

Leadership agility and its manifestations during the crisis: Qualitative evidence from African SMEs.

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Abstract

Agility is one of the primary features called for from firms during global disruptions. In this paper we analyze organizational agility and leadership agility during the COVID-19 crisis in the under-researched African context. Based on a qualitative case study on 30 SMEs from Nigeria and Ghana, the study shows how organizational agility at operational level and agile leadership at the person level are inter-linked. Our findings further highlight the multidimensional nature of leadership agility that may create resilience to the firms. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, African firms' prior exposure to crises such as the Ebola virus and prolonged armed conflicts, make our cases show significant resilience in the Covid-19 crisis. Specifically, the cases exhibit supply chain agility, flexible sources of raw materials, online transaction, flexible running costs, flexible and efficient resource utilization, total quality management, lean production, flexible staff contracts and wages, flexible shift-patterns, improved communication, and improved staff motivation during the Covid-19 crisis. Through our findings, we link these attributes to our cases' resiliency-creating and humanity-stressing leadership agility in crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key Words: Africa, agility, crisis, leadership, and SMEs.

1. Introduction

Organizational agility – a firm’s capacity to sense and respond quickly (and successfully) to the changing competitive environment (Cheng *et al.*, 2020) – has attracted growing scholarly attention in the 21st century organizational studies literature. This interest in organizational agility has intensified due to multiple crisis in recent years including COVID-19 and geopolitical conflicts such as Ukraine war and middle east war (Muzio & Doh, 2021; Uhl-Bien, 2021; Ali *et al.*, 2025; Bose *et al.*, 2026). In this concern, academics, managers, and policy makers have jointly called for policies and actions designed to maximize firms’ capacity to respond to crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Organizational agility involves proactiveness in adjusting the ways the firms operate to stay afloat despite significant disruptions in their operations (Attar & Abdul-Kareem, 2020; Arslan *et al.*, 2022; Ali *et al.*, 2025). Such adjustments can be in culture, structure, resources, raw materials, outputs, staff contracts, wages, operating hours, customer service, or working patterns. Agile organizations are seen to have such an understanding of their operating environments that allows them to respond quickly to shocks and uncertainties (Rabal-Conesa *et al.*, 2022), and this capacity to respond is seen as critical for thriving in dynamic and turbulent environments (Tooranloo & Saghafi, 2018; Bose *et al.*, 2026). This makes agile organizations more competitive than others (Gunsberg *et al.*, 2018). At the same time, Teece *et al.*, (2016) stressed that organizational agility is to be calibrated to an appropriate level in relation to the risk and uncertainty experienced.

Prior studies highlight the crucial role of leadership in a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Alo *et al.*, 2023; De Smet *et al.*, 2016). Researchers emphasize the capacity of leadership agility to set the guiding principles, develop strategies and build mechanisms for smooth transition to organizational agility (Attar & Abdul-Kareem, 2020; Ali *et al.*, 2025), as leadership agility is key to adopting a supportive organizational culture and robust adaptive strategies to exploit, manage and share knowledge under conditions of uncertainty (e.g., Salehzadeh *et al.*, 2017; Tooranloo & Saghafi, 2018). Despite such a growing body of literature, research examining leadership agility in emerging market firms amidst crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in African firms, is scarce. African firms encounter resource limitations, such as technological limitations (Alo *et al.*, 2024). At the same time, IT capabilities have been noted critical for agility in crisis (Melián-Alzola *et al.*, 2020; Shuradze *et al.*, 2018). Prior studies have found that crises situations lead to

disruptions in the global supply chain, and to keep the business afloat, technology as well as leadership play a critical role for agile firms (Ali *et al.*, 2025; Limaj *et al.*, 2026; Zhang *et al.*, 2022b). However, specific research on leadership agility is limited in African context – a gap which we aim to fill in this paper.

Unlike other types of leadership traits, leadership agility is acknowledged for its flexibility in adapting to volatility in competitive environment (Joiner, 2019), and thus is key to building a competitive advantage, especially in crises. Researchers therefore call for business investments in agile capacity building and leadership agility development (Attar & Abdul-Kareem, 2020; Liu, 2021). Leadership agility literature is still in its embryonic stage, and as such more research is needed to examine leadership agility in different situations and contexts. Such research can be seen even more critical due to the high rate of business failures during the Covid-19 pandemic, especially among SMEs in Africa (Alo *et al.*, 2023; 2024). Leadership literature is also biased towards studies that focused on industrialized societies, and yet, studies from other parts of the globe, especially from emerging economies, are key in unifying research on leadership and followership across the social sciences and its complementary disciplines (Garfield *et al.*, 2019). To address these issues this research will address the following questions:

1. *What relevant factors predict levels of leadership agility in African SMEs during the Covid-19 crisis?*
2. *How does leadership agility in African SMEs influence the organizational responses to the Covid-19 crisis?*

Researchers also link leadership agility to organizational commitment (Kostrad, 2019), follower engagement (Fitaloka *et al.*, 2020), job satisfaction (Özgenel & Asmaz, 2022), organizational learning and innovation (Uyun, 2019), high leader-member-exchange (LMX) quality (Alo & Arslan, 2022), and higher performance (Yalçın & Özgenel, 2021). We build on this background to elaborate knowledge on leadership agility further by addressing the interactions between organizational agility and leadership agility in the unique context of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) in Africa. For the analysis we collected semi-structured interviews with 30 African business leaders – 15 from Nigeria and 15 from Ghana.

