

**Compassionate leadership is an essential leadership style for a rapidly changing
tech-driven workforce.**

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Abstract

The nature of work, as we know, has evolved through generational change and intensified digital transformation in the workplace. Renewed interest in leadership models and capabilities that prioritise employee well-being, empathy and trust are in the firing line. Compassionate Leaders (CL) has been identified as a relational and humanistic approach to leadership as a positive alternative to traditional, performance-driven leadership models. While identified as crucial to the modern work era, CL remains scarcely researched, especially within African and emerging technological markets. This study examines how CL is experienced, perceived, and practised in rapidly changing tech-driven environments within South Africa. Specific focus was placed on the cultural contexts, such as the Ubuntu Philosophy and its influence on leadership culture, and its tie-in with CL.

The study was guided by an interpretivist, qualitative approach and data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were manually analysed and sorted thematically. The findings revealed that compassion in leadership manifests through modelling of behaviour, relational awareness, and emotional support. The findings also highlight that providing compassion is constrained by organisational structures such as performance demands, systemic inequality and technostressors.

The study makes a positive contribution to the localisation of Compassionate Leadership Theory (CLT) through culturally practised compassion in South African workplaces. It extends the scholarly literature of compassion and organisational sustainability by confirming the need for balance in the follow-through of enacted compassion and organisational demands and efficiency.

Key Words

Compassionate Leadership, Generational Changes, Employee Well-being and Tech-Driven Workspaces

Plagiarism Declaration

I declare that this research project is my own work. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Business Administration at the Gordon Institute of Business Science, University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University. I further declare that I have obtained the necessary authorisation and consent to carry out this research.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviated term	Full Term
CL	Compassionate Leadership
CLT	Compassionate Leadership Theory
JD-RM	Job Demands-Resources Model
Tech-Adoption	Technology Adoption
Tech Driven	Technology Driven

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

Why is compassionate leadership necessary?

Generation Z (GenZ), born post-1995, is the generation of technology and is poised to lead the workforce (Gaidhani et al., 2019). Early in their employment journey, GenZ insists on empathy, mental well-being, autonomy, technology upgrades, and mobile capabilities as top priorities. If that were not acknowledged or met, they would leave. It did not matter that they had just started working or had no backup plans; mental health and sanctity were a priority, regardless (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Celestin & Vanitha, 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2021).

This Chapter focuses on why compassionate leadership is essential. It will explore uncontrollable factors, such as the impact of technology and digital transformation on the workplace and discuss the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on the working world. This Chapter lays a foundation for the study whose focus will be prioritised on how compassionate leadership (CL) is experienced, perceived and enacted by employees and leaders in post-apartheid South African-based, technology-driven organisations. The study will examine the onset of GenZ in the workplace and rapid technology adoption as key factors igniting the necessity for adopting compassionate leadership. It will further explore how other leadership styles view it.

1.2. Background of the study

What is compassionate leadership, and why is compassionate leadership essential and necessary?

CL's origins lie within the broader research on compassion and leadership theory in organisational existence. Lazarus (1991), as cited by Atkins and Parker (2012), defines compassion as "being moved by another's suffering and wanting to help". CL is further defined by Benevene et al. (2022) as a selfless and relational form of leadership, grounded in emotional intelligence and described as extending beyond merely showing empathy to include actively recognising and attending to the needs of others by alleviating their

suffering (Wee & Fehr, 2021). The emergence of CL as a practical response to employees' emotional agony and suffering, and its impact on organisational sustainability, builds on a solid foundation established by the developed theory on compassion in the workplace (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Pansini et al., 2024).

The traditional African Philosophy of Ubuntu has been linked to the characteristics of CL by several scholars, like (Chetty & Price, 2024) and affirmed by the characteristics of Ubuntu highlighted by Sipondo (2025) that perfectly align with the definition of CL as stated by (Benevene et al., 2022). Ubuntu means humanity toward others (Metz, 2021, as cited by Chetty & Price, 2024), forms the essence of most traditional Southern African cultures' ways of existing (Ncube, 2010). Ubuntu and its relevance to CL will further be explored in Chapter 2 of this study.

Also highlighted in Chapter 2 are the frameworks, Compassionate Leadership Theory and the Job-Development Resources Model, which emphasise the need for adapting leadership styles as businesses pass through different industrial revolutions (Haleem et al., 2024). Industrial revolutions refer to the ongoing transformations of traditional industries, with the inclusion of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, robotics and Internet of Things (Haleem et al., 2024). A key focus of this study is on rapid technology adoption and technology-driven (tech-driven) workplaces, which currently align with the shift from the fourth to the fifth industrial revolutions.

Aggarwal et al. (2022) describes how technology adoption is the new wave in the “business landscape” They further explain that the habitual nature of social media and new technology platforms affects the technology demands of the GenZ workforce and leads to rapid technology adoption by organisations. Rapid tech adoption is the increased adoption of technological upgrades and innovation brought on by the reshaping of traditional work environments (Aggarwal et al., 2022). Tech-driven organisations refer to organisations that have undergone complete digital transformation and are continuously affected by innovation and new technologies to operate and deliver successfully (Haleem et al., 2024; Porfírio et al., 2021).

During the fourth industrial revolution, authoritative and directive leadership styles were more fitting due to their harsh implementation and complexities (Haleem et al., 2024; Hutagalung et al., 2020; Mkhize et al., 2024); however, this has long since evolved. A clear vision, decisiveness and confidence of leaders are core characteristics of authoritative and directive leadership (Haleem et al., 2024; Porfirio et al., 2021).

These arguments underscore the necessity for CL in rapidly evolving digital spaces where technostressors cause leadership challenges unprecedented in previous instances (Rademaker et al., 2023). This Chapter covers the current workplace context, the study's aim and objectives, and delves deeply into the business and theoretical problems around CL. The section concludes with a summary of the purpose and relevance both in the business and theoretical contexts.

1.3. The impact of technology and digital transformation on the workplace

Digital workplace transformation is a swift, long-term, unique event where new technologies will cause significant changes to work-related aspects within an organisation (Chatterjee et al., 2023). Directly affected by these changes are employees' social relations with other employees and their day-to-day tasks and processes, which in turn affect their overall workplace experiences (Meske & Junglas, 2020, p.1120, as cited by Chatterjee et al., 2023).

Leaders who are known to be hostile or whose behaviour can be perceived as abusive can end up contributing to technostress during a digital transformation, since new technology usually provides room for developing and imposing greater workloads and job demands, including creating an environment where off-work hours do not exist due to access and availability (Rademaker et al., 2023). Employees who do not leave these environments develop workaholism tendencies, creating destructive work environments that trickle down the hierarchy and feed into the organisation's culture (Gallup Inc., 2025; Rademaker et al., 2023). Such technology-created abusive leadership can lead to negative emotions, poor employee outputs, increased workloads, limited bounce back or recovery potential, and eventually will lead to work-life conflicts, which in turn will require even more compassion than previously needed before reaching rock bottom (Gallup Inc., 2025; Rademaker et al., 2023).

Remarkably, digital technology paired with responsible and supportive leadership easily allows employees to attain a seamless work-life balance (Pansini et al., 2024). Proper implementation and training will enable healthy flexibility and foster self-sustaining employee wellness (Chatterjee et al., 2023). Furthermore, information and communication technology (ICT) and innovation have a direct impact on employee performance, which drives productivity, efficiency, and organisational sustainability. Chatterjee et al. (2023) also state that technology adoption in a tech-driven workforce is not just about plugging in new technology; instead, it is about providing for an entire ecosystem.

While digital transformation and adoption were inevitable (Andrade, 2025), the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, discussed in the next section, accelerated the adoption and implementation of a digitally transforming work environment, forcing many to learn and adapt (Chatterjee et al., 2023).

1.4. The impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the working world

The global coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) originated from an acute respiratory infection spread primarily via human-to-human bodily fluid transmissions (Shi et al., 2020), and caused the deaths of at least 40% of those infected in 2019. The rapid spread of COVID-19 triggered a global economic shutdown known as the COVID-19 lockdown, during which people were not permitted to leave their homes except in compelling circumstances, including the need to work in office-based environments (Stern, 2020).

The pandemic was a tipping point that compelled organisations across the world to adopt technological advancements to continue operating and keep their economies alive (Subramaniam et al., 2021). For many, this included working from home during 2020. COVID-19 forced businesses to transition to remote operations or contactless environments, obliging them to adopt a more technological approach to complete tasks and facilitate seamless collaborations (Chatterjee et al., 2023).

With increased remote working conditions, interactions between leaders and followers are increasingly influenced by the decentralisation of teams (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Celestin & Vanitha, 2023). Technology adoption is accompanied by a unique, high-functioning, tech-driven workforce (Gallup Inc., 2025; Rademaker et al., 2023). As a result, leaders find

themselves having to adapt to these changes, relearn management techniques, and cater to new forms of employee needs (Subramaniam et al., 2021).

Although technology has shaped business since the 20th century, like adapting to new needs in the manufacturing line to produce more, quicker, and cheaper (Subramaniam et al., 2021), adaptation today, marked by the effects of COVID-19, has reshaped organisations and how work is done. It shifted from enhanced productivity to flexibility and relieving anxiety about storage and accessibility (Rademaker et al., 2023). If all these positives exist, then why is the adoption so scary?

Alongside this, leaders must also support employees by setting a good example, remaining motivated, enforcing a healthy work-life balance, and providing emotional support to mitigate the mental health effects of the digital world (Porfírio et al., 2021; Rademaker et al., 2023). Furthermore, the recognition and management of employee health has become an integral part of leadership, and it has grown full circle to become a necessity for successful leaders to prevent technostress as well as maintain employee well-being (Chatterjee et al., 2023).

Andrade (2025) emphasises how leadership plays a significant, albeit complex, role and indubitably remains the top resource for organisational effectiveness and employee satisfaction. A leader focused on mental and emotional health helps employees manage digital demands more effectively (Rademaker et al., 2023).

1.5. Research Purpose

This study explores how CL is perceived, practised, and experienced in South Africa, with a focus on a tech-driven workforce in organisations undergoing rapid digital transformation. Compassionate leaders create environments where employees feel valued and psychologically secure when understood and actively listened to (Benevene et al., 2022).

CL continues to face criticism from traditional, successful models, and a study exploring enacted compassion in the South African context can contribute to broader theoretical development (Frost, 1999). The study will explore and comprehend the impact of CL on employee well-being and the organisation's sustainability. It will examine the challenges

that leaders face due to rapid technology adoption, particularly how the newly tech-empowered demands on multi-generational employees directly affect the emotional health of both employees and leaders.

The study aims to purposefully explore how CL is experienced, perceived and practised in tech-driven South African organisations, with a sub-focus on supporting research questions addressing the influence of CL on: Employee trust and emotional well-being, The onset of GenZ and increased tech-adoption in the workplace, and How CL is perceived in relation to the traditional leadership models. All with a core expectation of uncovering how essential CL adoption is in rapidly changing tech-driven workforces in South Africa.

This research study will clearly define the challenges faced by leaders and employees during rapid technology adoption phases within their organisation. It will also cover the need for CL adoption as a formal job development resource under the JD-RM and the requirements to combat and avert these challenges. It further explores the connections and nuanced differences between CL and the principles of traditional Ubuntu Philosophy within the context of compassionate leadership theory (CLT) and its relevance to South African organisations and a tech-driven workforce.

1.6. Significance of the Study for Business

Change brings uncertainty, which requires adjustment and adaptation (Shuck et al., 2019). Leaders must manage burnout, change fatigue, disengagement, and ethical decision-making (Celestin & Vanitha, 2023; Chen et al., 2023). Additionally, they need to model the behaviour expected of their employees while providing emotional support (Chen et al., 2023; Wee & Fehr, 2021). During COVID-19, people became anxious and overwhelmed by the extent of information provided about the consequences of living through a pandemic (Andrade, 2025). Additionally, leadership qualities were tested - not just leaders' intellect or strategic capabilities - but also their ability to communicate effectively and create new relationships (Pansini et al., 2024).

Furthermore, leaders had to counter the adverse effects brought on by the pandemic, ensure the smooth implementation of technology, and continue sustaining their organisations while ensuring employee wellness (Andrade, 2025; Pansini et al., 2024).

Tech-disrupted environments pressure leaders to deliver results while also navigating ways to reduce or avoid employee burnout and disengagement (Rademaker et al., 2023). Leaders, however, have remained performance and results-driven, which has led to fractured work cultures and increased employee turnover rates (Pansini et al., 2024).

This study will address the significance of its findings to the business and practice of how leaders in tech-driven workforces can meet the emotional needs of their employees, encouraging a better work environment and leading to organisational sustainability and high employee performance.

1.7. Significance of the Study for Theory

Previous studies on compassion and CL were macro-environment-based and closely tied to the healthcare industry, mostly (Ramachandran et al., 2024). Ongoing developments in this research area have highlighted a focus on the macro-level impacts of digital transformation on business models, but not the impact at the micro-level (Chatterjee et al., 2023). Chatterjee et al. (2023) define macro-level impacts as systemic and organisational outcomes of digital transformation and micro-level impacts as individual or team-level consequences, including changes in employee roles, well-being, leadership behaviour and daily work practices. Developing research efforts aim to elaborate on the need for CL during new industrial revolutions (Porfírio et al., 2021) and for adopting the CL model (Ramachandran et al., 2024).

Haleem et al. (2024) noted that, throughout their research, academics emphasise the need to re-examine leadership to complement the disruptive effects of technology adoption. While CL is becoming a viable option for steering organisations toward positive change, its theoretical foundation remains unexplored, and its effects remain unexamined, with limited and fragmented data (Pansini et al., 2024).

Despite its philosophical ties to Ubuntu, research on CL in the African context remains scarce. Ubuntu, meaning humanity toward others, stresses the embodiment of community and interconnectedness (Metz, 2021, as cited by Chetty & Price, 2024) and forms the essence of most traditional Southern African cultures. This highlights a need to localise studies like CLT and its ties to specific environments within South Africa (Benevene et al.,

2022; Ramachandran et al., 2024). Furthermore, existing studies on the role and impact of adopting CL are limited and insufficient (Ramachandran et al., 2024; Shuck et al., 2019; Zulueta & Paquita, 2016). Research into managing the emotional impacts on employees affected by rapid digital transformation has not been conducted, and these environments remain unexplored within South Africa (Chetty & Price, 2024; Rademaker et al., 2023; Sipondo, 2025).

In an attempt to address these research gaps, the current study will explore CLT by extending its reach into untapped domains, reflecting the emotional, contemporary, and historical dynamics of leadership and the work-related demands of the tech-driven South African workforce.

1.8. Conclusion

This Chapter opened with an introduction to the study's background and explored key elements affecting the need for CL, including the impact of technology and digital transformation on the workplace, as well as the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the working world. The Chapter continued with the purpose of the research and uncovered the significance of the study in both practical business and theoretical contexts.

The purpose of this study is to address the growing need for human-centred leadership approaches in organisations navigating the complexity of technological transformation. The emotional demands arising from technostressors are rapidly affecting employee mental health and insecurity, more so in the South African context, where post-apartheid leadership failures have paved a path to inequality and distrust. Traditional leadership theories provide valuable insights, but they often overlook the emotional nuances of modern work environments.

