

ОБЩЕСТВЕНИ КОМУНИКАЦИИ И ИНФОРМАЦИОННИ НАУКИ
PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION SCIENCES

THE VOPA+ MODEL AS A GUIDELINE FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

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<https://doi.org/10.70300/ABLT2026>

Abstract: Digital transformation and increasing volatility are presenting new challenges for managers and leaders. Traditional leadership approaches are reaching their limits in VUCA environments. This article analyzes Buhse and Petry’s VOPA+ model as a framework for transformative leadership and examines its relevance for change management processes. Based on a systematic literature analysis of German and international publications on digital leadership and VUCA environments, the five principles of the model are examined: networking as the basis for digital collaboration, openness as the key to innovation, participation to involve employees, agility for flexibility in dynamic environments, and trust as a fundamental element. The analysis shows that the five dimensions are closely interlinked and that trust serves as a foundation without which the other principles are ineffective. Implementation requires a comprehensive cultural change that goes beyond merely introducing digital tools. Managers must change their role from that of the sole decision-maker to that of facilitator and enabler. The VOPA+ model offers a valuable framework for transformation processes, although the specific design must be context-dependent, depending on the industry, size and organizational culture. Further empirical research on the measurability of success is necessary.

Keywords: VOPA+; VUCA; Digital Leadership; Transformation; Change Management

INTRODUCTION

The current working world is characterized by increasing uncertainty and volatility. A global survey of 4,701 CEOs conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers clearly shows that macroeconomic fluctuations (35%), geopolitical tensions (27%) and cyber risks (24%) are perceived as key threats for 2025 (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2025). German CEOs also see these risks as particularly relevant, with the shortage of skilled workers being highlighted at 21 per cent (ibid.).

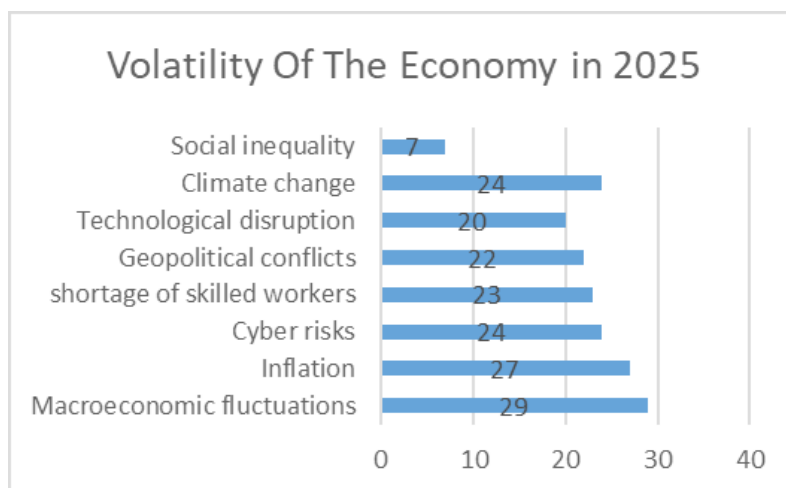


Fig. 1. CEOs concerned about economic volatility
Source: PwC Annual Global CEO Survey 2025

Not only global CEOs, but also German CEOs are feeling a growing sense of uncertainty. In January 2026, 84% of the German population stated that the current situation was cause for concern (Infratest dimap 2026). This mood and these developments are reflected in companies. In

2016, over 58% of executives surveyed in a study stated that the complexity of collaboration was a particular challenge (Hays 2017, p. 15). Increasing digitalization and flexible working models, generally referred to as “new work”, also pose new tasks for managers.

Current studies show that today’s working world and its environment can no longer be described as purely linear or predictable, and this is also how those affected and involved perceive it. The working world is characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The VUCA framework provides a systematic approach to understanding the challenges of modern leadership (Lippold 2019, p. 25). These dilemmas can be exacerbated by the challenges of digital transformation. According to McKinsey, 90 per cent of companies worldwide are now implementing digital transformation in some form (Rachytiski and Runets 2025). In Germany, the DIHK Digitalization Survey 2025 shows that many companies are actively engaged in transformation processes, with 54 per cent citing complexity and 60 per cent citing a lack of resources as key challenges (DIHK 2026). This is where traditional management approaches, which originated in other eras such as the second or third industrial revolution, reach their limits and fade into the background.

