegrated internal divisions (cargo, fleet, health protocols, training) to respond cohesively, rather than in departmental silos. (Ethiopian Airlines Website)
- Leaders identified systemic bottlenecks—such as border closures, customs regulations, and crew fatigue cycles—and applied cross-functional solutions.
- Ethiopian Airlines also operated as part of a larger continental system, aligning with the African Union and Africa CDC, exemplifying what Snowden and Boone (2022) refer to as "contextual leadership in complex systems." (Ethiopian Airlines Website)

These examples illustrate that adaptive resilient leadership does not emerge from isolated decision-making but from systemic situational awareness.

Integration with ARL Framework

In the ARL model, **systems thinking** functions as the cognitive lens through which leaders:

- **Detect vulnerabilities before they escalate**, such as recognizing that airport shutdowns can ripple through transport networks, affecting supply chains, cargo logistics, and regional connectivity (World Bank, 2022).
- **Design redundancy into critical operations**, for example, activating alternative hubs or parallel routes to ensure continuity of service across disrupted networks—essential in developing economies with limited infrastructure (World Bank, 2022).
- **Align stakeholder incentives during transformation**, coordinating between airlines, regulators, customs authorities, and healthcare agencies to ensure that system adaptation occurs cohesively rather than in isolated silos, thus effectively building institutional resilience (AfDB, 2020).

Such systems-level interventions are particularly vital in **low-resource, high-risk contexts** like many African economies, where failure at a single node—say, an airport—can cascade across national and transnational aviation ecosystems (African Development Bank, 2020).

2.4 Empirical Literature Review

Empirical literature provides the evidentiary backbone for understanding how adaptive and resilient leadership manifests in real-world settings. This section reviews recent studies that examine adaptive leadership, organizational resilience, and their integration—particularly in aviation and African organizational contexts. The aim is to ground this thesis in actual field experiences and identify gaps this study seeks to fill.

2.4.1 Empirical Evidence on Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership, first conceptualized by Heifetz, has been empirically explored across sectors responding to crisis, uncertainty, and institutional change. Fernandez and Shaw (2020) conducted a multi-institutional study during the early COVID-19 pandemic across U.S. colleges and universities. They found that leaders who empowered teams, decentralized authority, and practiced adaptive communication had the greatest success in maintaining operational continuity.

In the healthcare sector, Wilson and McConnell (2021) examined how hospital administrators in Canada adapted to pandemic pressures. Their findings confirmed that adaptive leaders actively engaged staff, redesigned workflows, and embraced flexible decision-making processes, contributing to lower stress levels and better institutional outcomes.

In aviation, Singh and Massoud (2021) analyzed leadership practices in six international airlines during COVID-19. They reported that leaders who displayed adaptive traits—such as cross-training staff, reorganizing schedules, and experimenting with new service models—achieved faster stabilization.

“In high-disruption environments like aviation, adaptive leadership is not optional; it is the only path to continuity.” (Singh & Massoud, 2021, p. 42)

2.4.2 Empirical Evidence on Organizational Resilience

Organizational resilience has also attracted extensive empirical study. Duchek (2020) synthesized resilience into three phases: anticipation, coping, and adaptation, and her model has since guided multiple empirical applications.

Giustiniano et al. (2021) surveyed 234 European firms and found that organizations with high resilience scores invested in flexible structures, employee training, and scenario-based planning. Similarly, Lengnick-Hall et al. (2022) identified social capital, cultural agility, and leadership continuity as central to resilience in knowledge-intensive firms.

In Africa, Makoni (2021) evaluated post-COVID recovery in the Southern African aviation sector. He found that resilience was best demonstrated in firms that diversified income streams, cultivated government partnerships, and prioritized mental health interventions.

“Resilience in African business ecosystems is not just about bouncing back; it’s about bouncing forward—through innovation and coalition-building.” (Makoni, 2021, p. 222)

2.4.3 Adaptive Resilient Leadership in African Aviation

While studies on adaptive resilient leadership (ARL) remain limited, several case-specific analyses illuminate the concept. **Chukwuemeka et al. (2022)** conducted in-depth interviews with senior managers at Ethiopian Airlines. They observed how the airline

reconfigured its cargo operations, aligned with the African Union and Africa CDC, and instituted rapid staff retraining—all indicative of integrated adaptive-resilient behavior.

Girma (2021) analyzed Ethiopian Airlines' COVID-19 strategy, focusing on strategic improvisation. His study highlighted the airline's shift to cargo dominance, the use of digital health passports, and internal collaboration across logistics, finance, and fleet management.

Ngugi and Ochieng (2022) examined Kenya Airways' leadership response to lockdowns and border closures. Their findings underscored the importance of emotional intelligence, staff involvement, and clear communication—behaviors consistent with the ARL model.

These studies confirm that African airlines, though operating in resource-constrained and politically complex environments, are capable of demonstrating world-class adaptive and resilient leadership.

2.4.4 Summary of Patterns

Key themes emerging from these empirical studies include:

- **Leadership decentralization and autonomy**, which allows faster adaptation (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Wilson & McConnell, 2021).
- **Crisis-triggered innovation**, such as converting passenger fleets into cargo services (Chukwuemeka et al., 2022).
- **Integrated systems thinking**, enabling organizational coherence in chaos (Girma, 2021).

2.4.5 Identified Gaps

Despite growing interest, several empirical gaps remain:

- **Geographic imbalance:** Most studies focus on Western contexts.
- **Short-term data:** Few studies track adaptive or resilient leadership across multiple phases of a crisis.
- **Sector-specific lack:** African aviation remains underrepresented in longitudinal or comparative ARL research.
- **Conceptual separation:** Few studies jointly examine adaptive and resilient leadership as a single construct.
- **Cultural and contextual adaptation,** especially in African settings, where informal networks and public-private partnerships are crucial (Makoni, 2021).

This thesis contributes to closing these gaps by providing a comprehensive case study of Ethiopian Airlines—Africa’s most prominent airline—during the COVID-19 crisis.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework above shows how adaptive resilient leadership is developed and demonstrated across three key dimensions of resilience: absorptive, adaptive, and transformative. These are supported by underlying traits and behaviors such as emotional regulation, quick decision-making, situational learning, and decentralized autonomy. The model is grounded in theory but shaped by real-world leadership practices observed in Ethiopian Airlines. It connects personal leadership attributes to organizational outcomes during and after crises, allowing for both stability and long-term improvement.