This study makes three distinctive contributions to the agility and leadership studies literature. Firstly, our paper is one of the pioneering studies highlighting specificities of SMEs' leadership

agility during the Covid-19 crisis in the context of Africa. Secondly, it is one of the rare studies to establish the interlinkage between organizational agility and leadership agility, especially in SMEs. The study demonstrates operational influences of leadership agility in SMEs by specifically linking leadership actions during the Covid-19 crisis to supply chain management and personnel management dynamics. Finally, this study highlights indigenous (African) leadership attributes where despite severe resource shortcomings, humane approach to staff contracts and wages was adopted wherever possible, while responding to the business problems caused by the Covid-19 crisis.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a review of related literature. Section 3 presents and justifies the methodology adopted. Section 4 presents study findings. Section 5 presents the study implications, and our paper concludes with the presentation of limitations and future research directions in section 6.

2. Literature review

2.1 Organizational agility

Organizational agility refers to firms' capabilities to sense and respond to unexpected changes in external environment swiftly and effectively (Cheng *et al.*, 2020). Defined as an "enterprise's ability to quickly respond and adapt in response to continuous and unpredictable changes of competitive market environments" (Sherehiy & Karwowski, 2014, p. 466), it reflects understandings of market changes and provides avenue for future development (Zhang *et al.*, 2022a). By fostering a sense of direction and strategic optimization (Cegarra-Navarro, *et al.*, 2016), agile capability allows firms and individuals to act in a dynamic environment and thus is key in building a competitive advantage (Doz, 2020). Prior literature has identified several drivers for agility, such as volatile and competitive market environment, innovations, changes of consumer needs and business environment (Ali *et al.*, 2025; Bose *et al.*, 2026; Abdelilah *et al.*, 2018; Tseng & Lin, 2011).

Organizational agility involves rapid changes of business process from inside of firms to respond to external markets (Bose *et al.*, 2026; Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011). The development of it needs speedy access to external information and resources, for instance, timely regulatory and market information (Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011). An increasing body of literature extensively

explores development of organizational agility internally from perspectives of IT capability (e.g., Cai *et al.*, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2015; Lu & Ramamurthy, 2011), structured knowledge processes and business intelligence (e.g., Cegarra-Navarro, Soto-Acosta, & Wensley, 2016; Cheng *et al.*, 2020). Achieving a high level of organizational agility also requires effective deployment of a firm's internal and external resources (Ravichandran, 2018).

Organizational agility is a broad concept with multi-dimensional aspects, which involve several diverse areas of an organization (Swafford *et al.* 2006). For instance, Goldman *et al.* (1994) explore nine components of organizational agility, which include customer dialogue and support, continuous improvement and change, people support, and flexible and rapidly responding operations. Researchers also link organizational agility to cross-cultural competencies, institutional context, and dynamic capability (Caligiuri & Caprar, 2023; Nijssen & Paauwe, 2012; Salmen & Festing, 2022).

Since organizational agility reflects the firm's ability to respond and adapt to its external environment (Sherehiy & Karwowski, 2014), it depends on individuals within an organization (Harsch & Festing, 2020). Human resources play a crucial role in developing individual agility (Alavi *et al.*, 2014) as HR strategies have significant impact on mindsets and behaviors of employees (Dyer & Shafer, 2003). An organization being effectively agile does not only depend on systematic strategy, superior minds, or efficient design of an organization but also effective leadership, behaviors, perceptions, values, and norms shared by senior management and every member of an organization (Doz, 2020). Dyer and Eriksen (2006) propose a key principle of human resources in relation to improving organizational agility, i.e., the alignment and fluidity of individual employees. Taking a talent management perspective, Harsch and Festing (2020) suggest that HR fosters agility through continuous shaping of talent. Yet, researchers link agility with individual productivity, employee commitment and engagement (e.g., Björkman *et al.*, 2013; De Boeck *et al.*, 2018; Ehrnrooth *et al.*, 2018), organizational learning (Alavi *et al.*, 2014; Bahrami *et al.*, 2016), flat hierarchies (Alavi *et al.*, 2014), teamwork (Muduli, 2016), and autonomy (Sherehiy & Karwowski, 2014).

In recent years, SMEs face further challenges in emerging turbulence and economic crisis due to scarcity of infrastructures and facilities (Dubey *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, not all SMEs can reasonably deal with labor and employee issues effectively due to lack of effective support

from legislations (Haq *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, labor problems became severe, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, due to limited resources for employees to learn new skills and diverse ways of working. While scholars have found that organizational agility can help firms adapt quickly to changes in their external environment (e.g., Ahlstrom & Wang, 2021), most research has been conducted in an economic and social environment without severe crisis or emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Debellis *et al.*, 2021; Hitt *et al.*, 2021). Interactions between organizational and leadership agility are not well-researched in extant literature and especially in African context either. Therefore, this paper is set to address this gap.

2.2 Leadership agility

Leadership agility is still a newly emerging concept under-defined by research (Boateng and Olexova, 2023). Greineder and Leicht (2020, p. 280) propose a working definition of leadership agility as “a distinct style of thinking and stance to leadership; an association with leading agile teams; specific leadership practices and processes.” Researchers link leadership agility to some principles which are the hallmarks of successful organizations. These include ambidextrous leadership, responsiveness to change, digital collaboration, constant interaction with stakeholders, and continuous improvement, while allowing followers to switch objectives along the way towards a potential goal (Alo, 2023; Busse & Weidner, 2020; Kustyadi & Wijayanti, 2021). Other principles featuring leadership agility include speed in decision making, effective and efficient execution of plans, continuous improvement, and a capacity to stay ahead of the competition regardless of change and turbulence (Denning, 2018). Researchers also found that leadership agility has a sense of urgency, the capacity to anticipate change, create and instill confidence in followers, initiate actions, evaluate results, while coping with an increasingly demanding market conditions (Busse & Weidner, 2020; Moss, 2010).