New leadership approaches are replacing outdated models because they appear better suited to today’s requirements. These new leadership models, such as digital leadership, combine technological, strategic and emotional skills, as they are particularly relevant (Boschuk 2024, p. 7). The VOPA+ model, introduced by Willms Buhse and expanded by Thomas Petry, offers a systematic framework for modern leadership. The aim of this article is to analyze the model’s principles and highlight their relevance to the design of change management processes.

This article will first provide a rough overview of new leadership approaches and describe the VOPA+ model, as well as substantiate its relevance for the current challenges faced by managers. Recommendations for action round off this work.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is based on a systematic analysis of literature and publications from German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon countries on digital leadership, the VUCA environment, and VOPA+. The acronym VOPA is only found in German-language literature, which is why the analysis was supplemented with the term’s ambidextrous leadership and ambidexterity. The theoretical foundations are supported by selected sources from the current scientific discussion, such as specialist journals and online articles.

RESULTS

New leadership approaches in the context of digital transformation

The demands of digital transformation have triggered a fundamental reassessment of traditional leadership approaches. Leadership research distinguishes between various models, each with a different focus, and understanding these models makes it easier to classify the VOPA+ model. The transactional leadership approach is based on the principle of exchange. Performance is rewarded and deviations from this are corrected (Bass and Riggio 2006, p. 8). It is suitable for stable, clearly structured environments, but reaches its limits in dynamic transformation processes. The transformational leadership approach goes beyond this. It aims to change employees’ values and attitudes, emphasizing vision and inspiration. Individual development is also anchored in this leadership approach (ibid., p. 6). Situational leadership models, such as that of Hersey and Blanchard (1969), emphasize the need to adapt the leadership style to employees’ maturity level (Lippold 2019, p. 21). Servant leadership views the manager primarily as an enabler who puts employees’ needs first (Simsa, p. 140).

These approaches form the basis for digital leadership as an integrative approach to the present. Digital leadership is not an entirely new theoretical construct, but rather a further development of proven leadership concepts for the digital age. It combines technological competence and strategic foresight and is thus specifically geared towards volatile, networked and rapidly changing organizational environments (Petry 2024, p. 56). The VOPA+ model operationalizes digital leadership by identifying five specific leadership dimensions that managers can use to guide their actions in the digital transformation process.

The principles of the VOPA+ model

The VOPA+ model is a framework developed in response to the new challenges of a world characterized by VUCA or BANI factors. The original VOPA model was presented by Willms Buhse in his 2014 book “Management by Internet: New Leadership Models for Companies in Times of Digital Transformation”. It describes the key principles highly relevant to managers in an increasingly digitalized and networked world. The acronym VOPA stands for networking, openness, participation and agility (Buhse 2014):

Networking as the basis for digital collaboration in the context of leadership

Networking is a central component of digital transformation. It encompasses interaction between people as well as connections between humans and machines or between machines themselves, for example in the Internet of Things (Buhse 2014, p. 24). Comprehensive internet-based networking, now a global infrastructure for information exchange, serves as the basis for countless other technologies (Baltra et al. 2023, p. 2). Social media platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn and X build on the basic technology of the Internet and not only enable private and professional communication, but also promote the establishment of networks, knowledge transfer and the organization of global communities (Lippold 2019, p. 27). Cloud technology and collaboration software, such as Confluence, are also noteworthy in a professional context as tools for networking and promoting digital collaboration. This networking, accelerated by digitalization, now enables global interaction, collaboration, and knowledge integration. Knowledge can thus be used today regardless of location. In addition, young technologies such as blockchain enable highly networked storage of data and information. They are increasingly influencing both the world of work and the private sphere. This technological dimension of networking is therefore crucial to modern leadership approaches. Nevertheless, people remain at the heart of successful leadership. An organizational culture is predominantly shaped by consistent interpersonal relationships (Schein and Schein 2017, p. 7), and trust between managers and employees is rooted in interpersonal interaction (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995, p. 711). In the context of this article, it should be emphasized that these forms of networking among managers must be used strategically to enable not only technological but also interpersonal collaboration.

