

**American University Kyiv**

A Capstone Project

LEADING CROSS-CULTURAL AND REMOTE TEAMS IN HIGH-RISK  
ENVIRONMENTS: LESSONS FROM SAP PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN  
UKRAINE

УПРАВЛІННЯ МІЖКУЛЬТУРНИМИ ТА ВІДДАЛЕНИМИ КОМАНДАМИ В  
УМОВАХ ПІДВИЩЕНОГО РИЗИКУ: УРОКИ З ДОСВІДУ УПРАВЛІННЯ SAP-  
ПРОЄКТАМИ В УКРАЇНІ

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## ABSTRACT

This Capstone is about leadership in SAP project teams that work online and include people from different countries. The study looks at teams that worked during the war in Ukraine. These teams worked under very difficult conditions, such as air attacks, blackouts, stress, and remote work.

Many studies talk about leadership skills like cultural intelligence, emotional intelligence, crisis leadership, and digital leadership. However, there is little research that shows how leaders use these skills together in real work situations during a long crisis. This study tries to understand how leaders behave and make decisions in such conditions.

The research uses a qualitative method. This means it is based on real experiences, not numbers. Eight SAP project managers and team leaders were interviewed. They worked with Ukrainian and international teams during the war. The interviews were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to find common patterns in leadership behavior.

The findings show that effective leadership in this context is not about one leadership style or one skill. Leaders constantly balanced two things. The first is structure. This includes clear roles, clear rules, coordination, and responsibility. The second is care for people. This includes empathy, emotional support, calm communication, and understanding stress. Leaders used both at the same time, depending on the situation.

Based on these findings, this study introduces the idea of Structured Empathy Leadership. This means leading with clear structure while also caring about people. The contribution of this study is not a new theory, but a clear explanation of how known leadership skills is used together in a very difficult and risky environment.

The results of this Capstone can help SAP project managers and organizations that work with remote and international teams in crisis or post-conflict situations.

## INTRODUCTION

Today, many companies work with people from different countries. These people often live in different time zones and work online. This is very common in large IT and SAP projects. In such projects, people must work together even if they have different cultures, languages, and ways of thinking.

At the same time, the world has become more unstable. Some teams work during crises, conflicts, or even war. Ukraine is a strong example of this. Since 2022 and full-scale invasion, Ukrainian teams have continued working on SAP projects during missile attacks, blackouts, stress, and uncertainty. Many people worked remotely from shelters or from other countries. This situation created new challenges for leaders.

Leading teams in these conditions is not easy. A leader must manage tasks but also care about people. Leaders must keep teams calm, motivated, and connected. They must communicate clearly online and understand cultural differences. Technical knowledge alone is not enough.

This Capstone focuses on leadership in cross-cultural and remote SAP project teams working in high-risk environments like Ukraine. The study looks at how leaders act when conditions are unstable and stressful. It explores how they support teams, make decisions, and keep projects running.

The research uses a qualitative approach. This means the study does not use numbers or statistics. Instead, it is based on real stories and experiences. The data comes from interviews with SAP project managers and team leads who worked with Ukrainian and international teams during the war. These interviews help to understand how leadership works in real life, not only in theory.

The main goal of this study is to understand which leadership skills are most important in such conditions. The research question is:

What leadership competencies are most critical for managing cross-cultural and remote SAP project teams in conflict or post-conflict environments like Ukraine?

By answering this question, the Capstone aims to help current and future leaders. The findings can be useful for SAP project managers, IT leaders, and organizations that work in remote, international, or high-risk environments. The study also adds practical insights to existing leadership theory by showing how leadership works under extreme conditions.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1. Understanding Culture in Global Project Teams

Modern organizations increasingly work across borders, time zones, and cultures. As teams became more international, researchers began asking why some multicultural groups perform well while others struggle. Early studies showed that technical knowledge and intelligence alone were not enough for success. Cultural expectations, communication styles, and personal values inform how people work together – especially in complex project environments such as SAP implementations.

One of the first large-scale attempts to understand cultural differences came from Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, G., 1980; Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M., 2010), who showed how national culture shapes workplace behavior. His cultural dimensions – power distance, individualism–collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity–femininity, and long-term orientation – help explain why people respond differently to leadership, teamwork, or decision-making. His model includes several key dimensions:

- Power Distance – how people treat those in charge at work.
- Individualism vs. Collectivism – whether people prefer to work alone or together with others.
- Uncertainty Avoidance – how people deal with new and unclear situation.
- Masculinity vs. Femininity – whether competition or cooperation is valued more.
- Long-Term Orientation – do people plan or focus on quick results.

For example, in high power-distance cultures, employees expect clear instructions and hierarchical decision-making, while low power-distance cultures encourage open dialogue and questioning of authority. These patterns matter for global SAP teams, where misunderstandings may arise simply because people are “playing by different cultural rules.”

Later, Charles Handy (1993) expanded the view from national culture to organizational culture, describing workplaces as power, role, task, or person cultures. Each type creates certain expectations about collaboration and responsibility. For instance, task cultures support flexible teamwork and problem-solving, whereas role cultures rely on procedures and clearly defined responsibilities.

Together, Hofstede and Handy offer a foundation for understanding why coordinating multicultural teams requires more than technical planning – it demands awareness of how people interpret work, leadership, and cooperation differently.

However, knowing *what* cultural differences are does not fully explain *how* leaders should behave in such environments. This led to the development of newer frameworks focused on leader capability, especially Cultural Intelligence (CQ).

## 2. From Understanding Culture to Leading Across Cultures

As organizations became more global, researchers shifted from describing cultural differences to studying how leaders can act effectively across those differences. Earley and Ang (2003) introduced Cultural Intelligence (CQ) as the ability to understand, interpret, and adapt to cultural diversity. CQ includes four dimensions – cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral – each describing how leaders learn about cultures, reflect on interactions, stay motivated to engage, and adjust their actions CQ:

- Cognitive CQ – understanding norms, rules, and practices of other cultures.
- Metacognitive CQ – thinking about what’s happening while talking to people from different cultures.
- Motivational CQ – having interest and desire to communicate with other cultures.
- Behavioral CQ – knowing how to change your words and actions for different people.