Researchers argue that leadership agility interact with organizational dynamics by supporting peers and fellows, establishing and reinforcing organizational values and encouraging constructive dialogue (Bäcklander, 2019). Leadership agility actively participates in strategic transformation, dynamic capability, and swift response to change (Fachrunnisa *et al.*, 2020), which are critical factors in successful SMEs especially in turbulent times (Hölscher *et al.*, 2020; Saputra *et al.*, 2021). For instance, Leadership agility is linked up with supply chain agility in terms of speed and responsiveness to market uncertainties (Gligor & Holcomb, 2014; Ali *et al.*, 2022) and

information-driven relationships (Huo *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, leadership agility is enabled to guide supply chain operations to respond to customer needs effectively when facing shifts in supplies and demands (Swafford *et al.*, 2006). Studies suggest that, in COVID-19, leadership agility fosters firms' capacity to achieve overall organizational agility at higher levels by leading firms to be more market sensitive (Cheng *et al.*, 2020; Swafford *et al.*, 2006).

2.3 Leadership agility for dynamic organizations and environment

Researchers have increasingly referred to the critical role of leadership agility in organizations (e.g., Ali *et al.*, 2025). Ulrich and Yeung (2019) also suggest agility in organizations to involve leadership, strategic and organizational agility and stress four capabilities – to create the future, anticipate opportunities, adapt to environmental turbulence swiftly, and learn always. Agile capability related to leadership optimizes the attributes that leaders should ideally possess within organizations (Boateng and Olexová, 2023), such as supervise teams and foster adaptability in the face of change (AlNuaimi *et al.* 2022; Akkaya and Mert, 2022).

Leadership agility plays a crucial role in building and sustaining organizational agility in terms of promoting values, shaping mindset, and providing a collaborative environment (Ali *et al.*, 2025; Arifin & Purwanti, 2023; Akkaya and Tabak, 2020). Effective leadership is not only about strategic direction but also creating an organizational atmosphere that embraces agility and innovation (Attar and Abdul-Kareem, 2020). Leaders' ability to communicate, encourage team members and seek solutions in navigating challenges, all cultivates “a resilient and agile organizational culture” (Jaafar *et al.*, 2026; Tandon *et al.*, 2025, p. 1841). Especially in current time of Industry 4.0, leadership agility has an impact on steering organizations when dealing with the complexities of environment. Yet, one of the major challenges business leaders are facing is the request to survive in increasingly dynamic and challenging environments, which requires more than the capacities of being adaptive to changes (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). In challenging circumstances, leadership agility assists firms to transform challenges into opportunities and respond effectively (Parameshwar, 2005). For instance, leadership agility enables organizations to scale up their innovative capacity by facilitating idea generation (Bock *et al.*, 2012; Tandon *et al.*, 2025) and enhancing competitiveness and strategic capacity to adapt to the Covid-19 crisis (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

While the importance of leadership agility is generally acknowledged, there is a lack of specific study on how leadership agility and supply chain agility intertwined to respond to the Covid-19 crisis in emerging markets of Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a testing time for leadership in African SMEs due to their vulnerability (Govuzela & Mafini, 2019), and their acute resource constraints (Alo *et al.*, 2023, 2024). Yet, the mainstream agility literature has focused mainly on Asia and the Western world. More research is needed (especially in the under-researched context of Africa) to help us understand how leadership agility plays in turbulent environment and organizational changes (Greineder and Leicht, 2020 and Boateng and Olexová, 2023). Our paper aims to fill this gap in the extant literature, and the next section on study methodology specifies the role of this under-researched context in our study.

3. Methodology

This paper follows exploratory research approach using qualitative methodology (Stebbins, 2011; Hennick *et al.*, 2020) due to lack of prior research specifically focusing on leadership agility (especially during the Covid-19 crisis) and associated dynamics in African SMEs. Although several studies have examined leadership agility, our research is unique in the sense that we are examining leadership agility in an under researched context, and during the Covid-19 crisis. This requires us to allow our participants ample time to narrate their lived experience as leaders who led their businesses successfully during the Covid-19 pandemic, despite their environmental and institutional constraints. We needed to uncover the participants' capacity to sense and respond quickly to the turbulence in their competitive environment during the Covid-19 pandemic. Obtaining such *subjective* experiences requires storytelling via semi-structured interviews (Knight & Jarzabkowski, 2023). Given that interviews provide an opportunity to capture the actors' side of the story (Liu & Rong, 2015), in our approach to interview we acknowledge our participants as the principal actors themselves. We allowed them the opportunity to reflect freely on how the Covid-19 pandemic has shaped their firms' operations, and if, and how, they responded to this (Dick & Collings, 2014; Ezzamel & Willmott, 2008; Liu & Rong, 2015). To access these principal actors, we relied on the lead author's contacts (Harvey, 2011; Knight & Jarzabkowski, 2023). The lead author was a classmate with two participants – one from each of the participating countries – Ghana and Nigeria. We then adopted a snowball sampling (also known as chain sampling or network sampling) method. First, we approached these two business leaders, who then helped us

to reach 28 other leaders of SMEs who agreed that their business operations have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Such networks were not only key in building trust from the beginning but encouraged participants to willingly share their views on their agility during the Covid-19 pandemic (Patton, 2015). We originally planned to do 40 interviews (i.e., 20 from each country), but we had to stop after interviewing the 15th participants from each country, as data saturation was noticed at this point. Therefore, our sample size is 30 participants – 15 from Ghana and 15 from Nigeria. Consent was sought and obtained via emails sent to each participant prior to the interview. As the interviews occurred between the months of August and December 2021, due to Covid-19 restrictions, the conversations were held via video conferencing.