Openness of leaders as the key to innovation

In this context, openness, or “opening up,” refers to transparency and a willingness to share knowledge and embrace new ideas. In earlier times, when processes and structures were less complex, it was not necessary to share knowledge to ensure a company’s long-term success. In today’s knowledge society, which, as described above, is also characterized by factors of uncertainty and non-linear predictability, sharing and pooling knowledge is of fundamental importance. Intellectual capital is created by combining the knowledge and experience of different actors, which requires exchange between them (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998, p. 248). On the other hand, employees must also be able to accept new knowledge and change, i.e. be open to it. Managers must create a corporate culture in which employees can communicate openly and perceive change not as a threat but as an opportunity (Buhse 2014, p. 25). Petry emphasizes that openness is a crucial infector to successful digital transformations, helping reduce resistance and fostering an atmosphere conducive to innovation (Petry 2024, p. 306f).

Openness is therefore a two-sided issue and manifests itself in various dimensions of leadership. On the one hand, it means communicative transparency, as managers should openly share information about strategic decisions, corporate goals and challenges with their teams. According to Kotter, this transparency creates trust and enables employees to understand the big picture of their work and identify more strongly with the company’s goals (Kotter 2011, p. 74f). On the other hand, openness also includes the willingness to accept feedback and to deal with it in a constructive manner, at the very least. Today’s managers should recognize that valuable ideas can come from all levels of the organization and create appropriate channels for mutual exchange.

Openness plays a particularly important role in change management processes and digital transformations, as it underpins the acceptance of new technologies and ways of working.

Participation in leadership: employees as co-creators

Participation refers to employees' involvement in decision-making processes, as well as to active promotion and co-creation. Modern managers recognize that it is not enough to operate solely a top-down leadership style with rigid hierarchical structures; employees can make valuable contributions through their expertise and perspectives. In concrete terms, this means that managers should encourage employees to take on responsibility and give them the necessary freedom and authority to do so (Petry 2024, p. 307).

However, the concept of participation goes beyond traditional forms of employee involvement. It encompasses not only the opportunity to have a say in decisions, but also the active shaping of processes, products and strategies. In concrete terms, in the digital world of work, this can mean that employees, for example through design thinking workshops, innovation labs and agile working methods, are directly involved in the development of new solutions, just like customers and other stakeholders. This form of participation and collaboration not only improves the quality of results but also strengthens commitment and identification with the company (Brandenburg and Thielsch 2009, p. 226).

It should be noted that managers' participation requires a changed understanding of their role. They act less as sole decision-makers and more as facilitators who create and moderate spaces for creativity. Against this backdrop, in particular, a change in corporate culture and in manager training may be necessary to ensure that the wrong emphasis is not placed. Although managers still bear a large share of the responsibility, they must relinquish power and place trust in their employees' competence. Recent studies show that participatory leadership in change management processes and digital transformations is a key success factor in increasing acceptance of change and strengthening employees' sense of self-efficacy (Petry 2024, pp. 315–317).

Agility as a leadership skill in dynamic environments

Neither academics nor experienced practitioners agree on the meaning of agility. However, all explanations agree that agility refers to the ability to respond quickly and flexibly to change (Maehrlein 2020, p. 17). Greater agility is supposed to help companies navigate complex and dynamic markets more effectively and develop better responsiveness. Agility is described in current literature as a key leadership skill (Maehrlein 2020, p. 51). Agile leaders create structures that enable quick decisions and iterative processes and promote the use of agile methods such as Scrum, Kanban or design sprints.

Agility in leadership means more than just applying agile methods. Rather, an agile mindset is necessary, i.e. an attitude that encourages experimentation, rapid learning from mistakes and continuous adaptation. Agile leaders create environments in which teams can work independently and are empowered to make decisions without being held back by complex approval processes or strong hierarchies (Maehrlein 2020, p. 18f).

In practice, agility manifests itself in various dimensions: cross-functional teams or matrix organizations make organizational structures more flexible. By shifting decision-making authority to lower levels, decision-making processes can be significantly accelerated (Bushuyev et al. 2023, p. 7). Planning processes are designed to be iterative, i.e. with short planning cycles, rapid feedback loops and regular adjustments based on newly gained insights. This form of agility enables companies and organizations to respond more quickly to market changes and better meet customer needs, thereby securing competitive advantages (Petry 2024, p. 320).