Studies show that CQ is one of the strongest predictors of success in multicultural teams. Leaders with high CQ communicate more clearly, prevent misunderstandings, and build better relationships (Jing et al., 2025). Among the four dimensions, motivational CQ appears especially important, because it helps leaders stay curious and confident even under pressure (Schlaegel, Richter, & Taras, 2021; Han et al., 2022). Unlike personality traits, CQ can be learned through experience, reflection, and training. Language skills also support cultural intelligence: learning a new language improves CQ, and people with strong CQ learn languages more easily (Ng, Rockstuhl & Ang, 2025).

Cultural diversity itself brings both opportunities and challenges. Research describes it as a “double-edged sword” (Stahl, Maznevski, Voigt, & Jonsen, 2021). Diverse teams can be highly creative and innovative – but only when leaders build trust and create psychological safety. Without this, differences may turn into conflict or

miscommunication. Effective multicultural leaders practice empathy, active listening, and flexibility, allowing team members to share ideas openly (Cook, Murrell-Jones et al., 2023).

Leadership adaptation is also essential. Leaders adjust their style in four ways – duplication, assimilation, incorporation, and transformation (Tsai et al., 2022):

- Duplication – both leader and team stay in their own cultural style.
- Assimilation – the leader adapts to the team’s culture.
- Incorporation – the team adapts to the leader’s culture.
- Transformation – both sides adapt and learn from each other.

The most successful approach is the transformational one, where both the leader and the team learn from each other and adjust continuously. This process increases collective CQ over time and strengthens collaboration.

Because CQ focuses on cultural understanding, it closely interacts with emotional intelligence (EQ), which helps leaders manage relationships and emotions in diverse teams (Schlaegel, Richter, & Taras, 2021; Han et al., 2022; Tsai et al., 2022). When a leader possesses and develops both, they become a success factor of any project.

EQ helps people notice and manage their own and others’ emotions. Leaders with high EQ show empathy, patience, and they are calm in stressful or uncertain situations. Original definition of EQ was introduced by Mayer and Salovey (1997). They described EQ as the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions to guide behavior. In teams from international organizations, these skills are very important because misunderstandings often happen not from language they speak, but from emotional tone and cultural signals.

Empathy is another essential behavioral skill. Studies on multicultural teams show that empathy improves collaboration and reduces conflict. When leaders listen actively and show understanding, they create psychological safety. As a result, people feel safe to speak up and share ideas. Empathy and open dialogue were the strongest drivers of trust in diverse international teams (Cook et al. 2023).

As much collaboration moved online, these interpersonal competencies became even more important in virtual settings, giving rise to new research on digital and e-leadership.

### **3. Leading in a Remote and Digital World: The Rise of e-Leadership**

Digital transformation and remote work have changed how global teams operate. Face-to-face interaction has been replaced by email, video calls, online workspaces, and real-time collaboration tools. As a result, leadership increasingly happens “through the screen”. This shift gave rise to e-leadership, first described by Avolio et al. (2001), which focuses on guiding and motivating people using digital tools.

In remote environments, leaders must compensate for the absence of informal communication and physical presence. Clear structure, regular check-ins, and transparent communication become essential (Crudu, 2025). Technology alone does not guarantee effective teamwork. Communication, trust, and coordination remain the core pillars of virtual team success. Leaders must choose tools wisely and ensure that messages are clear and meaningful to all participants (Jing, L., Zhang, Q., & Liu, S., 2025).

Cultural intelligence plays an important role in digital interactions as well. Leaders with high CQ adapt how they communicate online – offering more context to detail-oriented cultures or giving reflection time to people who think before they speak. The combination of CQ and digital competence helps create a sense of inclusion and emotional stability even when teams are physically dispersed (Anglani et al., 2023).

E-leadership research highlights several “faces” of digital leadership – visionary, collaborative, technological, and ethical (Bauwens et al., 2025). Leaders must not only manage tasks but also protect well-being, prevent burnout, and maintain fairness. Digital competence is more than technical skill; it involves choosing the right tool, balancing automation with human contact, and fostering psychological safety.

Across studies, one message is consistent: technology changes how leaders communicate but not what leadership is about. Trust, empathy, and cultural awareness remain central – even more so in a remote and multicultural context.

These leadership challenges become especially relevant in ERP/SAP projects, where teams are global, distributed, and highly interdependent.

### **4. Leadership in ERP / SAP Project Environments**

ERP and SAP projects are known for their complexity, interdependence, and organizational impact. Surprisingly, research shows that technology itself is rarely the main reason for success or failure. Instead, culture, communication, and leadership play decisive roles.

Global SAP projects bring together specialists from different cultures and time zones. Leaders must coordinate distributed teams, clarify expectations, and maintain engagement without daily in-person contact (Carter, 2025; Crudu, 2025). Open communication and attention to team well-being become critical, especially when external risks – such as infrastructure disruptions – add uncertainty.

Organizational culture also influences ERP outcomes. Companies that encourage learning, collaboration, and flexibility perform better during ERP transformations (Ashraf & Ali, 2022). Cultural readiness – improving communication, involving employees, and reducing fear – leads to smoother implementation (Skoumpopoulou and Moss, 2018). These findings highlight that ERP success depends on people, not only systems.

ERP solutions often reflect Western values such as transparency and process discipline. When these values do not match the local work culture, resistance may arise. Leaders must adjust the implementation approach, provide additional guidance, and translate new processes into familiar, context-specific examples (Vos & Boonstra, 2022).

Overall, ERP and SAP projects function as people projects. When leaders combine emotional and cultural intelligence, remote coordination skills, and sensitivity to cultural context, implementation becomes not a stressful disruption but a shared transformation.

In high-risk environments like Ukraine, these requirements intensify. Leaders must combine cross-cultural, emotional, and digital competencies with crisis leadership.

