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Scientific articles

Desafíos del liderazgo distribuido

Challenges of Distributed Leadership

Desafios da liderança distribuída

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Resumen

El liderazgo ha evolucionado a lo largo del tiempo mediante diversos enfoques que contribuyen al fortalecimiento de la adaptabilidad, la resiliencia y la capacidad de innovación en las organizaciones. Asimismo, favorece el desarrollo del talento individual, lo que incrementa la motivación de los equipos de trabajo y fortalece el compromiso colectivo. En este sentido, el liderazgo configura un entorno colaborativo sustentado en la confianza interpersonal y el reconocimiento mutuo.

Uno de los enfoques contemporáneos más relevantes es el liderazgo distribuido, el cual propone la distribución de responsabilidades entre los miembros de la organización para aprovechar de manera integral el conocimiento colectivo y favorecer el cumplimiento de la misión y los objetivos organizacionales.

Entre los elementos que favorecen este enfoque destacan la apertura en la comunicación organizacional, la confianza recíproca entre los integrantes y el fortalecimiento de una cultura organizacional sólida. Estos aspectos permiten mejorar la gestión institucional y potenciar el desempeño organizacional.

No obstante, la distribución de roles también puede generar desafíos relacionados con la toma de decisiones y posibles tensiones organizacionales. A pesar de ello, este enfoque promueve el desarrollo de competencias clave como la empatía, la escucha activa, la inteligencia emocional y la gestión colaborativa de equipos.



Palabras clave: liderazgo, liderazgo distribuido, adaptabilidad, resiliencia, innovación, cultura organizacional.

Abstract

Leadership has evolved over time through different approaches that contribute to strengthening adaptability, resilience, and innovation capacity within organizations. At the same time, it fosters the development of individual talent, increasing team motivation and reinforcing collective commitment. In this sense, leadership creates a collaborative environment supported by interpersonal trust and mutual recognition.

One of the most relevant contemporary approaches is distributed leadership, which proposes the distribution of responsibilities among organizational members to maximize collective knowledge and support the achievement of institutional missions and objectives.

Key elements that support this approach include open organizational communication, reciprocal trust among members, and the strengthening of a solid organizational culture. These aspects contribute to improving institutional management and enhancing organizational performance.

However, the distribution of roles may also generate challenges related to decision-making processes and potential organizational tensions. Despite these difficulties, this leadership approach promotes the development of essential competencies such as empathy, active listening, emotional intelligence, and collaborative team management.

Keywords: leadership, distributed leadership, adaptability, resilience, innovation, organizational culture.

Resumo

A liderança evoluiu ao longo do tempo por meio de diversas abordagens que contribuem para fortalecer a adaptabilidade, a resiliência e a inovação dentro das organizações. Ela também fomenta o desenvolvimento de talentos individuais, o que aumenta a motivação da equipe e fortalece o comprometimento coletivo. Nesse sentido, a liderança molda um ambiente colaborativo baseado na confiança interpessoal e no reconhecimento mútuo.

Uma das abordagens contemporâneas mais relevantes é a liderança distribuída, que propõe a distribuição de responsabilidades entre os membros da organização para aproveitar ao

máximo o conhecimento coletivo e facilitar o alcance da missão e dos objetivos da organização.

Entre os elementos que sustentam essa abordagem estão a comunicação organizacional aberta, a confiança mútua entre os membros e o fortalecimento de uma cultura organizacional robusta. Esses aspectos aprimoram a gestão institucional e melhoram o desempenho organizacional.

No entanto, a distribuição de funções também pode gerar desafios relacionados à tomada de decisões e potenciais tensões organizacionais. Apesar disso, essa abordagem promove o desenvolvimento de competências-chave como empatia, escuta ativa, inteligência emocional e gestão colaborativa de equipes.

Palavras-chave: liderança, liderança distribuída, adaptabilidade, resiliência, inovação, cultura organizacional.

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Introduction

Leadership has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, establishing itself as a key factor for the development and continuous improvement of educational and business organizations (Correa, 2021). In this context, current organizational dynamics demand leaders capable of adapting to changing environments characterized by innovation, uncertainty, and increasing institutional complexity. Therefore, contemporary leadership requires the strengthening of competencies geared toward strategic decision-making, human talent management, and the achievement of organizational objectives.

One of the challenges facing organizations is the concentration of leadership in a small number of people, which limits collective participation in management and decision-making processes. In response, new approaches have emerged that promote more horizontal and participatory organizational structures, fostering collaboration among members and generating changes in traditional management models.

In this sense, leadership is understood as a dynamic process that influences the functioning of organizations by building favorable work climates and strengthening collaborative relationships among the various institutional actors. These elements contribute to improving organizational effectiveness and promoting work environments that facilitate the achievement of institutional goals and the professional development of its members (Correa, 2021).

Similarly, various international organizations have promoted initiatives aimed at strengthening educational leadership and training school leaders. In particular, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has promoted training programs focused on educational inclusion, institutional leadership, and strengthening global citizenship. These initiatives seek to guarantee inclusive, equitable, and quality education, as well as promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2020).

In recent years, digital transformation and the advancement of information technologies have generated new demands for organizational leadership. In this context, digital leadership has become a fundamental component of institutional management, as it involves the ability of managers to integrate technological tools, promote pedagogical innovation, and strengthen organizational communication processes (Mancha et al., 2023).

The health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of leadership in educational management during periods of high uncertainty. In numerous Latin American countries, educational institutions faced unprecedented challenges related to the continuity of teaching and learning processes, adaptation to virtual environments, and the reorganization of school management practices (ECLAC and UNESCO, 2020). In this context, educational leaders played a fundamental role in coordinating resources, making decisions, and supporting teachers and students.

