

Strategic Leadership and Digital Transformation Awareness in Hierarchy-Based Organizations

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Abstract: *This study aims to examine the role of strategic leadership in enhancing digital transformation awareness within hierarchically managed organizations. In such organizational contexts, characterized by centralized decision-making, formal authority, and rigid structures, digital transformation initiatives often encounter resistance and limited internal acceptance. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on a comprehensive conceptual literature review. Relevant national and international studies on strategic leadership, digital transformation, organizational structure, and awareness were systematically analyzed to develop an integrative theoretical framework. Rather than relying on empirical data, the study synthesizes existing theoretical and conceptual contributions to explain how strategic leadership practices influence employees' understanding, perception, and internalization of digital transformation processes. The analysis indicates that strategic leaders play a critical role in fostering digital transformation awareness by articulating a clear digital vision, supporting organizational learning, and guiding change processes in hierarchical settings. Furthermore, the findings suggest that hierarchical organizational structures intensify the importance of leadership in shaping awareness, as employees tend to interpret digital transformation initiatives through the signals and actions of top management. The study contributes to the literature by positioning digital transformation awareness as a key conceptual mechanism linking strategic leadership and successful transformation outcomes. It also offers a theoretical foundation for future empirical research in hierarchical organizational contexts.*

Keywords: Strategic leadership, Digital transformation, Digital transformation awareness, Hierarchical organizations, Organizational change

JEL Code: M10, M12, M15

Hiyerarşik Yapılarda Stratejik Liderlik ve Dijital Dönüşüm Farkındalığı

Özet: Bu çalışma, hiyerarşik olarak yönetilen kuruluşlarda dijital dönüşüm farkındalığının artırılmasında stratejik liderliğin rolünü incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Merkezi karar alma, resmi yetki ve katı yapılarla karakterize edilen bu tür örgütsel bağlamlarda, dijital dönüşüm girişimleri sıklıkla dirençle karşılaşmakta ve kurum içinde sınırlı bir kabul görmektedir. Çalışma, kapsamlı bir kavramsal literatür taramasına dayanan nitel bir araştırma tasarımı benimsemektedir. Stratejik liderlik, dijital dönüşüm, örgütsel yapı ve farkındalık konularındaki ilgili ulusal ve uluslararası çalışmalar, bütünlleştirici bir teorik çerçeve geliştirmek amacıyla sistematik olarak analiz edilmiştir. Çalışma, ampirik verilere dayanmak yerine, stratejik liderlik uygulamalarının çalışanların dijital dönüşüm süreçlerine ilişkin anlayışını, algısını ve içselleştirmesini nasıl etkilediğini açıklamak için mevcut teorik ve kavramsal katkıları bir araya getirmektedir. Analiz, stratejik liderlerin net bir dijital vizyon ortaya koyarak, örgütsel öğrenmeyi destekleyerek ve hiyerarşik ortamlarda değişim süreçlerine yön vererek dijital dönüşüm farkındalığını geliştirme konusunda kritik bir rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, bulgular, çalışanların dijital dönüşüm girişimlerini üst

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yönetimin sinyalleri ve eylemleri aracılığıyla yorumlama eğiliminde olmaları nedeniyle, hiyerarşik örgütsel yapıların farkındalığın şekillenmesinde liderliğin önemini artırdığını göstermektedir. Çalışma, dijital dönüşüm farkındalığını stratejik liderlik ile başarılı dönüşüm sonuçlarını birbirine bağlayan temel bir kavramsal mekanizma olarak konumlandırarak literatüre katkı sağlamaktadır. Ayrıca, hiyerarşik örgütsel bağlamlarda gelecekteki ampirik araştırmalar için teorik bir temel sunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Stratejik liderlik, Dijital dönüşüm, Dijital dönüşüm farkındalığı, Hiyerarşik örgütler, Örgütsel değişim*

JEL Kodu: *M10, M12, M15*

Suggested Citation: Dedeoğlu, N. (2025). Strategic Leadership and Digital Transformation Awareness in Hierarchy-Based Organizations. *International Journal of Innovative Thinking in Business*, 1(1), 1-18.