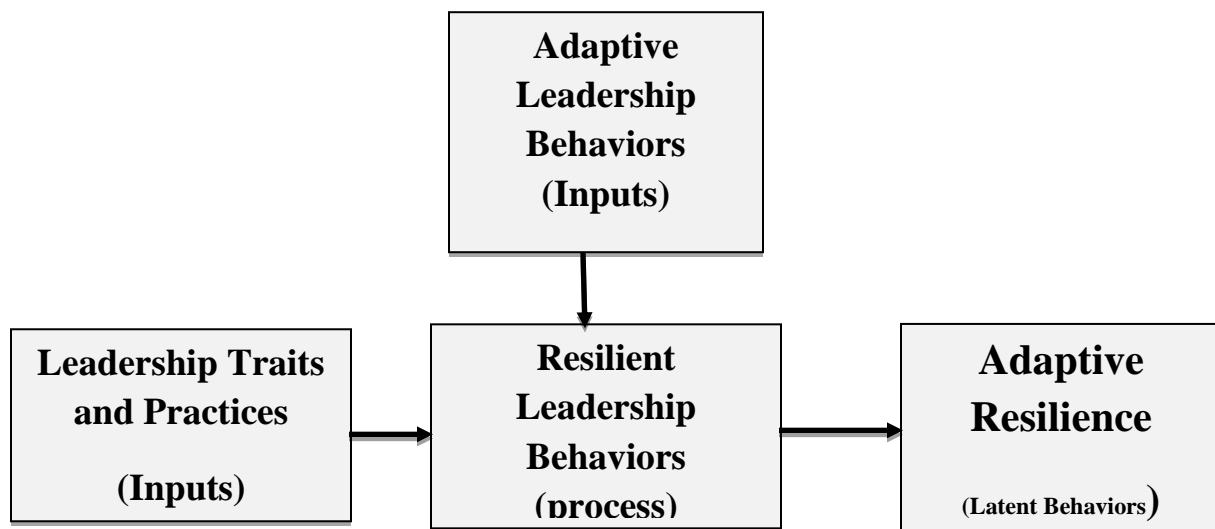


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Adaptive Resilient Leadership

Source: Adapted from Duchek (2020); Heifetz et al. (2009); Fletcher & Sarkar (2013); and author's design

Component Descriptions

Leadership Traits and Practices (Inputs) : This component includes foundational qualities such as emotional intelligence, values, strategic thinking, and experience. These traits shape how leaders interpret uncertainty and influence others. They also lay the groundwork for behavioral responses under pressure, as suggested by Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky.

Adaptive Leadership Behaviors (Inputs): These behaviors describe how leaders use their traits in action — by guiding people through complex situations, creating safe spaces for dialogue, adjusting plans, and sharing authority. Adaptive leadership focuses on helping people face difficult truths and make necessary adjustments in times of change.

Resilient Leadership Behaviors (Process): This stage highlights behavioral processes that help leaders anticipate challenges, cope with stress, and adapt to disruptions. These behaviors support both short-term survival and long-term learning. Ducheck describes resilience as an ongoing process rather than a fixed trait, emphasizing learning and reconfiguration in response to adversity.

Adaptive Resilience (Latent Behaviors): Adaptive resilience refers to the hidden but powerful ability of individuals and organizations to maintain performance under pressure. It is not directly seen, but it is revealed through outcomes like operational stability, team cohesion, and continuous improvement. According to Fletcher and Sarkar, this form of resilience arises from both psychological strength and effective leadership actions.

2.6 Models of Adaptive Resilient Leadership

Understanding how adaptive resilient leadership works in real life requires more than just knowing the definition — it involves looking at different leadership models that describe how leaders behave during stress, uncertainty, and crisis. Over the years, researchers have developed several useful models to explain how leaders cope with complexity and support their teams during tough times. This section discusses three of the most relevant ones: Duchek’s capability-based model, Heifetz’s adaptive leadership theory, and Fletcher and Sarkar’s psychological resilience framework. After describing each model, the section explains how they can be combined into a more complete understanding of adaptive resilient leadership — especially in the aviation industry.

A. The Adaptive Leadership Model (Heifetz et al., 2009)

This model sees leadership as a practice rather than a position. It focuses on helping people and organizations face difficult challenges for which no easy solution exists. Adaptive leaders do not solve problems alone. Instead, they create space for learning, encourage shared responsibility, and guide others through discomfort and change. Heifetz et al. outline core behaviors such as identifying adaptive challenges, managing distress, maintaining disciplined attention, and giving work back to the people. These behaviors are especially important in high-pressure fields like aviation, where flexibility and calm decision-making are crucial.

B. The Resilience Capability Process Model (Duchek, 2020)

Duchek presents resilience as a dynamic capability — something that can be developed and improved over time. Her model includes three stages: **anticipation** (preparing for risks), **coping** (responding during disruption), and **adaptation** (learning and improving after the event). This process view aligns closely with what airline leaders face: rapid decision-making, emotional control, and the ability to recover quickly. In this model, leadership resilience is not only about surviving but about using disruption to grow stronger.

C. The Psychological Resilience Model (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013)

This model focuses on the inner traits that help individuals stay strong under pressure. According to Fletcher and Sarkar, resilience comes from a combination of confidence, focus, motivation, and support. Their model also includes the ability to appraise stress positively — viewing setbacks as opportunities rather than threats. These traits serve as the “mental engine” of adaptive leadership, especially when quick decisions must be made with limited information.

D. Integrating the Models

When combined, these models give us a full picture of adaptive resilient leadership. Heifetz et al. explain **how leaders engage others and adapt socially**, Duchek outlines **how resilience works in stages over time**, and Fletcher & Sarkar reveal **what inner strengths fuel this process**. Together, they show that adaptive resilient leadership is not a fixed style, but a flexible approach shaped by context, personality, and experience.