Trust as a foundation: The leadership essence of the VOPA+ model

For Petry, it was crucial that the original four elements of the VOPA model could be effectively implemented only if complemented by a stable foundation of trust (Petry 2024, p. 305ff). Trust is not only a prerequisite for the success of each individual element, but also the key to enabling interaction and collaboration in a digitalized working environment.

Without trust, it is difficult to build genuine networks, as employees and managers may be reluctant to engage in open, transparent processes. Similarly, the willingness to participate and be agile depends on whether there is an environment in which mistakes are seen as learning opportunities and new ideas can be introduced without fear of sanctions. By adding the “+” for trust, Petry

emphasizes the essential role of this factor and makes it clear that modern leadership cannot succeed through technological or methodological approaches alone, but is based on a value-oriented, trust-based culture (Petry 2024, p. 307).

Research shows that trust-based leadership can create psychological safety in teams. Psychological safety describes a state in which team members feel safe to take risks, exchange ideas, give feedback and engage in help-seeking behaviors without fear of negative consequences. (O'Donovan and McAuliffe 2020, p. 2; Huerta et al. 2024, p. 639).

The dimensions of the model described above – networking, openness and participation – build on this foundation and can thus unfold.

Managers can build trust in different ways: by demonstrating integrity through consistency between words and actions. Through transparent communication, they create predictability, and by recognizing mistakes as opportunities to learn, they promote a constructive culture of error management (Kotter 2011, p. 82; Maehrlein 2020, p. 91). Especially in digital transformation processes, which are characterized by uncertainty and fear of change, trust is a crucial factor that can make the difference between success and failure.

Practical application of the VOPA+ model in leadership contexts

This model can be implemented in a variety of ways in business practice. Previous chapters have already outlined a few measures, which are supplemented below by further concrete approaches:

Organizations can use digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, or Workspace to promote networking and enable continuous information and knowledge exchange. Furthermore, regular cross-functional meetings and interdisciplinary work in project teams can promote collaboration across departmental boundaries. By participating in industry events and conferences, cooperating with universities and forming strategic partnerships, external networks can be profitably integrated into the organization.

The second dimension, openness, can be strengthened by establishing an open error culture in which regular feedback rounds take place at all hierarchical levels. Town hall meetings, in which management provides transparent information about strategic decisions and challenges, create trust and provide orientation. The author himself has already used this format several times in the context of transformation processes to create transparency. Internal communication platforms that give all employees access to relevant information can also be helpful.

Participation can be encouraged through innovation workshops and design-thinking sessions that actively engage employees in developing new products and processes. Active idea management also enables employees to contribute and develop their ideas and suggestions. Delegating decision-making authority and promoting self-organized teams strengthen personal responsibility and foster greater self-efficacy. In addition, regular retrospectives can give teams the opportunity to continuously reflect on their working methods and performance and derive improvements.

Agility manifests itself in the implementation of agile methods such as Scrum, Kanban or OKR. These methods can make an organization more flexible and increase its responsiveness through rapid iterations, working in fixed cycles and continuous adaptation. Short decision-making paths and decentralized decision-making authority also accelerate processes. Regular learning formats, such as Lunch&Learn or hackathons, promote continuous learning and experimentation. In addition, targeted training and further education can promote an agile mindset.

Trust, the foundation of the model, is built through consistent and coherent leadership behavior, in which managers not only communicate their values but also live by them. A culture of psychological safety, in which employees can express their opinions without fear of negative consequences, is essential. Regular one-to-one meetings between managers and employees can also promote strong personal and professional relationships.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the VOPA+ model shows that it can provide a comprehensive framework for modern leadership amid digital transformation. The five principles – networking, openness, par-

ticipation, agility and trust – are not isolated concepts but interact closely with one another. Trust creates the foundation on which the other four principles can be effectively built.

It is important to note that implementing the model is no trivial task, as it first requires a substantial cultural change in many organizations, which not only takes time and resources, but above all requires a long-term commitment from management. Simply introducing digital tools or agile methods is not enough. At the same time, the underlying values and attitudes must also be changed, which this paper broadly addresses under the term ‘agile mindset’.