The experience gained from this context revealed that leadership does not depend solely on the manager but can be distributed among various members of the organization. Thus, distributed leadership emerges as an approach that promotes collective participation, collaborative work, and shared responsibility in institutional management processes.

Furthermore, contemporary leadership has incorporated new perspectives related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Within this framework, female leadership has gained greater visibility in organizations, challenging traditional models historically associated with male leadership. Several studies highlight that female leaders tend to promote leadership styles characterized by collaboration, open communication, and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships (Carrasco & Barraza, 2021).

In this context, analyzing leadership in educational organizations requires considering multiple dimensions, including digital transformation, educational inclusion, change management, and the diversity of leadership styles. These dimensions allow us to understand the complexity of contemporary leadership and its impact on institutional management.

Based on these considerations, the purpose of this study is to analyze the challenges of distributed leadership in contemporary educational management, examining its main characteristics, contributions and limitations within the current organizational context.

Development

Leadership in the new normal

Contemporary organizations have faced profound transformations because of the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This context generated significant changes in institutional management dynamics, especially in the educational field, where institutions had to adapt to scenarios of confinement, virtual education, and the reorganization of their academic processes. In this scenario, leadership acquired a fundamental role in ensuring the continuity of institutional activities and the fulfillment of organizational objectives.

During times of crisis, leadership becomes a key factor in promoting organizational coordination, strengthening internal communication, and facilitating the resolution of complex problems. In this sense, leaders must foster collaborative environments that allow for a flexible response to situations of uncertainty, promoting trust and teamwork among members of the organization (Grint, 2020).

The uncertainty generated by the health crisis also produced significant emotional effects on work teams. Managers, teachers, and administrative staff faced high levels of stress and anxiety stemming from the rapid transition to virtual work models. Given this scenario, it is essential that leaders foster an organizational climate based on trust, institutional support, and effective communication—elements that contribute to strengthening organizational stability and the well-being of work teams.

In this context, leadership should be geared not only towards the management of resources and institutional processes, but also towards strengthening human relationships within the organization. As Starratt (2004) points out, educational leadership involves an ethical dimension focused on caring for people, collective responsibility, and strengthening the educational community.

Several studies highlight that, in crisis contexts, leaders must develop new forms of inter-institutional collaboration. In this regard, Hung et al. (2020) propose the need to promote ecological leadership, understood as an approach that fosters the building of alliances between institutions, communities, and social actors to address complex challenges.

During the pandemic, one of the sectors most affected was the education system. Numerous institutions had to temporarily close their facilities and shift their pedagogical processes to virtual or hybrid modalities. This process involved an accelerated transformation of educational practices and institutional management models, generating new demands for educational leadership (del Arco et al., 2021).

In this scenario, management teams had to implement strategies aimed at strengthening personal leadership resources (PLRs), which enable them to cope with uncertainty and promote organizational effectiveness. These resources comprise a set of personal skills and dispositions that influence leaders' ability to guide their teams and manage institutional processes effectively (Ramos-Pla et al., 2021).

Personal leadership resources relate to cognitive, social, and psychological traits that influence leadership practice. These resources enable leaders to analyze complex situations, establish collaborative relationships, and effectively manage emotions in changing organizational contexts.

As shown in Table 1, personal leadership resources can be classified into three main categories: cognitive resources, social resources, and psychological resources. Each of these dimensions contributes to strengthening managerial capabilities and developing more effective leadership practices.

Table 1. Personal Leadership Resources

Personal resource	Description
Cognitive resources	- They include systemic thinking skills, strategic analysis, and the ability to solve complex problems.
Social resources	- They include skills related to communication, building interpersonal relationships, and collaborative work.
Psychology resources	- They are linked to resilience, motivation, emotional intelligence, and the ability to adapt to situations of uncertainty.

Note. Adapted from Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2020), p. 11.

Cognitive, social, and psychological resources are essential for human development and effective problem-solving. Experience in resolving complex situations, along with specific knowledge, provides fundamental tools for addressing them appropriately. Likewise, the ability to perceive and manage emotions, as well as to act appropriately on an emotional level, is crucial for human interactions and teamwork. Psychological resources, such as optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, and proactivity, are internal drivers that strengthen motivation and the ability to overcome obstacles. Together, these resources promote emotional well-being and performance in various areas. In this regard, and from a managerial leadership perspective, Leithwood et al. (2020) propose seven key principles, which are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Key Leadership Principles

No.	Principle	Description
1	Influence of school leadership on learning	School leadership influences learning after classroom teaching.
2	Common practices of successful leaders	Successful leaders share effective practices.
3	Contextualized exercise of leadership	The way leaders carry out their practices reflects their responsibility to the context in which they operate.
4	Influence on teaching through staff support	School leaders influence teaching by motivating and supporting staff.
5	Distribution of school leadership	School leadership has a greater impact when it is distributed.
6	Differentiated effectiveness of leadership patterns	Some leadership styles are more effective than others.

7	Traits associated with leadership effectiveness	Some traits help explain the effectiveness of leadership.
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Note. Table Self-made, adapted from Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2020).

High-performing leaders who are highly effective in developing leadership practices and continuously improving the organization strengthen their personal leadership resources, which can be understood as qualities, dispositions, and competencies linked to their managerial performance. These resources foster more effective action in complex educational contexts and contribute to the achievement of institutional objectives.

Therefore, Leithwood et al. (2020) propose four key leadership practices, which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Key leadership practices

Leadership practice	Specific actions
Set an address	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building a shared vision. - Identify specific and shared short-term goals. - Generate high expectations about performance. - Communicate the vision and objectives.
Developing people and strengthening relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To stimulate the development of the professional skills of the staff. - Provide support and show consideration towards staff members. - Model the values and practices of the school. - Building trusting relationships with and among staff, students, and parents.