## **5. Leadership in High-Risk and Conflict Environments**

Leading projects in conflict zones adds another layer of complexity. War, instability, and safety threats disrupt communication, decision-making, and team coordination. Research on conflict-zone project management emphasizes the need for adaptive leadership, local partnerships, and resilience (Niroula, 2023; Enoaku, 2023).

In unstable environments, traditional top-down control becomes ineffective. Leaders must remain calm under pressure, communicate openly, and share decision-making with local teams. Adaptive leadership encourages flexibility, continuous learning, and emotional support-qualities essential for helping teams cope with stress and uncertainty.

Crisis management research identifies six key leadership functions during crises: communication, coordination, resource management, flexibility, decision-making, and recovery (Finnegan, 2021):

- Communication – making sure the information clear and the same for all.
- Coordination – keeping different stakeholders aligned, even in chaos.
- Resource management – using people and materials are used in the best way.
- Flexibility – reacting fast to new situations.
- Decision-making – balancing speed and accuracy under pressure.
- Recovery – using lessons from hard time to build long-term strength.

War conditions often threaten the first two, which leaders must rebuild early to keep teams aligned (Niroula, 2023; Enoaku, 2023). Digital systems can support this by enabling coordination even when physical infrastructure fails.

Evidence from post-war Kosovo shows that projects work better when local communities are involved early and empowered to contribute. Participatory, people-focused management increases trust and reduces delays (Earnest, 2019). Local ownership lowers risk and improves long-term sustainability.

Recent studies also highlight the rise of shared and distributed leadership, where responsibility is not held by one person but shared among team members. This approach increases creativity, resilience, and motivation-especially in multicultural and high-risk projects (Merits Journal, 2025; Whyte et al., 2022).

## **6. Ukrainian Context: Leadership Under War and Digital Transformation**

The full-scale Russian invasion forced Ukrainian companies to rethink operations and leadership practices. Several case studies illustrate how organizations used digital systems, adaptive leadership, and empowered teams to maintain continuity.

Medical Procurement of Ukraine implemented SAP Ariba within weeks, enabling transparent procurement processes under extreme uncertainty (SAP, 2024). Vodafone Ukraine rapidly migrated to Microsoft 365, ensuring secure communication and supporting employees' psychological well-being (SoftwareOne, 2023). A NIRAS (2024) report showed that flexibility, trust, and distributed decision-making helped teams stay connected despite loss of physical infrastructure.

Ukraine's long-term investment in digital governance-such as the Diia platform-also strengthened resilience, enabling public services to function during wartime (OECD, 2024; UNDP, 2023).

Across the Ukrainian cases, three leadership principles consistently emerge:

1. Digital systems maintain coordination when physical presence is impossible.
2. Empowered local teams act quickly when headquarters cannot respond.
3. Empathic leadership supports motivation and reduces stress during crisis.

These lessons are closely aligned with global research but become amplified under war-time conditions. They demonstrate that leadership in Ukraine must combine cultural understanding, emotional intelligence, digital competence, and crisis adaptation to support remote and cross-cultural SAP teams.

While existing research outlines the importance of crisis leadership, cultural intelligence, and e-leadership, this Capstone aims to inform which leadership competencies matter most when leading cross-cultural and remote SAP project teams in conflict or post-conflict environments like Ukraine.

## METHODOLOGY

### 1. Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as the main method of data analysis. Qualitative research is suitable when the goal is to understand how people experience, interpret, and give meaning to complex situations, rather than to measure variables numerically. In this study, the focus was on how SAP project leaders experience leadership during the war in Ukraine, including uncertainty, emotional strain, remote coordination, and cross-cultural teamwork.

Thematic analysis is one of the most widely used qualitative methods because it offers a structured but flexible way to identify patterns of meaning across interviews (Ahmed, S. K., et al., 2025). Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework was followed, as it provides clear guidance while allowing the researcher to remain actively involved in interpretation rather than treating analysis as a mechanical task.

This study specifically adopted reflexive thematic analysis, which recognizes that themes do not simply "emerge" from the data on their own. Instead, themes are constructed through the researcher's engagement with data, theoretical knowledge, and reflexive thinking (Ahmed, S. K., et al., 2025). This approach was appropriate because the researcher has professional experience in SAP project environments, which helped in understanding the context, language, and challenges described by participants. Rather than trying to remove this influence, reflexive thematic analysis requires the researcher to acknowledge and document it transparently, which strengthens credibility.

Thematic analysis was chosen instead of other qualitative methods for clear reasons. Unlike grounded theory, the aim was not to build a formal theory, but to develop a practical and conceptually grounded understanding of leadership under extreme conditions. Unlike interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which focuses on very small and homogeneous samples, this study examined patterns across diverse leadership roles and locations. Compared to content analysis, thematic analysis allows deeper interpretation of meaning, not just counting words or categories (Ahmed, S. K., et al., 2025).

The analysis followed a mainly inductive approach, meaning that themes were developed from the interview data itself rather than from predefined models. However, interpretation was theoretically informed by existing research on crisis leadership, emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, and remote leadership. This combination helped ensure that findings were both grounded in real experience and connected to academic literature.

## 2. Data Collection

### Interviews

Data was collected through eight semi-structured interviews, conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide guidance without rigidity. Core questions ensured consistency across interviews, while open-ended follow-ups allowed participants to describe unexpected experiences and personal reflections in their own words.

Each interview lasted between 35 and 60 minutes and was recorded with participant consent. Interviews were transcribed automatically and then reviewed for accuracy. Some interviews included Ukrainian language segments, which were translated into English. Special care was taken during translation to preserve meaning, tone, and emotional content, as recommended in qualitative research involving multilingual data (Christou, P. A., 2023).

Remote interviewing was not only practical but methodologically appropriate. The literature notes that online interviews can still produce rich and trustworthy qualitative data, especially when participants are geographically dispersed or when physical meetings are unsafe or impossible.