Article History: Submitted 15 June 2025; Revised 10 October 2025; 20 November 2025

1. INTRODUCTION

With the acceleration of digitalization, organizations have been compelled to reconsider not only the technologies they use but also their ways of doing business, management approaches, organizational structures, and leadership roles. The widespread adoption of digital technologies has become a strategic necessity for organizations to survive in a competitive environment, bringing the concept of digital transformation to the center of management literature (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Rogers, 2016). From this perspective, digital transformation represents not merely a technical renewal process but a holistic transformation of organizations.

In the literature, digital transformation is defined as the redefinition of how organizations create value through the use of digital technologies (Vial, 2019). This process requires a multilayered transformation encompassing strategy, structure, culture, and human resources. In particular, data-driven decision-making, the development of digital competencies, and the adoption of innovative business models are considered fundamental components of digital transformation (Kane, Palmer, Phillips, Kiron & Buckley, 2015). However, it is frequently emphasized in the literature that a significant portion of digital transformation initiatives fail to achieve the expected level of success (Davenport & Westerman, 2018).

One of the primary reasons for the failure of digital transformation processes is the tendency to address transformation solely through technological investments. In reality, digital transformation is directly related to how organizational members perceive this process, the extent to which they adopt it, and how well they comprehend its strategic importance (Rogers, 2016; Kane et al., 2015). In this context, digital transformation awareness emerges as a critical yet often neglected dimension of the transformation process.

Digital transformation processes exhibit a more complex structure, particularly in hierarchically managed organizations. Hierarchical organizational structures are defined as systems in which authority and responsibility are distributed vertically, decision-making processes are concentrated at the upper management level, and bureaucratic rules play a determining role (Weber, 1947). Although such structures provide stability and control, they may lead to a loss of flexibility in change and innovation processes (Mintzberg, 2009). Therefore, comprehensive transformation processes such as digital transformation may encounter higher levels of resistance in hierarchical organizations.

In Turkish literature, hierarchical structures are also observed to be prevalent, particularly in public institutions and large-scale organizations. In these institutions, digital transformation processes are often planned at the top management level, while employees are not sufficiently involved in the process (Aydın, 2021; Özdemir & Taş, 2020). This situation may prevent digital transformation awareness from developing adequately across the organization and may cause transformation initiatives to remain superficial.

At this point, leadership plays a central role in explaining the success of digital transformation processes. Strategic leadership, in particular, refers to the capacity of organizations to perceive environmental changes, develop strategies appropriate to these changes, and guide organizational members accordingly (Yukl, 2013; Northouse, 2022). Strategic leaders are considered actors who not only manage current operations but also determine the long-term direction of the organization and lead change.

The importance of strategic leadership in digital transformation processes stems from the uncertainty and risk inherent in transformation. Digital transformation may create concerns among employees regarding job security, the validity of their competencies, and role ambiguity. In this context, strategic leaders contribute to employees' sense-making of the digital transformation process by presenting a clear vision and establishing effective communication (Kotter, 1996). Furthermore, strategic leadership supports the development of digital competencies by encouraging organizational learning (Senge, 2006).

In Turkish management literature, strategic leadership is generally examined at the intersection of strategic management and leadership approaches. Koçel (2020) and Eren (2019) define strategic leadership as a form of leadership that determines the vision of the organization, manages environmental uncertainties, and directs change. However, studies examining the relationship between digital transformation awareness and strategic leadership, particularly within the context of hierarchical organizational structures, remain limited.

This situation indicates a significant research gap in the literature. For digital transformation to be successful, the interaction between leadership, awareness, and organizational structure must be addressed holistically. The main purpose of this study is to fill this gap by conceptually examining the role of strategic leadership in digital transformation awareness in hierarchically managed organizations. The study aims to provide both theoretical and conceptual contributions by integrating strategic leadership and digital transformation literature.

In this respect, the study departs from approaches that treat digital transformation solely as a technical process and presents a holistic perspective that places human, leadership, and awareness dimensions at the center. Additionally, the proposed conceptual framework is expected to provide a solid theoretical foundation for future empirical studies.