CL remains empirically unexplored and theoretically fragmented, especially in South Africa. Therefore, the problem addressed is how CL is experienced, perceived and enacted in a tech-driven workforce, thus building on and extending the existing theoretical basis. The next Chapter will critically examine the existing literature and frameworks to pave the way for developing the conceptual lens of the constructs in the study.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

This Chapter critically examines existing literature and theories on CL and its relevance in the current context of technology-driven (tech-driven) work environments in South Africa. The review will trace the origin and evolution of CL for the study by demonstrating the theoretical foundations and theories that underpin the construct, as well as examining the behavioural characteristics associated with its practice. It further explores CL in relation to existing leadership styles, highlighting differences in strengths, weaknesses, and areas of overlap or distinction. Finally, the Chapter closes off CL within the South African context, drawing on the philosophy of Ubuntu, the emergence of Generation Z (GenZ) in the workplace, and how rapid technology adoption is shaping the expectations and practice of compassion in leadership.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides a conceptual foundation for this study by linking established theories of leadership behaviour, employee experience, and organisational context, as well as the relationship between them (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). CLT provides significant insight into leadership practices concerning the recognition of employees' distress and subsequent actions (Wee & Fehr, 2021). The Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-RM) complements insights from CLT by illustrating how workplace demands and the availability of resources influence employee well-being, motivation, and performance (Chowhan & Pike, 2023). Collectively, these frameworks enable the examination of CL practices in tech-driven workforces, focusing particularly on understanding how leaders can balance performance pressures with the more human element of empathy (Pansini et al., 2024).

2.2.1. Compassionate Leadership Theory

CLT represents a multidimensional approach to leadership that integrates emotional awareness, responsive action, and ethical behaviour (Wee & Fehr, 2021). It emphasises that compassion is not merely a feeling, but a process of emotional unfolding through key stages of behaviour, i.e., noticing, feeling, and acting in response to the emotional distress or needs of others (Wee & Fehr, 2021; adapted from Atkins and Parker, 2012). These

dimensions of compassion enable leaders to foster environments that support human connection and performance through relationships built on trust, thereby strengthening internal team resilience (Sipondo, 2025).

The values of CLT are particularly significant in the South African context. The post-apartheid legacy has left the business environment grappling with historical leadership trauma and social inequalities, requiring empathetic and emotionally intelligent responses (Chetty & Price, 2024). Furthermore, CL offers a healing and relational approach that closely aligns with the cultural philosophy of Ubuntu, centred on mutual respect, dignity, and shared humanity (Chetty & Price, 2024). Using the process of emotional foundation, CLT underpins a relevant framework for balancing care and accountability in contemporary, tech-driven workspaces (Wee & Fehr, 2021).

2.2.2. The Job Demands-Resources Model

The JD-RM, adapted by Chowhan and Pike (2023) and Pansini et al. (2024), provides a framework for understanding the connection between the demands of a specific job and the resources required to perform it effectively. The model suggests that when adequate resources such as leadership support, recognition, or autonomy are not present in high-demand jobs, the risk of stress, burnout, and disengagement increases significantly (Chowhan & Pike, 2023). Similarly, it is then assumed that adequate resources in high-demand jobs result in motivated, resilient, and high-performing staff (Pansini et al., 2024).

This study positions CL as a critical job resource, enabling employees to cope with high-demand jobs associated with tech-driven workplaces (Wee & Fehr, 2021). By fostering environments of emotional support, care, and guidance, leaders help employees manage emotional, personal, and professional well-being, thereby positively impacting workload pressure management (Pansini et al., 2024). The JD-RM thus suggests that CL must be a strategic implementation to sustain both employee well-being and organisational performance amid rapid tech-adoption (Chowhan & Pike, 2023). Furthermore, the framework emphasises that emotional intelligence is crucial for addressing the lack of interpersonal connection brought on by technology adoption, thus confirming the need for compassion as a vital leadership resource (Pansini et al., 2024; Wee & Fehr, 2021).

2.2.3. Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

The integration of CLT and JD-RM collectively provides a comprehensive platform for assessing leadership in tech-driven workplaces. CLT expands on the emotional and added behavioural mechanisms of compassion (Wee & Fehr, 2021), and the JD-RM places these behaviours within the broader organisational context of demands versus resources (Chowhan & Pike, 2023).

Combined, CLT and JD-RM position compassion as a crucial work resource for leaders, helping employees navigate the pressures of daily high-demand jobs in tech-driven environments (Chowhan & Pike, 2023; Pansini et al., 2024; Wee & Fehr, 2021). To collectively sustain performance and well-being, compassionate behaviours such as emotional awareness, open communication, and fairness are required (Atkins & Parker, 2012). These frameworks have positioned compassion in rapidly evolving workplaces as a strategic enabler of employee resilience and engagement rather than a moral or social quality of performance (Pansini et al., 2024; Wee & Fehr, 2021).

2.3. Compassion in the Workplace

Leadership capabilities and styles have long been the success factors or limitations to the failure of businesses for centuries (Sunarsi et al., 2020). As argued by Maxwell (2007, cited by Haleem et al., 2024), everything rises and falls with leadership, from routine operations to large-scale strategic decisions. The world has remained witness to vast advances in technology and artificial intelligence (AI) for the last twenty years (Benevene et al., 2022). Additionally, over time, all business sectors were forced to transform their systems, sustain their economic relevance, and develop new competencies in rapidly shifting markets.

Innovations of the twenty-first century have strengthened the path to automation, alongside increasing competence in digital communication and analytics, creating a modern workforce that is both replete with opportunities and strained (Benevene et al., 2022; Pansini et al., 2024). While compassion fosters human interaction and promotes employee well-being, it may also undermine accountability and performance (Chatterjee et al., 2023; Frost, 1999). The arising challenge, therefore, lies within leadership capability to drive strategic outcomes and integrate compassion.

In combating this scene, research efforts have positioned compassion as a counterbalance that eases emotional burdens and results in long-term organisational sustainability (Ramachandran et al., 2024; Shuck et al., 2019). However, as technology grows and adoption increases, the pace of work accelerates (Benevene et al., 2022), complicating the practice of emotional care. This requires leaders to navigate the uncharted waters of managing the emotional well-being of teams in new work environments alongside the newly founded pressures to perform quickly (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023). Hence, it is evident that ongoing research on compassion in the workplace is essential and must continue to be explored by scholars (Christopher John Tietz, 2021). The tension between empathy and accountability underpins the concept of CL, discussed in the next section.

2.4. Compassionate Leadership

CL is defined as a selfless and relational form of leading, grounded in emotional intelligence (Benevene et al., 2022). Described as extending beyond merely showing empathy and includes actively recognising and attending to the needs of others by alleviating their suffering (Wee & Fehr, 2021). Compassionate leaders create environments where employees feel valued and psychologically secure when understood and actively listened to (Benevene et al., 2022).

2.4.1. Origins of compassionate leadership

From as early as 1999, research embodying the importance of compassion in the workplace has become an imperative and growing field (Frost, 1999). Compassion is a multifaceted response to another's suffering (Atkins & Parker, 2012, as cited by Wee & Fehr, 2021). Benevene et al. (2022) also noted that CL emerged due to high levels of burnout linked to employee emotional strain. They further noted that the emergence of emotional and mental employee needs has positioned compassion in leadership as both a performance enabler to satisfy business needs and an ethical imperative providing for the emotional needs of employees.

Insights developed by Wee and Fehr (2021) and Benevene et al. (2022) laid a foundation for developing leadership approaches that centre mindfulness, empathetic thinking, self-regulation, and psychological flexibility, which collectively form the structure of CLT.

Compassion has been humanised through the motivation to improve the well-being of others, embodying feelings of concern, care, and a strong desire to ease the suffering of others (Goetz et al., 2010, as cited by Andersson et al., 2022). Despite its rising global popularity, limited empirical research has examined how CL manifests in the African organisational context, particularly within tech-driven workspaces (Chetty & Price, 2024).

2.4.2. Characteristics of compassionate leadership

Compassion requires both a feeling and a response to be deemed valid (Andersson et al., 2022; Wee & Fehr, 2021). It is not a singular static event that can happen instantly; it involves moving from noticing an emotional response to the suffering of others and wanting to provide relief for them (Atkins & Parker, 2012). Alleviation of suffering is crucial in completing the compassion circle and differentiates it from other related emotional concepts such as empathy, sympathy, or altruism (Hafenbrack et al., 2020).

Elaborating on the elements of compassion required from leaders, Hafenbrack et al. (2020), adapted from Atkins & Parker, 2012) identified characteristics that they expanded into four dimensions:

- 1. Noticing:** the ability to recognise and be aware of others' suffering in the workplace. It requires awareness, emotional presence, and openness to effective communication.
- 2. Appraising:** Assessing the severity of the situation, the deservingness of the suffering individual, your compassion, and the relevance to the observer.
- 3. Feeling:** allowing oneself to have an emotional response such as concern, tenderness, or empathy. This emotion will enable you to make an informed decision on what to do next.
- 4. Acting:** Taking action to alleviate the suffering of others. This step closes the loop to genuine compassion by making an intentional, focused effort to provide support and relief.

Being on the receiving end of compassion can aid in the combat against stress; the experience of being supported provides additional emotional tools to navigate emotionally complex challenges (Andersson et al., 2022).

2.4.3. Critiques of compassionate leadership

Despite the growing need for and benefits of providing compassion in the workplace, it can sometimes be perceived as a sign of weakness or as not oriented toward organisational success (Wee & Fehr, 2021). Scholars like Wee and Fehr (2021) highlight the risks of CL on the psychological safety of leaders if they fail to maintain boundaries and blindly follow the key elements of providing compassion. Andersson et al. (2022), Benevene et al. (2022), all referred to the emotional fatigue of meeting emotional needs and absorbing the emotional burdens of others without proper support and structures in place. When CL is modelled, organisational culture can influence and change how compassion is seen and practised (Zulueta & Paquita, 2016).

The literature on CL is developing, and interest in its benefits continues to grow (Ramachandran et al., 2024). Additional research efforts, however, have uncovered that there remains a limited willingness to adopt CL as a leadership style, due to it being seen as a weakness in business management, and it is constantly criticised for lacking the capability to provide for a high-performance organisational setting (Atkins & Parker, 2012; as cited by Wee & Fehr, 2021).

2.4.4. Compassionate leadership versus established leadership models

CL intersects with well-established leadership models in numerous ways. Transformational, Servant, and Ethical leadership styles all possess similar character traits in the form of soft skills, as CL does. Some significant differences and clashes exist (Wee & Fehr, 2021).

Benevene et al. (2022) note that servant leadership is a values-based leadership style that prioritises the well-being of employees. They expand, however, that it lacks the emotional response emphasised in CL, where employees' needs are prioritised, but there is no primary focus on responding to or alleviating suffering (Wee & Fehr, 2021). Transformational leadership focuses on inspiration and motivation, embodies the creation of strong leader-follower relationships, and creates room for empathy, but these displays are often just a tool to ensure employees achieve planned business outcomes (Benevene et al., 2022). Ethical leadership is all about leading with integrity and legal responsibility (Hafenbrack et al., 2020). Similarities between CL and the other leadership styles

mentioned include, but are not limited to, a people-centred approach (Wee & Fehr, 2021), trust and relationship-building (Hafenbrack et al., 2020), and moral and ethical foundations (Ncube, 2010; Wee & Fehr, 2021).

2.5. South African Leadership Context

Literature developed by Sipondo (2025) establishes a profound connection between the ethical leadership crisis in the country and the loss of public trust. This, coupled with the ineffective leadership experienced by generations during and after apartheid, has created a leadership trauma deeply embedded in daily life that cannot easily be undone.

2.5.1. Similarities between Ubuntu and compassionate leadership

Ubuntu was often translated as "I am because we are", meaning humanity toward others, and stressed the embodiment of community and interconnectedness (Metz, 2021, as cited by Chetty & Price, 2024) and forms the essence of most traditional Southern African cultures' ways of existing (Ncube, 2010). Ubuntu remains a central tenet of African leadership philosophy, and, in the traditional African context, leadership was non-negotiable on traits such as solidarity, respect, dignity, compassion, and a commitment to the well-being and interconnectedness of a community (Muller et al., 2019, as cited by Sipondo, 2025).

In recent years, the Ubuntu philosophy has been applied to embody leadership values (Chetty & Price, 2024). Leaders who adopt this philosophy and the principles of Ubuntu start to prioritise the well-being of all stakeholders and create an environment that emanates a sense of belonging and fosters responsible, effective, and ethical leadership (Sipondo, 2025). Ubuntu-led leaders embody values and principles of respect, dignity, empathy, and collaboration; they demonstrate and encourage enhanced dedication to internal engagement among leaders and followers (Chetty & Price, 2024).

Furthermore, Ubuntu prioritises principles of humanity and pride in providing service to others, specifically for alleviating any suffering (Ncube, 2010). Ubuntu, as understood through the findings of Chetty and Price (2024) and Sipondo (2025), mirrors the behavioural traits of CLT as defined by Shuck et al. (2019) and Ramachandran et al. (2024) positioning compassion and employee well-being at the core of organisational values. CL

and Ubuntu have both been neglected in leadership theory, but clearly overlap conceptually (Sipondo, 2025).

Sipondo (2025) explains how post-apartheid South Africa still suffers from massive structural inequalities alongside emotional turmoil due to distrust formed by the country's leadership. He further argues that dissolution and leadership trauma amongst the previously disadvantaged are brought about by the lack of Ubuntu practised in leadership, even though it is preached to the country's citizens. Ronnie (2018) notes how historical sensitivities also distort leadership capabilities and trust in leadership. The continuous pursuit of adopting European cultural practices, rather than becoming an embodiment of traditional African culture and practices, continues to feed fragile economies and commemorate and idolise colonial leadership legacies that only brought the people of the country pain and suffering (Sipondo, 2025). From a CL perspective, the Ubuntu philosophy offers a culturally grounded framework for empathy in action.

In this sense, the Ubuntu philosophy, along with CL, converge in their purpose, encouraging leaders to lead with empathy, shared humanity, and fairness. Both concepts argue that this form of leadership becomes more necessary in trying times, such as increased digital transformation and global competitiveness (Sipondo, 2025; Wee & Fehr, 2021).

2.5.2. Workplace inequalities, multi-generational employee needs

Businesses existing in a rapidly changing technological environment have a pressing need for the exploration of CL as a practical and human-centred approach to leading a newer generation of employees, and providing for and supporting resilient, employee-centric and future-fit organisations (Pansini et al., 2024).

2.6. Technology and Generational Shifts

Recent studies highlight how GenZ's workplace expectations differ from those older workplace generations, creating new organisational and leadership challenges and potential conflict in multigenerational workforces (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Celestin & Vanitha, 2023; Chen et al., 2023). Generation Z, known as GenZ, refers to persons born from 1995 (1999- (Mahmoud et al., 2021) to 2012 (Chen et al., 2023). This generation

values autonomy, flexibility, mental well-being, and purpose-driven work above all else, contrasting with their predecessors (Zhu & Chen, 2015).

Scholars typically define other generations, such as millennials, born 1982 to 1999, Generation X, born 1965 to 1981, and lastly Baby boomers, born 1946 to 1964, as varying workplace demands, mostly different to those of GenZ (Chen et al., 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2021).

2.6.1. The changing nature of work

Organisations and leadership have been transformed by digital transformation (Aggarwal et al., 2022). The rise of Artificial Intelligence, forced remote work conditions, and advancements in automation have led to increased efficiency, but also created a rift in human elements (Mahmoud et al., 2021). One such element is emotional and relational behaviours (Benevene et al., 2022). Traditional work boundaries are blurred by technology, with imposed expectations on employees' availability across time zones and platforms (Ramachandran et al., 2024). Constant pressure arising from digital demands can lead to burnout and disengagement, heightening the need for leaders to demonstrate compassion (Chowhan & Pike, 2023).

Scholars argue that compassion in tech-driven environments acts as a human buffer against emotional depletion (Benevene et al., 2022; Pansini et al., 2024). Leaders who actively listen, respond to emotional distress, and acknowledge stressors tend to model vulnerable behaviours and create psychological safety in their teams (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). CL in these environments is no longer just desirable, but essential to sustain human connection and performance.

