Transformational Leadership as A Catalyst for Digital Transformation in Nigerian NGOs: A Case-Based Perspective

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Abstract: There is high pressure on nonprofit organizations to adopt digital technologies which have intensified the need for effective leadership models capable of guiding strategic transformation in resource-limited environments. This study critically investigates the impact of transformational leadership on digital transformation processes in Nigerian non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Leveraging on a qualitative case study approach, primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews with two executive leaders from Almurad Charity Foundation and Lola Carter for the Needy Foundation, operating across community development and sustainable development goals respectively. Thematic analysis of the data collected revealed that transformational leadership traits such as intellectual stimulation, idealized influence, individualized consideration and inspirational motivation commonly known as four I's, were crucial in promoting innovation, aligning organizational missions with digital tools and keeping going team engagement. However, evidence shows the practice of blended leadership, through transactional elements to complement transformational behaviors. These findings emphasize the adaptive nature of effective NGO leadership and point out the value of leadership flexibility in digital contexts. The study contributes to leadership and development literature by offering context-specific perceptions into how digital transformation unfolds under transformational leadership in West Africa, and Nigeria in particular. It also puts up to practical suggestions for NGOs leaders and stakeholders aiming to ameliorate digital resilience and performance.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies have advanced exponentially over recent years, bringing changes on operational norms across sectors, and forcing organizations to adopt innovative strategies to remain effective, transparent and responsive. For NGOs, digital transformation comes with both opportunity and challenge. On the one hand, it can improve communication, service delivery, and impact measurement; on the other, it demands leadership capacities that go beyond traditional administrative functions. In mission-driven NGOs, implementing digital systems often happens in contexts characterized by limited resources, organizational complexity, and shifting stakeholder expectations. In such environments, leadership plays a critical role in finding whether digital change is resisted or embraced (Heeks, Ospina, & Arun, 2023).

Transformational leadership first conceived by (Burns, 1978) and then expanded by (Bass & Riggio, 2006) has emerged as an ideal model for change-oriented processes in resource-constraint settings, emphasizing vision-building, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, and

inspirational motivation. Many scholars assert that such leadership fosters organizational learning, encourages innovation, and strengthens stakeholders' engagement, which are required for successful digital adoption (Qiao, Li, & Hong, 2024). Our study focuses more on understanding how these leadership principles apply in nonprofit contexts (Dahiya & Gayatri, 2023) although there is existing literature interested in corporate environments. However, tangible proof from Sub-Saharan Africa remains limited, particularly with respect to how NGO leaders embrace digital transformation in the middle of complex socio-economic and cultural constraints.

Nigeria offers a compelling context for exploring this intersection. The country has a vibrant and diverse nonprofit sector, yet its organizations often operate in environments marked by infrastructural gaps, fluctuating donor support, and digital illiteracy (Abiola, Idowu, & Afolaranmi, 2024). Covid-19 pandemic affected many Nigerian NGOs, forcing them to rapidly digitize their operations to keep program continuity going. This sudden shift showed both the potential and fragility of digital systema in NGOs and emphasized the centrality of leadership in facilitating adaptation. As noted by (Gachugu, 2024), visionary leadership becomes even more

critical in unstable environments where staff may lack technical skills and operational systems are not strong. This study explores how transformational leadership influences the implementation of digital transformation withing Nigerian NGOs, using as case examples two NGOs: Almurad Charity Foundation and Lola Carter for the Needy Foundation. The article aims to present grounded insights into how leadership style, resource limitations and organizational structure and vision interact during the process of digital change.

The study contributes to the growing body of literature on leadership in development contexts by bridging the gap between theory and practice in digital transformation within

NGOs. It offers three core contributions: (1) empirical evidence of how transformational leadership traits manifest in Nigerian NGO leadership; (2) insights into the practical interplay between leadership flexibility and digital strategy in under-resourced environments; and (3) a nuanced understanding of how leaders navigate hybrid leaderships approaches, combining vision-setting with performance-based pragmatism.