2.7 Empirical Evidence

There have been many books published on leadership in crisis times. However, the best lessons often come from real experiences. After all, the aviation industry is one which experiences regular concerns and incidents which are not due to the airplane itself. Quite a few major airlines have suffered from serious problems. It is when problems happen, that airlines like Singapore Airlines, Lufthansa and Delta Air Lines, and Qatar Airways go out of their way completely. They have to show strong leadership during difficult times. The sequel examines how these airlines were run as businesses in future years. Their stories show how leadership theory works in real life -- and how bad leadership will bring a company down, while good leadership saved it.

A. Singapore Airlines: Calm Leadership Through COVID-19

Air travel halted when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Singapore Airlines, one of the world's most respected airlines, was pummeled. The company was in a dire financial crisis, among the worst of its history. And instead of reacting with fear or confusion, the leadership remained calm and thoughtful. They didn't hide the truth. Instead they've told the truth to their employees, customers and investors — even when things have been painful.

Instead of letting people go right away, they sought out gentler remedies. Staff members were given the option of taking unpaid leave and furloughs were instituted with care. Leaders also liaised with the government to get cabin crew into temporary jobs — such as assisting in hospitals or serving customers. These measures revealed true concern and responsibility.

At the same time, the airline moved fast. R.D. chose to use planes built to transport

passengers as cargo planes to move products and keep the company afloat. They've also enhanced their digital services in anticipation of travelers' return. What really was exceptional was the company's ability to marry smart planning with emotional support. They didn't just concentrate on how to ride out the crisis — they also came together to ensure their people felt safe and valued. This is what adaptive resilient leadership is all about: Hold steady, adapt with intention, and care for others in adverse times. As a result, SIA retained its customers' and employees' confidence and was poised to return more resilient.

B. Delta Air Lines: Decentralized Crisis Decision-Making

At Delta Air Lines, a new kind of leadership emerged in the COVID-19 crisis and recovery. Delta's real distinction was how it believed in the judgment of its people on the ground. Rather than have to wait for orders from above, Delta empowered teams at local airports to make their own decisions based on the evidence in front of them. This allowed staff to take swift action — which proved pivotal throughout a fast-paced situation.

So if new travel rules were issued in the middle of the day, for instance, airport teams didn't have to wait for guidance from headquarters. They just altered boarding procedures or re-routed passengers immediately. This made the whole show flow more smoothly and avoided delay. Delta's chief executive, Ed Bastian, frequently spoke about trust and good communication and valuing one another in sharing responsibility. These values made people feel safe, secure and supported.

As a result, even when passengers were stressed or confused, staff remained “calm and engaged,” he said. They knew they were trusted to act as they saw fit. This kind of leadership — empowering people closest to the problem — made Delta more successful. It demonstrated that resilience doesn’t only emanate from the top; it emanates from everyone working together with clarity and purpose.

C. Qatar Airways: Bold Moves and Quick Thinking During Crisis

Qatar Airways, meanwhile, played off the coronavirus pandemic with bold and swift action. While most airlines ceased flying and shut down operations, Qatar took a different approach. It continued flying to crucial destinations, issued special flights that brought people home, and cultivated a cargo business to meet emerging needs. And its leaders made snap decisions based on data at the time, but they also thought about the future — how to protect their brand and emerge from what one can safely call an unprecedented storm with a strong place in the market.

The airline’s chief executive, Akbar Al Baker, was deeply involved. He was frequently on the phone with the media, justifying the airline’s decisions and taking full responsibility for what was happening. His leadership style is sometimes characterized as rigorous and intense, but during that time, it appeared both strong and emotionally controlled. He did not flounder and lose focus when so many others didn’t know what the hell.

Qatar's approach was risky, but it was also bold and long-term. Instead of merely reacting to the crisis, they took the moment to grow and strengthen their standing in global aviation. This is a powerful exemplar of resilient leadership — resilient not only in surviving the crisis, but in coming out stronger.

D. Lufthansa: Balancing Tough Choices with Responsibility

When the COVID-19 crisis descended, Lufthansa — one of Europe's largest airlines — was in a world of hurt. The travel came to a halt, the planes were grounded and the company began losing money fast. The dilemma led to some difficult choices for the airline. But rather than rushing to do either, Lufthansa's top executives sought to weigh financial survival against their responsibilities to their employees and the public.

The airline engaged in hard-bargaining with the German government and agreed to a hefty bailout to keep aloft. That meant embracing rules and public expectations, but the leaders elected to be transparent. They detailed the logic informing each move, like canceling flights and slashing employees too. Even when those decisions were hard, communications with Lufthansa remained open and respectful.

The company also demonstrated some flexibility. As it downsized, it continued investing in digital tools, cargo flights and future training for employees. Leaders kept in regular touch with teams, heard feedback and had room for emotional support in a stressful time.

Lufthansa's story was a reminder that leadership that is adaptable, resilient and able to remain calm in the face of great harm isn't always fast or flashy. Other times, it's just

about being steady under pressure, making careful but difficult decisions, and keeping people informed and treated with respect along the way.

Insights from the Cases

What stands out in all of these airline stories is not just that they had strong leaders — but that their leaders knew how to alter course according to what was happening. In each case, the leadership:

- Quick Actions with thought and reflection
- Leadership made hard decisions but also considered the people
- Permitted teams to have agility to adapt and react locally
- Communicated openly and frequently, even when it was difficult

These behaviors reveal to us more than whether someone is a good leader. They demonstrate how the entire organization adjusted — not just those at the top. The leaders' approaches to the crisis they faced were influenced not only by personal strengths of their own but also by smart changes in how the companies were run.

Although each airline pursued a different strategy, all have figured out ways to keep flying and begin the recovery. They offered us a model of adaptive resilient leadership — not as a concept but as a living, breathing reality.

2.8 Literature Gaps

Although the fields of leadership, resilience, and organizational adaptation have expanded quite substantially in recent years, three important gaps remain — particularly

with respect to practical application, industry context, and geographical distribution. Although many of the models available provide valuable insights, they account largely for Western, corporate leadership experiences. There is a shortage in research that has described how adaptive resilience leadership operates in developing countries or high-risk industry such as aviation in Africa.