2.6.2. Workplace inequalities, multi-generational employee needs

Generational shifts further compounded leadership challenges, with Millennials and GenZ now forming a significant portion of the current workforce (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023). These newer generations tend to value inclusion, flexibility, and authentic leadership above hierarchies and micro-management (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Gallup Inc., 2025; Mahmoud et al., 2021). These employees expect their leaders to address concerns related to well-being, transparency, and compassion (Chatterjee et al., 2023). Businesses

in a rapidly changing technological environment have a pressing need to explore CL as a practical and human-centred approach to leading a newer generation of employees and supporting resilient, employee-centric and future-fit organisations (Pansini et al., 2024).

2.7. Leadership in a Tech-Driven Workforce

This section will cover the psychological impacts on leaders and employees, as well as the importance of CL in this era. It will look at the psychological impact of technology adoption on a tech-driven workforce. While technology promises success and speed, it can also reinforce exclusion if empathy and inclusion are not prioritised (Chen et al., 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2021).

2.7.1. psychological impact on the workforce

The rapid and widespread adoption and implementation of information and communication technologies (ICT) has driven dramatic and significant leadership changes (Rademaker et al., 2023). The fast-paced paradigm shift is primarily attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, which accelerated the need for rapid tech-driven adoptions without reasonable notice, planning, or training (Subramaniam et al., 2021). Additionally, Rademaker et al. (2023) highlight an astonishing connection between emotional strain on leaders and tech-driven disruptions. They further state that the negative psychological impact reinforces the need for CL within organisations as technological transformation moves away from an optional process to a necessity.

Technology adoption meant organisations would reap benefits such as employee flexibility and enhanced productivity (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Chatterjee et al., 2023). However, enforcing ICT on employees also comes with downfalls (Chen et al., 2023). ICT-induced stressors, known as technostressors, have become a significant concern (Rademaker et al., 2023) as digital disruption embeds itself in organisational culture (Pansini et al., 2024).

Technological demands have infiltrated business models (Porfírio et al., 2021), with organisations benefiting from digital workplace adoption and employees struggling to place boundaries between their work and private life (Rademaker et al., 2023). Employees were also increasingly overwhelmed with enhanced expectations and the complexities of newer, unknown systems (Chen et al., 2023; Gallup Inc., 2025). This essentially leads to

technostress, strain on cognitive functions, and reduces emotional energy. Technostress was conceptually introduced by Brod in 1982 and defined as "the inability of an individual or organisation to adapt to the introduction and operation of new technology" (Rademaker et al., 2023).

Effects on leadership roles are apparent in the added task of coping with the influx of digital tools, alongside having to tend to the emotional toll it has on its followers (Chen et al., 2023). The psychological impact on employees who are not digitally inclined poses a risk of adverse effects on social roles and employee identities (Chatterjee et al., 2023; Pansini et al., 2024) including the potential for severing human bonds and emotional interconnectedness (Gallup Inc., 2025), should a buffer not exist to mediate these challenges.

2.7.2. Preliminary conceptual framework

To guide the theoretical orientation of the study, a literature-informed conceptual model was developed, visually mapping the key scholarly influences and tensions discussed in Chapter 2. The model on the following page, Figure 2.1. provides a visual synthesis of existing literature and contextual pressures that encourage the exploration of CL in the South African tech-driven context.

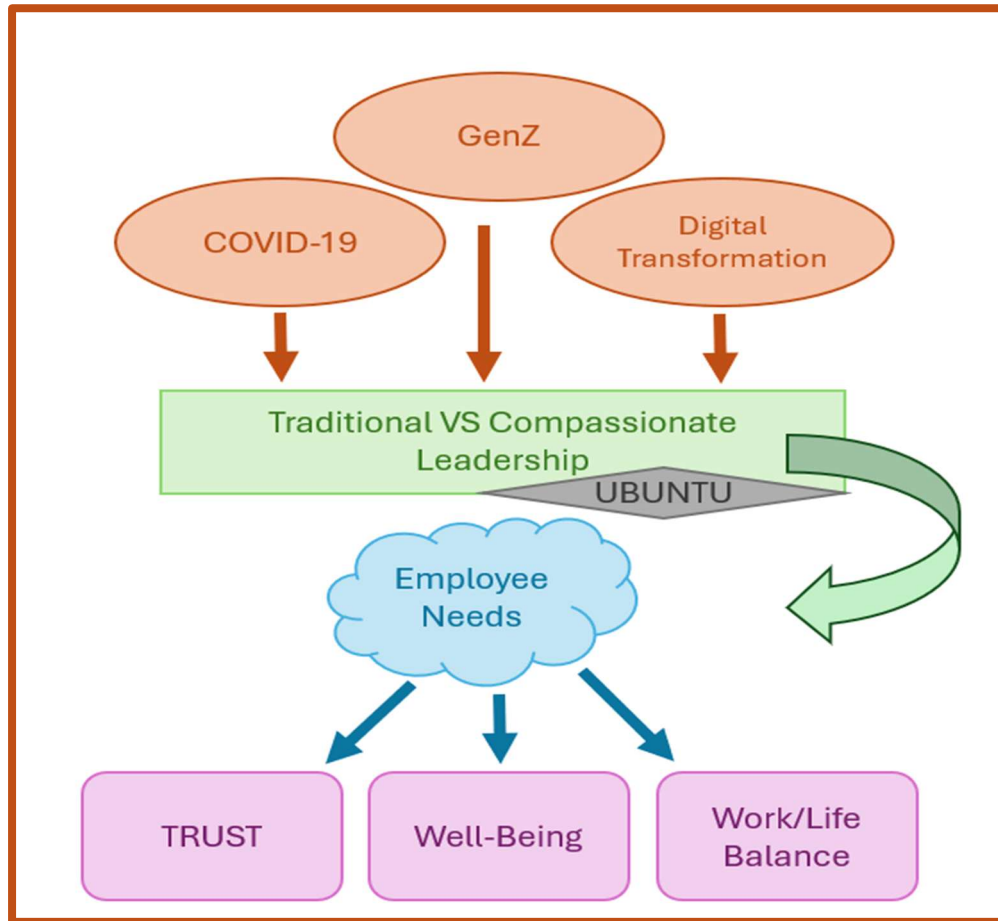


Figure 2.1: Preliminary Conceptual Framework

The preliminary framework identifies three macro-level drivers:

- i. **GenZ:** A generation demanding environments fostered in empathy, flexibility, value alignment, and digital fluency.
- ii. **COVID-19:** A catalytic event that sped up tech adoption and amplified humanistic elements such as emotional fatigue and leadership support gaps.
- iii. **Digital transformation:** The acceleration, adoption, and integration of technology creates new pressures on workflows and employee/leader dynamics.

The drivers exert pressure on leadership behaviours and styles. Scholars argue a critical tension between traditional leadership styles and the emerging need for CL. Simultaneously, Ubuntu philosophy offers a more natural and cultural leadership foundation that aligns almost perfectly with the values of CL, particularly within South African-based organisations.

The core of the model depicts the outcome variable, employee needs. Particular focus was placed on employees' emotional well-being, trust in leadership, and a healthy work/life balance. The model proposes that when CL is present and aligned with the cultural embodiment of Ubuntu values, the outcomes for employees' needs are positively influenced.

2.8. Conclusion

This Chapter explored the existing body of literature on CL. It examined the theoretical underpinnings and their relevance in modern, tech-driven environments. The conceptual framework, which includes CLT and the JD-RM, ties in with the four components of compassion discussed in this Chapter. It covers the culturally familiar Ubuntu Philosophy alongside tech-driven workspaces and their relation to CL. It then examines the current overall need for emotionally capable leadership, such as CL, alongside GenZ requirements and how that ties into CL adoption.

However, it remains unclear why CL is essential for a rapidly changing tech-driven workforce, given the unique cultural ethos and historic pressures affecting South African organisations. Evidently, the emotional well-being of employees in a tech-driven workforce, along with organisational performance, remains essential for successful business operations. The Chapter that follows will explore the research questions aimed at focusing on the study and essentially aligning with or extending the current literature available.

CHAPTER 3 – RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1. Research Questions

This study investigates how CL is practised and perceived by employees within tech-driven workforces in South Africa. The research questions were developed to explore possible gaps identified in the literature on CL, its existence, practice, and complications. A particular focus is on leadership behaviour in the context of generational changes, emotional and psychological strain (Benevene et al., 2022; Chatterjee et al., 2023; Sipondo, 2025).

Given the topic's under-researched nature in the African context, the study adopts a qualitative, exploratory approach, guided by research questions. A central research question is used to address the research problem, and three sub-questions are employed to develop a rich data sample. The research questions were developed and informed by the literature review stipulated in Chapter 2 of the study. Each question is designed to foster a nuanced understanding of CL's relevance in a generationally diverse and digitally driven workplace.

3.2. Main Research Question:

How is compassionate leadership experienced, perceived and practised in tech-driven workforces in South Africa?

The main question developed seeks to explore how leaders and employees experience, define, and enact CL. With the intersection of compassion, cultural leadership expectations, and technology still emergent in scholarly literature (Chetty & Price, 2024; Sipondo, 2025), this open-ended question allows for inductive insight.

3.3. Sub-Research Questions

SRQ1: What is the influence of compassionate leadership on employee trust and emotional well-being in a tech-driven workforce in South Africa?

Informed by the JD-RM and literature exploring the emphasis of compassion as a critical job resource (Chowhan & Pike, 2023; Pansini et al., 2024). This question will explore the notion of emotional well-being and trust as vital outcomes of compassionate leadership in high-demand, tech-driven environments (Ramachandran et al., 2024).

SRQ2: How did the onset of GenZ and increased technological adoption influence leadership behaviour and expectations?

This question highlights the literature on Generation Z's prioritisation of authentic, empathetic leadership requirements and the growing challenges faced by leaders in adapting to tech-driven organisational changes (Chatterjee et al., 2023). This question aims to explore these challenges through the lens of lived experiences and employee perceptions.

SRQ3: How is compassionate leadership perceived in relation to other leadership approaches and future generational needs in tech-driven environments?

This question considers how CL and traditional leadership approaches align or converge. It draws on the comparison of modern leadership approaches versus other leadership styles, such as transformational and servant leadership (Benevene et al., 2022; Wee & Fehr, 2021).

3.4. Conclusion

This Chapter outlined the research questions that guide this study on how CL is experienced in tech-driven workforces in South Africa. Each question is rooted in literature findings explored in Chapter 2 and reflects current leadership challenges arising from the generational shift and digital transformation, as well as the emotional strain in the workplace that results from these changes. The research questions are designed to uncover rich insights into the understanding, application, and experience of CL and differentiate it from traditional leadership approaches. The next Chapter will explore these questions and gather empirical data by detailing the research design and methodology employed.

CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

This Chapter justifies the methodology used to explore the research questions posed in Chapter 3. To understand employees' experiences with CL within a South African tech-driven organisation, a qualitative research design was adopted to explore participants' deeper, less visible perceptions. In this Chapter, the researcher outlines the research design and purpose, explains the data collection strategy, and describes the thematic analysis and categorisation of data thematically according to the theory discussed in Chapter 2.

Concerns about the reliability and validity of the data, along with the time constraints imposed on the researcher, were taken into account during the development of the research methodology. Strategic planning was employed to mitigate these concerns, and the Chapter concludes with an exploration of possible limitations and ethical considerations required to complete the study's data collection.

4.2. Research Methodology

The main research question focused on exploring the experiences, perceptions, and practices of CL within South African tech-driven organisations. It was explored through a phenomenological approach, utilising interviews with leaders and employees based on an interpretivism philosophy.

The objective of the study included a focus on the role of GenZ in the working economy and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as drivers of the necessity for the adoption of CL. The researcher adopted an empathetic stance toward participant perceptions, furthermore, the researcher maintained an open and reflective stance throughout the remainder of the study to new knowledge throughout the study (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The research design is the blueprint for a study, explaining the structure of the research conducted and the logic behind the researcher's choices in answering the research questions (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, pp. 104–136).

4.2.1. Research Philosophy

Research philosophy concerns how knowledge is developed, understood, and interpreted in a particular research field (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 106). The study adopts a philosophical, interpretivist approach, which best aligns with the subjective nature of the research's aim, to explore how CL is experienced, perceived, and understood by employees in the tech-driven South African workforce.

Interpretivism emphasises the importance of understanding people as social actors, both shaped by and shaping their environment (Saunders et al., 2017, p. 107), which is critical when examining psychological behaviours such as emotional intelligence, leadership experiences and dynamics. The most appropriate philosophical foundation for the study, given the personal, context-specific nature, is an interpretivist one, which allows a view of multiple first-person realities (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 107)

4.2.2. Research Approach

The research approach provides the plan or logic used in developing the direction of the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study adopts a qualitative method, which has guided the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 202) as it prioritises individual perception, context, and the development of meaning from the data, which is central to the purpose of this study.

A quantitative approach was not suitable due to the subjective nature of the study (Saunders & Lewis, 2018) and the need to deeply explore the meaning of CL rather than to measure or generalise in a specific setting. A qualitative design meets the necessary requirements when developing an open-ended enquiry (Lim, 2025) for exploring the personal and emotional aspects of leadership, as required by this study.

The logical form of inquiry is inductive as it aligns with the decision to use a qualitative, interpretivist data collection approach. This approach is used to develop a theory based on observations of the collected data, rather than testing existing theory (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 113). Expanding on the inductive approach involves synthesising theories against each other, exploratively (Lim, 2025; Oluka, 2025), built from data collected through interviews by observing repeated patterns or occurrences. An exploratory study is

one that explores new, previously untouched or under-covered literature (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 115), as discussed in Chapter 2 of the study.

As CL is an evolving leadership approach, with limited and fragmented research currently being undertaken (Pansini et al., 2024). The researcher adopted a mono-method of data collection, which involves using a single data collection technique to enhance research development (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 127), as set out in this study.

4.2.3. Research strategy

The research strategy outlines the action plan for getting your research from the planning phase to the doing phase (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Using phenomenology as the basis for their research strategy, the researcher uncovered the lived experiences of their subjects and were able to interpret them theoretically (Ishtiaq, 2019; Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Phenomenology enabled a rich exploration of lived leadership experiences, directly aligned with the main research question: How CL is experienced, perceived and practised. It also allows the study to include a small number of subjects for a fixed period of time to gain an understanding and uncover the essence of a particular first-person experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), uncovering exactly what the research aims to achieve in a tight and concise manner.

4.2.4. Time horizon

The Time horizon in research refers to the time constraints on completing a study (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 129). The researcher opted for a cross-sectional approach due to the project's nature and the strict timelines. A cross-sectional approach is an appropriate method for exploring phenomena within a predefined timeframe, particularly to uncover qualitative insights that do not require longitudinal measurement over time (Ishtiaq, 2019; Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The researcher explored the phenomenon through in-depth, first-person experiences gathered from the purposive sampling set of interviewees for the cross-sectional data collected.

4.3. Population

The population in research refers to a group of persons or entities that are relevant to the study and can potentially be used to draw a data sample (Ishtiaq, 2019). The researcher's

purposive sample comprises leaders and employees from organisations directly impacted by rapid technology adoption within a tech-driven workforce in South Africa. An estimated sample of 15 to 20 participants was initially pre-empted to fulfil the research obligations. The final sample, however, was capped at 13 due to data saturation occurring earlier than expected (Ahmed, 2025).

4.4. Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis is the primary entity required for the study and refers to the cohesiveness of the subject being analysed (Ishtiaq, 2019). This study examines how CL is experienced by employees, with a specific focus on how leaders in South Africa enact it. The researcher has thus pre-empted that the participants should be leaders and employees directly affected by the leadership practices in tech-driven organisations. Leaders must be direct managers and supervisors of at least one GenZ employee. The leaders of the sample accounted for 30% to ensure adequate coverage of their perspective. To maintain contextual integrity (Lim, 2025) organisations that failed to thrive during the adoption of digital technology will not be assessed in the study, as their failure might dilute the findings.