3.1 Data Collection

For our data collection we adopted semi-structured interview approach, each interview lasting approximately 1 hour. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. To develop familiarity with the participating firms, before the interviews, with the help of our two initial contacts, the lead author collected relevant information regarding each participant and their firms (Harvey, 2011). At the start of each interview, the interviewer first familiarized him/herself with the participant, outlined the purpose of the research, including the aims and objectives, and discussed the potential research outcomes and ethical issues before outlining the interview structure and process. Each participant was then asked *to give an overview of their experiences with the Covid-19 pandemic*. Participants were then specifically asked *whether they faced any unusual challenges in the way they run their businesses due to the Covid-19 pandemic?* As every participant answered yes, the follow-up question was *“what type of challenges have you faced during the Covid-19 pandemic”*? For each challenge mentioned, the participant was asked: *“how did your organization deal with these challenges”*? They were then asked *if they had made any adjustments and to give some examples of the adjustments they’ve made in the way they run their business?* Each response was probed further with specific questions including *if, and how they adjusted their existing structure and existing resources in response to the challenges*. In furthering the discussions, participants revealed how the disruptions in the global supply chain have affected their businesses operations. Accordingly, they were asked to reflect on *if, and how, they adjusted their sources of raw materials in response to the disruptions in the global supply chains*. As participants revealed

they had to make some redundancies and downsizing in response to Covid-19 induced business losses, they were then asked *to reflect on if, and how, they had to review the contracts and wages of the survivors*. Participants were also asked *to reflect on if, and how, they think that such changes might have impacted on their business operations and profitability*. Participants were then asked *to reflect on what these responses reveal about their organization's ability to respond to the challenges brought by the Covid-19 pandemic*. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on (1) *where they felt they were most successful in responding to the Covid-19 pandemic-induced challenges*, (2) *where they think they could have done better in responding to such challenges*, and (3) *areas they felt were out of their control*. Throughout the conversations, participants were asked *to elaborate their answers and to provide specific examples of stories that support their statements*.

We were aware that, as a relational process, that participants might engage in impression management during the interview (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 173). Accordingly, we paid careful attention to how language was used and framed. Furthermore, we understand the need to empathize with the interviewees as they reflect on their experiences/challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic (Knight & Jarzabkowski, 2023). Therefore, to encourage participants to reflect on the type of challenges they faced during the Covid-19 pandemic and how their organizations dealt with these challenges, the interviewer played the role of fellow entrepreneur who experienced similar challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic, while empathizing with participants as they narrated their stories. While this encouraged participants to engage in the process of sensemaking (Gabriel, 2000), to serve as a social anchor, the interviewer also had to challenge certain claims made by the interviewee (Brown *et al.*, 2008), and which helped to check attempts to engage in impression management when they arose (Knight & Jarzabkowski, 2023).

3.2 Data Analysis

In line with prior discursive analyses of subjectivity (e.g., Knight & Jarzabkowski, 2023), our data analysis process was a constant reiterating process between the dominant literature and the emergent themes from the raw interview data (Laine & Vaara, 2007; Mantere & Whittington, 2021). Each author read all the interview transcriptions in isolation, which helped us to achieve familiarity with the data sets (Patton, 2015). This was followed by open coding, and we shared the data among ourselves for coding. We coded each raw data independently based on key themes that

relate to how participants talked about their experiences/challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic, and how they have led their firms to respond to such challenges. Each team member passed their coded data on to other team members for vetting. The role of researchers as auditors (Filho & Rettig, 2016) and critical friends (Kember *et al.*, 1997), have been highlighted in previous qualitative research (e.g., Alo, 2020). We then compared each set of coded data with their original interview transcripts before agreeing on an integrated coding structure to unify the whole interview quotes. Although reaching this agreement was not easy as we had to disagree a few times before reaching a consensus (Patton, 2015), this process resulted in a set of first-order categories related to (a) agile response to restrictions in movement, (b) agile response to disruptions in the global supply chain, and (c) agile response to drop in sales revenues.

The second stage of coding matched the large sets of initial codes against the corresponding existing literatures on organizational and leadership agility. This alerted us to a range of consistent themes (mediated by a range of subcategories) that joined these codes together. For example, as we continued to compare our interview notes, we realized that three common themes ran through our data – (1) how these firms have adjusted their structure and existing resources in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, (2) how these firms have adjusted their sources of raw materials and distribution strategies in response to the disruptions in the global supply chains, and (3) how flexible they were with their leadership styles, staff contracts and wages in response to the Covid-19 pandemic-induced business losses. We then labelled and compared all interview conversations and similar stories that fall within these overarching data groups, using illustrative quotes to link them with the extant literature. Having completed our data analysis at this stage, we shared our findings with our participants (Patton, 2015), and their feedback was a reassurance of the dependability of our findings. Table 1 below shows the categories, subcategories, and the emerging themes from our interview data.

Table 1 Categories, subcategories, and themes

Categories	Subcategories	Themes
Agile response to restrictions in movement.	• Using fuel economy motorbikes for delivery instead of cars. • Offering home delivery services for the first time. • Allowing buyers to pay via money transfers for the first time.	<i>Adjusted their structure and existing resources.</i> (<i>N</i> = 30).