### Participant Profile

Eight participants took part in the study:

- Six Ukrainian SAP / IT project managers or team leads
  - Three remained in Ukraine throughout the war
  - Three relocated abroad but continued leading Ukrainian teams remotely
- One Spanish participant working in the United Kingdom on SAP transformation programs involving Ukrainian teams
- One Belgian participant managing global SAP workstreams with Ukrainian and offshore contributors

This sample reflects a wide range of leadership conditions, including direct exposure to missile attacks, remote crisis leadership, and cross-cultural coordination across Europe and offshore locations. Such variation is important in qualitative research, as it allows identification of patterns across different but related contexts.

### Rationale for Participant Selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, which is recommended in qualitative research when the goal is to gain deep insight from information-rich cases. All participants:

- held leadership or coordination roles in SAP or ERP projects,
- worked in remote and cross-cultural teams, and
- had direct experience working with Ukrainian teams during the war.

This ensured that the data directly addressed the research questions and avoided superficial or second-hand accounts.

### 3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke. This process is iterative, meaning the researcher moved back and forth between phases, refining understanding over time (Ahmed, S. K., et al., 2025).

#### Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data

The researcher listened to recordings and read transcripts several times to gain a deep understanding of the data. Familiarization is considered a critical foundation for rigorous analysis, as meaningful interpretation is not possible without immersion in the dataset (Ahmed, S. K., et al., 2025). Initial notes were taken on repeated ideas, emotional expressions, contradictions, and leadership dilemmas.

#### Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Transcripts were coded line-by-line to identify meaningful segments related to leadership behavior, emotional responses, communication practices, and cultural dynamics. Coding was both semantic (what was said directly) and latent (underlying meanings and assumptions). Coding is not a purely technical step; it is an interpretive act influenced by the researcher's perspective, which was documented through analytic notes (Ahmed, S. K., et al., 2025).

#### Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Codes were grouped into broader patterns that addressed the research question. This phase involved active sense-making, where codes were compared, clustered, and visually mapped to explore relationships between them. Themes were treated as meaningful patterns, not just topic summaries.

#### Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

Candidate themes were reviewed for internal coherence (do the data extracts fit together?) and external distinction (are themes clearly different from each other?).

Themes were refined, merged, or redefined to ensure analytical clarity and consistency across the dataset (Ahmed, S. K., et al., 2025).

#### Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Each theme was clearly defined by its core meaning and relevance to leadership in high-risk SAP environments. Names were chosen to be conceptually clear and accessible, avoiding vague or purely descriptive labels. This step ensured that each theme contributed directly to answering the research question.

#### Phase 6: Writing the Report and Building the Conceptual Model

The final phase involved integrating themes into a coherent narrative supported by selected interview quotes. In line with recent guidance, the analysis moved beyond theme description toward conceptual development, using themes to build a conceptual model of leadership in war-affected, cross-cultural, and remote SAP projects (Christou, P. A., 2023).

Throughout analysis, reflexivity was maintained through analytic memos that recorded decisions, assumptions, and changes in interpretation. This transparency strengthens methodological rigor and trustworthiness.

#### 4. Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the study purpose, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. No identifying information was included in the thesis. Interview data was stored securely and used only for academic purposes.

#### 5. Methodological Limitations

The study included eight participants, which limits generalization but allows deep and context-rich insight, consistent with qualitative research goals. Remote interviews limited observation of non-verbal cues; however, this was appropriate given safety concerns and geographical distribution. Translation may affect nuance, but careful selection and checking of quotations helped preserve meaning.

## FINDINGS

This Capstone adds new insights to leadership research by studying how cross-cultural and remote SAP teams are managed during the war. The literature review describes different leadership theories, such as cultural intelligence, crisis leadership, and e-leadership. However, the interviews show how these ideas are used in real work situations.

The findings show that leaders do more than just follow theory. They actively rebuild communication, create shared responsibility, and support team members emotionally. Participants described these actions as supporting teams in continuing work under unstable and stressful conditions. The study shows that leadership skills are not only concepts, but practical tools that leaders used to maintain coordination and engagement under high-risk conditions.

Participants consistently described leadership effectiveness in war-time SAP projects as being closely linked to a balance between two complementary dimensions: **structured leadership** and **human-centered leadership**. These dimensions were not predefined but emerged across all themes during the thematic analysis.

On one side, leaders emphasized the need for structure, discipline, and clear coordination. War-time conditions, remote work, and cross-cultural complexity increased uncertainty and operational risk. In response, leaders introduced clear roles, control points, structured communication, and shared ownership to maintain project continuity. Several interviewees described practices like crisis or military-style coordination, especially in remote environments where informal control is not possible.

On the other side, leaders strongly emphasized empathy, emotional stability, and psychological safety. Interviewees repeatedly described the leader's role as an "island of stability" — someone who remains calm, predictable, and supportive while teams operate under stress, fear, and emotional exhaustion. Leaders adapted their communication style, slowed down expectations when needed, and prioritized people's well-being without abandoning responsibility.

Interviewees described that when leadership emphasized structure without sufficient emotional support, team members experienced the approach as more pressuring or emotionally difficult. From other side, when leadership focused mainly on empathy without clear coordination routines, participants reported more confusion, slower decision-making, and repeated follow-ups. The combination of structured and human-centered approach is the basis of what this study defines as Structured Empathy Leadership.

This study does not only say that leaders should care about tasks and people. It shows how leaders actually balance these two things in real work during the war. The interviews describe clear actions that leaders used in remote and cross-cultural SAP projects. For example, during blackouts, leaders made coordination more structured, but at the same time tried to reduce emotional pressure on the team. Leaders also used clear roles and responsibilities to lower conflict, while keeping communication calm and predictable to help people feel safe.

While the balance between structured leadership and human-centered leadership represents the central finding of this study, it does not operate in isolation. The interviews show that this balance is enacted through a set of recurring leadership practices that respond to different but interconnected challenges. These practices were grouped into five themes, which together explain *how* leaders translate structured empathy into everyday leadership behavior in wartime, remote, and cross-cultural SAP projects:

1. War-time resilience and crisis leadership
2. Remote and digital leadership
3. Cross-cultural communication and cultural intelligence (CQ)
4. Adaptive and emotionally intelligent leadership
5. Coordination, ownership, and team structure

The five themes should not be read as separate or competing leadership styles. Instead, each theme highlights a specific context in which leaders must continuously balance structure and empathy. Together, they form a coherent explanation of leadership effectiveness across crisis conditions, digital work, cultural diversity, emotional strain, and complexity coordination.