4.5. Sampling method

Sampling is how participants of a study will be selected from the broader population (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, pp. 137–145) which forms an imperative part of a qualitative study that requires a case rich with perspective and information, not just statistics (Oluka, 2025). The researcher used a purposive sampling method to select participants based on their relevance to the study (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 145).

Purposeful sampling is an encouraged technique during research to ensure quality and direct relation to the study topic (Mayer & Oosthuizen, 2020). The data sample will not limit gender, age, religious affiliations, or time served at the organisation; however, the data collected will be detailed in the findings to ensure completeness (Ahmed, 2025; Oluka, 2025). Due to the study context, all participants need to be based at organisations within South Africa.

Access to participants was gained through professional networks, referrals, and direct outreach to organisations affected by digital transformation, ensuring relational recruitment (Lim, 2025). The researcher contacted participants via email, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp when requested. Snowballing (Ahmed, 2025) was utilised by asking current participants for possible referrals to more participants when a participant had excellent insights from their organisation. Ahmed (2025) defines snowball sampling as an iterative, complementary strategy that builds upon an initial sampling set. Participation remained voluntary at all times, fostering authenticity and emotional openness (Oluka, 2025).

The selection criteria for participants were:

- Employed in an organisation directly affected by rapid digital transformation or predominantly tech-driven organisations.
- South African-based organisations ensure that the post-apartheid leadership context is considered.
- Participants must be leaders or employees of the organisation. Leaders must be a direct supervisor of a GenZ employee.
- Minimum of two years in the current organisation.
- Participants must consent to being interviewed on the specified topic and should agree to be recorded during that interview.

4.6. Measurement instrument

In research, measurement instruments are tools used to gather data in answering a research question (Ishtiaq, 2019). The researcher used interview guides and leveraged the five-step process content analysis developed by Terre Blanche et al. (2006). The five-step process is ideally suited to the study as it includes familiarisation with the study's findings, induction of themes, coding/thematic analysis, elaboration, and data interpretation and checking (Elo et al., 2008, adapted from Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

Additional tools used by the researcher include transcribing interview recordings and manually editing notes taken during the interviews, which help to ensure familiarity and accuracy of the data (Oluka, 2025). Transcripts were then used to categorise them

thematically. The data were sorted, interpreted, and assessed for quality (Lim, 2025; Oluka, 2025) before being noted in the findings chapter of the study.

The interview guide consists of high-level questions tailored to discuss the existence of CL within a tech-driven workforce in South Africa. The researcher developed the interview guide from the research questions posed in Chapter 3 of the study. Structured questioning was employed to fulfil the research objectives (Hartwell et al., 2019), focusing on first-person experiences of compassion in the workplace provided by leadership, the lack thereof, and the necessity to adopt CL as a leadership style in their organisation. This allowed the researcher to understand how leadership changed and adapted during transition periods, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for rapid tech adoption. The interview will conclude with a discussion of whether employees believe there is a necessity for CL in tech-driven workspaces and, if so, then why.

A pilot study was conducted prior to the actual data collection, using a participant who met the study's criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of the interview questionnaire and the data collected. A pilot interview is a trial run of the interview process used to test and refine the interview structure, questions, and data collection approach (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 160). The interview structure is Annexure One at the end of the study. While essential to the study's success, the pilot data will not be included in the final dataset.

4.7. Data gathering process

The data-gathering process outlines a step-by-step guide to collecting data for the study, including practical and ethical considerations (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, pp. 137–178). For this study, primary data collection involved semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, conducted virtually at the participants' request. Semi-structured interviews refer to interviews that are prepared with set questions, but can change depending on responses from the participants (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

The researcher adopted a directive style of questioning at the beginning of the interview and gradually transitioned to a more relaxed form of questioning once the participants were more comfortable. Directive questioning is when an interviewer controls the flow of conversation through specific and closed-ended questions (Wroe & Salkovskis, 2000).

Furthermore, the interviewer guided participants toward the necessary study topic response if a more precise answer or further clarification was needed during the interview (Oluka, 2025).

All interviews were recorded electronically with the participants' permission. Recording makes transcription easier and allows for further data dissection (Oluka, 2025), retracing the questioning and the answers received. Sub-questioning will be employed and form part of the interviews' post-directive questioning, defended by the need to maintain direction and openness with participants (Lim, 2025). The researcher kept an observation journal to note any visual observations outside the verbal interview, to document the non-verbal cues, and to be immersed in the participants' lived experiences (Oluka, 2025). Participants were provided with a handout that defined compassion and described CL, as well as other related concepts, prior to the commencement of interviews. These handouts built participant trust in the researcher (Rajasinghe et al., 2024) and fostered an environment of comfort with their knowledge of what is being covered (Oluka, 2025).

4.8. Data analysis approach

The data analysis approach is how the researcher makes sense of the data collected (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, pp. 184–213). The researcher's approach included ongoing analysis from the beginning of the study (Saunders & Lewis, 2018), enabling early detection of data saturation (Ahmed, 2025) and allowing the researcher to rework questioning as they immerse themselves in the richness of the data (Lim, 2025; Rajasinghe et al., 2024). Ongoing analysis further provided an opportunity for early pattern development and created a credibility platform in the analysis process (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

The researcher employed thematic analysis as the data analysis method, which is best suited for a qualitative, interpretivist, and inductive study (Ahmed, 2025). Thematic analysis is a process of identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns in data, which develops the themes for the study (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the data collection method (Oluka, 2025), encouraging participant to be open about their lived experiences. All interviews were recorded and

transcribed. Transcripts were manually reviewed and cleaned to ensure accuracy and resolve discrepancies.

Thematic analysis was conducted manually using Microsoft Excel, where data were coded, categorised and analysed iteratively (Lim, 2025), ensuring systematic and transparent analysis and establishing trustworthiness. Coding data refers to the structured organising or labelling of data findings to uncover and identify patterns and search for underlying meanings (Lim, 2025; Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 182).

Themes were generated from repeated patterns (Oluka, 2025), which were identified and later clustered where overlap or similarities occurred (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The conceptual frameworks and constructs highlighted in the research questions influenced the thematic clusters (Lim, 2025; Oluka, 2025). The data review was complete when visible patterns appeared and saturation was reached (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Data Confidentiality was practised and employed at every stage of the data-gathering process (Lim, 2025).

4.9. Research ethics

Research ethical considerations refer to the steps the researcher takes to ensure the research is conducted respectfully, is morally responsible and legally compliant (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 75). Additionally, the study method should ensure the safety, rights, and dignity of all participants.

The research study conducted involves leaders and employees of organisations, and the following core ethical principles were addressed for the study (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, pp. 75–84):

There must be informed consent. Informed consent means all participants must be well informed about the research purpose and what their participation entails, including any risks involved (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 135). All participants signed a copy of the consent form before any interviews were conducted, ensuring voluntary agreement to participate and absolving the researcher of any risks involved (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 135).

Secondly, there must be confidentiality and anonymity (Lim, 2025). Furthermore, all participant data must remain anonymous, including their names and organisations, to maintain trust and transparency. To maintain ethical standards and data confidentiality, the data will be stored securely and access restricted. Additional protection measures put in place were the use of pseudonyms in transcripts and reporting, as well as analysing and editing transcripts to remove any identifiers from the conversation (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

The third ethical consideration is voluntary participation (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, p. 135). Participants were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. All relevant information regarding voluntary participation was made clear in the consent form shared with participants (Lim, 2025).

The fourth consideration is compliance with data security, signifying that all data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and consent documents, will be stored on encrypted cloud-based drives, kept per the GIBS data protection policy, and retained for as long as legally required (Lim, 2025). All data has been stored in encrypted cloud drives in the researcher's personal capacity and will be uploaded to the GIBS drives as requested.

A final consideration made by the researcher is to provide for psychological sensitivity. Since the study involves lived experiences around work-life balance and leadership experiences, the researcher is prepared to pause or defer interviews if discomfort or distress occurs (Lim, 2025). The researcher purposely paused between questions to allow the participant a moment to reflect and continue when ready.

4.10. Quality controls

Quality controls are implemented to demonstrate credibility and trustworthiness in a study's findings (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, pp. 202–204). Controls such as credibility, verifiability, dependability, and transferability will be implemented and exercised to ensure the integrity and reliability of the data collected.

Credibility refers to the data being documented and interpreted accurately (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, pp. 202–204). In this study, credibility was established through a pilot study and continuous engagement with datasets throughout the data collection.

Dependability ensures the study is replicable through its findings and conclusions (Saunders & Lewis, 2018, pp. 202–204). To ensure dependability, the researcher will provide a rationale for the study, employ purposive sampling, maintain records of the interview process and any amendments, and keep a journal and reflexive notes on decisions and changes made.

The third quality control is verifiability, which will confirm if the researcher can provide evidence that the presented findings are the confirmed views of the study participants (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). To ensure verifiability, the researcher utilised direct quotes in data sets, acknowledged personal biases, and ensured the research supervisor reviewed the study.

Lastly, the researcher will ensure the study's transferability. Transferability is the ability of the study findings to apply to other groups or settings (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The study will provide a rich and detailed description of the context, constructs, and participant selection criteria, which can be easily distinguished from those of other participant groups and study settings.

4.11. Limitations

A study's limitations refer to potential factors that may affect its depth, breadth, and generalisability. The researcher usually has little control over these factors (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019; Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Possible limitations recognised in this study include subjectivity, limitations associated with purposive samples, research participant biases, contextual limitations, and imposed time constraints.

Qualitative research is inherently subjective; It emphasises depth and richness from lived experiences (Lim, 2025). Thus, the researcher's perspective will influence the thematic analysis and findings. Subjectivity refers to the perspectives, experiences, and

interpretations of the researcher and participants that construct meaning within qualitative inquiry (Oluka, 2025).

Subjectivity is not seen as a weakness, but rather a source of clarity, depth and reflexivity (Lim, 2025). The researcher acknowledged and regulated subjectivity through transparency, reflexivity and methodological consistency (Oluka, 2025). Leveraging deep, qualitative insights enabled the researcher to balance subjectivity rather than relying on large-scale generalisations.

Limitations associated with purposive samples stem from their non-random nature and reliance on the researcher's judgement, thereby limiting generalisability. Purposive sampling limitations refer to smaller, less generalised sample units (Oluka, 2025). It does, however, enable deep, context-specific insight from participants (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). The researcher used purposive sampling to ensure the most relevant participants were approached. Furthermore, the study sample did not include organisations and industries outside of South Africa. Thus, the researcher maintained the decision to use purposive sampling to gain information-rich experiences.

Participant bias occurs when participants consciously or unconsciously alter their responses to interview questioning, to exaggerate, alter or shape their answers (Lim, 2025). Participant bias is the possibility of skewed data based on individual perceptions and personal experiences (Lim, 2025). To mitigate the risk of personal bias, the researcher adopted a subjective perspective, prioritising meaning over objectivity.

Contextual limitations refer to the extent to which results are bound to the specific social, cultural, or temporal context in which data were collected. It does, however, enhance contextual depth and meaning (Opara & Petrucka, 2024). This study focused on post-apartheid, tech-driven workforce organisations in the South African context. This means the study did not apply to other cultural or organisational settings, both inside and outside of South Africa. To combat this limitation, the researcher kept interviews flexible and open-ended, allowing participants to share detailed, rich stories even when it led to less standardisation.

The final limitation identified in the study was time constraints. Imposed time constraints refer to practical restrictions, such as deadlines, limited access periods, that may affect data analysis or the depth of analysis (Ahmed, 2025). As a master's-level study, the university has imposed time constraints on the completion of the study, including the number of participants and data collection methods. To address these limitations, the researcher will focus on South African organisations directly impacted by the tech-driven workforce and digital technology adoption.

4.12. Conclusion

This Chapter outlined the methodological framework adopted for the study. An inductive qualitative research approach and an interpretivist philosophy guide the study's framework. The exploration of the perceptions and practices of CL within South African tech-driven workforces was conducted phenomenologically, using semi-structured interviews and purposive sampling to guide the research and yield rich context-specific data. Data were analysed thematically and ethically; existing limitations were identified as possible trade-offs for small, purposive, and deep sampling, including the embrace of the study's contextual grounds.

In this Chapter, we explored the research philosophy, then examined the research approach and the details of the study sample. It further detailed the data measurement and gathering process, along with the research ethics and quality controls in place. The methodology Chapter addresses the questions posed in Chapter 3 of the study. The next chapter will discuss the study's findings from semi-structured interviews conducted with rapidly changing, tech-driven organisations in South Africa.

5. CHAPTER FIVE- FINDINGS

5.1. Introduction to Findings

Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings of the study, derived from the 13 semi-structured interviews with employees and leaders across tech-driven organisations in South Africa. The aim was to explore how CL is experienced, perceived, practised and enacted in work environments shaped by rapid digital transformation, lingering post-apartheid dynamics and generational shifts.

The Chapter will describe the study sample and expand on the findings, using verbatim quotes to ensure credibility and transparency. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns, which were then used to categorise the findings according to the research questions posed in Chapter 3 of the study. Before moving on to the next Chapter, the researcher will conclude this one with a summary of the study's findings.

5.2. Sample Description

All participants were purposively selected to ensure that the data aligned with the research questions posed in Chapter 3 of this study. The data will be thematically presented and analysed. Verbatim quotes from participants will be used to validate the findings presented.

The sample comprised participants from diverse backgrounds and industries, such as IT services, consulting, telecommunications, and NGOs. Participants ranged from early-career employees with at least four years of work experience and two years in their current position, to senior employees with 20 years or more of experience and two years in their current position. One participant had recently changed roles, but their previous expertise fulfilled the criteria to partake. Generations were represented across the working age groups from GenZ to Millennials and GenX, enabling a rich exploration of perspectives and lived experiences on CL in tech-driven workplaces. Generation Z, known as GenZ, refers to persons born from 1995 (1999- (Mahmoud et al., 2021) to 2012 (Chen et al., 2023). Scholars typically define other generations, such as millennials, born 1982 to 1999, Generation X, born 1965 to 1981, and lastly Baby boomers, born 1946 to 1964, as varying workplace demands, mostly different to those of GenZ (Chen et al., 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2021). The sample included participants from various industries, generations, positions,

tenure, and organisational roles, which is tabulated for ease of perusal in Table 5.1 depicted below.

Table 5.1: Participant Profiles

Participant	Gender	Role	Industry Org Type	Self-ID	Work Arrangement	Current position	Generation
P1	M	IT Manager	Tech/Service	Leader	Hybrid	2 years	Gen X
P2	M	Senior Engineer	IT/Cloud/ Banking	Employee	Remote	4 years	Gen X
P3	M	Senior IT technician	Tech/Service	Both	Hybrid	5 years	Millennial
P4	M	Senior IT technician	Tech/Service	Leader	Hybrid - prefers onsite	1.5 years	Millennial
P5	M	Executive	Tech/Service	Leader	Hybrid- prefers onsite	10 years	Millennial
P6	F	Tech Trainer/ Engineer	Tech/ Healthcare	Leader	Remote- travel position	5 years	Millennial
P7	M	Senior management	Tech/Service	Leader	On-site	3.5 years	Millennial
P8	M	Director	Tech/Service	Leader	Hybrid	3 years	Millennial
P9	M	Director	Tech products and services	Leader	On-site	4 years	Gen X
P10	M	Technician	Tech Services	Employee	Hybrid- travel tech	5 years	Millennial
P11	M	Engineer	e-commerce /cloud computing	Employee	On-site	6 years	GenZ
P12	M	Executive	Tech products and advisory services	Leader	Hybrid	2 years	Gen X
P13	F	Executive	Non- Governmental Organisation	Leader	Hybrid	2 years	Millennial

Table 5.1 provides an overview of the 13 participants in the study. The sample was purposively selected to include employees from different organisational working tiers and industries, ranging from early-career professionals to senior and executive employees. Tenure ranged from 1.5 to 10 years in their current positions, and they represented multiple generational cohorts, including Gen X, Millennials, and GenZ. The work arrangements also highlighted post-COVID effects on work environments, including on-site full-time, hybrid, and remote contexts.