	• Haulage companies assign their trucks to entirely different sectors. • Seeking cheapest sales promotion. • Changing to online meeting and funding employees' private internet subscription. • Allowing staff to work remotely, part time, and compressed hours. • Increased running cost. • Adopting TQM and lean production. • Adjusting opening and closing times. • Adding more edibles to their stores.	
Agile response to disruptions in the global supply chain.	• Importers sourcing their raw materials locally for the first time. • Exporters sourcing local buyers. • Suppliers ration the quantity supply in response to shortage of goods.	<i>Adjusted their sources of raw materials and distribution strategies.</i> (N = 26).
Agile response to drop in sales revenues.	• Firms downsized and renegotiated the contracts of the survivors. • Stretch their capacity utilization amidst dwindling revenue. • Communicating more with staff to keep encouraging and reassuring them. • Making and fulfilling promises than before.	<i>Flexibility in leadership styles, staff contracts and wages.</i> (N = 30)

4. Findings

We selected our participants from several industries – retail supermarkets (groceries), importation and distribution, construction, transportation/haulage, exporters of locally made products, logistics, oil and gas, real estate, tourism and hospitality, and event management. Despite choosing our participants from a wide range of sectors, a few themes ran through all the interview data. As participants responded to our interview questions, first, they all admitted that they faced unusual challenges in the way they run their businesses due to the Covid-19 pandemic. When asked to explain what type of challenges they faced during the Covid-19 pandemic, their responses were also identical. When asked participants to describe how they dealt with such challenges, they also

provided similar responses. Specifically, one common theme running through their responses were the interaction effects of leadership agility and organizational agility in helping the organizations to sense and respond to unexpected changes in their external environments swiftly and effectively during the Covid-19 pandemic. To help us make sense of the interview data, we have used the three themes below to categorize, present and analyze the interview quotes.

4.1 Leadership agility in African SMEs during the Covid-19 crisis

Participants had to adjust the way they ran their businesses in many ways during the Covid-19 pandemic. Particularly, they reviewed their existing resources and tried to vary and tailor them to suit and adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic induced lifestyle. For instance, due to reduced revenue, instead of using cars for delivery, some had procured (fuel-economy) motorbikes as a means of delivery to save costs and fuel.

“I had to adjust the way I run my business during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, I had modified the logistics section by procuring some fuel-efficient motorbikes as means of delivery to save cost and fuel, instead of using the car” (Nigerian participant 12).

“One key step we have taken since the hike in fuel prize due to the Covid-19 pandemic was the use of motor bikes for delivery [in place of delivery vans]” (Ghanaian participant 7).

The above quotes are consistent with earlier studies on leadership’s capacity to rethink their teams’ existing resources, and adjust their power structure, their influence, leadership style, and control mechanism in response to uncertainty they perceived in their competitive environment (De Smet *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, participants said, formerly, buyers can only pay them through their bank accounts but during the Covid-19 pandemic and when most bank services were stalled, they realized that it was even more convenient for them to be paid via PayPal and Western Union money transfer. This is evidence in the next set of quotes:

“Originally, what we had was that our buyers were only paying us through our bank accounts but during the Covid-19 pandemic our buyers realized that it was even more convenient for them to pay us via Western Union money transfer, especially when the monies are not much, say \$500” (Nigerian participant 5).

“To minimize the spread of the virus, we now allow customers to pay us via PayPal from the comfort of their homes, if they so wish” (Ghanaian participant 2).

Researchers have also emphasized the leadership agility to set the guiding principles, develop strategies and build mechanisms for smooth transition to organizational agility (Attar & Abdul-Kareem, 2020). Furthermore, as sectors such as oil and gas were completely shut down in most

parts of the Covid-19 pandemic in both countries, transportation and haulage contractors who worked in the oil and gas sector had to redeploy their trucks to other areas/sectors where their services were required, e.g., food distribution. The next set of quotes has revealed that such diversification was the only way they managed to keep afloat:

“As you know we are in oil and gas and, as I said earlier, some sections were completely shut down while other sections only operated partly. So, we had to deploy some of our trucks to other areas where their services were required, e.g., food distribution. That was how we diversified to keep afloat” (Ghanaian participant 13).

“Being a haulage company, we were not among the worst hit, as we have options to assign our trucks to areas such as supply of medical equipment and food supplies, which never shut down” (Nigerian participant 2).

The above quotes are consistent with previous research that found that agile organizations have a better understanding of their operating environments, and thus they respond quicker to shocks and uncertainties (Rabal-Conesa *et al.*, 2022). Such a capacity to respond quicker and more effectively to shocks and uncertainties have also been argued as the most critical factor for thriving in a dynamic and turbulent environment (Tooranloo & Saghafi, 2018) and thus makes agile organizations more competitive than others (Gunsberg *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, as those firms operating in the importation and distribution sector had incurred huge losses due to the lockdown, border closure, and cash shortage, to complement such financial losses, they had to go for the cheapest advert, while some adopted additional staff bonuses and discounted offers [for customers] such as buy-10 products and get one free. These findings are evidenced in our next set of quotes:

“We now go for the cheapest advert. We also do buy 10-products and get one free” (Nigerian participant 12).

“As the business was struggling, I had to tell them [i.e., the staff] that if you can sell a certain quantity of goods in a week you will earn a certain additional bonus in return. That was the strategy I used to encourage them to push more, as most of our goods are perishable and I needed to ensure that they were all sold out before the next lockdown. I also had to meet my major buyers and promised them that if you buy 1000 cartons, you would be given one carton for free” (Nigerian participant 6).