The structure of the paper is as follows: Section 2 reviews existing literature on transformational leadership and digital transformation, with focus on nonprofit sectors. Section 3 outlines the methodology employed in this study, including the rationale for a case study approach. Section 4 presents the key findings from the two organizations, while Section 5 discussed these results considering the literature and theoretical framework. The final section concludes with implications for practice and future research directions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Transformational Leadership in Nonprofits

Transformational Leadership has gained traction as a motor for change in mission- driven organizations. According to (Dahiya & Gayatri, 2023), it is a process by which leaders articulate a compelling vision, stimulate intellectual curiosity, and attend follower development. In the nonprofit sector, where genuine motivation often replaces financial rewards, transformational behaviors are linked to higher volunteer retention and organizational commitment (Adanri & Singh, 2018). (Abiola, Idowu, & Afolaranmi, 2024) when further in the findings demonstrating that transformational leadership practices enhance institutional capacity and innovation in Nigerian NGOs. The survey of nonprofits conducted in Oyo State in Nigeria showed that leaders who regularly apply core values and provide individualized support were more successful in implementing new programs. These studies collectively underline the centrality of transformational traits known as the four I's in cultivating resilient nonprofit cultures.

B. Digital Transformation in NGOs

Digital Transformation in nonprofit context is the integration of digital technologies into the organization's operations, from project delivery to stakeholder engagement (Heeks, Ospina, & Arun, 2023). It is not just about adopting those technologies but reimagining processes and models to leverage data, remote collaboration, and automated workflows (Qiao, Li, & Hong, 2024). (Sacavém, Cunha, Rego, & Clegg, 2023) went ahead to argue that successful digital transformation in civil society requires strategic leadership that aligns digital tools with mission objectives, ensures staff readiness, and navigates ethical considerations. Although experimental studies in Sub-Saharan Africa remain short, (Gachugu, 2024) indicates in his fieldwork conducted in East African NGOs that digital maturity correlates strongly with leadership commitment and organizational learning structures. Further, other scholars underline how innovating in digital governance, underpinned by transparent communication and stakeholder co-creation, can extend outreach even under resource constraints. Collectively, this literature positions digital transformation as a multifaceted change process requiring both technological and human capital interventions.

C. Intersection of Transformational Leadership and Digital Change

Several researchers explore how transformational leadership behaviors enable digital transformation outcomes in nonprofit settings. (Dahiya & Gayatri, 2023) discovered that transformational leaders create a learning environment that eases experimentation with new technologies. (Qiao, Li, & Hong, 2024) has demonstrated that organizations where leaders have a clear digital vision of communication and provide individualized coaching to their staff about adoption of digital tools end up improving significantly in efficiency and service quality. Some documentations from (Adanri & Singh, 2018) in Nigeria showed a huge relationship between transformational leadership practices and perceived digital readiness among NGO administrators. They suggest that transformational leadership works as a catalyst, connecting organizational aspirations with practical digital capabilities by promoting psychological safety, encouraging risk- taking, and aligning core values with technological initiatives.

D. Contextual Challenges in Nigerian NGOs

Despite the promise of transformational leadership, NGOs based in Nigeria face unique barriers to digital change. (Abiola, Idowu, & Afolaranmi, 2024) identify persistent lack of infrastructure, unstable electricity and low broadband penetration as main obstacles.

Furthermore, limited digital literacy among staff increases resistance to new systems (Ngongpah, 2025), while inconsistent donor funding hinders long-lasting technology investments. (Gachugu, 2024) observes that in volatile environments, the use of hybrid leadership approaches is strongly recommended because it blends transformational vision-casting with transactional incentives to maintain staff's morale during digital transitions. (Sacavém, Cunha, Rego, & Clegg, 2023) assert that adaptive leadership, where leaders' flexibility shifts between different behaviors based on situational demands, is critical in an unstable socio-political environmental context. These factors underline the need for leadership frameworks that combine digital strategy with local realities, rather than general models.

E. Summary and Research Gap

The literature reviews confirm that transformational leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering innovation and employee engagement which are key drivers of digital transformation in nonprofits. Empirical evidence from global and regional studies indicates that transformational behavior corresponds positively with digital readiness and performance. However, most studies focus in corporate or Global North contexts, with few addressing how these dynamics unfold in Nigerian NGOs facing severe infrastructural and socio-cultural limitations. In addition, while hybrid leadership practices are mentioned circumstantially, there is a lack of case-based analysis illustrating thoroughly how transformational and transactional elements co-occur in practice during digital change.