The diverse sample of participants provided the researcher with rich insights into the perceptions and expectations of CL within tech-driven environments. The term ‘participant’ will be abbreviated to the letter ‘P’ and will include the related participant number when referring to participant accounts, reflections, or verbatim quotes.

5.3. Findings of The Study

The study’s thematic analysis was manually conducted in Microsoft Excel and grouped in direct correlation with the research questions. This section will discuss these findings in that order below. The key emerging themes, along with their subthemes, are tabulated in Table 5.2 below.

Table 5.2: Key Themes

Theme 1	Compassion&Performance	Theme 5	Generational Dynamics
	compassion as a motivator for for performance		Generational experiences
	compassion limited by workplace ethics		Generational tensions
	compassion is tokenistic		learning across generations
Theme 2	Ubuntu and organisational culture	Theme 6	Post Apartheid legacy
	inclusion and belonging from an Ubuntu lens		racial distrust and leadership sensitivity
	teamwork and accountability		Transformation and change
	Ubuntu in small vs large organisations		Healing the legacy
Theme 3	Tech-driven challenges	Theme 7	Leadership styles and effect on compassion
	stress and fear lined to technology		Collaborative ad relational leaders
	adaptation to technology		Directive and transactional leaders
	automation and the human connection		Adaptive and situational leaders
Theme 4	Employee Well-being and engagement	Theme 8	Compassion in practice
	leadership responsibility		Everyday acts of support and understanding
	Flexible work and work-life balance		Flexibility and practical accommodation
	Stress, burnout and organisational pressures		Balancing care and accountability

The study produced eight key themes, indicating that the data collected was very rich and valuable. These themes will be expanded upon using the research questions as a guide to their value. Verbatim quotes from participants of this study will be used to confirm the findings discussed in this Chapter.

Main research question

How is compassionate leadership experienced, perceived and practised in tech-driven workforces in South Africa?

This question sought to understand how participants perceived and interpreted CL in their day-to-day work. Insights were gathered from both employees and leaders, revealing varied and layered interpretations. Key themes relevant to these questions included: Compassion and performance, Ubuntu and organisational culture, and Compassion in practice.

5.4. Theme 1: Compassion and performance

The recurring tensions between compassion and performance emerged as a key theme in the findings. The sub-themes that form this theme include compassion as a motivator for performance, compassion limited by workplace ethics, and compassion as a tokenistic gesture.

The participants described leaders as trying to show empathy and employee support when organisational demands required it. Pressure to perform and meet deadlines meant that compassion was often expressed verbally but rarely translated into tangible action. The following participant statements were selected to highlight the theme:

Leaders say take time off, but the pile of work is waiting when you come back (P11).

It's not like we're the kind of organisation that just fires people when they make mistakes or struggle, but at the same time, people still need to deliver; there's work that needs to get done (P1).

Several participants noted that compassion was evident in provisions for employees regarding parental duties or religious obligations, but that deadlines and organisational pressures continued (P2). P12 further stated:

If you are only compassionate, people take advantage. If you are only performance-driven, people burn out. I often have to rein myself in so people are not burned out.

A notable number of participants argue that compassion increases motivation in the workplace and ultimately enhances employee performance. They describe compassion as a motivational factor that encourages employees to exceed expectations, thereby reducing employee turnover and enhancing overall organisational culture. Most participants agreed that leadership is about balance:

The whole aim is to be a compassionate leader, but to still chase results (P5)

You can't have a situation where you only care and nothing gets done, but at the same time, if you push for targets all the time, you lose people.

It's about finding that balance - being compassionate and still expecting delivery (P5).

You can sustain performance if people are burnt out or disengaged. Compassion is what keeps people going. It's not about being soft, it's about understanding that we're all human and that's how you keep performance long-term (P13).

Leaders from the interview sample framed compassion as part of a leadership toolbox, used to build and retain trust and commitment and secure pure employee effort that goes deeper than surface-level pressures alone. Furthermore, participants stated:

People stay when they feel valued, when they're treated well. You can't demand performance from someone who doesn't trust you or feels invisible. Compassion builds that trust, and that's when they give their best (P9).

Yes, I am one of those leaders. I may be compassionate, but I live by a 24-hour rule. My team knows your boss will always look after you as long as you're doing your dues (P8).

Especially at year-end, performance outweighs compassion. We had a case where a user was told she didn't do her job, even though we knew she was stumbling. The leader eventually mediated with compassion, but only after performance had been questioned (P6).

Notably, when accounts are examined from the perspective of a leader rather than an employee, they demonstrate how deadlines and anticipated outcomes may undermine acts of compassion or similar gestures. These uncertainties lead participants to question the authenticity of the compassion offered. Consequently, it gives the impression that such actions are merely expected gestures, rather than an authentic means of alleviating distress.

All participants interviewed recognised compassion as valuable in workspaces, but none described it in a way that overrode the need to meet performance targets. Most participants shared examples of how and where leaders offered compassion through support while simultaneously reinforcing deadlines and accountability. While accountability was not always placed on the affected employee, it was always placed elsewhere.

To conclude, participants consistently described compassion as important and necessary. Employees, however, sometimes saw it as manipulative in practice rather than transformational. Leaders seemed to use it as a performance enabler, yet constraints like deadlines often overshadowed its effectiveness. Although experiences varied, the tension between compassion and performance shaped both trust and frustration in the workplace, making it a prominent theme among participants.

5.5. Theme 2: Ubuntu and organisational culture

The second central theme to emerge was Ubuntu and its role in shaping organisational culture. The sub-themes that formed it were inclusion and belonging from an Ubuntu lens, as well as teamwork, accountability and Ubuntu in small versus large organisations.

Participants described Ubuntu as a guiding value, mostly embedded at an individual level but creating an environment of collective responsibility, inclusion and belonging. The

dataset consistently shows how participants linked Ubuntu to current leadership practices. One participant linked Ubuntu to the flat organogram structure, while Others noted:

*Our Slogan is 'the road is longer than it is wide'. It reflects Ubuntu!
We walk together, not alone (P3).*

*Ubuntu for me means creating spaces where people feel they
belong. Leaders must treat people as human beings, not just
employees (P8).*

A reflection by P1 has described how their organisation extends Ubuntu beyond the employee in their professional capacity. Extending care to include an employee's community reinforces and internalises their sense of belonging.

*When we do our end-of-year or wellness events, we invite families,
because that's how you build community (P1).*

Participants also often linked Ubuntu to the foundation of teamwork, working as a unit towards shared success. Alongside the concepts of belonging and inclusion, Ubuntu was described as a reminder to employees that no one is left to struggle alone, just as no one can succeed alone. Responsibility is carried collectively as a team. Participant reflections included:

*I lead in a sense of no man gets left behind, we are only as strong
as our weakest link. By supporting growth, we are future-proofing
(P8).*

P13 further supports this statement, stating:

*Any individual aligns directly with Ubuntu. A person is a person
because of others. It runs through how we do things; it permeates
culture (P13).*

Reflections from these participants showcase Ubuntu as a form of collective accountability, where both leaders and employees recognise that challenges and progress are tackled together. However, Ubuntu was practised and experienced differently in varied sizes of organisations. Participants mentioned:

In large organisations, if you're not making it, you're replaced. In a small one, you execute truly on Ubuntu, because of the next person, and vice versa (P13).

P1 reinforced P13's narrative, noting that their CEO used small gestures, such as individually greeting every employee by name every day, and even providing a free counselling session when needed. These distinct human interactions are what set small organisations apart from the more impersonal interactions associated with larger organisations.

5.6. Theme 3: Compassion in practice

A lesser-mentioned theme, but no less important, was the leader's practice of compassion. The sub-themes that emerged in developing this theme were everyday acts of support and understanding, flexibility and practical accommodation and balancing care and accountability. The data shows that compassion in leadership needs to be visible in behaviour rather than expressed through words or in policies on paper.

Participants recognised compassion in moments when leaders took time to listen to them and adjusted expectations. It was also recognised through practical and achievable support when employees faced professional or even personal difficulties. P8 describes compassion in leadership as "attentive".

I think compassion starts with the individual itself. If you lack compassion, you can't teach it or you can't experience it (P8).

*The more compassion you have, the more success you reach.
....And to actually look out more for the staff than they look out for themselves, because that's the most important thing (P8).*

P8's emphasis on attentiveness highlights the importance of incorporating compassion in daily interactions rather than as a formal or structured event. Furthermore, Several participants shared acts of care demonstrated by their leaders:

P3 shared a personal story about his son breaking an arm at school on a day when a very important client meeting was scheduled. Rather than being stressed out by the situation, his supervisor relieved him of his duties, took control of the meeting and allowed him time off to care for his son. Similarly, P9 shared an example in which his line manager rescheduled deadlines after a core team member had a family emergency, exclaiming how this act "made everyone realise people come first".

Participants described compassion as flexibility. P6 said they felt supported when a leader was informed of their struggling and quietly asked if they were okay. No formality, not in a meeting or publicly, but in the timing and tone of enquiring. The flexibility demonstrated by leaders is commendable when they adjust expectations; expressions of compassion are then seen as effective.

Affirming that compassion is most meaningful when translated into actions that bring relief. P1 described how managers reallocated tasks during demanding periods to reduce the pressure on teams.

It's not a tool, it's not a machine, and it's not a car. You have to think about who the people in this person's life are and what is happening with them right now (P1).

He explained that effective leaders recognise employees as human beings, which drew attention to a statement from another participant on overextending themselves for their employees:

It has put some emotional drainage on me. But I do obviously reflect by going to church, getting a counselling session every now and then, or just checking on my mental well-being because it's very important (P8).

P8's reflection affirms the need for balance of care and accountability in being a compassionate leader. When referring to effective leaders, P12 maintained that leaders should "care, but still keep the team moving. You can't let empathy stop progress". His statement suggests that compassion still requires structure and guidance, and that compassion without accountability will end in uneven workloads and unfairness.

Flexibility and fairness are key indicators of supportive leadership, according to participants. Compassion cannot take place through statement or grand gesture alone; participants confirm that action and presence are the most significant measures of a leader who truly cares.

Sub-Research Question One

What is the influence of CL on employee trust and emotional well-being in a tech-driven workforce in South Africa?

This question aimed to explore the influence of CL on building and retaining employee trust as well as on the emotional well-being of the modern workforce in rapidly changing, tech-driven environments. The findings led to two key themes: employee well-being and engagement, and the post-apartheid legacy in organisational identity.

5.7. Theme 4: Employee Well-Being and Engagement

Employee well-being remained at the forefront of discussions regarding effective leadership and sustainable performance. Several participants recognised a shift in the balance between employee engagement and productivity, from leaders' active support and recognition. This key theme was developed through sub-themes exploring leadership responsibility, flexible work and work-life balance, as well as stress, burnout, and organisational pressures.

The participants further noted several wellness practices within their organisations, including flexible work environments, regular check-ins and counselling support. They all agreed that these small measures were tangible ways to reduce burnout and foster employee-leader engagement. On the other hand, participants highlighted how environmental pressures, such as deadlines, make it challenging to prioritise employee well-being.

If someone goes through something, like a loss or a breakdown, the organisation will pay for their first counselling session. We've done that before; it's part of looking after people (P1).

Similarly, P3 described their leaders' efforts to conduct daily check-ins with all staff, ensuring they inquire about their personal well-being and professional lives, without seeming to pry.

Based on participants' accounts, it is apparent that responsibility for employee well-being consistently lies with organisational leaders. Several participants indicated that it was not merely a human resources initiative, but rather the day-to-day practice of leaders and their interactions with their teams. P12 provided a more nuanced perspective:

I think if you are highly compassionate and only compassionate, people take advantage of it. So it's about how you strike the balance of saying this needs to be done, but let's re-share, let's re-look at your workload so that it eases your staff. That's compassion and performance output because you can't overwork people at [sic] their own detriment. And then you have people who are burned out. I have to rein myself in quite often to make sure people are not being burned out (P12).

All reflections on leadership's interaction with employees regarding care and compassion were shared so willingly and comfortingly that it is evident that leadership can make or break employee wellness initiatives. Several participants linked flexible work environments and the ability to balance professional and personal lives comfortably to their own well-being in the workplace.

The term 'flexible' in this context refers to the trust placed in employees to complete their duties outside the work environment, beyond set working hours, and without micromanagement. Trust was the foundation of hybrid work environments following the COVID-19 pandemic, according to P1. Who emphasised,

We work in a hybrid way. It requires a lot of trust. You can't be watching the clock; it's about delivery. As long as people are delivering, we don't have an issue (P1).

P2 had similar reflections on the flexibility provided by leaders when they stated,

If someone needs to do the school run or fetch their kids, we accommodate that. Managers are quite flexible about those things, as long as the work gets done (P2).

Creating room for needs like school runs for parents is a recognition by leaders of the personal roles employees play and their individual circumstances. For P1 and P2, respect and autonomy were gained from the trust placed in the flexibility of duties and environments, both of which contributed to increased emotional and mental well-being.

A comment by P5 looked at the limits of what could be offered in terms of well-being. When employees are intrinsically motivated by financial survival rather than passion and engagement. Flexibility can do very little to relieve pressure or resolve any well-being-related issues.

Despite the growing pressure to create work environments that recognise and support employee well-being, participants acknowledged that daily organisational pressures make this difficult to maintain and achieve. Lack of resources, deadlines, and high workloads are breeding grounds for stress, fatigue, and emotional distress, particularly during busy periods.

P6 highlighted how performance demands at specific points were prioritised over compassion:

Especially when it comes to year-end, you see a lot more focus on performance than actually compassion (P6).

P6 further discussed a case in which a user was told she didn't do her job, even though they knew she was stumbling. This scenario illustrates how high-pressure environments sometimes lead to a lack of support for employees, even when leaders are aware of the challenges they face. Similarly, P11 reflected on how certain well-intended gestures quickly go south when the workload or time periods are not adjusted accordingly.

You take leave, but you feel like you're taking leave, which you've actually earned, is almost like getting yourself down because you come back and you end up with a mountain pile of work (P11).

An account by P9 added that when trust was present, communication was open and transparent. Employees were more willing to voice their challenges and seek assistance, rather than internalise them, in environments that were less hostile and more engaging.

The findings under this theme suggest that while leaders value employee well-being, with some making a visible effort to mainstream it, organisational pressures and workloads can erode these intentions and challenge their actualisation. Finding the balance between compassion and accountability evidently remains a challenge for leaders and organisations in this study.

5.8. Theme 5: Post-Apartheid Legacy in Organisational Identity

1.2.1. Post-apartheid legacy in organisational identity

South Africa's post-apartheid history has continued to influence leadership behaviour in the country. Participants reflected on the organisational identity and the distrust of leadership arising from this history. They further noted the resulting legacies of racial division, unequal opportunity and access to resources, schooling, and work. For several participants in the study, the history and aftereffects of apartheid were not confined to the past, but rather embedded in everyday work life, influencing how people collaborate, communicate, and are led.

In this context, leadership was not just a control function but a moral and social corrector that carries significant weight. Participants positioned CL as a relevant response to historical wounds, aimed at rebuilding trust in structures of authority and returning dignity

to workplaces as they navigate the boundaries of transformation. Other key ideas reflected upon by participants include empathy and sensitivity, while maintaining fairness and inclusion; thus preventing division and unnecessary hierarchies.