First, one of the most tangible absences is the geography of the literature. Many of the insights about adaptive leadership and resilience are drawn from cases studied in the United States, Western Europe, or East Asia. Such circumstances are ordinarily characterized by economic and political systems that are less volatile, and shape the framing and nature of leadership challenges. What's lacking is a closer examination of how leaders act in far less predictable settings — in situations with fewer resources and with more frequent external intrusions (and disruptions), like political shake-ups and gaps in infrastructure.

Second, despite robustness in the theoretical literature on adaptivity (Heifetz et al., 2009) and organizational resilience (Duchek, 2020), there are only few empirical studies that combine both ideas to construct an integrative leadership model. Researchers studying resiliency typically look either at personal traits, such as emotional mastery and confidence, or at system wide capacities, like operations planning. The area that is still underdeveloped is the intersection of how leadership's actions at the individual level feeds into organizational level resilience real-time.

Thirdly, there is scarce industry specific evidence on leadership in aviation beyond the major international carriers. Which may help to explain why the handful of airline case

studies tend to examine sales data or brand reputation, or how staff handle passengers — rather than what the C-suite does when destructive events are taking place behind the scenes. Such a gap exists in the consideration of how airline leaders really think and act and how they achieve the development of their staffs in crisis situations, particularly in fast moving day to day operational domain, and for errors that yield negative life and death consequences.

Fourth, the literature is largely speculative and thus not well grounded in empirical evidence. Models have their uses, but they often leave out the intimate stories, the micro-decisions and adaptive practices that show how leaders really operate under duress. Leadership, as a result, continues all too often to be spoken of in abstract, rather than lived in situationally, terms.

A third gap is a methodological one. But many leadership studies are based on heavily processed survey and structured performance data. While useful, these practices do not address the emotional and leadership paradoxes faced during turbulence. This has led to growing recognition of the potential utility of the qualitative, interview-based methods available to fill this gap — by giving a voice to real leaders, especially those from underrepresented regions.

These evidences demonstrate the significance of this study. Taking an approach of studying adaptive resilient leadership in a large African airline through real interviews and qualitative analysis – this study provides something new. It contributes to the global dialogue by incorporating voices, contexts and challenges that often get excluded from

leadership studies in the west. It also presents lessons for any other organizations which, like NGO workers, operate in potentially lethal environments.

2.8.1 Justification of the Study / Contribution to Knowledge

Many leadership studies come from places where things usually work well — places with strong systems, steady power, and enough resources. But in many countries, especially in Africa, the situation is not like that. Leaders often work with less. They deal with power cuts, sudden rule changes, and not enough staff or tools. These are real problems, and they make leadership harder .

Most of the time, research about leadership does not include these kinds of stories. It usually focuses on big companies in Europe, the U.S., or Asia. It talks about plans, systems, or company rules. But it doesn't often talk about what leaders do when things suddenly go wrong. It doesn't show how they keep their teams going when there's pressure or fear .

This study helps fill that gap. It looks at leadership in a real working environment — an airline where people face stress every day. It focuses on how leaders stay calm, how they guide others, and how they make fast choices when time is short. It looks at both the person and the system. Because in hard times, both matter .

This study also uses interviews. That means the leaders speak for themselves. They share their stories, in their own words. This helps us understand what leadership really looks like — not just in theory, but in real life. These voices are often missing in research, and they give us something honest and useful .

By doing this, the study brings something new. It gives space to leaders who are usually not seen in books or papers. It helps us learn from them. And it can help others in similar jobs who also work in busy, high-pressure places.

2.9 Summary of the Literature Review

This chapter looked at different ideas, models, and research about leadership, resilience, and how organizations deal with crisis. It began with basic ideas like what leadership means, what resilience looks like, and how the two can work together. Then it moved on to key theories from people like Heifetz, Ducheck, and Fletcher & Sarkar. Each of these models helped us see different sides of leadership — from personal strength, to social support, to big system changes.

After that, the chapter showed how real airlines handled hard times. It shared stories from Singapore Airlines, Delta, Qatar Airways, and Lufthansa. These examples gave life to the theory and showed how leadership works when there's real pressure. They also showed that good leadership doesn't always look the same. What matters is being clear, flexible, calm, and supportive.

Then the chapter pointed out what's missing in the current research. Many leadership studies focus on rich countries with stable systems. They often leave out places like Africa, or industries like aviation, where problems come fast and resources are limited. The chapter also showed that we still don't fully understand how personal leadership and organizational resilience work together in real time.

The chapter ended by explaining why this study is important. It brings new voices, real stories, and useful lessons from a part of the world that is not often included in leadership research.

Chapter Three

3.1 Research Methodology

The chapter describes the research methodology used to conduct this study by highlighting the research design, which includes population, sample, data sources, data collection tools, data analysis procedures, and ethical considerations, focusing the study to assess resilient leadership in Ethiopian Airlines

3.2 Description of Study Area and Study Period

This study focuses on Ethiopian Airlines in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It was chosen because of its extensive international reach and continued operations experience as well as capabilities. In addition, it is well-equipped to deal with serious tribulations: for example COVID-19 there were still flights out of Guinea during the height of the outbreak; or when boeing 737 MAX aircraft grounded .Data collection will begin in April 2025 and last until the following April, 2025. This long period of time gives enough scope for thorough qualitative research as well as statistical analysis.

3.3 Research Design and Approach

1.1.1 Research Approach

This study will be using a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methods are suitable due to the exploratory and interpretative nature of the research objectives. Specifically, qualitative research will enable a deeper understanding of resilient leadership practices, the challenges encountered, and the opportunities leveraged within Ethiopian Airlines.

1.1.2 Research Design and Type

A case-study research design is employed, focusing specifically on Ethiopian Airlines as a representative case for examining resilient leadership. This design allows an in-depth investigation of leadership resilience within a real-life organizational context, providing rich, detailed insights through comprehensive qualitative analysis.

3.4 Population of the study

The population of this study includes managerial and executive staff within Ethiopian Airlines, specifically those involved directly in strategic decision-making and crisis management processes. The targeted population comprises senior executives, department heads, operational managers, and supervisors across various units, including flight operations, corporate communication, human resources, and risk management departments.