2. THE CONCEPT OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND ITS THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Strategic leadership is defined as a leadership approach that determines the long-term direction of organizations, anticipates environmental changes, and effectively mobilizes organizational resources accordingly. This leadership perspective reflects a holistic viewpoint that is not limited to daily operational decisions but encompasses strategic choices that shape the future of the organization (Yukl, 2013; Northouse, 2022). Particularly in environmental conditions characterized by uncertainty and rapid change, strategic leadership plays a critical role in enabling organizations to achieve sustainable competitive advantage.

While traditional leadership approaches generally focus on the individual characteristics of leaders and short-term performance outcomes, strategic leadership emphasizes value creation at the organizational level and long-term success. In this context, strategic leadership is a multidimensional concept positioned at the intersection of leadership literature and strategic management literature (Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2017). Strategic leaders not only determine the mission and vision of the organization but also analyze environmental opportunities and threats, ensuring that organizational strategies are shaped accordingly.

One of the theoretical foundations of strategic leadership is the Upper Echelons Theory developed by Hambrick and Mason (1984). According to this theory, the strategic choices and performance outcomes of organizations are shaped by the values, cognitive frameworks, experiences, and perceptions of top-level managers. The way senior executives perceive the world and interpret environmental changes directly influences the strategic orientation of the organization. This approach provides an important theoretical basis for explaining the relationship between individual leader characteristics and organizational outcomes in the context of strategic leadership.

Upper Echelons Theory further highlights the importance of strategic leadership, particularly in managing complex and highly uncertain processes such as digital transformation. In digital transformation processes, leaders' perceptions of technology, change, and innovation are among the fundamental factors determining the extent to which organizations adapt to these processes (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Vial, 2019). Therefore, strategic leadership in the digital age is evaluated not only as a managerial competency but also as a cognitive and visionary capacity.

The concept of strategic leadership is frequently associated with the transformational leadership approach in the literature. Burns (1978) defines transformational leadership as a leadership style that enables organizational

change by transforming followers' values, beliefs, and motivations. Bass and Riggio (2006) emphasize that transformational leaders increase the change capacity of organizations through vision creation, inspiration, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation. In this respect, strategic leadership shares significant similarities with transformational leadership.

However, unlike transformational leadership, strategic leadership places a stronger emphasis on strategic dimensions such as environmental analysis, competitive strategies, and long-term organizational performance. Strategic leaders not only motivate employees but also make strategic decisions that ensure organizational alignment with the external environment (Hitt et al., 2017). This characteristic makes strategic leadership an indispensable leadership approach in managing multidimensional processes such as digital transformation.

Although the fundamental components of strategic leadership are classified differently in the literature, competencies such as vision creation, strategic thinking, environmental scanning, change management, and organizational alignment generally come to the forefront (Yukl, 2013). Vision creation refers to clearly and comprehensively articulating the future goals that the organization seeks to achieve, while strategic thinking refers to the capacity to address complex problems from a holistic perspective.

Environmental scanning and analytical competency enable strategic leaders to recognize technological, economic, and social changes at an early stage. This competency is of vital importance for organizations, especially during periods characterized by rapid technological changes such as digital transformation (Rogers, 2016). Change management refers to the ability of strategic leaders to reduce organizational members' resistance to change and ensure the sustainability of transformation processes (Kotter, 1996).

In Turkish management literature, the concept of strategic leadership is generally addressed within the context of strategic management. Koçel (2020) defines strategic leadership as a leadership style that determines the organization's vision, manages environmental uncertainties, and directs organizational change. Similarly, Eren (2019) emphasizes that strategic leadership is one of the fundamental managerial competencies that ensure the long-term success of organizations. These studies reveal that strategic leadership plays a more prominent role, particularly in large-scale and hierarchical organizational structures.

In hierarchical organizational structures, strategic leadership can serve as a balancing function against the limitations created by centralized decision-making mechanisms. In such structures, leaders' demonstration of visionary and strategic approaches facilitates the organization-wide adoption of comprehensive transformation processes such as digital transformation (Koçel, 2020; Aydın, 2021). Therefore, strategic leadership is evaluated not only as an individual leadership style but also as a structural mechanism that enables organizational transformation.