While some participants mentioned their organisations have moved beyond post-apartheid issues like distrust and racism, many others agreed that South Africa's past continues to haunt its people and influences the expectations placed on leaders to overcompensate for the associated emotional challenges. This theme was developed through the exploration of three key sub-themes: racial distrust and leadership sensitivity, transformation and change and healing the legacy.

Several interviews concluded with discussions on post-apartheid legacies. One of the most prominent concerns participants reflected on was racial trust and sensitivity in leadership and their relationships with employees. Key reflections were made on the historical inequalities from the apartheid era that continue to shape perceptions of fairness and competence in the workplace. Trust was difficult to earn, given that race, language, and culture were often used as measures of competence.

Ongoing barriers in leadership credibility and confidence, as described by P2:

You can be qualified and experienced, but because of your skin colour...There's still that distrust, saying, can you trust this person with this particular position? It's difficult to completely trust your boss, especially if your boss is not from your same race or culture (P2).

His narrative of the experience centred around how the workplace dynamics might be changing and adapting, but the transformation has not been smooth. He added that there was always someone who felt they had authority over others due to their privileged background. P1 echoed these sentiments when stating:

It's understood and acknowledged (post-apartheid tensions). There's always an element of sensitivity around, remember there's

also this part that needs to be considered, before we even take any step (P1).

To provide context, the conversation centred on the post-apartheid workplace and alluded to the fact that leadership decisions in their organisation were consciously made to consider the country's social history and be more ethical and sensitive. Similarly, P10 reflected as a black male looking in on their shared racial and cultural experiences in the organisation.

In teams where most people are black, there is a sense of camaraderie. We understand the struggle. But in a team full of white males, that doesn't exist. There are cliques, and you can feel the separation (P10).

His lived experience is evidence of the influence of historical events on trust and a sense of belonging. These employee reflections illustrate how leaders are expected to exhibit moral awareness and competence outside of technical capabilities. This requires leadership transformation.

A few participants described transformation as an ongoing, complex process. They echoed that the lengthy process stems from the history of inequality and the limited remediation efforts thus far. While organisations have made efforts to become racially diverse, participants questioned whether transformation is embedded more deeply than surface-level representation, or whether current transformation efforts address deeper issues around fairness and empowerment.

P12 offered one of the most nuanced accounts of transformation being a challenge within organisations:

You have leaders who might not be respected because of being a different race, or black women might not be held accountable for fear of being called racist. Leadership has to change over time because you have more women in the organisation, which means

you have to be a lot more feminist, but placing a black person with a white person is not a transformation. Transformations is skills as well (P12).

P12 managed to capture both the practical complexity and moral tension seeded within transformation. To heal from structural inequality, leaders must confront bias without falling victim to tokenism or avoidance. A related concern shared by P2 is that some employees still carry a sense of entitlement rooted in their historical privilege. This created a toxic environment where others felt forced to prove themselves beyond measure or qualifications. He describes the ongoing discomfort as:

Still learning how to trust across race and culture (P2).

Affirming that transformation is as much a psychological process as it is a physical action. In addition to transformation, P1 refers to “organisational sensitivity” in leaders’ decision-making on addressing inequity and maintaining cohesion. He further added that transformation conversations are difficult and require careful handling, even if understood and acknowledged. Transformation will always be emotionally charged.

Several participants noted a visible change in dynamics, aside from the persistent racial tension and mistrust, as new generations enter the workforce. Post-apartheid legacies affected them differently, and thus, they experience workplaces as more inviting and inclusive. Older generations, still haunted by the memory of injustice, carry its emotional distress in their daily duties.

You can see the hurt in these kinds of people... they saw and felt the unfairness of it. It predates the younger generation (P13).

P13 emotionally shared that while the residue of apartheid still exists within workplaces, younger generations are not emotionally attached to the injustices since they did not directly suffer its constraints.

In contrasting reflections, P4 and P5 both describe their workplaces as fully diverse. P5 stated that:

It's never really been an issue; we've always been quite a diverse organisation (P5).

Similarly, a younger-generation employee, P4, noted that cultural and religious diversity formed part of everyday life. These reflections align with the sentiment that post-apartheid legacies are less evident in their environments. However, they still inform the structural base of inclusivity and mutual respect within working teams. P8 reinforced the sense of collective healing amongst the younger workforce with a reflection on Ubuntu:

Ubuntu, for me, is about making people feel like they belong. That they're not just numbers on a payroll. As leaders, we need to see people as people, not just as employees who come to do a job (P8).

Collectively, participants' reflections imply that generational change was associated with healing and adaptation. While older participants bore the lingering scars of apartheid, younger employees appear to be embodying an era of new leadership, characterised by equality, empathy and coexistence.

The consensus amongst participants is that transformation remains incomplete; it is an unfinished project that demands courage and compassion. They suggested that fundamental transformation should not merely be representation, but also include redistribution of trust, providing a platform for people to voice themselves and an opportunity to be who they want to be within the organisation.

Sub-Research Question Two

How did the onset of GenZ and increased technological adoption influence leadership behaviour and expectations?

This sub-question sought to explore how the onset of GenZ in the workplace and the increased necessity to adopt technological changes rapidly affected leadership

behaviours. It further explores how leadership behaviours were influenced by these changes and the variations in expectations of then versus now.

5.9. Theme 6: Tech-driven Challenges

Developed around the sub-themes of stress and fear associated with technology, adaptation to technology, and the human connection in the context of automation, this theme explores the challenges of technology in the workplace for both employees and leaders. Participants interpreted the introduction of new technologies as unsettling. They always knew that technology would evolve and that people would need to adapt to it for efficiency, sustainability and competitiveness, but it also instilled fear and insecurity.

Older employees were particularly anxious and fearful of being replaced or becoming redundant when automation started to take over their work. *P13 explained the anxiety that was triggered:*

When technology comes in, it invokes fear for many people. They start feeling like their purpose or their role is being taken away. That's when leadership has to step in, to be present, to help people see where they fit in and not feel worthless or afraid (P13).

Her reflection highlights the perceived threat employees face in being replaced by technology, emphasising the importance of CL to assist employees in transitioning, rather than blindly enforcing technology on them. Several participants made the same connection between technology and stress; P6 observed that technology-driven pressure intensified at specific points, leading to a decrease in CL.

Especially when it comes to like year-end, you see a lot more focus on performance than actually the compassion (P6).

Participants recognised that digital transformation was a necessary step toward organisational competitiveness and efficiency. However, deadlines and closures compound stress, making technology an added burden to employees as compassion wanes.

The data shows apparent generational differences in how employees and leaders adapted to technology and the changes it brought about. Older colleagues remain unsettled by digital systems and paperless environments. By contrast, younger employees were quite comfortable with change and more flexible in responding to demands and amendments. P13 highlights the difficulty faced by senior staff:

Older people struggle when everything becomes data-driven; they miss the human touch. As a leader, you have to be accommodating, give them time, build confidence, because it's a slower journey for them (P13).

This statement highlights the challenges faced and the importance of leaders responding with kindness, patience, and empowerment. Several participants confirmed the divide between generations and the adoption of technology. P2 noted that younger employees would more likely demand the flexibility and resources to adapt to system changes, while older staff would, with great difficulty, try to keep up with demands as they arise. This contrast placed strain on leaders to adapt to the demands of the young while guiding older staff to balance innovation with inclusivity.

These accounts collectively illustrate how digital transformation was received and experienced differently. Generational positioning, particularly age, influenced how employees engaged with the changes.

Several participants described the risk of automation undermining the need for humanistic leadership. Concerns included:

We rely so much on systems now, everything is automated from emails to data tracking. But the human element can get lost. That's where compassion becomes critical; it reminds people they still matter (P1).

You have to be flexible with clients; you can't just be stuck with one solution. Each client is different, so you adjust as you go along (P3).

These participant accounts express direct concern with how technology alone cannot sustain an organisational culture or employee well-being. Leaders need to step up and compensate for the loss of human connectedness during and post-technological transitions by intentionally practising and modelling compassion. Participants expect themselves as leaders to maintain a balance, ensuring that digital progress grows at the same rate as human connectedness, and inclusion is emphasised.

Personally, I believe in the upside-down organogram based on experience. I believe for the foreseeable future it's required, it's necessary. The days of militaristic-like leadership are over. I believe they are over. Did they have a place, and in certain aspects, do they have a place now? Yes, they did, and yes, it was. But the world is different now. But ultimately, leaders have to make decisions. So you will go through the process. You need to go through the process of understanding, taking feedback. It will influence your decision. But ultimately, you're going to make a decision with all perspectives and you're not going to make everybody happy. So you need to be comfortable to make a decision for a particular direction. But at the same time, you are not the cleverest person in the room (P13).

To conclude, the theme recognised that participants see technology adoption as both necessary and disruptive within their organisations and daily duties. For some, it was a source of anxiety; generational differences meant that older staff found it more stressful, and they feared being replaced by it. Simultaneously, participants warned that technology risked erasing the much-needed human touch in leadership and employee relationships, making adaptability and compassion more essential than ever.

5.10. Theme 7: Generational Dynamics

Another key emerging theme from the dataset is the effects of generational dynamics on communication, work behaviour and leadership expectations. All participants recognised that their workplaces comprised various generations, and most had at least three generational sets currently. Each generation comes with its own strengths and quirks, as

well as distinct attitudes toward technology, leadership, hierarchy, and terms of engagement.

Several participants observed the behaviours of younger employees and how they prioritised autonomy, flexibility and psychological comfort over job security and financial gains, whereas older generations emphasised loyalty, accountability and the maintenance of organisational structure. The differences in employee priorities have often forced leadership to adapt its style to accommodate the diverse preferences of its employees.

I think it is important for us to navigate those generational changes and understand the aspects and the like. I think I'm in the middle at the moment where you do have some of the, like a high, an older generation, and they may need you to assist them or kind of like lead them into different aspects. But being able to help them understand and navigate certain aspects, especially in a tech, like in certain of the tech driven approaches is that, you have that process where you kind of need to step back and understand that they may not understand a certain aspect and just being able to slow down so that you can show that and like process that aspect within that time and being able to just understand where the challenges are and again take that time to listen and actually then move towards solutions (P9).

Many noted that fear and stress from rapid technological adoption affected their ability to lead or to provide adequate support. Others noted the generational challenges: older staff are averse to technological change, while younger staff are too tech-savvy to work on-site or adapt to the organisation's current level of technological change. Others described how leaders struggled to create a balance between tech-driven efficiency and human connection.

Generational changes are something that cannot be changed. Remember, it comes and is experienced as it is. But leadership tactics and traits can change to suit each generation, if you want to

call it that. I believe that your leadership style or the information you have should be adjusted towards the generation you are basically servicing or managing. You can't expect to run a millennial or GenZ on a Boomer-type of structure (P8).

New generation lifestyle is completely, completely different from ours. And if you are coming with your traditional way of leadership, where you believe that even the communication hierarchy goes from top to bottom and everything, you will definitely have a challenge, will frustrate the young ones and also will be frustrated as the elder ones in leadership positions. So we need to balance that (P2).

Participants also noted the opportunity for inter-generational learning, suggesting that empathy and collaboration could bridge the divides between them. Leaders need to learn to speak across generations rather than addressing each group separately. Thus, they can bridge the divide and create space for mutual understanding, and remove stereotypes and hierarchies. This theme will explore how generational diversity affects compassion, relational aspects and continuation of organisations.

According to the data, employees from different generations had contrasting expectations of leadership and organisational culture. Older employees seemed to value hierarchy, clear direction and consistency, while younger employees demanded more flexibility, open communication and autonomy. Younger employees tend to seek more comfort and freedom, rather than rigid supervision:

You can see with the younger ones, they like flexibility. They don't want to be sitting in traffic for two hours; they'd rather log on and do the work. They're also big on comfort; they want to feel good where they are. If leaders don't understand that, you lose them quickly (P2).

This reflection by P2 suggests that leaders were compelled to gradually shift away from traditional command-and-control management structures toward more adaptable and empathetic approaches. P13 echoed these sentiments, suggesting that leadership development needed to evolve to welcome the generational change:

Future leaders will have to learn from the newer generation instead of trying to manage them. You're going into environments that are already self-managed, where people expect autonomy and input (P13).

Essentially, P13 views the younger generations as catalysts for transforming leadership, challenging now-ancient norms and introducing a new era of trust, inclusion and collaboration.

Generational diversity has been portrayed both as a challenge and as a source of renewal. Participants are aware of and accept that different generations expect and value varied leadership traits, but all agree that workplaces are shifting toward an empowerment model rather than a control model.

Generational diversity has been recognised, and there is value in the contrasting expectations, but participants also noted the attendant tensions. Generational differences led to variations in values and expectations. In some hierarchical structures, participants have recognised that diversity often leads to misunderstandings, tensions, frustrations and communication mishaps within teams and organisations. Attitudinal differences toward authority have occasionally resulted in friction between younger employees and older-generation leadership.

P6 reflected on his need to manage people differently at individual levels during a conversation around newer generations entering the workplace, because of the noticeable shift in “personalities and attitudes”. Similarly, P13 highlighted contrasts between technologically averse older generations versus younger employees who embrace technology, which also necessitates a shift in leadership styles. She mentioned that technology unsettles older staff and that:

Future leaders need to learn from the newer generation, rather than trying to manage (P13).

These reflections demonstrate that, on both ends of the generational spectrum, tensions exist that require different approaches. The need for different management styles can cause tension for leaders who are stretched trying to maintain a peaceful work culture, and may seem to favour some employees. While trying to adapt, older-generation employees may perceive these adaptations as unfair and overly lenient, which can create tensions among employees.

A reflection by P11 on leaders compassionately suggesting employees take time off, yet not ensuring the workload does not pile up while they are away, reveals a generational frustration around responsibility and follow-through. Leaders are making promises to prioritise well-being, but are not simultaneously creating environments to successfully incubate these gestures. Younger employee participants feel that leniency for rest and recuperation should be a priority, unlike older employees, who will often just get the work done and suffer in silence.

These participant accounts all agree that generational divides have frequently led to frustration and misunderstanding, requiring leaders to rethink their practices and adjust their management styles and employee expectations. Being a compassionate leader with a multi-generational team is not just about empathy; it also involves learning from them to develop the skill of identifying and mediating between differing workplace ideologies and general values.

Participants recognised the potential for mutual learning from the generational tensions and expectations. By viewing the generational divide as an opportunity for growth, collaboration and innovation rather than a breeding ground for sorrow and conflict, participants believe that workplace leadership and culture can evolve. The idea deeply reflected by P13 is that:

Leaders today need to work across generations; you can't relate to people your age or your kind of thinking. You have to speak to different experiences, different backgrounds. That's the only way to bridge the gap (P13).

This suggests that to lead effectively, leaders must adopt humility and empathy as management styles.

P13 further discussed the political and social evolution in South Africa, highlighting how lessons from the country's transition from apartheid to democracy offer helpful insights into how leaders can engage diverse groups. He emphasised the importance of leadership in embodying the values of forgiveness and openness, thereby enabling respectful coexistence among different employees.

Another relevant point was raised by P3, who emphasised the responsibility of new generation leaders to step up:

Leaders today need to step up and look at what new generations bring to the table. We have to learn from them, instead of always telling them what to do (P3).

His reflection resonates with the earlier points on leaders needing to lead with humility and shared leadership. He emphasises a key factor: influence is a two-way street, and once embraced, it becomes a powerful tool of engagement.

Expanding the idea of intergenerational learning, P13 underlined the need for future leaders to "learn from newer generations". She emphasised that a shift toward a more autonomous and collaborative form of management was necessary, offering an opportunity to redefine leadership.

Similarly, P2 observed how leadership styles evolved and practices changed in response to shifting employee needs. Young-generation employees' expectations of flexibility and

autonomy have prompted a mindset shift among leaders, creating previously unavailable room for growth.