Another aspect open to discussion is whether this model is universally applicable or requires adjustments by industry, size, and culture. Although the basic principles are widely accepted and have been described by other authors and in other publications, their concrete implementation is likely to vary widely depending on the application and context. For example, a start-up with a few employees may experience the dimensions of networking and agility very differently from a corporation in a highly regulated environment with more than 10,000 employees.

There is also the question of how to measure success. How can we determine whether implementing the VOPA+ model leads to better results? Further empirical research is needed to examine the model’s impact on various dimensions of success, such as innovative strength, employee and customer satisfaction, and financial performance.

Nevertheless, the VOPA+ model offers a valuable framework for managers navigating an organization through the challenges of digital transformation. This is because it focuses on the essential dimensions of modern leadership and, with its concrete starting points, offers scope for designing the necessary change management processes.

CONCLUSION

The VOPA+ model described here offers a clear, structured approach to transformative leadership amid increasing digitalisation. The five principles of the model – networking, openness, participation, agility and trust – form a holistic framework that can guide managers in successfully navigating their organisation through change management processes.

The analysis has shown that the five dimensions of the model cannot be viewed in isolation, but are closely interrelated and, in some cases, mutually dependent. Trust is the central element, without which the other four principles cannot be effective. Only a leadership culture based on trust will promote openness to new ideas, willingness to participate and agility in dealing with change.

In practice, implementing the VOPA+ model means understanding it as a holistic transformation process, and that introducing individual components, such as digital collaboration tools for networking or agile methods to increase agility, will not achieve the desired effect. Rather, it requires a comprehensive and lengthy cultural change that must not only be exemplified by top management and Leaders, but also promoted and demanded. This must also be deeply embedded at all levels of the organisation.

However, the challenges of the VUCA world – volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity – require a new understanding of leadership, because managers can no longer rely solely on their role as sole decision-makers. They must also act as facilitators, coaches and enablers, creating conditions in which employees can act independently, think innovatively, respond flexibly to change and develop resilience.

The model described should not be understood as a rigid scheme, but rather as a framework for orientation that must be adapted to the specific contexts and needs of an organisation. The specific characteristics depend on the industry, the size of the company, its stage of development and its corporate culture, and vary considerably.

In summary, the VOPA+ model has made a valuable contribution to the discussion of new, modern leadership approaches, as it integrates technological, methodological, and cultural aspects into a holistic framework and offers practical starting points for designing transformation processes. Managers who internalise the principles described and align their leadership actions accordingly can lead an organisation more effectively and successfully into the digital future.

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МОДЕЛЪТ VORA+ КАТО РЪКОВОДСТВО ЗА ТРАНСФОРМАЦИОННО ЛИДЕРСТВО

Резюме: Цифровата трансформация и нарастващата нестабилност поставят нови предизвикателства пред мениджърите. Традиционните подходи към лидерството достигат своите граници във VUCA-характеризираните среди. Тази статия анализира модела VORA+ на Buhse и Petry като рамка за трансформационно лидерство и изследва неговата релевантност за процесите на управление на промяната. Въз основа на систематичен анализ на литературата от германски и международни публикации за цифрово лидерство и VUCA-среди се изследват петте принципа на модела: мрежово взаимодействие като основа за цифрово сътрудничество, отвореност като ключ към иновациите, участие за ангажиране на служителите, гъвкавост за адаптивност в динамични среди, както и доверие като фундаментален елемент. Анализът показва, че петте измерения са тясно свързани помежду си и доверието служи като основа, без която другите принципи не са ефективни. Прилагането изисква цялостна промяна в културата, която надхвърля простото

въвеждане на цифрови инструменти. Ръководителите трябва да променят ролята си от единствени вземащи решения лица към фасилитатори и улесняващи лица. Моделът VOPA+ предлага ценна ориентационна рамка за трансформационни процеси, като конкретната форма трябва да се определя в зависимост от контекста, отрасъла, размера и организационната култура. Необходими са допълнителни емпирични изследвания за измеримостта на успеха.

Ключови думи: VOPA+; VUCA; цифрово лидерство; трансформация; управление на промените

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