Leadership practice	Specific actions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish productive working relationships with representatives of the teaching staff.
<p>Develop the organization to support desired practices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Build a collaborative culture and distribute leadership. - Structure the organization to facilitate collaboration. - Building productive relationships with families and communities. - Linking the school with its wider environment. - Maintain a safe and healthy environment. - Allocate resources in support of the school's vision and goals.
<p>Improve the instructional program</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff the instructional program. - Provide instructional support. - Monitor student learning and progress in school improvement. - To reduce staff distractions that interfere with instructional work.

Note. Table created by the author, adapted from Leithwood, Harris and Hopkins (2020).

In educational management, leadership focuses on learning and extends throughout the entire school organization. It also promotes the development of the educational community, emphasizing justice and social equity. Therefore, school leaders play a crucial role in decision-making, especially in crisis situations (del Arco et al., 2021).

RPL skills In high-performing teams, the aim is to strengthen the assumption of responsibilities and foster greater self-esteem in job performance. This contributes to higher quality work and a greater level of involvement in the educational organization. Similarly, the manager monitors, supervises, and guides teachers and administrative staff in processes

such as professional development planning, academic planning, and task delegation, to promote the achievement of organizational objectives (OECD, 2009; del Arco et al., 2021).

Likewise, the pandemic and the global lockdowns created significant adaptation challenges for educational institutions. This led administrators to make decisions focused on the partial closure of academic activities and the implementation of emergency remote systems, such as online teaching through various digital platforms.

It is worth noting that, as an integrating element of the management process, managerial thinking occupies a relevant place in the configuration of organizations. In this sense, Álvarez (2006) proposes typologies of managerial and strategic thinking that allow us to understand different ways in which leaders and managers act in educational organizations, particularly in contexts of crisis and institutional transformation.

Álvarez (2006) describes twelve typologies of managerial thinking, ranging from “zero thinking” to “strategic thinking.” These typologies integrate relevant operational conditions and are articulated with elements of critical, creative, and innovative thinking.

Therefore, the exploratory typology is understood as a construct derived from observing management practices and the attitudes adopted by directors and leaders of educational organizations in the face of institutional challenges. This perspective allows for the analysis of the sense of responsibility with which leadership is exercised in educational management (Álvarez, 2006).

Table 4 below describes some common categories of the typology of directive thinking.

Table 4. Typology of directive thinking

Typology	Definition
1. Zero Thought	A passive attitude that involves “letting things happen and letting them pass”
2. Naive Thinking	A desire to find "simple, easy, cheap and easy-to-control solutions" to very complex structural problems in the short term.
3. Normative-Bureaucratic Thinking	Observing laws and regulations allows you to solve any problem.
4. Evasive (Gelatinous) Thinking	The manager evades management responsibilities, passing them on to subordinates or returning them to their hierarchical superiors.
5. Thought (Democratic or Tribal)	It seeks power for power's sake. It assumes the infallibility of authority. It blocks the delegation of functions. It compromises the institutional mission.
6. Autocratic Patrimonialist Thought	The manager believes that, by virtue of having been legally elected or appointed to a position, he has become the owner of the institution under his charge.
7. Political and Trade Union Corporate Thinking	The manager tries to stay on good terms with all power groups; whether they are union leaders, teachers, students, political parties, business leaders or social leaders.

Typology	Definition
8. Corporate Business Thinking - Private	He believes that educational institutions are organized and managed like any other productive or service-oriented business. He emphasizes financial aspects and the pursuit of short-term profits.
9. Rationalizing Thinking	It seeks to allocate scarce resources among users who compete for those same resources. It is based on the clear establishment of priorities, which are not always evident. This criterion, when applied excessively, tends to inhibit institutional development.
10. Critical Thinking	It seeks to get to the bottom of problems and identifies the peculiar nature of each problem and its relationship to other problems.
11. Creative or Innovative Thinking	It questions the future implications of continuing with "more of the same" that have not been fundamentally resolved.
12. Strategic Thinking	It represents a commitment to solidarity with the fulfillment of the institutional mission by the members of the organization, through the promotion of the development of critical thinking and innovative thinking.

Note. Table created by the author, adapted from Álvarez (2006).

The typologies of managerial thinking refer to the way leaders process information, make decisions, and address problems within an organization. It is also important to note that these thinking styles are not mutually exclusive, as leaders can employ different approaches depending on the situation and the specific needs of the organizational context.

Furthermore, developing managerial thinking skills is essential for strengthening decision-making and effective leadership within organizations. Managerial thinking typologies offer a relevant analytical framework for understanding how leaders interpret reality, guide their decisions, and address the challenges of increasingly complex organizations.

Figure 1 presents the key elements of leadership for effective organizational management in dynamic and changing contexts.

Figure 1. Keys to leadership success



Note. Original work, adapted from *The 21 Laws of Leadership*, by J. Maxwell, 2007, Editorial Grupo Nelson.

It is worth noting that the keys to successful leadership lie in the combination of skills, qualities, and strong values, guided by a clear vision and a commitment to the development of the team. Similarly, effective leadership is characterized by decision-making with integrity, empathy, and the ability to inspire, motivate, and guide team members toward achieving common goals.

The keys to successful leadership vary depending on the situations and contexts in which it is exercised. Consequently, building strong relationships within a team fosters trust and strengthens collaboration, essential aspects for achieving individual and collective success.

In this context, success in leadership involves a particular combination of skills, qualities, and values that is tailored to each situation and the characteristics of the people involved.