3.5 Sampling Technique

A purposive (judgmental) sampling technique is employed for participant selection. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select participants based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives, ensuring data richness and relevance. Participants are deliberately selected for their direct involvement in leadership roles, crisis management experiences, and strategic decision-making within Ethiopian Airlines

3.6 Sampling Size and Sample Size Determination

In qualitative research, sampling is not driven by statistical generalizability but by the depth, richness, and relevance of the data collected. Therefore, the sample size is determined by the principle of **data saturation**—the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006)

3.6.1 Sampling Strategy

This study employed **purposive sampling**, specifically **criterion-based sampling**, to select individuals who possess in-depth knowledge and experience relevant to adaptive resilient leadership during the COVID-19 crisis at Ethiopian Airlines. This approach ensures that participants are **information-rich** and directly involved in leadership, strategy, or crisis response roles (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Participants were drawn from diverse units, including:

- Executive leadership
- Cargo and logistics management
- Flight operations
- Passenger services
- Training and human resource departments

This diversity allowed for **triangulation** and a **multi-perspective analysis** of leadership responses during the pandemic.

3.6.2 Sample Size Justification

A total of 15 participants were selected and interviewed. This number is considered adequate for a qualitative case study design, where the goal is conceptual depth rather

than numerical breadth. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative studies generally include between 5 and 25 participants when conducting in-depth interviews, depending on the complexity of the subject and the homogeneity of the population.

This study reached thematic saturation by the 13th interview, with the last two interviews used to confirm the stability of themes. The sample size is therefore justified by:

- The expertise of respondents
- The thematic convergence during coding
- The manageable scope for deep content analysis

3.7 Data Collection Instruments

In qualitative case study research, the researcher functions as the primary instrument of data collection, supported by structured tools such as interview guides and document review protocols. This study used **semi-structured interviews** as the core data collection tool, supplemented by **secondary data sources** for triangulation and contextual validation.

3.7.1 Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Semi-structured interviews allowed for both guided inquiry and the flexibility to probe unexpected but relevant insights. The interview guide was built around the study's main research questions and conceptual framework, focusing on themes such as:

- Adaptive decision-making during crises
- Organizational restructuring under pressure
- Interdepartmental coordination

- Stakeholder communication
- Leadership learning and post-crisis adaptation

Sample questions included:

- “What leadership strategies were applied in your department during the pandemic?”
- “How did your team adapt its operations under fast-changing conditions?”
- “What challenges did you face in collaborating with other departments or external stakeholders?”

The interview guide was **pilot-tested** with two aviation professionals not included in the final sample, leading to improved clarity and sequencing of questions.

3.7.2 Use of Secondary Data

In addition to primary interviews, secondary data played a vital role in this research. Secondary data refers to existing materials that were not originally collected for this specific study, but are relevant and insightful. These sources were used to:

A. Triangulate Interview Findings

Secondary documents were used to cross-check claims made by interview participants. For example, leadership strategies described in interviews were verified against Ethiopian Airlines' official press releases and Africa CDC logistics updates.

B. Enrich Contextual Understanding

Official reports from the International Air Transport Association (IATA), the African Union, and the World Health Organization (WHO) were reviewed to understand broader aviation sector challenges and leadership responses during COVID-19.

C. Document Institutional Actions

Internal communications (where available), news articles, and policy briefs helped reconstruct Ethiopian Airlines' crisis response timeline and adaptive decisions (e.g., converting passenger planes to cargo, rerouting supply chains, etc.).

D. Highlight Systemic Alignment

By comparing Ethiopian Airlines' documented actions with international aviation responses, the study identified instances of systems thinking and institutional alignment in practice.

Examples of secondary data sources include:

- Ethiopian Airlines COVID-19 press releases (2020–2022)
- Africa CDC logistics and transport updates
- AU–Ethiopian Airlines vaccine delivery reports
- News articles from Bloomberg, Reuters, and local Ethiopian media
- IATA and ICAO policy statements

3.7 Method of data analysis

The study employs qualitative thematic analysis for data interpretation. Thematic analysis enables systematic identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns and themes emerging from interview transcripts and secondary documents

3.8 Ethical Consideration

Ethical integrity was a foundational element of this study, particularly given the qualitative nature of the research, which required close interaction with human participants. Before any data collection began, ethical clearance was obtained from the Addis Ababa University College of Business and Economics Research Review Board. The ethical approval process ensured that the research design complied with institutional guidelines concerning the treatment of participants, data confidentiality, and academic integrity.

All participants were provided with a **clear explanation of the research purpose**, procedures, potential risks, and benefits prior to the interviews. Participation was strictly **voluntary**, and informed consent was obtained both verbally and in writing. Participants were assured that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any negative consequence. Consent forms were prepared in clear and understandable English, and verbal clarification was provided where necessary.

To ensure **confidentiality and privacy**, participants' identities were anonymized using pseudonyms. No identifying information—such as names, specific job titles, or email addresses—was included in any published or shared version of the study. Audio

recordings and transcripts of interviews were stored securely in encrypted files accessible only to the researcher. Upon completion of the thesis, all raw data will be deleted in accordance with Addis Ababa University's data retention policy and international best practices in qualitative research.

Furthermore, the study adhered to principles of non-maleficence and beneficence, ensuring that the research did not cause any harm to participants and that the findings may contribute positively to organizational learning and leadership development in the aviation sector. Care was also taken to avoid power imbalances; interviews were conducted respectfully and neutrally, without leading questions or coercion. In addition, care was taken to avoid potential **conflicts of interest**, and the researcher maintained a neutral stance throughout the data collection and analysis process.

In the use of **secondary data**, ethical rigor was also maintained. All sources were properly cited, and no confidential or proprietary documents were accessed without permission. Publicly available reports from reputable sources such as IATA, WHO, the African Union, and Ethiopian Airlines were used to supplement and validate findings.

Overall, ethical practice was integrated into every stage of this research—from design through to dissemination—in alignment with international research ethics standards and the guidelines set by Addis Ababa University.

Chapter Four

4. Data Presentation and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative study conducted to explore adaptive resilient leadership at Ethiopian Airlines. Drawing from the insights of 15 participants across various departments—including Flight Operations, Cargo, Passenger Services, Cabin Crew, and Executive Leadership—the analysis is rooted in rich, narrative data collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis technique. Themes were drawn both from the guiding research questions and organically from the language and patterns shared by participants.