Strategic leadership plays a critical role in helping organizations manage uncertainties encountered in the digital age and achieve sustainable success. Understanding the theoretical foundations of strategic leadership in multidimensional processes such as digital transformation provides an important analytical framework for explaining why transformation processes are successfully implemented in some organizations while failing in others. In this context, strategic leadership is considered one of the fundamental concepts explaining the development of digital transformation awareness.

3. HIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND MANAGEMENT APPROACH

Organizational structure is a fundamental element that determines how authority, responsibility, and communication relationships are organized within an institution. This structure plays a determining role in many

areas, ranging from organizational decision-making processes to employee behavior. Although organizational structures are classified in different ways in the literature, hierarchical organizational structures have historically emerged as one of the most widely used forms of management (Mintzberg, 2009). Hierarchical structures are particularly dominant in public institutions and large-scale private sector organizations.

Hierarchical organizational structures are defined as systems in which authority and responsibility are distributed vertically, decision-making processes are concentrated at upper management levels, and superior–subordinate relationships are clearly defined (Weber, 1947). Max Weber’s theory of bureaucracy constitutes the theoretical foundation of hierarchical structures. According to Weber, bureaucratic structures ensure organizational order and predictability through rules, standardized processes, and clearly defined authority relationships.

Among the primary advantages of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures are stability, control, and accountability. The effectiveness of hierarchical structures increases, particularly in environments where routine tasks are intensive and tolerance for error is low (Daft, 2016). However, the literature frequently emphasizes that these structures contain limitations in adapting to changing environmental conditions. Rigid rules and centralized decision-making processes may make it difficult for organizations to respond rapidly to environmental uncertainties.

One of the most significant challenges organizations face in the digital age is adapting to rapidly changing technologies and customer expectations. In this context, hierarchical organizational structures are considered potential barriers to digital transformation processes that require flexibility and innovation (Burns & Stalker, 1961). Hierarchical structures, also referred to as mechanistic organizational structures, often demonstrate incompatibility with the agility and horizontal communication patterns required by digital transformation.

Particularly in hierarchical structures where decision-making processes are centralized, digital transformation initiatives are generally planned by top management and communicated downward. This situation limits employee participation in the transformation process and may prevent digital transformation awareness from developing adequately across the organization (Kane et al., 2015). The exclusion of employees from the process may increase resistance to transformation.

Turkish management literature also emphasizes that hierarchical organizational structures are particularly dominant in public institutions. It is stated that bureaucratic structures in public organizations slow down decision-making processes and make it difficult to implement innovative practices (Eryılmaz, 2018; Aydın, 2021). It is further indicated that digital transformation projects in public institutions are often limited to technical infrastructure investments, while cultural and behavioral transformation dimensions are neglected.

The impact of hierarchical organizational structures on digital transformation should not be evaluated as a one-directional and absolute barrier. Some studies in the literature demonstrate that successful examples of digital transformation are also possible in hierarchical structures through strong leadership practices and appropriate management approaches (Westerman, Bonnet & McAfee, 2014). At this point, leadership emerges as a fundamental mechanism capable of balancing the restrictive effects of hierarchical structures.

In hierarchical structures, leaders generally act based on formal authority. However, in processes characterized by uncertainty, such as digital transformation, formal authority alone is insufficient; visionary thinking, communication, and persuasion skills become more prominent (Kotter, 1996). This situation further increases the importance of strategic leadership in hierarchical structures. Strategic leaders can use the authority provided by hierarchical structures to guide change and ensure that transformation processes are adopted throughout the organization.

The relationship between organizational structure and leadership is also decisive in the formation of digital transformation awareness. It is stated that employees in hierarchical structures tend to attach greater importance to messages coming from top management; therefore, leaders' discourse and behaviors related to digital transformation directly influence awareness levels (Yukl, 2013). In this context, strategic leadership plays a key role in developing digital transformation awareness within hierarchical structures.

In conclusion, hierarchical organizational structures contain both opportunities and limitations in terms of digital transformation processes. While the order and control provided by these structures may facilitate the coordination of transformation processes, lack of flexibility and centralization may limit the speed and depth of transformation. Within this contradictory structure, strategic leadership emerges as a critical balancing factor enabling hierarchical organizations to successfully manage digital transformation processes.

4. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AWARENESS

Digital transformation has become one of the most widely discussed concepts in management and organizational literature in recent years. Rapid developments in information and communication technologies have fundamentally transformed the environments in which organizations operate, forcing them to restructure not only their technological infrastructures but also their strategies, processes, and organizational cultures. In this context, digital transformation is defined as a holistic change process in which organizations fundamentally alter the ways they create value through the use of digital technologies (Vial, 2019).

In the literature, the concept of digital transformation is frequently confused with digitalization and information technology investments. However, while digitalization refers to making existing processes more efficient through the use of digital tools, digital transformation involves fundamentally redesigning organizations' business logic, decision-making processes, and organizational structures (Westerman et al., 2014). Therefore, digital transformation is addressed not merely as a technical renewal but as a strategic and cultural transformation process.

One of the prominent definitions in digital transformation literature conceptualizes digital transformation as "the use of digital technologies to create fundamental changes in business and organizational domains" (Bharadwaj, El Sawy, Pavlou & Venkatraman, 2013). This definition emphasizes the strategic dimension of digital transformation and highlights its impact on organizational performance. Similarly, Rogers (2016) presents a multidimensional framework by examining digital transformation in the context of customer experience, operational processes, business models, and competitive strategies.

The dimensions of digital transformation are addressed through different classifications in the literature. However, digital transformation is generally evaluated as a multilayered process consisting of technological, organizational, cultural, and human-centered dimensions (Kane et al., 2015; Vial, 2019). The technological dimension involves the integration of digital technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things into organizational processes. Nevertheless, these technologies alone are insufficient to create transformation.

The organizational dimension refers to the impact of digital transformation on structures and processes. Digital transformation encourages more flexible, horizontal, and agile organizational structures instead of traditional hierarchical structures (Burns & Stalker, 1961). This shift enables faster decision-making processes and allows organizations to respond more rapidly to environmental changes. However, implementing such structural transformations in hierarchically managed institutions involves significant managerial and cultural challenges.

The cultural dimension has gained increasing importance in digital transformation literature. Organizational culture is a fundamental factor shaping employees' attitudes and behaviors toward change. Digital transformation requires a culture that encourages learning, experimentation, and tolerance for mistakes (Senge, 2006). Cultures based on rigid rules and the preservation of the status quo may create serious resistance during digital transformation processes. In this context, the success of transformation depends on the extent to which organizational culture aligns with the digital vision.

The human-centered dimension represents one of the most critical yet frequently neglected aspects of digital transformation. Digital transformation requires employees to develop digital competencies and assume new roles. This situation may create uncertainty and anxiety among employees (Kane et al., 2015). Employees' adoption of the transformation process depends on the development of digital transformation awareness. Awareness refers to employees' understanding of the reasons, objectives, and potential impacts of transformation on themselves.

In Turkish literature, digital transformation is generally addressed within the context of public administration and large-scale organizations. While the effects of digital transformation on the efficiency and transparency of public services are emphasized, it is also noted that the human and cultural dimensions of transformation are often neglected (Özdemir & Taş, 2020; Yıldız, 2022). This situation may negatively affect the sustainability of digital transformation projects.

The role of leadership in digital transformation processes has attracted increasing attention in the literature. In particular, the uncertain and risk-oriented nature of digital transformation necessitates a strong leadership approach (Westerman et al., 2014). Leaders' ability to clearly articulate a digital vision and share this vision across the organization is decisive for the success of transformation processes. In this context, strategic leadership plays a critical role not only in initiating digital transformation but also in ensuring its sustainability.

Digital transformation represents a multidimensional and complex change process. The success of this process depends not only on technological investments but also on organizational structure, culture, human resources, and leadership practices. Particularly in hierarchically managed institutions, the perceptual and cognitive dimensions of transformation must be considered for digital transformation to succeed. At this point, digital transformation awareness emerges as a fundamental concept positioned at the center of the transformation process.

5. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AWARENESS

Digital transformation awareness refers to the extent to which organizations perceive digital transformation processes not merely as technical changes but as holistic and strategic transformations. This concept is directly related to the degree to which employees and managers understand the reasons, objectives, scope, and potential impacts of digital transformation on the organization. The literature emphasizes that perceptual and cognitive factors, in addition to technology and strategy, play a decisive role in explaining the success of digital transformation (Kane et al., 2015; Vial, 2019).