Leadership styles

Leadership style refers to how a leader interacts with subordinates, influences decision-making, and guides the team toward achieving organizational goals. From this perspective, managerial skills are manifested through various leadership styles, each with its own characteristics and approaches.

It should be noted that the choice of a leadership style within an organization, whether public or private, depends on multiple factors, including the nature of the institution, the organizational culture, the specific goals and objectives, as well as the individual characteristics of the leaders and their collaborators.

According to Madrigal (2017), leadership styles constitute a set of skills that foster knowledge development and conflict resolution within an organization, while also enabling the guidance of a group of people toward achieving a common goal. In this sense, managerial functions are linked to operational management, while leadership focuses on influencing, persuading, and motivating employees to reach institutional goals.

Table 5 presents three types of leadership frequently used in the educational and organizational field.

Table 5. Types of leadership

Types of leadership	Feature
Instructional Leadership	This leadership approach guides team members toward achieving organizational goals by providing direction, support, and resources for their growth and learning.
Distributive Leadership	This approach recognizes that leadership is not limited to a single person but is distributed among several members of the team or organization. It acknowledges that different members of the group can contribute leadership in specific areas of knowledge, experience, or skills.
Pedagogical leadership	It focuses on the continuous improvement of teaching and learning in educational contexts. This type of leadership is not limited to school principals, but can also be exercised by teachers, academic coordinators, and other educational stakeholders.

Note. Table created by the author, adapted from Bernal and Ibarrola (2016).

In the field of educational management, Bernal and Ibarrola (2016) argue that the governance of educational organizations can be exercised through various leadership styles. From this perspective, each style has its own advantages and limitations, so the effectiveness

of leadership is conditioned by the leader's ability to adapt to the specific contexts and needs of the organization.

Furthermore, successful leadership hinges on the leader's ability to understand the needs of their team and the circumstances of the situation. Consequently, effective leadership requires adopting the most appropriate approach, based on the leader's developed skills and the demands of the context.

New leadership styles

In the face of rapid changes in technology, culture, and the economy, new leadership models have emerged that are aligned with the demands of contemporary reality. These models reflect a transformation in how leadership is conceived and practiced, focusing on adaptability in changing contexts, valuing diversity and inclusion, promoting human development, and strategically leveraging technology to address the challenges and capitalize on the opportunities of the 21st century.

Table 6 presents some of the new leadership models.

Table 6. New leadership models

Leadership model	Definition
Ethical leadership	Demonstrates appropriate behavior and encourages it in followers through communication and decision-making.
Authentic Leadership	Their leaders are self-aware and aware of their surroundings, and they demonstrate confidence, hope, optimism, resilience, and moral character.
Servant leadership	Prioritize helping others and foster an environment where the team thrives and produces quality work.

Note. Table created by the author, adapted from Brown et al. (2005), Avolio and Gardner (2005) and Barbuto Jr. and Wheeler (2006).

It is worth noting that ethical leadership is particularly relevant because it is based on solid moral principles and values that guide the leader's decisions and actions toward the common good and the benefit of all stakeholders. From this perspective, such leadership rests on principles like integrity, responsibility, respect, empathy, justice, and commitment to the

common good. Consequently, ethical leaders not only strive to achieve results but also seek to achieve them in a way that is consistent with a sense of purpose and a solid moral foundation.

In this context, new leadership models serve as useful benchmarks for understanding their operationalization in leaders whose practices are based on behaviors guided by ethical and moral values. Over the last few decades, leadership theories have emphasized personality traits, intellectual abilities, and socially influential behaviors as explanatory elements of contemporary leadership styles.

Inclusive Leadership

The leadership styles mentioned above, such as distributed leadership and pedagogical leadership, are recognized for their key role in educational management, particularly in strengthening high-performing work teams and improving the quality of education for students.

One of the main challenges of leadership in educational organizations is to integrate actions aimed at building a work environment based on respect, tolerance, recognition and appreciation of the needs of the entire educational community.

In this regard, it is essential to promote quality training within the school culture of the educational organization to foster the development of an inclusive organizational climate. Likewise, the participation of families is especially important in schools, given that their involvement plays a key role in promoting benefits for students and the educational community (Crisol et al., 2022).

To promote equality and social justice in educational organizations, leadership focused on the inclusion of the entire community is required, with a growing interest in addressing and improving school diversity. In this way, inclusive leadership contributes to strengthening more equitable and participatory practices within the institution.

Therefore, the stakeholders within the educational organization, including management, administrative, and teaching staff, participate jointly in achieving the objectives of the school's mission. This participation fosters the fulfillment of their responsibilities and obligations, with the aim of achieving academic success. At the same time, it strengthens their commitment to the community and promotes the development of an institutional identity and social development geared towards ensuring inclusive environments within the diverse school population (Crisol et al., 2022).

It is worth mentioning that the concept of inclusion has traditionally been linked to disability and special educational needs. However, in recent years, students and families have begun to play a central role in decision-making regarding inclusive practices, to raise awareness and activate the community in participating in school life (Sotomayor et al., 2020).

In this context, inclusion emerges as a response to processes of exclusion associated with factors such as disability, poverty, gender, and ethnicity, among others. This reality has driven structural transformations reflected in educational policies, social policies, and new practices aimed at strengthening the participation of the educational community (Ossa et al., 2014).

Likewise, in educational management, inclusion implies collaborative relationships aimed at improving academic performance and enabling students to reach their full potential. Similarly, strengthening the organizational climate helps resolve issues of coexistence and fosters democratization processes within the educational organization.

In this sense, inclusive leadership is based on contributions from distributed leadership and pedagogical leadership. Murillo (2006) considers that both represent approaches that are especially relevant for educational management, since they promote the participatory collaboration of the entire school community through mutual commitment.