Managers also had to constantly adjust their leadership styles, especially at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, some had to change to online meetings, while funding employees' private internet subscription. They also adopted smart technologies to communicate with staff regularly, as staff were allowed to work remotely, part time, and compressed hours. Participants

also revealed that these measures were all designed to help them to reduce the contact hours and free up time for staff to engage in other things of interest.

“As staff were quite apprehensive due to fear of the unknown, I have to start communicating with them more often to keep them abreast of changes in government guidelines [on Covid] and the way out of the Covid-19 crisis” (Nigerian participant 3).

“...yes, because the best approach to managing the Covid-19 crisis was constant communication with staff and customers...As I knew they all had all sorts of Covid-related worries, I kept asking them about their families” (Ghanaian participant 12).

“...we were aware that some employees will struggle to afford the internet services, so we paid for their subscription” (Ghanaian participant 4).

The above quotes are consistent with the nine components of organizational agility, which include, customer dialogue and support, continuous improvement and change, people support, and flexible and rapidly responding operations (Goldman *et al.*, 1994). Furthermore, our participants also said they had to inject more funds into their business to prevent it from collapsing. In fact, participants revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed them to be constantly evolving and finding newer and better ways of doing things:

“I also inject more funds into the business to prevent it from collapsing” (Nigerian participant 8).

“I had to increase our running cost, as the business was approaching bankruptcy at a point” (Ghanaian participant 11).

The leadership literature also links leadership agility to the situational leadership style, as these styles can balance conflicting situations in an organization to leverage crisis dynamics towards organizational development (Bose, 2026; Bäcklander, 2019). Also, before the Covid-19 pandemic, especially before the lockdown, participants filled up their stores more and had higher sales volume. During the lockdown, to minimize waste, they adopted TQM and lean production, as they started taking proper inventories and evaluated the demand for each product very carefully before placing the next orders, as the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in drop in sales due to reduced opening hours and coupled with travel restrictions. This is epitomized in the next set of quotes:

“Yes, I think I have had to adjust the way I run my business at different stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. An example is that, before the lockdown, I didn’t spend longer hours waiting for customers and I stocked up my store more than you are seeing now as I was successful in providing goods and services to people within my environment. During the lockdown, I reduced my opening hours because fewer people came to buy goods. I also reduce the

quantity I order from my suppliers. After the lockdown, everything slowly went back to normal” (Nigerian participant 3).

“The major difference between the way I ran my business before and during the Covid-19 pandemic is that [during the Covid-19 pandemic] people do not have reason to stock up, but as life went back to the way it used to be, so did my business. So, I reverted to stocking up after taking proper inventories and evaluating demand for my products” (Ghanian participant 14).

Furthermore, apart from adjusting their opening hours, participants also added more edibles to their stores during the lockdown, as they believe that with more people working/studying from home, people will need to eat more. Accordingly, they started to offer home delivery services as well, which was a strategy aimed at increasing patronage, but to also ensure that they satisfy and retain their key customers during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is evidenced in the next set of quotes:

“What I have done to adjust the demands of running my business during the Covid-19 pandemic is that I adjusted my opening hours” (Nigerian participant 10).

“I have added more edibles to increase patronage” (Nigerian participant 9).

“I have also made some adjustments to ensure that I retain my customers during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, I had to introduce home services to ensure customer satisfaction and patronage” (Ghanaian participant 5).

Participants also revealed that Covid-19 has helped them to realize that they can run their businesses remotely. Specifically, they do not need to be in the office 24/7 to get things done.

“For instance, changing to digital meeting, applying smart technologies to communicate with staff, allowing staff to work remotely, part time, and compressed hours have collectively helped to reduce the hardship [for staff] and free up time for staff to engage in other things of interest” (Ghanaian participant 1).

“Of course, it was difficult during the first lock down until we realized that we can actually run our business remotely, and which was somehow ideal as we are only service providers” (Nigerian participant 2).

The above quotes are consistent with Busse and Weidner’s (2020) findings previous studies on the relationship between strategic flexibility, competitive intelligence, organizational innovation, IT capacity and leadership agility in crisis (e.g., Ali *et al.*, 2025; Busse and Weidner, 2020).

4.2 Leadership agility and supply chain flexibility

This section reveals some flexibility, adaptation, and agility in the way our participants led their organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, participants who had imported their raw materials originally had to seek alternative means of sourcing their raw materials locally during the lockdown and when borders were closed.

“As the borders have been closed for quite some time now, we now source our raw materials locally”. Although this is not ideal, we have no choice” (Nigerian participant 11).

“During the lockdown [i.e., when borders were closed] we had to seek alternative means of getting our raw materials, otherwise we would have shut down” (Ghanaian participant 14).

Due to border closure, to remain in business, participants who are into exportation of locally made goods also sourced local customers to supply their goods.

“Originally, due to the lockdown, we could not sell most of our products as they expired during the lock down due to most of them having limited shelf lives. But recently we have sought some local businesses and manufacturers who are willing to buy our products, but at a reduced price” (Ghanaian participant 5).

“Covid-19 pandemic has hampered our relationships with our overseas clients, as we could not supply as many of the products as they need. This was basically because just as the airports were affected, the shipping line was affected too... Before the Covid-19 pandemic, at one point, I would send 12 consignments as usual for export, but it was only two of our consignments that left for overseas this month... So, I had to source local buyers for the remainder, but at reduced prices” (Nigerian participant 13).