The concept of awareness is generally examined in management literature within the contexts of change management, organizational learning, and innovation. In organizational change processes, awareness is considered a critical prerequisite for individuals to understand the necessity of change and internalize it (Kotter, 1996). Digital transformation awareness emerges as a specific form of this general awareness concept adapted to the requirements of the digital age.

Digital transformation awareness refers not to employees' level of knowledge regarding digital technologies, but rather to their capacity to understand how these technologies transform organizational processes, job roles, and value creation methods. In this respect, awareness serves as a bridge between technical knowledge and strategic perception (Rogers, 2016). If employees fail to comprehend the strategic importance of digital transformation, transformation initiatives are likely to remain superficial and unsustainable.

The literature indicates that studies directly addressing the concept of digital transformation awareness are limited. However, concepts such as digital maturity, digital competence, and digital mindset indirectly refer to the phenomenon of awareness (Westerman et al., 2014; Kane et al., 2015). While digital maturity expresses the level of progress organizations achieve in digital transformation processes, digital transformation awareness constitutes a fundamental element underlying this maturity.

Digital transformation awareness can be examined at two levels: individual and organizational. At the individual level, awareness refers to employees' understanding of how digital transformation affects their job roles. Employees with high levels of awareness tend to demonstrate lower resistance to transformation and show greater willingness to adopt new applications (Kane et al., 2015). At the organizational level, awareness involves perceiving digital transformation as a strategic priority and developing a shared understanding throughout the organization.

Communication processes play a significant role in developing organizational-level digital transformation awareness. When the objectives and expected outcomes of digital transformation are not clearly communicated, employees may perceive transformation as a threat. This situation becomes more evident, particularly in hierarchically managed organizations. In hierarchical structures, the top-down flow of information may lead to the widespread emergence of misunderstandings regarding transformation processes (Mintzberg, 2009).

In Turkish literature, the concept of digital transformation awareness is generally addressed indirectly. It is particularly emphasized that digital transformation projects in public institutions are not sufficiently understood by employees and are often perceived as a technical necessity (Özdemir & Taş, 2020; Yıldız, 2022). This situation negatively affects the sustainability of transformation projects. Low levels of digital transformation awareness may prevent technological investments from producing the expected benefits.

There is an inverse relationship between digital transformation awareness and organizational resistance. As awareness levels increase, employees' resistance to transformation decreases and their participation in change processes increases (Kotter, 1996). In this context, digital transformation awareness can be evaluated as a critical mediating variable in change management literature. Particularly in digital transformation processes characterized by high levels of perceived uncertainty, awareness functions as a mechanism that reduces employees' anxiety levels.

The development of digital transformation awareness does not occur spontaneously. This awareness is consciously constructed through organizational learning, communication, and leadership practices (Senge, 2006). Leaders' discourse, behaviors, and strategic decisions regarding digital transformation directly influence how employees perceive this process. Therefore, digital transformation awareness cannot be evaluated independently of leadership.

Strategic leaders, in particular, play a critical role in disseminating digital transformation awareness throughout the organization. By explaining why digital transformation is necessary for the organization and demonstrating how this process relates to long-term organizational goals, strategic leaders can create a shared understanding (Yukl, 2013; Rogers, 2016). This process is considered a fundamental mechanism that transfers digital transformation awareness from the individual level to the organizational level.

Digital transformation awareness emerges as a determining factor in the success of digital transformation processes. This awareness enables organizations to perceive digital technologies not only as instrumental tools but also as strategic elements. Particularly in hierarchically managed organizations, the development of digital transformation awareness is closely associated with strategic leadership practices. Therefore, digital transformation awareness is considered a fundamental conceptual bridge explaining the relationship between strategic leadership and digital transformation.

6. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

In the previous sections of this study, the concepts of strategic leadership, hierarchical organizational structures, digital transformation, and digital transformation awareness were examined in detail. In this section, these concepts are brought together from a holistic perspective, and the relationships between strategic leadership and digital transformation awareness in hierarchy-based organizations are explained within a conceptual framework. In addition, the theoretical contributions of the study to the literature are systematically presented.