All we have to do is that come Monday we sit down, we have our planning session for the week, give deadline, say this is what I'm going to deliver by Friday, that's it, we end there, come Friday, I'll have to deliver. If not, I would have to notify you. So most managers find it difficult for them because they don't understand exactly how they should now operate when they have to. Not to manage their employees, but manage their work. So I think that's the biggest change I would recommend that when you train managers, train them to manage the work (P2).

The findings from the Generational Dynamics theme revealed that generational diversity has shaped leadership practices and expectations within the organisations studied. The participants gave clear illustrations of the contrasting work environments that different generations expect. The focus remained on younger generations seeking autonomy, flexibility and more accessible terms of engagement, whereas previous generations did not, and followed a more structured approach to management. These differences created instances of tension and misunderstanding, requiring a change in leadership approach.

Sub-Research Question Three

How is compassionate leadership perceived in relation to other leadership approaches and future generational needs in tech-driven environments?

The purpose of this question was to uncover how compassionate leadership is perceived under current leadership approaches compared with more traditional leadership approaches, and the effects of future general needs in tech-driven environments on these perceptions.

5.11. Theme 8: Leadership Styles and the Effect on Compassion

Leadership styles and the effect on compassion

The final theme in the analysis of the data was leadership styles and the effect on compassion. The development of which was derived from three sub-themes: Collaboration

and relational leaders, Directive and transactional leaders and Adaptive and situational leaders. Participants were able to describe their leaders in various terms and styles, reflecting on their communication approaches, people management abilities and even their tone in engagement. These differences affected how compassion was experienced in these organisations. Some genuinely care, others are more fair and balanced, and the rest are performance and accountability-oriented. Several participants expressed pride in how their leaders led with empathy and fostered collaboration, while others described a more transactional, directive leadership experience.

Leadership is often linked to an individual's personality and character. Participants explained that leaders who are easy to talk to and consistent in their ethical behaviour are perceived as trustworthy and more supportive. They also noted that authoritative or hierarchical leaders showed less compassion, and when they did, it was more often perceived as being conditional or strategically performative. Leadership was depicted as a critical factor in shaping workplace relationships during the study. These relationships led to more motivated, engaged and satisfied employees.

We can see, especially with GenZ coming about, there's a different way of thinking, culture and like sort of vibe or aura amongst them. So yeah, I think, with leadership style, they obviously have to take that into consideration, evolve so we can get to understand them a bit better. So yeah, I think they have to be aligned with that, and like things are not the same as they were before. And I think in a lot of environments we see that, like things change the way people operate or do things or think changes. So leaders will have to be open to that and cater for it too (P1).

You can't just give them and let them go. You have to walk the road with them. Which is a different thing compared to the way we were trained, where you were just given a task and had to figure it out. And as much as I would want to do that sometimes because it's so time-intensive, I don't think it's going to happen. So it's being, you

know, being a lot more attentive to their needs, overly empathetic (P12).

People-focused and relational is how several participants described their leaders. They highlighted communication, empathy and collaboration as essential components of effective leaders. They perceived leaders who engaged with employees on a personal level and fostered open communication platforms as leaders who aspire to build teams that are stronger, more motivated and willing to stay longer.

When one of us fails, the team feels it (P8).

Participants connected employees through shared responsibility. He also mentioned that Ubuntu is about carrying each other through the work, alluding to a sense of collective responsibility. Leaders should be grounded in teamwork and mutual respect, rather than micro-management or complete control.

P3 also emphasised the importance of responsiveness for effective relational leaders. He noted that leaders need to adapt flexibly to client needs and avoid being rigidly attached to a single solution. While his statement focused externally on client servicing, it highlights essential leadership skills such as listening, trust, and adjusting to meet people at their level with flexibility rather than being the know-it-all.

Similarly, both P12 and P13 noted that accountability and empathy must be equally important to a leader. They respectively stated that if you are only compassionate, people take advantage. If you are only performance-driven, people burn out, and

Leadership is about humility. It is about stepping into someone else's shoes and understanding before judging (P13).

Their reflections illustrate that leadership is a shared human experience that seeks to sustain connection while maintaining clear boundaries on business and ensuring fairness across the board.

Collectively, these participants framed leadership as human interaction, togetherness rather than authority. They associated relational leadership with flexibility, attentiveness, the ability to build strong individuals and teams through trust and engagement, rather than relying on formal authority or asserting control.

Most participants valued compassion, empathy and collaboration in leaders, but for some, leadership was observed to be more directive and transactional. While the exact terms were not used, characteristics such as efficiency, measurable outputs, KPI's and deadlines were the key terms used to describe their leaders. Participants across the various industries represented in this study all fully appreciated the importance of structure and control; however, they noted that excessive control might limit employee engagement and reduce the level of care provided.

Participants acknowledged that directive leadership might be pragmatic when necessary, such as during periods of peak activity. They also concluded, however, that it would not be sustainable in terms of building trust and sustaining positive employee engagement. Participants shared some examples regarding moments of pressure or tension:

Especially when it comes to year-end, you see a lot more focus on performance than actually compassion (P6).

You take leave, but you feel like you're taking leave, which you've actually earned, is almost like getting yourself down because you come back and you end up with a mountain pile of work. Nothing is adjusted (P11).

These reflections show that, under pressure, leaders often focus on outputs or use compassion rhetoric without actually providing relief.

Most participants described their leadership as situational, requiring flexibility, adaptability and responsive behaviour to uncertain circumstances rather than rigid adherence to a single management style. Participants agreed that leaders who could adjust and adapt easily were the most effective leaders.

The majority of participants regarded adaptability as a necessary attitude for leaders, rather than a strategic tool. P5 and P8 explained that a good leader can identify when teams or individuals require different forms of management or guidance:

You can't lead everyone the same way. Some people need direction, others just need space to do their work (P5).

You can work with personalities; what motivates one person doesn't always work for the next. You have to understand people differently (P8).

This reflection describes adaptability as a daily management task, recognising that small things such as personality differences matter just as much as performance and meeting deadlines. Participants such as P10 noted that in the long run, leadership itself will change as organisations grow and environments shift. He specifically stated that,

As the generations change, those are going to be the people who are going to be employed. Right. So as the generational change takes place, then the leadership style needs to also adapt to that (P10).

P13 took the narrative a step further by linking adaptability to inter-generational learning. They stated that:

Younger people are stepping up differently, and we can't ignore that. We have to learn from them too, because they see things from a different perspective (P13).

Her reflection solidifies the opinion that leadership must evolve. Leaders need to empower themselves with new perspectives and create space for changing expectations.

Participants described adaptability as a crucial leadership trait in the modern era. It is viewed as a sign of awareness, equipping leaders with the necessary skills during times of change or challenge.

Wrapping up the theme, it is noted that leadership was described as context-specific, shaped by organisational demands and individual traits or personalities. Participants openly valued their leaders' fairness and composure in stressful situations. Key points from the study included leaders' learning behaviour and how it effectively changed course in necessary circumstances. Leadership styles may have differed, but good leadership was always described as grounded in situational awareness, adaptability to change, and a willingness to adjust when necessary.

5.12. Summary of Findings

This chapter presents the findings of a study that used semi-structured interviews with 13 participants to explore their lived experiences and perceptions of leadership in a rapidly changing tech-driven workforce. The participants were selected from various industries and organisations representing different career levels, races, and genders. An analysis was conducted to assess and categorise the data into themes, focusing on key interpersonal and structural dimensions that directly affect employees in their changing environments.

The data from the participant reflections revealed eight common threads that informed the thematic analysis discussed throughout this chapter. The themes covered structural dimensions and interpersonal challenges, and were elaborated on using sub-themes and verbatim quotes from participants to support the analysis.

The top four themes that emerged from the interviews were compassion and performance, Ubuntu and organisational culture, tech-driven challenges, and employee well-being and engagement. Other themes include generational dynamics, post-apartheid legacies, leadership styles and their impact on compassion, and last but not least, compassion in practice. While this is not an exhaustive list, a decision was made to focus on eight key themes that directly relate to the study's research objectives. A visual summary of the thematic tie-in with CL is depicted in Figure 5.1. below.

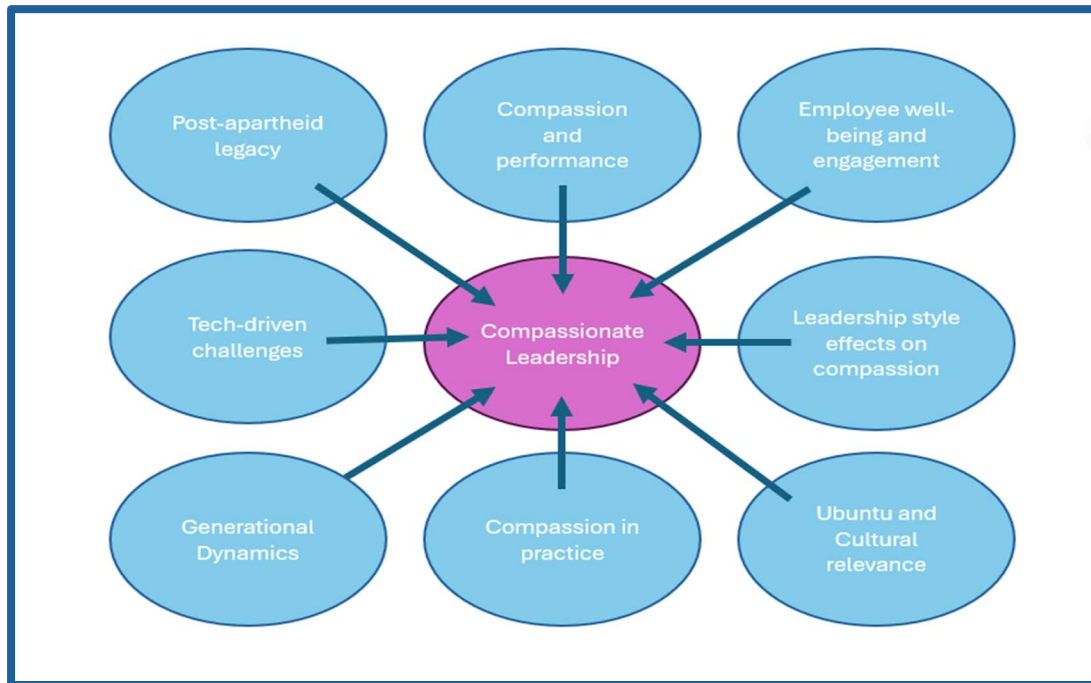


Figure 5.1. Conceptual Model of Contextual Compassionate Leadership.

The Conceptual model above, derived from the thematic analysis, consolidates the eight themes presented in this chapter. It illustrates the influence of specific themes on one another. The model begins with the contextual realities of post-apartheid legacy, tech-driven challenges, and generational dynamics, illustrating how these shape leadership behaviours, which in turn influence organisational culture and employee well-being. The arrows depict the directional influence and the feedback loop between cultural effects and the future leadership style expectations.

Closing off Chapter 5 is a summary of the themes directly linking the data findings to the study's research questions. The findings reflect the lived experiences and perceptions of leadership in tech-driven workplaces in South Africa as shared by the study participants. Emphasis was placed on the conditions that enable or constrain CL, and participants highlighted the social, historical, generational and technological contexts that influence leadership practice.

Main research question:

How is compassionate leadership experienced, perceived and practised in tech-driven workforces in South Africa?

Participants described CL as gestures demonstrated through everyday actions rather than formal, structured or policy-defined actions. They perceived compassion as an awareness of action, expressed through flexibility, accommodation, fairness and active listening. Leaders were considered compassionate when they provided relief after noticing strain, through adjusting workloads or maintaining open communication channels. This was particularly raised as concerns during busy work periods.

Participants also noted consistent tensions between compassion and performance. Resource constraints, technological demands and deadlines limited the degree of compassion shown. While leaders verbally promoted and encouraged self-care, employees noted that no additional steps were taken to reduce expectations or adjust outcomes to align them with verbal gestures. Even with the identified tensions, compassion remains a central component of effective leadership. It fosters trust, respect and enhanced engagement, especially in environments plagued by constant change.

In summary, the findings suggest that CL in tech-driven settings is practised, but mostly at informal levels. Compassion is embedded in an individual's character, manifesting as a leadership style, rather than a formal systems training. How compassion is shown and practised is heavily dependent on leader awareness, relational sensitivity and the ability to balance empathy and care with accountability and organisational outcomes.

Sub-research question one:

What is the influence of compassionate leadership on employee trust and emotional well-being in a tech-driven workforce in South Africa?

The top concerns for several participants were emotional stability and workplace trust. Participants noted increased confidence, motivation, and security when being supported by leaders who are more approachable, fair and composed. Leaders who actively listened

and acknowledged employee circumstances outside of their professional lives created environments that fostered trust and flexibility.

Participants reported frustration and a sense of uncertainty where leaders were inconsistent or overly directive toward employees. Trust in formal relationships is derived from the reliability of leaders and their follow-through on their verbal promises. Compassionate leaders ultimately created environments where the culture fostered support and respect, reinforcing employee well-being emotionally and physically, even in high-pressure, tech-driven settings.

Sub-research question two:

How did the onset of GenZ and increased technological adoption influence behaviour and expectations?

As workplaces became increasingly technology-driven, participants described changes in leadership behaviour. They noticed changes in expectations as newer generations entered the workforce. Digitally paced work is perceived as demanding, and participants agreed that it demanded greater flexibility, awareness, patience and adaptability from its leaders. Several participants praised technology for its ability to improve efficiency, but many exclaimed that it was exhausting, and the lack of human interaction meant continuous availability and a lack of work-life balance.

At the same time, the onset of GenZ in the workplace was described as instrumental in reshaping leadership within a technology-driven environment. The newer staff were observed to have higher expectations of leadership, including open communication, authenticity, shared responsibility, collaboration, and care. They entered their environments completely intolerant of rigid, hierarchical structures and demanded transparent communication and autonomy in their assigned tasks.

Collectively, the onset of GenZ and the adoption of technology highlighted a significant shift in leadership dynamics toward leaders who embody relational awareness and technological competence. Participants emphasised the need for leaders to balance

expectations and outputs with adaptability and empathy to maintain trust and engagement in their increasingly changing environments.

Sub-research question three:

How is compassionate leadership perceived in relation to other leadership approaches and future generational needs in tech-driven environments?

Participants collectively agreed that compassion as a leadership trait was needed now more than ever. They highlighted that modern tech-driven environments are fast-paced, automated and lack human interaction. Many described compassion as the bridge to these gaps, enabling leaders to remain effectively connected to their employees and teams while ensuring organisational sustainability.

When asked what key attributes or changes leaders need to prepare for future generations, most participants highlighted adaptability, empathy and self-awareness as critical learnings. Many participants mentioned that GenZ employees specifically expected leaders to be more approachable and easily accessible; they also wanted transparency and the opportunity to lead upwards. Based on these reflections, compassion is recognised as a practical skill required by leaders to navigate the new or modern workplace dynamics.

Participants agreed that accountability and output are essential to organisational sustainability. However, they emphasised that leaders must balance care and performance to successfully navigate the diverse needs of their teams. Based on the data, CL is needed to complement adaptability, empathy, and self-awareness; all of which are essential requirements for sustaining intergenerational, tech-driven work environments. The next Chapter will discuss the findings in relation to the literature explored in Chapter 2 of this study.