This article addresses these gaps by providing a comparative case study of two Nigerian NGOs, examining how transformational leadership traits manifest, adapt, and blend with pragmatic strategies in real-world digital transformation initiatives.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to investigate the influence of transformational leadership on digital transformation within Nigerian NGOs. Considering the experimental nature of the research question and the complex, context-dependent nature of leadership and organizational change, qualitative inquiry offers the depth and flexibility necessary for understanding leadership practices in real-word settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A. Research Design

This research is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A case study design was employed to allow comparative insights between two NGOs: Almurad Charity Foundation and Lola Carter for the Needy Foundation, both nonprofits which have engaged in digital transformation efforts in the last 7 years.

B. Case Selection

The two organizations were selected through purposing sampling based on three criteria which are proof of ongoing digital transformation projects, active operation in Nigeria since 2019 and top leadership with more than 4 years of tenure. This procedure of selection guaranteed the participant's strategic and operational perceptions on digital change processes and leadership decisions.

C. Data Collection

We have conducted semi-structured interviews with the CEOs of each organization. They lasted between 25 and 35 minutes and were guided by a flexible framework that explored leadership traits, digital projects, organizational challenges, and stakeholder engagement. This method helped collect rich and nuanced data while giving them the opportunity and freedom to elaborate on relevant themes.

D. Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyze the data from each interview, following (Braun & Clarke, 2019) six-phase framework: Familiarization with data, Generation of initial codes, Search for themes, Review of themes, Definition and naming of themes, and Production of the report. We must note that the process was iterative and inductive.

Transcripts were manually coded and cross-compared to find out recurring patterns across the two cases. Then, we mapped the themes against the four I's of transformational leadership as well as the organizational outcomes related to digital transformation.

E. Ethical Considerations

Verbal consent was obtained prior to the interviews and participants were provided with an interview guide, outlining the purpose and scope of the study.

F. Limitations

The case study method allows for profound contextual understanding; however, its findings are not generalizable to all Nigerian NGOs. The small sample size though intentional, may not capture the full diversity of leadership practices across different regions or sub-sectors. Moreover, they might be biased due to reliance on self-reported data. These limitations are addressed and mitigated through transparent reporting.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents key discoveries from interviews conducted with the CEOs of Almurad Charity Foundation and Lola Carter for the Needy Foundation referred as P1 and P2 respectively. Thematic analysis showed how transformational leadership traits supported digital transformation withing the two organizations. The themes are structured around four I's of transformational leadership as outlined by and adapted to the nonprofit digital transformation context.

A. Idealized Influence: Leading by Example and Building Trust

Findings show that P1 and P2 have demonstrated idealized influence by showcasing a clear ethical vision for how digital tools could improve organizational transparency, communication and efficiency. P1 made reforms by digitizing reporting systems and introducing basic data protocols. These changes were not externally imposed but adjusted through consistent leadership behaviors, which fostered employee's confidence and buy-in. P2 similarly emphasized mission alignment in digital initiatives, stating,

"We couldn't adopt a digital tool unless it matched our core mission of dignity and empowerment."

This alignment corresponds to (Bass & Riggio, 2006) concept of value-based leadership as a trust-building mechanism. Financial constraints didn't stop both CEOs from gaining moral authority by embodying their digital ambitions.

B. Inspirational Motivation: Communicating Vision Amid Constraints

Both leaders described how they inspired their staff through persuasive communication rather than material incentives. P2 made use of storytelling during team meetings to show how digital outreach improved beneficiary impact. While P1 pointed out that communication became "the biggest currency." These practices reflect the concept of inspirational motivation, where leaders frame change in compelling, hopeful terms (Dahiya & Gayatri, 2023). Digital transformation was placed in both organizations as a shared journey toward greater reach and resilience. These tactics motivated staff during infrastructural breakdowns and a shortfall in funding. Such motivation strategies are work well in environments characterized by limited resource like Nigeria, where most NGOs must learn commitment without extrinsic rewards (Abiola, Idowu, & Afolaranmi, 2024).