<b>Keywords (raw data)</b>	<b>Codes (with description)</b>	<b>Theme</b>
<i>"Shelling", "no electricity", "unavailable", "powerstation", "emotional exhaustion", "burnout", "people have become more closed", "need to be supported", "stress"</i>	<b>War-time operational disruptions</b> – External events (shelling, electricity outages, air raids) interrupt work continuity and affect team availability and performance.	<b>1. War-time resilience &amp; crisis leadership</b>
<i>"Burnout", "exhaustion", "emotionally difficult", "need support", "emotional stability"</i>	<b>Emotional strain and support needs</b> – War conditions increase emotional exhaustion,	

Keywords (raw data)	Codes (with description)	Theme
	requiring leaders to apply empathy and emotional support mechanisms.	
<i>"Adapt", "react fast", "change plans", "be flexible", "we have to adapt", "quick decisions under pressure"</i>	<b>Adaptive crisis response</b> – Leaders must adjust plans, timelines, and expectations quickly because the environment is unpredictable.	
<i>"Lack of physical presence", "distanced working", "Teams", "calls", "chats", "async communication", "time zones", "structured communication"</i>	<b>Digital-first collaboration</b> – Communication and coordination happen mostly through digital channels; structure and clarity become more important than ever.	<b>2. Remote &amp; digital leadership</b>
<i>"Control Points", "Regulated Schedule", "Mindfulness", "Discipline at a Distance", "Self-Control"</i>	<b>Remote discipline and accountability</b> – Leaders must create a system of mutual expectations, clear rules, and accountability without micromanaging.	
<i>"Virtual empathy", "you need to feel people through the screen", "emotions are not visible online"</i>	<b>Virtual empathy skills</b> – Leaders adapt emotional communication to digital formats, compensating for loss of non-verbal signals.	
<i>"Different cultures", "Latin Americans are not proactive", "Indians with a different style", "Ukrainians are more responsible", "client from another country", "other types of communication"</i>	<b>Cross-cultural variation in work styles</b> – Teams differ significantly in pace, expectations, directness, responsibility, and communication norms.	
<i>"Misunderstanding", "cultural conflicts", "different approaches", "need to explain", "client manipulates weaknesses"</i>	<b>Intercultural misunderstandings</b> – Conflicts arise from differing expectations and interpretations of responsibility, initiative, and hierarchy.	
<i>"We adapt the style", "Explain more", "Take into account the context", "Local leaders did not help", "We use local examples"</i>	<b>CQ-based communication adjustments</b> – Leaders modify communication style depending on cultural background (clarity, detail, context, follow-up).	
<i>"Support people", "empathy", "understanding emotions", "discipline vs democracy", "feel"</i>	<b>Emotionally intelligent leadership</b> – Leaders rely on empathy, emotional regulation, and interpersonal awareness to	<b>4. Adaptive &amp; emotionally intelligent leadership</b>

<b>Keywords (raw data)</b>	<b>Codes (with description)</b>	<b>Theme</b>
<i>team", "create psychological safety"</i>	maintain trust and collaboration.	
<i>"Adapt the style", "the democratic model does not work", "clear deadlines are needed", "the crisis requires structure", "change leadership to the situation"</i>	<b>Leadership style adaptation</b> – Leaders shift between directive, democratic, and coaching styles depending on risk level, team maturity, and context.	
<i>"Shared ownership", "responsibility needs to be shared", "people take the initiative", "everyone is involved in decisions", "when local teams have power"</i>	<b>Distributed ownership</b> – Empowering local or remote team members to participate in decision-making improves speed, resilience, and creativity.	<b>5. Coordination, ownership &amp; team structure</b>
<i>"Synchronization between teams", "coordination", "cross-team coordination", "lack of communication", "burndown due to lack of statuses"</i>	<b>Coordination complexity</b> – multi-country, multi-vendor setups require more structured alignment, synchronized planning, and transparent expectations.	
<i>"Manual control", "problems with other contractors", "we took over the work", "do not comply with agreements"</i>	<b>Compensatory leadership actions</b> – Ukrainian teams often step in to fix gaps caused by others, leading to role strain but ensuring delivery.	

Together, these themes show how leaders navigated uncertainty, conflict, cultural differences, and digital distance – all while ensuring operational continuity in SAP and ERP environments. The findings are grounded in participant interviews and supported by relevant literature.

### **Theme 1: War-Time Resilience and Crisis Leadership**

This theme shows how structured empathy leadership is applied under direct war-time pressure, where emotional stabilization and operational discipline must coexist.

War conditions significantly shaped the emotional climate, work routines, and leadership strategies. Participants described shelling, blackouts, unreliable internet, disrupted routines, and ongoing fear as part of their professional reality (especially in the first months of the full-scale invasion). Despite this, many team members continued delivering SAP work with exceptional dedication.

One participant explained: “People were working from shelters or without electricity. It helped them stay focused and calm.” (Respondent 1, Interview, 19.11.2025)

Another shared: “People are emotionally exhausted, but they hold on to their jobs as a source of stability.” (Respondent 6, Interview, 28.11.2025)

*Leadership as psychological stability.* Leaders often played the role of emotional anchors. They monitored stress, encouraged rest, and normalized slower productivity during dangerous periods. One manager said: “Sometimes we literally had to force people to take a day off because they wouldn’t admit they were burned out.” (Respondent 3, Interview, 21.11.2025)

This reflects research showing that crisis leadership requires emotional stabilization and predictable communication (Finnegan, 2021).