It is worth noting that the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2019) emphasize the importance of a sense of belonging for families and students, as well as a shared emotional connection. From this perspective, inclusive leadership involves the entire educational community and commits school leaders to strengthening ties and reflecting on new management approaches that promote family participation in school decision-making. This need becomes especially relevant in the face of disagreements and mutual mistrust (Okoko, 2019).

Furthermore, educational leaders seek diverse strategies to improve the quality of inclusive education, through interaction between institutions and the creation of co-responsibility mechanisms (Crisol et al., 2022).

According to Valdés (2019), one of the main challenges of educational inclusion is to identify new leadership practices in schoolwork teams, since these influence the construction of inclusive organizational cultures.

Likewise, the role of leaders and administrative staff is fundamental to establishing links between the educational organization, the community and families, who share a mutual objective focused on the institutional mission and maximizing educational success.

In inclusive leadership, Collet-Sabé (2020) highlights the importance of the active participation of families as a social link and as a central element in the design of new inclusion programs that involve the entire educational community in academic and socio-emotional development.

Therefore, DeMatthews (2021) identifies four leadership practices that are key to creating effective inclusive schools, which are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Keys to creating effective inclusive schools



Note. *Elaboration own , adapted from Undoing systems of exclusion: Exploring inclusive leadership and systems thinking in two inclusive elementary schools , by DeMatthews (2021), Journal of Educational Administration.*

To promote inclusion in student learning, educational leaders need to develop leadership practices geared toward this goal. Likewise, it is essential to foster collaboration with families and other educational institutions in the planning and evaluation of inclusive programs.

Furthermore, the lack of material resources and services in educational organizations has hindered the development of teaching and learning processes in inclusive educational contexts. In response, the implementation of leadership practices linked to inclusive pedagogical strategies promotes a better distribution of services and resources, while simultaneously strengthening the leadership capacities of teachers and administrators in schools.

Furthermore, research analyzing institutional openness and community development driven by leadership practices aimed at facilitating inclusion processes remains scarce. In this regard, further study of issues related to diversity, as well as the promotion of participation by families and the educational community, is crucial (Barrientos et al., 2016).

It is worth noting that inclusive leadership can bring significant benefits to the continuous improvement and consolidation of quality educational organizations. It also contributes to building an inclusive school culture in which students are recognized, supported, and valued, promoting equal opportunities throughout the educational community.

Digital Leadership

COVID-19 health crisis highlighted significant limitations in the leadership of educational organizations during the pandemic. In this context, the transition from in-person instruction to emergency remote learning occurred abruptly globally and at all levels of the education system.

In this context, the managerial figure acquired a central role by exercising digital leadership that made it possible to sustain the interaction between administrative staff, teaching staff and students through virtual and remote environments.

It is worth noting that Berkovich and Hassan (2023) conceptualize digital transformational leadership as a style through which managers implement technological and digital communication strategies to interact with all members of the educational organization. Furthermore, adopting this style in crisis contexts helps address organizational and school conflicts arising from abrupt changes in educational modalities.

Furthermore, one of the areas most affected in educational management during the health crisis was the implementation of online learning models, supported by digital platforms for holding meetings with administrative and teaching staff, as well as for the development of teaching and learning processes with students.

Transformational school leadership

Bass and Riggio (2006) define transformational leadership as an approach in which the leader directs their actions toward raising the aspirations and performance of their subordinates, while simultaneously strengthening their confidence to achieve higher levels of accomplishment within the organization. For this reason, transformational leadership is

considered one of the most influential models for promoting organizational change. In the field of management, the theory of transformational leadership was revisited at the end of the 20th century by Leithwood and Steinbach (1995). In the area of educational management, this approach fosters motivation, student development, and teacher engagement. Furthermore, this style becomes especially relevant in crisis situations, as the leader, in the face of complex situations, provides guidance, support, and a sense of direction to their team members, which strengthens decision-making with greater determination and confidence (Berkovich and Hassan, 2023).

Digital transformational leadership

The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has shaped a new paradigm in leadership challenges and work environments within public and industrial sector organizations. In this context, virtual communication has opened a new field of analysis regarding interactions between leaders and subordinates. Furthermore, communication through digital environments has demanded new skills, both for effective interaction and for the proper use of technological tools. Likewise, the application of transformational leadership in digital environments is an emerging topic, especially due to its relevance to the performance of virtual teams. In educational management, this approach has gained importance in teaching and learning processes conducted remotely or virtually, leading to new educational models, including hybrid models at various levels of education. The characteristics of digital transformational leadership have influenced student learning outcomes by inspiring them to achieve challenging goals. Similarly, this style has favored the satisfaction of teaching staff by observing progress in the training process, as well as the formation of work teams among students through digital platforms (Berkovich and Hassan, 2023).

Leadership plays a fundamental role in strengthening organizational commitment and team cohesion. In this regard, Bogler and Berkovich (2022) define organizational commitment as a strong attachment or psychological bond to a specific organization, driven by both internal motives and external normative pressures. This condition fosters affective commitment, insofar as the emotional connection with the organization promotes greater collaboration, a sense of belonging, and institutional identity. Therefore, leaders strengthen the commitment of organizational members through socio-emotional support, which

contributes to the development of affective bonds and improved performance in institutional activities (Berkovich & Hassan, 2023).