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the central themes that emerged in relation to how adaptive resilient leadership is defined, practiced, and supported within Ethiopian Airlines. Special attention is given to real-life examples and leadership behaviors shared by the respondents, with a particular focus on the perspectives of both frontline managers and executive leaders. Where applicable, direct quotes—particularly from prominent figures such as Lemma Yadecha—are included to deepen the contextual relevance of the findings.

4.2 Ethical Consideration

All interviews were conducted with informed consent, and participant confidentiality has been strictly maintained. No real names or identifying information have been used in this analysis. All quotes are anonymized by role and department to preserve privacy while ensuring contextual relevance.

4.3 Participant Overview

Ethiopian Airlines employees who have been specially selected by purposive sampling. Participants were selected on the basis that they had leadership responsibilities. Each participant was interviewed with a 12-question adaptive leadership questionnaire to find his perceptions, experiences and management outlook.

Table 1: Participant Roles and Departments

Participant Name	Department / Role
Participant 1	Executive
Participant 2	Passenger Services Supervisor
Participant 3	Cargo Operations Lead
Participant 4	Flight Captain – International
Participant 5	Aviation Academy Instructor
Participant 6	Senior Flight Dispatcher
Participant 7	Cabin Services Coordinator
Participant 8	Passenger Services Lead
Participant 9	Passenger Systems –Consultant
Participant 10	Aviation Safety Analyst
Participant 11	Executive
Participant 12	Head of Strategy and Analytics
Participant 13	Manager , Advertising
Participant 14	Manager , Customer Experience
Participant 15	Management , Revenue Optimization

4.4 Thematic Analysis

This part of the chapter looks closely at what 15 staff members from Ethiopian Airlines had to say about adaptive resilient leadership. We spoke to people at different levels — from those working on the ground to senior executives — to get a full picture of how leadership works during tough times. To make sense of their responses, I used two ways of finding patterns: one based on the questions we asked (structured coding), and another that came from reading their answers carefully to spot repeated ideas (emerging themes).

I grouped these themes and added real quotes from the participants to keep their voices in the story. Then I compared what they shared with ideas from well-known leadership researchers like Ducheck (2020), Heifetz and his team (2009), and Fletcher & Sarkar (2013). Their work helped me see where the airline’s approach fits into bigger leadership theories.

But more importantly, the interviews also showed us something new. At Ethiopian Airlines, leadership during a crisis doesn’t just follow official plans — it often depends on people stepping up, adjusting quickly, and making smart decisions on the spot. These actions aren’t always written in manuals, but they matter. This kind of behavior adds to what we already know from research and gives a better picture of how adaptive leadership really works in African aviation — something not often covered in global studies.

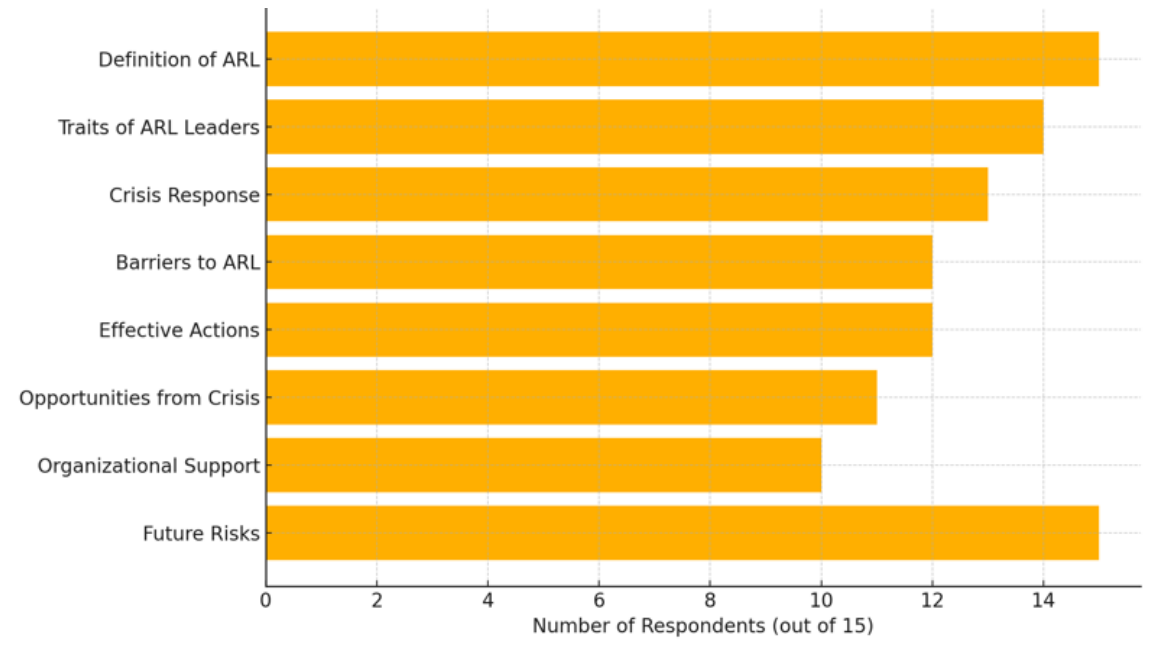


Figure 4.4: Frequency of Key Themes Identified from 15 Interviews

4.4.1 Definition and Understanding of Adaptive Resilient Leadership

Majority **participants** offered definitions or reflections on what adaptive resilient leadership means in their daily work. While their roles and experiences varied, there was strong agreement on one thing: adaptive resilient leadership is about responding quickly and calmly during unexpected challenges — and doing so in a way that helps the team stay focused and confident.

A **Flight Dispatcher** explained it clearly:

“To us, it’s about changing flight plans under pressure and not losing team confidence.”

An **Executive** added from a strategic viewpoint:

“It’s when you don’t wait for orders but act based on experience and safety logic.”

These insights closely match Duchek’s (2020) idea of resilience as a capability to anticipate, respond, and adapt to disruptions in real time. In this case, the participants described it not as a formal policy or training, but as something that lives in the fast-paced decisions they have to make every day — especially in critical operational environments like flight scheduling, cargo rerouting, or passenger handling. This reinforces the idea that leadership resilience often shows up in moments of stress, not just in planned responses.