The success of digital transformation processes is predominantly addressed in the literature within the context of technology, infrastructure, and strategy, while leadership and awareness dimensions are generally evaluated at a secondary level (Vial, 2019; Davenport & Westerman, 2018). This study focuses on the perceptual and cognitive dimensions of digital transformation, positioning digital transformation awareness as a central concept and emphasizing the role of strategic leadership in the development of this awareness.

6.1. The Relationship Between Strategic Leadership and Digital Transformation Awareness

The relationship between strategic leadership and digital transformation awareness arises from the uncertain and complex nature of digital transformation. Digital transformation requires not only the adoption of new technologies but also the redefinition of work processes, roles, and competencies from the perspective of organizational members. This situation increases the perception of uncertainty among employees and may trigger resistance behaviors toward transformation (Kane et al., 2015).

Strategic leaders emerge as key actors guiding the organization within this environment of uncertainty. The vision-building and strategic communication dimensions of strategic leadership play a decisive role in the development of digital transformation awareness. Leaders' ability to clearly explain why digital transformation is necessary and how it relates to the long-term goals of the organization facilitates employees' interpretation of the transformation process (Rogers, 2016; Yukl, 2013).

The literature emphasizes that the lack of leadership in digital transformation processes is one of the primary reasons for the failure of transformation initiatives (Westerman et al., 2014). In this context, strategic leadership promotes the adoption of transformation across the organization by increasing digital transformation awareness. Employees with high levels of awareness tend to perceive digital transformation as an opportunity rather than a threat and participate more actively in the process.

The Turkish literature also highlights the role of strategic leadership in change and transformation processes. Koçel (2020) and Eren (2019) indicate that strategic leadership is a fundamental element guiding organizational change. However, these studies generally address the concept of digital transformation awareness indirectly. This situation necessitates a clearer articulation of the relationship between strategic leadership and digital transformation awareness.

6.2. The Moderating Role of Hierarchical Structure

Hierarchical organizational structures are considered an important contextual variable in the relationship between strategic leadership and digital transformation awareness. In hierarchical structures, the centralized nature of decision-making processes causes digital transformation initiatives to be shaped predominantly at the top management level (Mintzberg, 2009). This situation increases the influence of leaders' attitudes and approaches toward digital transformation throughout the organization.

Strategic leadership behaviors exhibited by leaders in hierarchical structures directly affect how employees perceive the digital transformation process. If top management does not consider digital transformation as a strategic priority or presents it merely as a technical necessity, digital transformation awareness may remain low (Özdemir & Taş, 2020). Conversely, strategic leaders who support the transformation process through a clear vision can partially balance the restrictive effects of hierarchical structures.

Some studies in the literature demonstrate that strong leadership practices can enable successful digital transformation cases even within hierarchical organizations (Westerman et al., 2014). In this context, hierarchical structure is not considered an absolute barrier to digital transformation but rather a context shaped by leadership practices. Strategic leadership can utilize the authority provided by hierarchical structures to guide transformation and increase awareness levels.

6.3. Proposed Conceptual Model

The conceptual model developed in this study aims to explain the relationship between strategic leadership and digital transformation awareness. According to the model, strategic leadership directly influences digital transformation awareness. The visionary approaches of strategic leaders, their communication styles, and practices that encourage organizational learning enable employees to understand and internalize the digital transformation process.

In the model, hierarchical organizational structure is addressed as a moderating variable in this relationship. As the rigidity of hierarchical structures increases, digital transformation awareness is assumed to become more dependent on leadership practices. In other words, in organizations where hierarchical structures are dominant, strategic leadership plays a more critical role in the development of digital transformation awareness.

The proposed conceptual model presents an original approach by placing perceptual and cognitive processes, which are frequently overlooked in the digital transformation literature, at its center. The model explains the success of digital transformation not only through technological and strategic dimensions but also through the interaction between leadership and awareness.