Furthermore, during the health crisis, educational organizations adapted their operations to virtual spaces to ensure the continuity of school activities. In this context, managing these environments demanded greater resilience from members of the organization, investment in technological programs, the establishment of institutional agreements, and the strengthening of collective empowerment to face the challenges of remote emergency systems, all under strong leadership focused on fulfilling the organizational mission. One of the main characteristics of forming virtual work teams is the organizational commitment of all its members. In this way, digital transformational leadership fosters effective and meaningful commitment among members of the organization (Whillans, Perlow, and Turek, 2021). Organizational commitment is fundamental in school settings, as it contributes to the effectiveness of the results achieved in relation to institutional objectives, without placing undue pressure on the educational community or limiting its resources. Likewise, the motivational effects on teaching staff promote higher levels of commitment, which can reduce turnover and professional dropout (Bogler and Berkovich, 2022).

It is worth noting that leadership is crucial in virtual environments, as it promotes integration and organizational effectiveness. Furthermore, the role of educational leaders is decisive in their management performance as promoters of excellence and institutional quality. Therefore, leadership is perceived by teachers as a factor closely linked to organizational success, since it influences affective commitment and other forms of engagement within the institution. Consequently, virtual environments, characterized by digital interactions and physical distance, modify the dynamics of leadership in the relationship processes between administrators and work teams.

Transformational Leadership

Leadership is an essential component of organizational operations and the generation of change and innovation processes in management models. From this perspective, leadership development is a complex task, which is why various theorists have focused on defining the characteristics of effective leadership. However, the diversity of existing models and the complexity of their practical application make their delimitation and operationalization difficult (Deng et al., 2022).



In this context, transformational leadership is conceived as behavior aimed at inspiring, empowering, and fostering the development of others. Ethical leadership, on the other hand, is distinguished by behaviors that exemplify and promote sound moral principles. Authentic leadership, in turn, reflects the leader's awareness of their values and the transparent communication of these values. Finally, servant leadership adopts an orientation focused on serving others in the workplace (Deng et al., 2022).

According to Deng et al. (2022), the main characteristics of transformational leadership are the following:

- ❖ Idealized influence
- ❖ Intellectual stimulation
- ❖ Individual consideration
- ❖ Inspiring motivation

Consequently, the articulation of these four characteristics can constitute a relevant basis for the design and implementation of various transformational leadership behaviors in different organizational contexts.

Female leadership

Female leadership refers to the leadership style exercised by women in various fields, including business, politics, education, and other organizations. It is often associated with characteristics such as empathy, teamwork, effective communication, and resilience.

However, despite these positive attributes, women's leadership also faces obstacles and challenges, including gender discrimination, cultural stereotypes, and various structural barriers. Nevertheless, as society moves toward greater gender equality and recognizes the value of women's leadership, a growing number of women are assuming leadership roles and making a significant impact in their respective fields.

It is worth mentioning that the traditional perception of the leadership paradigm has historically been linked to a male figure. In this sense, leadership styles have differed based on gender-typical behaviors. Therefore, the increasing participation of women in management positions has been conditioned, in many cases, by the adoption of leadership styles constructed from a masculine perspective (Carrasco and Barraza, 2021).

One of the challenges faced by female leaders is the tendency to experience social and professional isolation, a situation that leads them to renegotiate their sense of belonging to adapt to new organizational contexts. Because of this, female leadership has had to be

shaped by broad and flexible characteristics that allow women to assume leadership roles in diverse organizational management scenarios (Jones, 2017).

Therefore, increasing gender equality in the formation of work teams within organizations is fundamental to achieving excellent results and recognizing the importance of female talent as a valuable resource. Similarly, fostering opportunities for the development of female leadership in management processes contributes to problem-solving and organizational improvement (Grant Thornton, 2022).

Based on Carrasco and Barraza (2021), female leadership is characterized by its capacity to contribute to conflict resolution and to empower high-performing work teams. It also strengthens collaborative work relationships, social integration, and the development of more horizontal environments of cooperation.

Similarly, this leadership style is distinguished by addressing the needs of the organization by promoting collaborative work, personal development, joint participation, assertive communication, and the reconstruction of relationships from a democratic perspective, oriented towards the achievement of organizational objectives (Carrasco and Barraza, 2021).

Female leadership is also characterized by a strong emotional connection with the team. This involves the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions, as well as those of others, highlighting the importance of effective emotional intelligence for managing workplace relationships.

Furthermore, the leader establishes appropriate management of emotional expression within the work team. These qualities foster a more effective balance in performance and the work environment.

Therefore, Carrasco and Barraza (2021) point out that female leadership is distinguished by accompanying younger colleagues from an empathetic approach that fosters communication, active listening and the building of close relationships.

This leadership style shares characteristics with distributed leadership, promoting collaboration, social justice, and an ethic of care as central to managerial practice. It is also based on prioritizing employees, strengthening open communication, actively listening, and incorporating empathy into decision-making. In this way, it fosters community action and cooperation in social and work contexts (Carrasco & Barraza, 2021).

During the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, female leadership was associated with preventative, rapid, and empathetic qualities. Various analyses highlighted

the relevance of leadership styles based on honesty, empathy, and agile, informed, and socially sensitive decision-making in the face of the health crisis (Meggiolaro, 2020).

Challenge for leaders in educational management

Globalization has had a significant influence on education, as it is closely linked to economic, political, technological, and cultural processes. In this context, it is essential to equip individuals to integrate and collaborate in interdisciplinary teams. Furthermore, this phenomenon has driven decentralization processes in education, which are observed internationally.

Similarly, contemporary society, characterized by constant change and complexity, has fostered a decentralization of power in educational institutions, which increases the demands on leadership in these organizations (Krüger, 2010).

Leaders in educational institutions face challenges that demand skills geared toward fostering a culture of collaboration and building high-performing teams. Added to this is the need to maintain high academic expectations and contribute positively to student academic achievement.