*Flexibility as a survival strategy.* War-time unpredictability forced leaders to reorganize work quickly: “You cannot plan a perfect week when you don’t know if people will have power.” (Respondent 5, Interview, 26.11.2025)

Leaders adapted meetings, deadlines, and expectations based on real-time safety, which is consistent with adaptive leadership literature in unstable contexts (Whyte et al., 2022).

*Transparent and calm communication.* Participants emphasized the leader’s responsibility to remain calm: “A leader must be an island of stability.” (Respondent 3, Interview, 21.11.2025)

Crisis research similarly highlights the importance of steady, transparent communication to reduce uncertainty (Boin, A., Kuipers, S., & Overdijk, W., 2013).

Overall, Theme 1 shows that leadership in Ukraine required a combination of emotional intelligence, crisis management, and human empathy – far beyond standard project management tasks.

## **Theme 2: Remote and Digital Leadership**

This theme explains how structured empathy leadership is translated into digital and remote work, where leaders must replace informal control and emotional cues with intentional structure and virtual empathy.

All participants highlighted that remote work – initially due to COVID-19 and later reinforced by war – fundamentally changed how leaders communicate and coordinate.

*Loss of informal signals.* As one leader noted: “If you’re face-to-face, you see everything. Online, you lose these informal signals.” (Respondent 2, Interview, 21.11.2025)

Without non-verbal communication, misunderstandings increased, emotional states were harder to detect, and collaboration relied heavily on clarity and structure. This aligns with global virtual team research showing communication structure gaps as the main source of inefficiency (Jing, L., Zhang, Q., & Liu, S., 2025).

*Structured communication has become essential.* Participants described the need for precise instructions and consistent written follow-up: “If you don’t define the action point clearly, three weeks later nothing moved.” (Respondent 2, Interview, 21.11.2025)

Leaders compensated for the lack of hallway conversations with daily stand-ups, regular check-ins, and transparent communication routines-consistent with Crudu’s (2025) findings on remote SAP development.

*Digital empathy.* Several participants described the difficulty of reading tone, emotions, or stress levels online: “You need to be emotionally intelligent through the screen.” (Respondent 1, Interview, 19.11.2025)

These findings align with modern e-leadership literature emphasizing empathy, presence, and consistent communication (Tahirkheli et al., 2022; Avolio et al., 2001).

*Maintaining relationships in remote settings.* Leaders used brief personal conversations, virtual coffee breaks, or informal check-ins to maintain connection. This confirms literature stating that remote leadership must intentionally recreate social presence.

### **Theme 3: Cross-Cultural Communication and Cultural Intelligence (CQ)**

This theme highlights how structured empathy leadership operates across cultures, requiring leaders to combine clear expectations with cultural sensitivity.

Cultural differences emerged as one of the strongest themes. Leaders described contrasts in directness, hierarchy, responsibility, conflict expression, and escalation styles.

*Differences in communication styles.* “Ukrainians are very direct. British are polite. Indians avoid saying ‘no.’ All of this creates misunderstandings.” (Respondent 3,

Interview, 21.11.2025) “In Asia, people do only what they are told to do – nothing more.” (Respondent 2, Interview, 21.11.2025)

These patterns reflect differences in Hofstede’s cultural dimensions (power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance), and the literature on CQ which emphasizes the need to understand cultural norms (Earley & Ang, 2003; Schlaegel, Richter, & Taras, 2021).

*Leaders as cultural translators.* The respondent described how she often needed to explain not only tasks, but also emotional context and personal impact when communicating with team members during the war (Respondent 7, Interview, 05.12.2025).

This reflects leadership adjustment categories (assimilation, incorporation, transformation) presented by Tsai et al. (2022).

*Cultural misunderstandings slow projects.* Silence, tone, or politeness were often misinterpreted: “They assume silence means approval. For us it means thinking.” (Respondent 8, Interview, 05.12.2025)

Stahl et al. (2021) describe cultural diversity as a “double-edged sword” – it can either enhance creativity or cause friction depending on communication quality.

*CQ as a predictor of smoother collaboration.* Participants confirmed that leaders with cultural sensitivity prevent conflict escalation and create psychological safety-supporting findings from Han et al. (2022).

#### **Theme 4: Adaptive and Emotionally Intelligent Leadership**

This theme focuses on the internal leadership capabilities that allow structured empathy to remain effective under stress, conflict, and emotional overload.

A significant theme was the ability of leaders to adjust their style depending on individual needs, culture, or stress conditions.

*Adaptive behavior as a leadership norm.* “You cannot lead everyone the same way. You must find a key for each person.” (Respondent 6, Interview, 28.11.2025). This aligns with situational and adaptive leadership theories.

*Emotional intelligence as a critical competency.* “If the leader is stressed, everyone is stressed.” (Respondent 4, Interview, 24.11.2025)

Participants described empathy, patience, and calmness as necessary to reduce conflict and maintain motivation.

Literature confirms that EQ strongly enhances CQ and overall leadership effectiveness (Han et al., 2022; Tsai et al., 2022).

*Managing conflict with emotional sensitivity.* Several participants described “resetting” emotional conversations by pausing and continuing later: “When emotions escalate, I stop the meeting and continue next day.” (Respondent 1, Interview, 19.11.2025)

This technique reflects findings that conflict resolution in multicultural teams requires emotional awareness and strategic timing (Wang, Y., Li, X., & Chen, Z., 2024).

### **Theme 5: Coordination, Ownership, and Team Structure**

Leadership challenges were not only cultural or emotional – they were also structural.

This theme shows how structured empathy leadership becomes embedded in coordination mechanisms, ownership models, and team structures that sustain project delivery.

*Differences in ownership and autonomy.* “Ukrainians take responsibility quickly. Some teams wait for very detailed instructions.” (Respondent 8, Interview, 05.12.2025)

This reflects cultural expectations tied to hierarchy and uncertainty avoidance.

*Coordination overhead in global SAP teams.* “Leaders spend more time coordinating than solving technical issues.” (Respondent 2, Interview, 21.11.2025). Participants confirmed that communication gaps between countries, vendors, and internal employees require leaders to manage risks, align stakeholders, and follow up constantly.