4.4.2 Traits of Adaptive Resilient Leaders

Majority of the participants described the personal traits and behaviors they believe define strong adaptive resilient leaders. The most commonly mentioned qualities included staying calm under pressure, being flexible, listening to team members, and acting quickly without confusion. Many said that leadership is not just about giving orders — it’s about how leaders carry themselves and support their teams during uncertain times.

A **Cabin Crew Lead** shared:

“My supervisor didn’t panic during the reroute — she gave us all roles and spoke to passengers with empathy.”

A **Cargo Manager** emphasized:

“You must anticipate problems. Don’t wait for the crisis to tell you what to do.”

These real-life examples reflect the model of Heifetz et al. (2009), who describe adaptive leaders as emotionally stable, responsive, and able to engage teams in solving unfamiliar problems. In the case of Ethiopian Airlines, these traits weren't theoretical — they were visible during real disruptions and often made the difference between confusion and smooth recovery.

4.4.3 Crisis Response and Organizational Adaptation

Almost all participants described how their teams adapted during crises such as COVID-19, sudden IT failures, or unexpected route closures. They shared practical examples of moving fast—switching to digital tools, revising routines on the spot, and letting local staff decide without waiting for formal approval.

A Safety manager recalled:

“Our safety reports went digital fast. We were sending data live from the tarmac.”

A Dispatcher added:

“Regional teams made flight-reroute calls without central clearance. That saved hours.”

These stories fit well with Fletcher and Sarkar's view that true resilience means solving problems in real time and adjusting procedures under pressure. At Ethiopian Airlines, this often meant skipping long reporting chains and trusting the people closest to the issue to act—proving that real adaptation relies as much on frontline judgment as on formal plans.

4.4.4 Barriers to Leadership

All participants pointed out challenges that made it difficult for leaders to act quickly and effectively during crises. The most common barriers included delayed decision-making from upper management, poor communication of new policies, unclear authority, and emotional fatigue across teams. These issues made it harder for even experienced leaders to stay adaptive, especially in fast-changing situations.

A **Training Manager** reflected:

“Policy updates were unclear — people acted based on instinct, not instruction.”

This quote illustrates a key gap in some leadership literature, including Duchek’s (2020) framework, which often assumes organizations have clear systems and communication in place during crises. In real-world practice, especially in high-stakes aviation, unclear policies can lead to inconsistent responses and unnecessary stress. Ethiopian Airlines staff frequently relied on informal guidance or personal judgment — a reality that theory doesn’t always capture.

4.4.5 Enabling Practices and Effective

Majority of the respondents identified specific leadership practices that helped them respond effectively during operational disruptions. They highlighted the value of empowering local team leaders, using pre-approved contingency plans, delegating roles early, and maintaining clear, simple communication under pressure.

A Ground Operations Officer explained:

“We no longer wait for HQ to approve changes. We follow pre-agreed protocols and act.”

This kind of operational autonomy supports Duchek’s (2020) argument that resilient organizations don’t just react — they build flexible processes in advance, so teams are ready to adapt when needed. Ethiopian Airlines seems to have quietly embedded this autonomy in many frontline roles, helping them respond faster and more confidently during emergencies.

4.4.6 Opportunities Born from Crisis

Majority interviewees spoke about how crises like COVID-19 led to positive, long-lasting changes in the way the airline operates. These included new response teams, digital training modules, more efficient crew rotation, and simulations for future disruptions. Instead of going back to old routines, many departments improved their systems and kept the upgrades.

A Passenger Services Lead shared:

“We created a recovery team and use them during every big disruption now.”

This response mirrors Duchek’s concept of "learning from crisis" — where organizations use challenges as a chance to grow, improve, and build resilience. These internal adaptations show that leadership resilience at Ethiopian Airlines is not just reactive — it’s becoming more proactive and forward-looking with each experience.

4.4.7 Organizational Support Structure

All respondents said they’ve seen changes in how the airline supports people during and after a crisis. These support systems weren’t always formal policies — sometimes they were simple practices like team check-ins, talking things out after a flight, or helping each other when stress was high. But they made a real difference.

As a **Cabin supervisor** shared:

“Now we talk after flights — it wasn’t like this before. It makes a difference.”

These kinds of everyday support habits matter. They help people handle pressure better, reflect on what happened, and go back to work stronger. This reflects Fletcher and Sarkar’s (2013) idea that resilience isn’t just about bouncing back alone — it’s also about feeling supported and learning together with your team. At Ethiopian Airlines, that kind of support seems to be growing naturally.

4.4.8 Recommendations and Emerging Risks

Every participant shared thought on how to prepare better for the next crisis. Some talked about the need for more hands-on simulations. Others brought up future risks like AI systems failing, cyber threats, and weather disruptions. Everyone agreed: while tech is important, it's people who need to stay ready, flexible, and informed.

An **Executive** put it this way:

“AI may help us reroute, but it must be tested for failure. Resilience is human-first.”

That kind of thinking matches what Heifetz and his colleagues (2009) talk about — how real leadership isn't just about knowing what to do, but staying steady and helping others through the unknown. The message from these interviews is clear: Ethiopian Airlines is aware of the new risks coming, and their people are asking for tools and trust to face them head-on.

4.5 Literature Gap and Empirical Contribution

Most leadership research we read comes from big companies in the West, or from formal government and military systems. What this study brings is something different — it shows how resilience is built and used in an African airline that operates in a world full of unpredictability.

What makes Ethiopian Airlines unique is:

- Leaders don't always wait for permission — they act when action is needed
- People take on different roles when things get tough, without waiting for orders

- Decisions are often made by the people closest to the problem, not just those at the top

These real-world experiences tell us that resilience isn't always something that's trained or designed — sometimes it grows out of how people work together, solve problems in real time, and support each other when it matters most. That's something many leadership theories don't fully capture, and it's a big part of what this research adds.

4.6 Summary of Insights

This chapter presented an in-depth look at how adaptive resilient leadership is practiced at Ethiopian Airlines. Through the voices of 15 professionals across departments, eight major themes emerged — all supported by real examples and aligned with key academic models. The data shows that while the organization has built strong adaptive behaviors, especially during crisis events, there remain areas for growth, including clearer communication and future-focused training. The findings offer both validation of existing leadership practices and concrete direction for strengthening organizational resilience. The next chapter will explore how these findings can be translated into strategic recommendations and applied improvements.