C. Intellectual Stimulation: Encouraging Innovation and Learning

P1 and P2 encouraged and supported adoption of digital tools. P1 implemented a rotating task force model where new staff could test new digital forms for beneficiary data collection. While not all tools were successful, the process fostered a culture of inquiry and openness. P2 in the other hand promoted learning by organizing peer-led training sessions, allowing staff to share digital knowledge in an inclusive way. Its approach aligns with (Braun & Clarke, 2019) concept of leadership collaboratively built through dynamic interaction. So, in this sense, it was not about hierarchical instruction but about allowing subordinates to bring in innovation.

D. Individualized Consideration: Coaching and Support

Leadership accessibility was a key theme from both interviews. We found that both leaders could be approached by their staff members for a face-to-face meeting or mentoring on digitalization. P1 said,

"Sometimes I have to sit beside a field officer and walk them through how to upload data on their phone, because if I don't, who will?"

This type of individualized consideration reinforced trust and decreased resistance to change. Moreover, it mitigated digital literacy gaps which consists of a major challenge noticed in Nigerian NGOs (Ngongpah, 2025). The fact that transformational leaders could adapt their coaching styles based on employees' needs was key for sustaining digital initiatives.

E. Blended leadership Styles: Transactional Complements

It was interesting to find that both leaders at some points made use of transactional elements strategically such as offering recognition rewards. P1 offered modest financial bonuses to staff who successfully submitted their digital tasks during projects. P2 rewarded punctual staff in digital reporting. These behaviors suggest a hybrid leadership model, where transformational principles are complemented by pragmatic managerial tools. This aligns with (Gachugu, 2024) findings on effectiveness of flexibility in leadership style in unpredictable NGO context.

F. Comparative Summary

Table 1 Comparative Summary

Theme	Almurad Charity Foundation (P1)	Lola Carter for the Needy Foundation (P2)
Idealized Influence	Digitized reporting; role modelling	Ethical framing of tech adoption
Inspirational Motivation	Motivational speeches, vision casting	Storytelling and collective mission framing
Intellectual Stimulation	Taskforce for tool testing	Peer learning workshops
Individualized Consideration	Hands-on training and coaching	Mentorship and open-door policy
Transactional Mix	Performance bonuses	Reporting rewards and internal KPIs

V. DISCUSSION

This chapter interprets the research's findings considering existing literature, from connections between the lived experiences of transformational leaders in Nigerian NGOs and the scholarly discuss on leadership and digital transformation. The section also reflects the extent to which the study meets its research objectives and identifies areas where findings either reinforce or diverge from prior studies.

A. Linking Leadership practices to Transformational Theory

The case studies confirm that the four I's of transformational leadership were crucial to the digital transformation journeys of both Lola Carter for the Needy Foundation and Almurad Charity Foundation. As defined by (Bass & Avolio, 1994), behaviors observed were evident in the ways leaders inspired their staff, modelled ethical use of technology, and nurtured digital capacity.

This aligns with findings by (Dahiya & Gayatri, 2023), who asserted that nonprofits with transformational leaders are more open to digital innovation practices which are part of the organizational missions. (Sacavém, Cunha, Rego, & Clegg, 2023) went further emphasizing on the facilitative role of leadership in aligning people, processes and digital tools, a point proven in the narratives of both case participants.

B. Contextualizing Digital Transformation in Resource-Limited Environments

Although the topic of this study is less explored in current digital transformation research, it adds depth to the literature by looking into how transformational leadership works under resource constraint environments. While many scholars focus more on vision and strategy, this research instead shows that adaptability, accessibility and interpersonal coaching are critical as well in Nigerian context where there is poor technical infrastructure and lack of staff digital literacy.

(Abiola, Idowu, & Afolaranmi, 2024) and (Gachugu, 2024) claim that the success of digital change projects in African NGOs may depend not only on visionary leadership but also on hybrid leadership styles that merge transformational ideals with transactional strategies. We found out in this study that both leaders used motivational incentives, confirming the need for flexible, context-specific leadership model.