*Conflict linked to unclear structure.* “We had conflict because expectations were not aligned. After explaining the cultural context, it stopped.” (Respondent 5, Interview, 26.11.2025)

This supports ERP literature showing that unclear roles amplify cross-cultural complexity (Carter, 2025; Skoumpopoulou & Moss, 2018).

Taken together, the five themes demonstrate that leadership effectiveness in Ukrainian SAP projects is not driven by isolated competencies, but by the leader’s ability to continuously integrate structure and empathy across different contexts. Whether responding to war-time disruptions, managing remote teams, navigating cultural differences, regulating emotions, or coordinating complex stakeholders, leaders

relied on the same underlying logic: clear structure provides stability, while empathy sustains people.

These findings suggest that leadership in high-risk environments can be understood as a dynamic process rather than a fixed style. To capture this process and illustrate how contextual pressures, leadership behaviors, team processes, and project outcomes are connected, the next chapter introduces a conceptual model based on empirical findings.

## CONCEPTUAL MODEL

This model is an interpretive summary of recurring patterns in participants' accounts; it illustrates how interviewees described connections between context, leadership practices, team processes, and continuity of delivery, rather than testing causal relationships. The interviews suggest that leaders worked to *translate* extreme contextual pressures into workable routines by combining coordination structure with emotional stabilization. Based on this pattern, this study proposes a conceptual model called **Structured Empathy Leadership**, which explains how cross-cultural and remote leadership operates in high-risk settings.

Interview participants consistently described working under intense war-time conditions, including air raids, blackouts, relocation, psychological stress, and loss of infrastructure. At the same time, remote work, which expanded during COVID-19, became mandatory and unstable. Cross-cultural complexity further increased due to daily collaboration with European and Asian teams. These conditions created high uncertainty and placed additional pressure on leaders.

As a result, leadership demands changed. Participants explained that it was no longer enough to rely on technical expertise or standard project management methods. Leaders had to remain calm, adapt quickly, and communicate clearly, even when planning was difficult. As one participant noted, "You cannot plan a perfect week when you don't know if people will have power" (Respondent 5, 26.11.2025). Another described the leader's role as "an island of stability" for the team (Respondent 3, 21.11.2025). These experiences support crisis leadership research showing that uncertainty increases the need for emotional stability, flexibility, and transparent communication (Boin, A., Kuipers, S., & Overdijk, W., 2013; Finnegan, 2021).

To respond to these pressures, leaders drew on a set of interconnected competencies. Participants described these competencies as the main ways leaders responded to wartime and remote pressures in everyday work. In their companies, crisis readiness, digital leadership, CQ, and adaptive emotional leadership were repeatedly mentioned as resources used to maintain direction, reduce uncertainty, and support collaboration. Together, these skills allowed leaders to maintain direction, reduce anxiety, and support motivation. Interviewees highlighted the importance of emotional and situational awareness in digital settings, for example stating, "You need to be emotionally intelligent through the screen" (Respondent 1, 19.11.2025), and "You have to find a key for each person" (Respondent 6, 28.11.2025).

Importantly, these competencies were applied in two complementary ways. On one side, leaders used **structured leadership** practices, such as clear roles, defined responsibilities, coordination routines, control points, and shared ownership. These

practices helped reduce ambiguity and replace missing informal control in remote and multi-country teams. Several participants compared this need for structure to crisis or military-style coordination, where clarity supports action under pressure.

On the other side, leaders emphasized **human-centered leadership**, focusing on empathy, emotional stability, psychological safety, and individual adaptation. Leaders recognized emotional exhaustion, adjusted expectations, and treated well-being as a leadership responsibility. Participants repeatedly stressed that they were “working with people, not machines,” especially during war.

These two dimensions – structure and empathy – did not operate separately. Instead, they reinforced each other. Interviewees described that structure without sufficient empathy was often experienced as emotionally difficult and pressuring. In contrast, empathy without clear structure was described as creating confusion, unclear priorities, and slower follow-up. Structured Empathy Leadership emerged when both were applied together.

In the interviews, leaders said that using structure together with empathy helped teams work better every day. This was especially clear in communication, follow-up on tasks, trust, shared responsibility, and handling conflicts. These findings align with global virtual team research identifying communication, trust, and coordination as key performance drivers (Jing, L., Zhang, Q., & Liu, S., 2025), as well as SAP literature showing that cultural readiness predicts project success more strongly than technical factors (Carter, 2025).

Finally, participants suggested that when these team processes were stable, it became easier for teams to keep the work going despite war-time uncertainty. Stable and motivated teams were the main reason SAP work continued despite war conditions. Leaders who successfully combined structure with empathy enabled resilience, proactive ownership, effective coordination, fewer conflicts, and sustained engagement. As one participant explained, “Many of those people were without electricity or in shelters, and you have to take into account that you are not working with machines” (Respondent 1, 19.11.2025). This supports ERP research showing that human and cultural readiness are critical for successful implementation (Skoumpopoulou & Moss, 2018).

In summary, the conceptual model demonstrates that effective leadership in war-time Ukrainian SAP projects is not defined by technical mastery alone. Instead, it is defined by **Structured Empathy Leadership**, where leaders act as stabilizers in crisis, translators across cultures, and connectors in remote environments. By combining structure with empathy, leaders shape team processes that ultimately contribute to project success under extreme conditions.

## FINAL CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The final conceptual model summarizes how leadership was described by participants as supporting SAP project continuity in high-risk, cross-cultural, and remote environments such as war-time Ukraine. The model is based on the interview findings and explains how leaders describe working with instability through coordinated and human-centered teamwork.

The model begins with the contextual pressures faced by teams. These include war-related disruptions, emotional stress, forced remote work, and cross-cultural collaboration across countries and time zones. These conditions increase uncertainty, weaken informal communication, and place additional emotional demands on both leaders and team members.

In response to these pressures, leaders apply Structured Empathy Leadership, which combines two equally important dimensions: structured leadership and human-centered leadership.