The above quotes also confirm previous findings that leadership agility has a better understanding of their core competencies (Ali *et al.*, 2025; Gunsberg *et al.*, 2018), foster a supportive culture, can bring new technology into their operations, have an improved interpersonal relationships and leadership capacity to make more assertive decisions (Bose *et al.*, 2026; Franco *et al.*, 2023). Our participants showed that they are sensitive to their environments and that they are proactive in responding to new challenges and the changing dynamics in their business environment, especially in crises. For instance, due to shortage of supplies, to retain their key customers, participants had to adjust the quantity supplied to each customer. They do this by rationing the quantity supplied so it can go around their key customers. The next set of quotes also reveals that at some point, participants had to withhold credit facilities originally offered to key customers:

“I have not been getting the same quantity of goods as I was getting from the manufacturers and suppliers before the Covid-19 pandemic. When I ask for a specific quantity say one truck

load, instead of the manufactures to give me this quantity they will ration it so it can go round other distributors, and I must do the same to retain my key customers” (Nigerian participant 8).

“Before the Covid-19 pandemic, our truck load of goods arrived every day and I will distribute the goods to my customers on credit. But we cannot afford to do the same at the moment, because this time even with cash, there is not many goods to buy [from the manufactures] for distribution...and because of the Covid-19 pandemic manufactures have stopped allowing me to take their goods on credit, so I have to withhold my own credit facilities from those that buy from me as well” (Nigerian participant 13).

The above set of quotes are consistent with previous research that found that unlike other types of leadership, leadership agility has a higher capacity to adapt to volatility in their competitive environment (Joiner, 2019), and thus is key to building a competitive advantage, especially in crises.

4.3 Leadership agility in staff management during the Covid-19 crisis

This section also reveals other distinguishing characteristics of leadership agility such as their capacity to maximize their firms’ existing resources in critical times, which makes leadership agility key for building a competitive advantage, especially in turbulence. For instance, unlike the pre- Covid-19 pandemic when almost everything was face-to-face and when more staff were needed, during the Covid-19 pandemic most things went online, and revenue dropped. Therefore, participants had to adjust by downsizing and renegotiating the contracts of the survivors. This is shown in the next set of quotes:

“Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic everything was face-to-face, but as everything went online during the Covid-19 pandemic, income dropped, so I had to adjust by reducing the staff strength” (Nigerian participant 7).

“Yes, when things are not working well, I do adjust the way I run my business. For instance, reduction in expenses, reduction in the number of staff and reduction in salaries” (Ghanaian participant 4).

“To help us adjust to the demand of running the business during the Covid 19, we had to downsize and take a pay cut as well” (Ghanaian participant 1).

The above set of quotes has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has helped agile leadership to (re)think how to stretch their capacity utilization amidst dwindling revenue. Previous research also shows that unlike other types of leadership, leadership agility is famous for its flexibility in adapting to volatility in their competitive environment (Joiner, 2019), and thus is key to building

a competitive advantage, especially in crises. The next set of quotes also shows that participants had to place some employees on half salaries. Then to lessen the burden of hardship on this category of staff, they were allowed to work from home, or to only come to the office twice or three times per week:

“Since we have to place some people on half salaries, we also decided to lessen the burden of the hardship on them by allowing them to work from home, or to only come to the office only two or three times per week” (Ghanaian participant 6).

“Yes, I have introduced some adjustments in the way I run my business. For instance, I have asked staff where it is possible to work compressed hours, i.e., if they can complete their weekly tasks in say three days while in the office, then they will receive their full weekly wages” (Nigerian participant 13).

Participants also had to talk more to staff during the Covid-19 pandemic than they did pre-Covid, because staff needed to be constantly encouraged and reassured to help them cope with the whole Covid-19 pandemic situation. Participants, in fact, kept making and fulfilling promises.

“I had to talk more to staff during the Covid-19 pandemic than I did pre-Covid-19, because the staff themselves too were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. So, they also need encouragement and reassurance to help them cope with the whole situation” (Nigerian participant 5).

“I kept making and fulfilling promises than I ever did prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, I will say don’t worry just try and finish the work, I will do this for you and buy this for you” (Ghanaian participant 13).

Finally, one of the key findings of our research is our participants’ resilience (as shown in the next set of quotes), compared to their overseas counterparts. For instance, operating in a resource constrained environment and exacerbated by the institutional voids in Africa has helped our participants and their organizations to develop the requisite skills/capacity to survive the Covid-19 crisis. Participants have shown that, despite challenges, they were able keep businesses and their supply chain afloat (e.g., Ali *et al.*, 2025; Bose *et al.*, 2026; Vinodh *et al.*, 2010), amid resource constraints due to leadership agility. This is illustrated in the next set of quotes:

“Although the Covid-19 pandemic was quite a difficult period in our lives and a challenging time for business operations around the world, especially, in Africa due to lack of government support..., we had to adopt the same measures as we did during the Ebola virus outbreak, when, despite the lack of government support and clear guidelines, we were able to keep our businesses afloat while following the rules of quarantine” (Nigerian participant 7).

“...Due to the reduced income, travel restrictions and social distancing we had to produce smaller versions of our products, allowed customers to choose home delivery services and online [instead of face to face] payment options...” (Ghanaian participant 11).

This section has shown the interview responses in relation to how the interaction effects of leadership agility, supply chain agility and organizational agility have helped SMEs in Ghana and Nigeria to sense and respond to unexpected changes in their external environments swiftly and effectively during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, through the interview quotes above, participants have revealed how they have led their organizations to (re)structure their operating mechanisms and their existing resources, to (re)adjust their sources of raw materials and distribution strategies in response to the disruptions in the global supply chains, and how they have helped to achieve flexibility in their staff contracts and wages in response to the Covid-19 pandemic-induced business losses. This typifies the crucial role of leadership agility in crisis. The following figure 1 summarizes the study’s findings.