In this study, both leaders employed elements of contingency management (e.g., task monitoring, modest incentives), validating the need for flexible, context-specific leadership models.

C. Revisiting Research Objectives

Our main aim was to critically evaluate how effective transformational leadership impact the implementation of digital transformation in Nigerian NGOs. The objective was met through a well comparative analysis of two case studies.

➢ *Specifically:*

- Objective 1: Explore how transformational leadership traits manifest in NGOs digital transformation.
  Here we have addressed by identifying and categorizing leadership behaviors across the four key dimensions.

- Objective 2: Identify challenges and enabling factors in digital transformation process.
  Here we have addressed through interview insights on infrastructure, digital literacy and financial constraints

- Objective 3: Evaluate whether transformational leadership alone is enough for digital innovation in nonprofit organizations.
  It was partially addressed. While transformational leadership provides a solid ground, success often requires transactional complements, especially in context like the one we are in.

D. Theoretical Considerations

This research contributes to advance the understanding of hybrid leadership models in the nonprofit sector. While much of the literature treats topics on leadership styles as distinct and static, this study discloses a vibrant exchange between ideal-driven and pragmatic behaviors. In doing so, it aligns with the emerging scholarship that promote adaptive and situational leadership in unstable organizational contexts (Heeks, Ospina, & Arun, 2023).

The findings of this study expand (Bass & Riggio, 2006) model by narrowing its application in developing countries, thereby enriching its cultural validity.

Transformational leadership in Nigerian NGOs appears most effective when supported by adaptable structures and localized strategies.

E. Practical Insights for NGO Leadership

For those practicing leadership at top level in NGOs, this study underscores the importance of inserting leadership

development into *digital* transformation agendas. These leaders must not only be visionaries but also be able to engage in day-to-day mentoring, to ensure tools fit the local context, and remain open to using transactional mechanisms when there is need.

Training programs that help NGOs executives blend strategic vision with digital fluency, team motivation, and context awareness could seriously improve outcomes of digital transformation. This answers (Qiao, Li, & Hong, 2024) who champion for leadership upskilling as a key enabler of sustainable digital change.

VI.   CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusion

According to our findings, transformational leadership characterized by inspirational vision, intellectual engagement, ethical modeling and individualized support plays a key role in facilitating digital transformation within impact-focused organizations. In both Almurad Charity Foundation and Lola Carter for the Needy Foundation, the two CEOs showcased strong transformational traits, which reinforced staff commitment and resilience, digital tool adoption.

However, the study also revealed that transformational leadership alone may not be sufficient. Leaders in context marked by infrastructural gaps, inconsistent funding, and digital illiteracy must adopt hybrid leadership styles which integrate transactional elements such as performance tracking, task incentives, and structured feedback systems. This style has been proven to be effective in sustaining momentum and ensuring measurable progress toward digital goals.

By positioning transformational leadership within the Nigerian NGOs context, this study addresses a significant shortcoming in the literature and presents practical suggestions for leadership development, digital planning, and policy advocacy.

B. Recommendations for Practice

To improve the effectiveness of transformational leadership in digital initiatives, NGOs leaders and stakeholders should consider investing in leadership development programs, encouraging peer-to-peer learning, balancing vision with pragmatism, promoting a culture of continuous learning and adapting tools to local realities.

C. Recommendations for Future Research

Future researchers should be encouraged to:

- Enlarge the sample and context by including more NGOs across Nigeria and across Sub-Saharan Africa at large.
- Gather multiple stakeholder perspectives from staff, volunteers to top executives.
- Conduct longitudinal studies
- Explore blended leadership models in practice
- Examine patterns from specific sectors such as education, health, development…etc.

This study concludes that while transformational leadership provides a powerful foundation for digital transformation, its success in the nonprofit sector especially in Nigeria depends on stakeholder engagement, contextual adaptability, and commitment to learning. The findings contribute to both leadership theory and nonprofit practice, offering a guideline for organizations seeking to explore digital change through visionary, grounded, and flexible leadership.

➤ *List of Nomenclature*

- NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
- P1: CEO Almurad Charity Foundation
- P2: CEO Lola Carter for the Needy Foundation
- KPI: Key Performance Indicators

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