In this regard, Sepúlveda and Aparicio (2017) point out that there are three types of leadership in education: leadership focused on ensuring high levels of learning, leadership aimed at improving motivation and promoting collaboration, and leadership focused on empowering teachers to assume leadership roles. These approaches significantly improve educational performance.

It is essential that school leaders implement effective educational programs that develop skills and knowledge to address complex problems and promote strategic improvements, considering the specific culture of the educational institution. The success of school leadership depends both on the leadership style adopted and on the formation of collaborative teams capable of generating creative solutions to current challenges (Sepúlveda & Aparicio, 2017).

Therefore, leadership plays a crucial role in students' academic performance, influencing their performance through the relationship with teachers, the individual characteristics of the students, and the context of each educational establishment.

The educational leader, although often perceived as an indirect agent, plays a key role in creating the necessary conditions within the classroom. Furthermore, their influence extends to the organization of classroom work and the improvement of the quality of teaching

provided by teachers. In this way, they foster an organizational climate conducive to academic development and the establishment of high expectations (Sepúlveda & Aparicio, 2017).

In this regard, Hallinger (2011) points out that managers recognize the importance of adopting leadership styles tailored to different circumstances and specific priorities. From this perspective, leadership is not a one-size-fits-all solution for improving education, but rather a systematic and goal-oriented process of change that positively impacts academic structures and promotes good pedagogical practices.

Leadership Challenges

Leadership involves facing diverse challenges, which depend largely on the specific context in which the leader operates and the effectiveness with which they assume their duties.

In today's organizational landscape, leadership faces complex challenges that are transforming how teams and organizations are guided. Generational diversity, the search for purpose, emotional well-being, and constant adaptation to change characterize the contemporary environment. Within this framework, leadership is not limited to the exercise of formal authority, but also involves building trust, fostering collaboration, and promoting empathetic communication.

Furthermore, the challenges of contemporary leadership include managing uncertainty and making decisions in dynamic environments. Innovation, continuous learning, and openness to dialogue strengthen the ability to respond to changing scenarios. Leadership aligned with human values fosters team cohesion and contributes to the holistic development of individuals, generating a positive impact both organizationally and socially.

In this context, leadership takes on a more human-centered approach, where understanding individual and collective needs is key to achieving sustainable results. Table 7 presents some of the most common challenges leaders face.

Table 7. Leadership Challenges

Challenges	Description
Effective communication	Leaders value clear and effective communication, based on understanding, active listening, and adapting to the team.
decision making	Leaders face complex decisions that they consider how to resolve quickly and effectively, even under pressure and uncertainty.
Team Motivation	Leadership inspires a diverse team by considering their needs and aspirations to maintain motivation.
Change management	Leaders guide their teams through change processes and face resistance as a key challenge.
Skills development	Long-term success requires developing the team and adapting leadership through skills strengthening and continuous learning.
Time management	Leaders face many tasks, so effective time management helps avoid being overwhelmed.
Conflict resolution	Conflicts are common in teams, and leaders seek to resolve them fairly and constructively.
Organizational culture	Building a positive organizational culture is a constant challenge that depends on the actions and decisions of leaders.
Adaptability	In a changing business environment, leaders seek to adapt to new circumstances and trends.
Self-knowledge	Effective leaders recognize their strengths, weaknesses, and biases to exercise authentic leadership.

Note. Table created by the author, adapted from *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* (Maxwell, 2007).

Meeting the challenges of leadership demands strong skills, empathy, emotional intelligence, and a continuous focus on personal and professional development. In dynamic

and complex contexts, leaders need to strengthen their adaptability, manage change, address diversity, make ethical decisions, and sustain ongoing learning processes.

Leadership challenges are varied and can manifest in different areas, whether professional, community, or personal. Among the most common are managing diverse teams, making decisions under pressure, conflict resolution, motivating team members, and adapting to rapid changes in the environment. While these challenges may be perceived as demanding, they also represent valuable opportunities for learning and growth.

In this sense, facing such challenges allows for the development of flexibility to respond to unforeseen situations, empathy to understand the team's needs, and skills related to effective communication, conflict resolution, and leading with vision and purpose. Consequently, the appropriate approach to leadership challenges contributes not only to the achievement of organizational objectives but also to the consolidation of environments of trust, motivation, and commitment within work teams.

Discussion

The research analyzed the challenges of distributed leadership in the context of contemporary educational management and highlighted its relevance in environments characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and digital transformation. The results obtained demonstrate that distributed leadership is consolidating itself as a model that strengthens collective participation, co-responsibility, and organizational commitment, in accordance with the arguments of Murillo (2006) and Riveros (2012), who recognize its contribution to institutional improvement.

Compared to previous studies, the findings agree that distributed leadership fosters the development of collaborative cultures and strengthens internal work networks. Research such as that by Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) highlights that the influence of school leadership increases its impact when exercised in a shared manner, an aspect reflected in the theoretical analysis developed. Likewise, Bello Villablanca and López-Yáñez (2022) emphasize the importance of relationships and social networks in school effectiveness, which is related to the need for coordination and trust identified in this study.

However, there are also significant differences compared to other studies. While some research emphasizes the benefits of distributed leadership in terms of academic performance and school improvement, this study delves into the operational challenges that arise during its implementation, such as ambiguity in decision-making, duplication of roles,

and tensions stemming from a poorly consolidated organizational culture. Consequently, these elements broaden the understanding of the phenomenon by integrating not only its advantages but also its structural and cultural limitations.

Among the main limitations of the study is the theoretical and documentary scope of the analysis, which focuses on a literature review and the conceptual integration of various leadership approaches. The lack of an empirical study with fieldwork restricts the possibility of comparing the findings with quantitative or qualitative evidence in specific contexts. Furthermore, the approach is primarily oriented toward the educational field, which limits its generalizability to other organizational sectors.