The structured leadership dimension focuses on clarity and coordination. Leaders establish clear roles, responsibilities, control points, and communication routines. These practices reduce ambiguity, support accountability, and replace missing informal control in remote and distributed SAP teams. Structure helps teams remain focused and operational even when conditions are unstable.

The human-centered leadership dimension focuses on empathy, emotional stability, and psychological safety. Leaders recognize stress, fatigue, and emotional overload and respond with understanding and flexibility. By remaining calm and predictable, leaders act as a stabilizing presence and help teams feel safe, supported, and motivated.

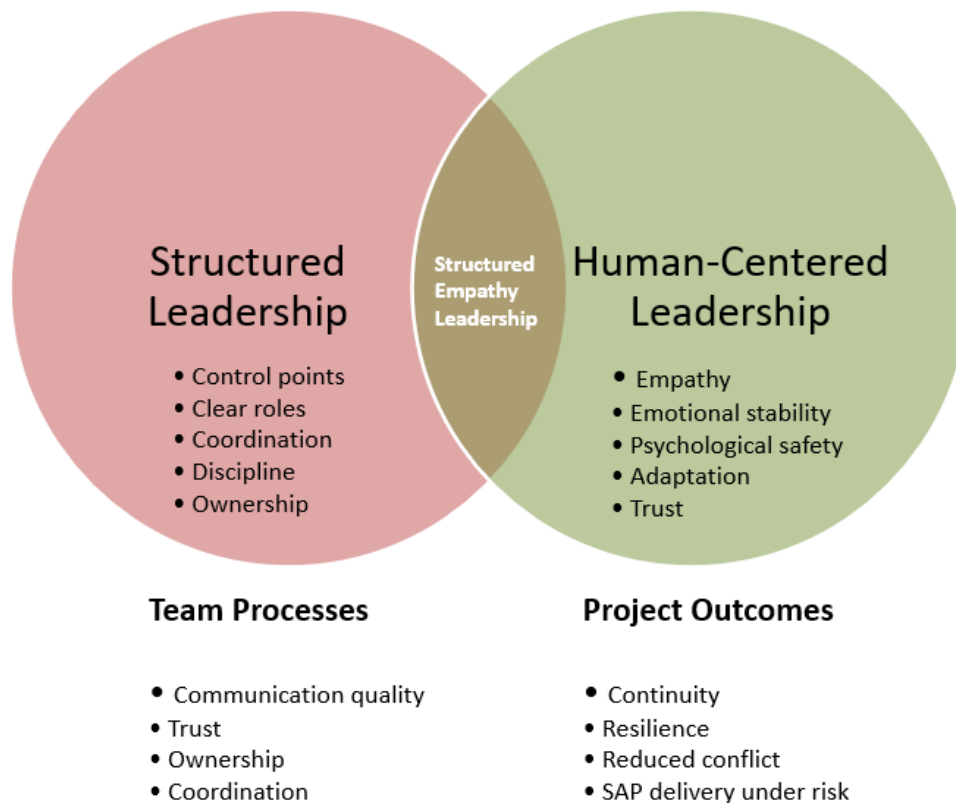
These two dimensions are not separate. The model shows that leadership is most effective when structure and empathy are applied together. Participants described structure without empathy as more pressuring and disengaging, while empathy without structure was described as creating confusion and weaker coordination. Structured Empathy Leadership emerges at the intersection of both.

With this combined approach, leadership practices were clearly seen in everyday team work, such as communication, trust, shared responsibility, coordination, and handling conflicts. Clear structure enables alignment and efficiency, while empathy supports openness, responsibility, and collaboration.

Participants suggested that when these team processes were stable (for example, clear coordination, shared ownership, and psychological safety), teams found it easier to continue the work and reduce escalation under war-time uncertainty. Participants described that this approach helped SAP projects continue under extreme uncertainty and risk.

In conclusion, the final conceptual model demonstrates that effective leadership in war-time Ukrainian SAP projects is not defined by technical expertise alone. Instead, success depends on a balanced leadership approach that integrates structure with empathy. Structured Empathy Leadership provides a clear explanation of how leaders stabilize teams, bridge cultures, and sustain execution of action points in the most challenging environments.

## Structured Empathy Leadership Model



## **Future Research Directions**

This study focused on identifying leadership competencies that support cross-cultural and remote SAP project teams in high-risk, war-time conditions. While the findings offer valuable insights, they also open several directions for future research. One important area is to examine how these leadership competencies evolve over time. Future studies could explore whether crisis-driven leadership behaviors, such as increased empathy, adaptability, and digital coordination, remain effective in post-conflict environments or gradually shift toward more traditional leadership styles as stability returns. This would help clarify which competencies are situational and which become part of long-term leadership practice.

Another promising direction concerns the interaction between leadership competencies and organizational structures. Future research could investigate how different governance models, such as centralized versus decentralized decision-making, influence the effectiveness of cultural intelligence, emotional intelligence, and shared leadership in remote SAP projects. Comparative studies across industries or regions could reveal whether the patterns observed in Ukraine are transferable to other conflict or post-crisis contexts, such as post-disaster reconstruction projects or global programs operating in politically unstable regions.

Finally, future research could deepen the understanding of digital and e-leadership in high-risk environments. While this study highlights the importance of digital competence and communication clarity, further work could explore how specific digital tools, communication rhythms, or platform choices affect trust, psychological safety, and team resilience. Mixed-method studies combining interviews with project performance data may provide stronger evidence of causal relationships between leadership behavior, team processes, and project outcomes. Such research would strengthen both academic theory and practical guidance for leaders managing complex ERP and digital transformation initiatives under conditions of extreme uncertainty.

### **Potential future research questions**

How do leadership competencies developed during war-time projects change in post-conflict SAP implementations?

Which leadership competencies have the strongest impact on psychological safety and trust in remote, cross-cultural teams?

How does shared or distributed leadership affect project outcomes in high-risk digital transformation projects?

What role do specific digital tools play in enabling e-leadership and emotional connection in crisis conditions?

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