6.4. Theoretical Contribution and Extensions to the Literature

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is addressing the concept of digital transformation awareness as an independent and central variable. While digital transformation is generally explained in the literature through digital maturity, digital capability, or technology investments, this study focuses on the perceptual dimension of transformation (Kane et al., 2015; Vial, 2019).

The study also provides a new perspective to the strategic leadership literature within the context of digital transformation. In this study, strategic leadership is addressed not only in relation to organizational performance or competitive advantage but also as a determining mechanism in the construction of digital transformation awareness. This approach explains the role of strategic leadership in the digital age in a more comprehensive manner.

From the perspective of Turkish literature, the study offers an original contribution by examining digital transformation and leadership within the context of hierarchical organizational structures. This conceptual framework, particularly developed for public institutions and large-scale organizations, provides a strong theoretical foundation for future empirical studies.

In conclusion, the conceptual framework presented in this section holistically explains the relationships between strategic leadership, digital transformation awareness, and organizational structure in hierarchy-based organizations. This framework is expected to inspire new research that places leadership and awareness dimensions at the center of the digital transformation literature.

7. CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

Digital transformation has become an inevitable necessity for contemporary organizations, fundamentally transforming not only their technological infrastructures but also their management approaches, organizational structures, and leadership roles. This study goes beyond approaches that address digital transformation as merely a technical process and focuses on its perceptual and cognitive dimensions. In this context, the study conceptually examines the role of strategic leadership in digital transformation awareness within hierarchy-based organizations.

The literature review conducted within the scope of this study clearly demonstrates that technological investments alone are insufficient for the success of digital transformation processes. For digital transformation to be implemented sustainably, organizational members must understand, adopt, and recognize the strategic importance of the transformation process (Kane et al., 2015; Rogers, 2016). In this regard, digital transformation awareness is considered a critical component at the center of the transformation process.

From the perspective of hierarchy-based organizations, digital transformation represents a more complex and multi-layered process. Centralized decision-making mechanisms, rigid bureaucratic structures, and limited horizontal communication channels may hinder the dissemination of digital transformation initiatives throughout the organization (Mintzberg, 2009; Weber, 1947). In such structures, transformation processes are often planned at the top management level, while employees are involved in the process only to a limited extent. This situation may result in low levels of digital transformation awareness and lead transformation projects to remain superficial.

One of the main findings of the study is that strategic leadership serves as an important mechanism capable of balancing these negative structural effects. Strategic leaders contribute to the development of digital transformation awareness by creating vision, establishing effective communication, and encouraging organizational learning (Yukl, 2013; Koçel, 2020). Particularly in hierarchical structures, leaders' discourse and behaviors directly influence how employees perceive the transformation process. This finding indicates that strategic leadership plays not only a supportive but also a determining role in digital transformation processes.

This study provides three main contributions to the literature. First, the concept of digital transformation awareness is addressed as an independent and central construct and is conceptually grounded. Second, strategic leadership is repositioned as a leadership approach that shapes perceptual and cognitive processes within the context of digital transformation. Third, hierarchical organizational structure is examined as a moderating contextual variable in the relationship between strategic leadership and digital transformation awareness. This holistic approach highlights the interaction between leadership, awareness, and organizational structure, which is often neglected in the digital transformation literature.

From a practical perspective, this study offers important implications, particularly for public institutions and large-scale hierarchical organizations. Digital transformation projects should not be limited to technical infrastructure

investments but should also be supported by strategic leadership practices. Senior management's ability to communicate a clear and consistent digital transformation vision will strengthen the success of the transformation process by increasing employees' awareness levels.

This study also has certain limitations. The study is conceptual in nature and does not include empirical data. Therefore, the validity of the proposed conceptual framework should be tested through future quantitative and qualitative research. Additionally, examining the concept of digital transformation awareness across different sectors and organizational types may provide significant contributions to the literature.

Future research may empirically examine the effects of strategic leadership dimensions on digital transformation awareness. Furthermore, incorporating variables such as organizational culture, digital competencies, and employee participation into the proposed model may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of digital transformation processes.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that strategic leadership and digital transformation awareness play a critical role in the success of digital transformation within hierarchy-based organizations. The recognition that digital transformation is not only a technological process but also a leadership- and awareness-based process constitutes a fundamental reference point for both academic research and practitioners.

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