Furthermore, another aspect to consider is that distributed leadership is closely linked to the institutional, cultural, and regulatory context of each organization. Therefore, the results must be interpreted from a situated perspective, recognizing that power dynamics, management training, and organizational maturity significantly influence its implementation.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a conceptual advancement by integrating the challenges of distributed leadership with contemporary approaches such as digital, inclusive, and transformational leadership. This integration allows us to understand distributed leadership not only as an organizational strategy but also as a dynamic model that interacts with current technological, social, and cultural changes.

In short, the discussion establishes a coherent relationship between the results obtained and the conclusions put forward, showing that distributed leadership represents a viable strategic alternative, if it is accompanied by clear structures, continuous training and an organizational culture based on trust, effective communication and shared responsibility.

Conclusion

Distributed leadership represents a relevant alternative to traditional management models, although it faces significant implementation challenges. Coordination among multiple stakeholders, clarity in decision-making, and shared responsibility are critical aspects that affect its effectiveness.

Furthermore, the absence of an organizational culture based on trust and collaboration limits its development and sustainability. Despite this, this approach fosters active participation, collective commitment, and innovation—fundamental elements for managing highly complex organizational environments.

In this sense, the consolidation of distributed leadership implies not only shared participation in leadership roles, but also the existence of defined structures, effective communication mechanisms, and a strategic orientation that integrates the capabilities and experiences of the various members of the organization. From this perspective, its value lies in strengthening teamwork and expanding the possibilities for responding to contemporary institutional demands.

Distributed leadership offers significant advantages for organizations, as it fosters greater adaptability and a better capacity to respond to change by sharing decision-making among different team members. It also contributes to the development of individual talent by recognizing and enhancing leadership capabilities across diverse areas of knowledge, experience, and skills.

Similarly, the participation of multiple stakeholders in leadership processes strengthens organizational resilience, reduces dependence on a central figure, and fosters creativity and innovation through diverse perspectives. Furthermore, by sharing responsibility and authority, this approach increases team members' commitment and motivation.

Distributed leadership fosters collaborative and trust-based work environments where each member's contribution is recognized. However, its implementation also presents significant challenges due to the complexity of coordinating responsibilities, integrating leadership styles, and maintaining clarity in decision-making. Therefore, its effectiveness depends on clear organizational structures, consistent communication, and institutional conditions that encourage teamwork.

This leadership approach presents specific challenges that demand flexibility, effective communication, coordination, trust-building, and a strong organizational culture. Understanding and addressing these factors allows for better utilization of the potential of distributed leadership to strengthen team performance and facilitate the achievement of organizational goals.

The effectiveness of distributed leadership rests on the ability to adapt leadership practices to the needs and contexts of the organization, as well as on establishing clear and transparent communication processes supported by resources that facilitate interaction among team members. Similarly, empowerment, trust, and the delegation of responsibilities strengthen commitment and a sense of belonging, while a culture focused on collaboration, teamwork, and autonomy provides the necessary conditions for its development.

Furthermore, strengthening skills related to leadership, communication, problem-solving, and decision-making, along with monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, helps identify areas for improvement and optimize implemented strategies. From this perspective, distributed leadership becomes relevant as an approach that, beyond simply redistributing functions, requires specific organizational conditions to consolidate and respond effectively to institutional demands.

Distributed leadership is based on the organization's and its members' ability to adapt to circumstances, communicate effectively, empower team members, foster a collaborative culture, develop skills, and maintain ongoing performance evaluation. From this perspective, its consolidation depends on the articulation of collective practices geared toward achieving common goals.

Furthermore, the integration of these elements contributes to building a dynamic, transparent, and motivating work environment, in which each member of the organization recognizes themselves as a valuable part of the collective effort and is committed to achieving institutional objectives. Within this framework, the distributed exercise of leadership strengthens team performance by promoting more active, coordinated, and responsible participation.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of distributed leadership becomes most apparent when the challenges associated with its implementation are properly addressed. Under such conditions, this approach fosters agility, collaboration, and the adaptability of work teams to changing environments. Therefore, its relevance lies in offering a strategic alternative for organizations operating in contexts characterized by interdependence, digital transformation, and networking.

Future lines of research

Based on the findings and the analysis developed, several lines of research relevant to further study of distributed leadership in educational and organizational management are identified.

First, it is relevant to develop empirical research that analyzes the implementation of distributed leadership in specific educational institutions, through case studies, qualitative approaches or mixed designs that allow evaluating its impact on academic performance, organizational climate and teacher commitment.

Secondly, this study proposes to explore the relationship between distributed leadership and digital leadership in hybrid or virtual environments, especially given the consolidation of educational models mediated by information technologies. Analyzing the distribution of responsibilities in virtual teams and the building of trust in digital spaces constitutes a field of study with significant academic potential.

Another line of research focuses on the study of distributed leadership from a gender perspective, with an emphasis on the interaction between female leadership and collaborative structures. Examining these dynamics would allow us to understand how the distribution of leadership fosters equity, inclusion, and cultural transformation within organizations.

It is also relevant to examine the influence of organizational culture on the sustainability of distributed leadership, considering variables such as resistance to change, managerial thinking styles, and institutional evaluation mechanisms.

Finally, the need is identified to design measurement instruments that allow for the evaluation of the maturity level of distributed leadership in organizations, integrating dimensions such as communication, empowerment, coordination, trust, and institutional results. This methodological development would contribute to strengthening the scientific rigor in the study of this phenomenon.

Taken together, these lines of research expand the possibilities for analyzing distributed leadership and offer new opportunities to deepen its theoretical and practical understanding within the field of contemporary educational management.

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