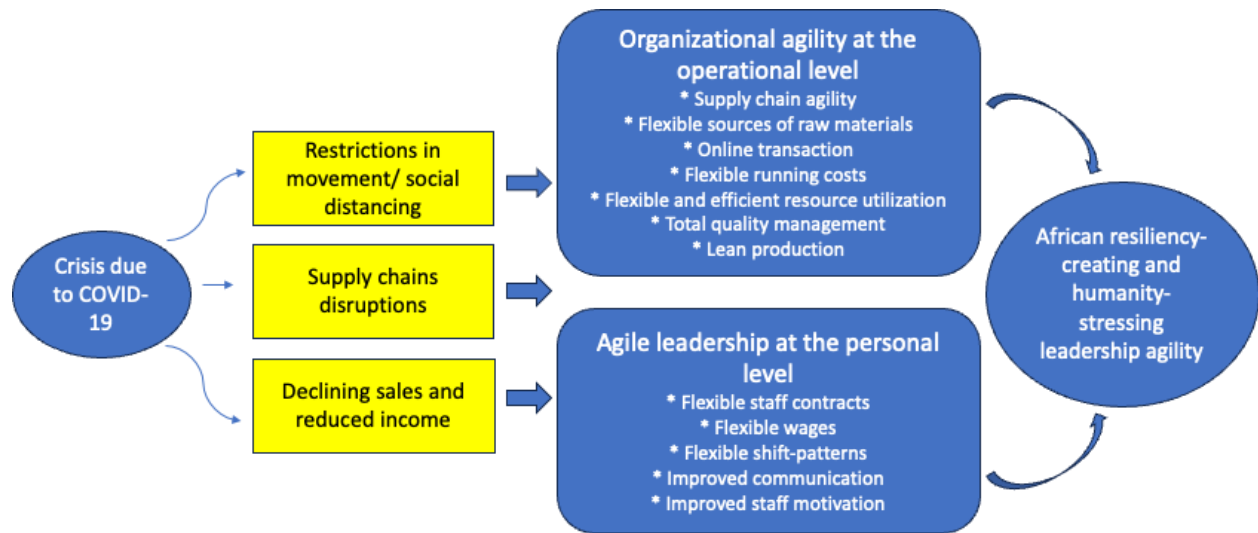


Figure 1. Leadership agility emerging as a response to the Covid-19 crisis in the African context.

5. Theoretical and practical implications

The current study offers both theoretical and practical implications. The main theoretical implication relates to bringing forward specificities of leadership agility in African SMEs, while

establishing its linkage with organizational agility at operational level. For theorization of leadership agility in African context, another finding from our study is also vital. We found that in almost all case SME leaders did their best to devise a relatively humane response to staff management (including wages and contracts) despite the business problems caused by the Covid-19 crisis. This approach is influenced by collective culture and indigenous management approach where the leader is like a father figure who is personally responsible for the wellbeing of his staff (like children). Similar aspects have been found in some other Africa focused studies by the scholars where the organizational leaders referred to the feeling of being personally responsible for betterment and survival of their staff despite extremely difficult external conditions (e.g., Arslan *et al.* 2020; Golgeci *et al.*, 2021). This specific “humane” aspect (influenced by the collective culture) is so far not necessarily part of agile leadership theorization. However, we argue that it is a vital element, which should be considered by scholars while theorizing leadership agility especially in the global south countries.

The key takeaway for the managerial audience from our study concerns realizing leadership agility and its intrinsic linkage to organizational agility especially in relatively high-risk emerging economies such as African countries. It has been argued by management scholars that exposure to volatile context results in developments of both resilience and agility at individual and collective levels (Golgeci *et al.*, 2020). Hence, for such individuals and organizations, a larger crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic is not as shocking as their counterparts used to operate in stable environments with established institutional norms. For African SME leaders, continuous exposure to volatility and uncertainty caused by institutional voids and political risks should be viewed as a learning opportunity, which prepares them to face larger crisis relatively well, if/when they face them. Consequently, we recommend African SME leaders to develop organizational routines with the best practices regarding managing supply chains, staff, local and international contracts and other business matters in a crisis such as the Covid-19 are documented and shared among the staff. This is expected to strengthen not only organizational agility but also improve operational performance leading to better revenues and profits.

6. Limitations, and future research directions

Our paper has several limitations like any other academic study. First, this is a qualitative study, so the limitations generally associated with such work also apply in our case. Secondly, this study

has been conducted in a specific region, so cultural and contextual limitations should be considered while extrapolating the findings. It should further be stressed that despite certain similarities, there is a great variation in African countries (and in the leadership styles of SMEs operating there). Hence, the findings need to be used with caution in this concern. Despite this limitation, the current paper has highlighted specificities of leadership agility in African context, thereby offering several new research avenues for the future scholars. For example, the future scholars should undertake more in-depth and longitudinal analysis of the interlinkage between leadership and organizational agility in African firms (large ones and SMEs). In this concern, analysis of leadership agility and its manifestation in organizational agility at operational and strategic level pre and post COVID-19 crisis can be a very impactful research topic. Also, reliance of African countries on Russia and Ukraine for food imports has been high. Academic scholars should explore how specifically transportation and agrifood sector African firms adapted to the Ukraine war and associated food supply challenges, and how leadership agility has manifested itself in these circumstances. Finally, learning from prior crisis whether internal political strife, or health emergencies such as Ebola should be incorporated in the analysis by future scholars while analyzing leadership and organizational responses in Africa to recent crisis situations such as Covid-19 pandemic or Russian-Ukraine war.

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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