Chapter Five

5.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together everything we learned from the people who shared their experiences at Ethiopian Airlines. It takes a closer look at how adaptive resilient leadership is actually practiced — not just as a theory, but as something that shows up in real decisions, teamwork, and crisis moments. The voices of 15 staff members from different departments and levels help us understand what this kind of leadership looks like in action. Here, we compare those experiences with what the academic literature says, looking at where they match and where they differ. We also reflect on what these findings mean for the future — both for leadership training at the airline and for how we think about resilience more broadly. Most importantly, this chapter connects the practical, on-the-ground realities with the leadership models explored earlier in the research..

5.2 Summary of Major Findings

This study identified five major findings about adaptive resilient leadership at Ethiopian Airlines:

1. Clear Understanding Across Roles:

All participants described adaptive resilient leadership as acting quickly and calmly during sudden challenges while keeping the team focused.

2. Consistent Traits Among Effective Leaders:

Strong leaders were described as calm, flexible, communicative, and confident under pressure.

3. Frontline Decision-Making Was Crucial:

Quick local decisions, especially during crisis moments, were a key part of successful team responses.

4. Barriers Slowed Some Responses:

Communication delays and centralized instructions were common obstacles to timely action.

5. Supportive Structures Helped Teams Perform:

Delegation, teamwork, and informal support systems contributed to effective adaptation during disruptions.

These findings summarize how leadership behavior influenced team performance during times of stress and highlight areas where organizational support can be strengthened

5.3 Practical Implications for Ethiopian Airlines

Based on the study findings, there are several practical lessons that Ethiopian Airlines can apply to further strengthen its leadership resilience. First, decentralizing decision-making in a controlled way proved effective during emergencies and should be formalized into crisis protocols. Second, leadership development programs should include real-case simulations that build confidence and test adaptability under pressure. Third, emotional resilience support—like peer debriefs and coaching—should become standard practice across all departments. Lastly, while technology such as AI is helpful, it must always be

paired with human judgment. Systems should be designed with fallback protocols and trained leadership layers at every level.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on the insights drawn from this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance adaptive resilient leadership at Ethiopian Airlines:

1. Strengthen Cross-Department Crisis Drills – Conduct regular crisis simulations that involve multiple departments to improve coordination and response time.
2. Promote Emotional Resilience Coaching – Offer leadership coaching and peer-support systems to help staff deal with stress and make clear decisions under pressure.
3. Improve Policy Communication Tools – Ensure faster and clearer internal communication systems to minimize confusion during disruptions.
4. Build Leadership Development Based on Real Scenarios – Incorporate case-based learning and scenario training into the Aviation Academy's leadership programs.
5. Balance Technology with Human Judgment – Use AI and digital tools to support decisions but maintain fallback options where human leaders can intervene confidently.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter summed up the main things we learned from the study and linked them to what leadership books and experts have talked about before. One thing that came through clearly is that adaptive resilient leadership isn't just an idea at Ethiopian Airlines — it's something real that people are already doing. Whether it's reacting quickly in emergencies or helping teammates through tough times, many parts of the airline already show strong leadership and resilience, even if it's not written down in a manual.

At the same time, there are still things that could be better. Some staff mentioned that communication could be clearer, and that more formal training would help them lead with more confidence. But overall, the message is hopeful. Leadership resilience isn't something you have to be born with — it's something people can learn, grow into, and use every day. And in a busy, high-stress place like aviation, that kind of leadership makes all the difference

5.6 Suggestions for Further Research

This research focused on a single airline within a specific regional context. Future research could consider:

- Conducting comparative studies between multiple African airlines to explore common resilience strategies.
- Studying leadership behavior over a longer period (e.g., before, during, and after a major disruption).
- Exploring adaptive leadership among ground staff, technical teams, and customer service units.

- Evaluating how formal training programs influence adaptive behavior over time.

5.7 Final Reflection

Adaptive resilient leadership is not just a theory — it is something people live through every day, especially in industries like aviation where uncertainty is constant. This study has shown that leaders do not need to be perfect, but they must be present, responsive, and open to learning from every situation. The voices from Ethiopian Airlines offer valuable lessons not only for their organization but for any leader trying to guide a team through complexity. Resilience, in the end, is a shared effort — it is built through people, relationships, and the courage to adapt when everything is on the line.

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Appendices

Qualitative Interview Questionnaire

Adaptive Resilient Leadership, Challenges, and Opportunities: The Case for Ethiopian Airlines

Interview

Participant: _____

Position/Title: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Part I: General Understanding of Resilient Leadership

1. How do you define resilient leadership based on your experience within Ethiopian Airlines?
2. In your view, what are the key characteristics or traits a resilient leader should possess, especially in the aviation industry?

Leadership Resilience and Crisis Response

3. Can you describe a recent significant crisis faced by Ethiopian Airlines?
 - How did the leadership respond initially?
 - What specific leadership behaviors or decisions were particularly effective?
4. In your opinion, what factors contributed most significantly to Ethiopian Airlines' resilience during crises (such as COVID-19 or the Boeing 737 MAX crisis)?

Challenges and Obstacles

5. What were the major leadership challenges faced during the crisis situations you've described?
 - How did the leadership manage those challenges?

6. Could you highlight specific leadership challenges that emerged from these crises that Ethiopian Airlines could have handled differently?

Opportunities Arising from Crisis

7. What major opportunities emerged for Ethiopian Airlines as a direct result of leadership resilience during and after recent crises?
8. In your opinion, how effectively did leadership leverage these opportunities?

Developing Resilient Leadership Capacities

9. What specific actions, trainings, or strategies does Ethiopian Airlines currently use to build resilience among its leadership team?
10. What recommendations would you suggest to enhance resilient leadership practices at Ethiopian Airlines?

Future Perspectives

11. Looking ahead, what future leadership challenges do you anticipate at Ethiopian Airlines, and how can resilience strategies help address them?
12. Do you have additional recommendations for strengthening leadership resilience within Ethiopian Airlines?