In summary, the findings reveal that leadership practices in South African-based organisations are shaped by the historical remnants of apartheid, embedded Ubuntu values in individuals and current influences. Participants emphasised that adaptation and a balance between structure and humanity are necessary for successful environments,

and that leadership cannot be defined solely by complexity. The following section will summarise the key findings and link them to the study's research questions, setting the stage for discussion on how they relate to current literature and theories presented in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER SIX- DISCUSSION

6.1. Introduction

The results from the analysis presented in the previous chapter will be discussed in detail in this chapter. The discussion will interpret data in relation to existing theories and prior research on leadership, compassion, and tech-driven work environments. While Chapter 5 thematically presented the empirical findings from the semi-structured interviews of 13 participants, Chapter 6 will analyse those findings within a broader scholarly context.

The discussion highlights where the results confirm, challenge, or extend the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 of this study. It demonstrates how CL is currently perceived and practised in South African workplaces shaped by the onset of technological adoption, generational diversity, and increased pressures to perform.

The analysis of the data will be organised according to the research questions posed in Chapter 3 to guide the study:

1. Main research question (RQ1): How is compassionate leadership experienced, perceived and practised in tech-driven workforces?
2. Sub-research question one (SRQ1): What is the influence of CL on emotional distress and employee well-being?
3. Sub-research question two (SRQ2): How did the onset of GenZ and increased technological adoption influence leadership behaviour and expectations?
4. Sub-research question three (SRQ3): How is CL perceived in relation to other leadership approaches and future generational needs in tech-driven environments?

Each section will first summarise the relevant theoretical perspective, then compare the study's findings to the summarised literature, and lastly, interpret the data implications within the context of South Africa. The structure will demonstrate the researchers' depth of insight into how compassion functions as a leadership trait that balances the human element with the demands of a rapidly evolving, tech-driven working world.

6.2. Discussion per research questions

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the findings are structured around the four research questions that guide the study. Each subsection interprets participants' reflections or perspectives within the context of the existing literature. The analysis draws particularly on CLT, the JD-RM, and the Ubuntu Philosophy to interpret how compassion is perceived and practised within tech-driven South African workplaces. This structure ensures that the data align with the research aim and provides a coherent body of knowledge for interpreting the findings.

6.2.1. RQ1: How is compassionate leadership experienced, perceived and practised in tech-driven workforces in South Africa?

The findings revealed that participants never viewed CL as a formal, structured organisational policy or human resources initiative, but rather as an action. They saw it as a behavioural trait of a leader grounded in fairness, flexibility, and emotional awareness. This understanding ties in with the behavioural and relational essence that underpins CLT, which places compassion in business as a multidimensional process involving noticing, feeling, and acting in response to the needs of others (Wee & Fehr, 2021).

Compassion was further described as demonstrated by leaders through daily actions such as consistent acknowledgement, active listening, or guidance when workloads overwhelmed employees. These participants expect transparency, relief, and fairness, which they see as small acts of empathy. These expectations align closely with the dimensions of CLT, affirming that tangible acts of care override verbal assurances (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Wee & Fehr, 2021).

Participants also noted that organisational demands barred compassion in practice. Leaders from the study expressed difficulty in balancing empathy with high-pressure demands in tech-driven environments where deadlines and targets dominate daily operations. This aligns with Pansini et al. (2024) and Chowhan and Pike (2023), who argue that compassion in high-demand environments must operate within the limits imposed by job design and digital intensity. In this view, compassion functions as a job resource, as the JD-RM describes, providing a supply that protects employees from burnout in high-demand environments without eliminating the demand. Leaders have thus used

compassion to balance rather than be lenient: “We’re not a firing organisation, but deliverables still matter” (P1). This leader’s approach reflects what Wee and Fehr (2021) call pragmatic compassion, providing empathy within organisational realities.

Compassion within the South African context can also be interpreted as being influenced by socio-cultural practices (Chetty & Price, 2024; Sipondo, 2025). When prompted, several participants agreed that Ubuntu-inspired values were tied to the concept of compassion. Ubuntu is recognised for fostering respect, dignity, and shared humanity (Ncube, 2010). It adheres to the cultural belief that individuals should be seen for who they are, rather than being judged by their status or authority. “Ubuntu means togetherness, there’s no man left behind. We are only as strong as our weakest link” (P8).

Participant observations regarding Ubuntu and compassion align with Chetty and Price (2024), who underscore Ubuntu’s capacity to rebuild trust and inclusion in post-apartheid workplaces where inequality and historical wounds continue to manifest. CL, therefore, can be regarded as an ethically familiar practice that reflects grassroots understandings of humanity and shared responsibility. From this perspective, compassion is a culturally grounded leadership behaviour, expressing both morals and emotional intelligence.

Even with Ubuntu supporting relational connection naturally in the South African context, several participants noted the tension between compassion and accountability. Acts of compassion were sometimes perceived as inconsistent or situationally dependent on organisational pressure or the leader’s expectations to perform. P11 reflected that “You take leave, but you feel like you’re taking leave, which you’ve actually earned, is almost like getting yourself down because you come back and end up with a mountain pile of work. It wasn’t actually adjusted accordingly”. This finding contradicts the assumption by Benevene et al. (2022), who found that compassion consistently leads to enhanced engagement, trust, and psychological safety. What it does suggest, however, is that verbal compassion cannot translate to employee well-being unless actions, such as changes to organisational systems, are made to reinforce it. The contradiction suggests that context, e.g., tech-driven workplaces, moderates the impact of compassion.

Overall, CL was perceived by participants as situational and adaptive rather than a fixed state. While valued as a moral and relational strength, it is not objectively practised in environments with operational constraints. These findings extend CLT by illustrating that compassion, when embedded in tech-driven environments, functions more as a strategic behaviour than as an emotional impulse, as suggested. To be effective, the balance between empathy and performance has to be intentional and strategic (Aggarwal et al., 2022). With regard to the JD-RM, there is perfect alignment using this interpretation that leadership involvement mitigates strain (Pansini et al., 2024). It also demonstrates how Ubuntu values can co-exist with efficiency and sustainability (Chetty & Price, 2024). These findings align perfectly with tech-driven workspaces in South Africa.

6.2.2. Sub-RQ1 What is the influence of compassionate leadership on employee trust and emotional well-being in a tech-driven workforce?

Building on the effects of CL, the following section examines how CL practices influence employees' trust and emotional well-being. The findings suggest that compassionate behaviour from leaders is vital in fostering trust and emotional well-being within tech-driven workplaces.

Participants consistently described compassion as a behaviour that helps employees feel valued and secure in their roles. These descriptions are aligned with CLT, which considers compassion as a process of noticing, feeling, and acting in response to others' needs (Wee & Fehr, 2021), by actively addressing employee distress instead of just recognising it. It moves empathy from a feeling to practical support, strengthening relational trust and credibility. Trust was repeatedly linked to leaders who follow through on commitments and show concern for employees both personally and professionally. One participant, a leader, explained, "When you show compassion and actually take the time to understand what each person needs, that's when you build real trust. People see that you care, and they give more back" (P9). Reflections like these illustrate that trust is built through consistent actions, rather than verbal or emotional recognition alone.

Participant observations mirror Benevene et al.(2022) and Shuck et al. (2019), who emphasise that CL behaviour reinforces belonging and commitment by fostering emotionally supportive organisational climates. Participants noted how their leaders'

compassionate approach alleviated anxiety and the isolation brought on by rapid technological changes. These outcomes align with Ramachandran et al. (2024), who associate compassion with sustainable engagement in high-demand settings (Chen et al., 2023). Some micro-practices deemed meaningful by participants, such as after-hours check-ins or redistributing workloads during tough times, guided employees in self-managing and maintaining a balance between their duties and well-being. Micro practices refer to small acts of care in this context.

Participant reflections also directly connect compassion to the JD-RM as a job resource, where Chowhan and Pike (2023), as well as Pansini et al. (2024), all argue that resources such as supportive leadership play a significant role in mitigating stress and burnout. This is particularly evident when work demands are intense. Participants affirmed this assumption when reflecting on how compassionate leaders facilitate recovery without undermining productivity.

Compassion has also been reported to enhance emotional stability and motivation. Employees were not afraid to own up to errors and speak out when they felt strained or fatigued. The support from leaders is perceived as supportive rather than judgmental. P9 reflected how compassionate leaders foster emotional trust through their enacted behaviour: “people need to know that they can make mistakes and they’re in the safe zone”. Wee and Fehr (2021) noted that emotional awareness and response are central to building trust in contemporary leadership, as reinforced by participant data and comments. Employees felt validated when changes were made to accommodate them during a difficult time, specifically, this strengthened their self-worth and sense of belonging.

The data also revealed that compassion was not a one-person thing; when properly conducted, it influences the culture of the organisation, extending beyond professional and individual relationships. Several participants linked compassion and Ubuntu in their interviews. P8 specifically observed that “Ubuntu means togetherness”, which confirms the narrative that compassion is not about individual culture, but a social contract collectively agreed upon, grounded in respect and mutual responsibility. Chetty and Price (2024) and Sipondo (2025) highlight these particular values, emphasising that leadership value lies in its legitimacy based on empathy and inclusion, particularly in the context of post-apartheid

South Africa. CL is, therefore, an effective mechanism for restoring trust in systems plagued by the history of exclusion and unfairness.

Limits exposed in the findings include the constraints of compassion on environments with high demand pressure (Celestin & Vanitha, 2023; Chen et al., 2023). When leaders verbally express compassion and solutions but take little action to alleviate the suffering, employees question care and authenticity. There is partial alignment with Benevene et al. (2022), who stated that for compassion to be, it must be adjusted to its environment of use. This aligns with JD-RM, which states that resources must be available and accessible to counteract high demands (Chowhan & Pike, 2023; Pansini et al., 2024). The lack of structural reinforcement in the example above confirms this alignment.

Collectively, CL experienced by employees in tech-driven workplaces in South Africa appears to influence the development of well-being and trust. Firstly, trust is developed through compassion, which is carried through its dynamics of noticing, feeling, and acting. Leaders must lead by example to earn credibility and build loyal relationships. Secondly, compassion is an emotional resource that benefits everyone in the environment. These accounts illustrate complete synergy between CLT, JD-RM, and Ubuntu Philosophy, and extend the prior literature in demonstrating that compassion in high-demand tech-driven environments is not merely a moral value but a practical strategy for sustaining employee trust and emotional well-being.

6.2.3. Sub-RQ2: How did the onset of GenZ and increased technological adoption influence leadership behaviour and expectations?

The findings suggest that the coincidental emergence of the Generation Z workforce and rapid technology adoption forced leaders to rethink their leadership capabilities. Compassion played a key role in clarifying what was needed from leaders during these transition periods. The disruptions of digitisation, management boundaries, increased performance expectations, and accelerated communication without face-to-face interaction were discussed at length during the interviews. While exciting, these transformations created both opportunity and strain. Leaders had to adapt to new requirements and remain efficient, and become tech-savvy while simultaneously navigating new management pathways that required empathy and humanity. Participant

13 reflected that, “technology has changed how we lead. You must now connect through screens and still make people feel heard”. This validates the necessary shift from traditional leadership styles to CL, which can adapt to the quick-paced and transparent environment demanded by a tech-driven workforce.

This transformation, as emphasised by Benevene et al. (2022), confirms that the adoption of technology increases both cognitive and emotional stressors, compelling leaders to provide stronger interpersonal support (Mahmoud et al., 2021). Through the JD-RM, technological acceleration increases job demands, while CL is the counterbalancing resource. (Chowhan & Pike, 2023). The findings from this study reinforce the claim that leaders who empathetically engaged employees and provided flexibility where needed were more successful in sustaining morale and motivation during the ups and downs of digital transition. Compassion is, therefore, a strategic form of adaptability.

The most significant leadership shift was attributed to the rise of GenZ’s in the workplace (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Celestin & Vanitha, 2023). Several participants described younger employees as the ambassadors of openness, purpose, and immediate feedback, emphasising a shift away from hierarchy and a significant change in leadership expectations. Participants noted that “Leaders need to step up, to look at what they bring to the table rather than just tell them (employees) how things used to be” (P3). A powerful statement reflecting the generational inversion of authority, where authority is not derived from tenure but from authenticity and willingness to learn and share learnings.

Chetty and Price (2024) connect the new generation attitudes to the literature; they argue that leadership to renew South Africa depends on inclusion, empathy, and emotional intelligence, rather than rigid control. Aligning with the theory by Aggarwal et al. (2022) and Celestin and Vanitha (2023) who noted that the onset of GenZ facilitated organisational restructure and leadership practices. South Africa is wounded by rigid control; therefore, the complete opposite is essential. This context places compassion directly at the bridging point between general divides, creating room for intergenerational learning.

Another key finding was how compassion helps leaders in closing the interpersonal divide created by the onset of technology. Working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic

underwent a tremendous shift, marked by the adoption of remote work and online collaboration (Chen et al., 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2021). These shifts removed human connection, and automation became the norm. Participants described several attempts to rehumanise digital interaction through personal wellness check-ins and camera-on meetings to encourage and sustain emotional connections. The compassionate actions by leaders who noticed disengagement in real-time, became concerned about digital fatigue and employee well-being, and then acted to create a sense of belonging or worth, all reflect the completion of the dimensions of compassion emphasised by Wee and Fehr (2021). Such acts confirm that compassion in tech-driven workspaces is a behavioural adaptation that builds, restores, and maintains trust in digital working conditions, rather than being merely an abstract sentiment devoid of action.

Another generational divide visible from the participant perceptions was how older leaders tended to separate their professional and personal lives, while GenZ employees expected psychological openness and shared vulnerability through an integrated work-life environment. Participant 10 summed it up perfectly when he explained, “You can’t lead with the old-school approach anymore; people want to talk about how they’re doing, not just what they’re doing”. These GenZ expectations mirror the modern leadership notions highlighted by Benevene et al. (2022) and Aggarwal et al. (2022), which are grounded in relational awareness and psychologically supportive work environments, are the skills required to effectively navigate the generational needs. Grounded in emotional intelligence, compassion becomes a mediating force in balancing the differing values of diverse generations regarding autonomy and transparency.

The current findings extend the view that generational and technological changes interact with Ubuntu-based understandings of leadership. Sipondo (2025) and Chetty and Price (2024) all describe Ubuntu as a culturally based moral foundation for mutual respect, collective learning, and shared humanity. Collectively, these findings extend the view by illustrating how Ubuntu values manifest across generations, genders, races, and workplaces. Young employees call for inclusivity, while old ones lead with commitment and authenticity; although their values differ, they are all still grounded in the values of Ubuntu. Shared responsibility is evident in the mentoring provided by older employees, which is freely given, and the relational balance required by GenZ. Together, these practices

demonstrate that when grounded in Ubuntu, managing diverse and tech-driven generations provides a culturally fit form of leadership.

In Summary, the rapid adoption of technology, coupled with the onset of GenZ in the workplace, has reshaped leadership expectations in South Africa. Leaders are required to be digitally competent and possess emotional intelligence to balance the fast-paced environment with the expected empathy. The research findings align with CLT, JD-RM, and Ubuntu, affirming that compassion is both an adaptive response and a relational bridge, equipping leaders with the dynamics required to ensure that technology enhances the human essence of work, rather than eroding it.

Although tensions were evident, participants highlighted how these differences were breeding grounds for growth and renewal, presenting an opportunity to narrow down the divide through intergenerational learning and innovation. Overall, the theme suggests that to be compassionate of generational divides in workspaces, there must be a change in leadership capabilities. There must be a willingness to listen, unlearn and relearn. Leaders must be aware of the change and be willing to adjust and adapt as necessary, becoming better equipped to develop environments filled with trust and collaboration that sustain inclusion.

6.2.4. Sub-RQ3: How is compassionate leadership perceived in relation to other leadership approaches and future generational needs in tech-driven environments?

The findings revealed that participants viewed CL as compatible with other leadership styles. Several described compassion as a human element that can be added to traditional leadership styles, creating a balance in accountability and care. Wee and Fehr (2021) defined compassion as an applied behaviour that can be integrated into diverse leadership styles, which perfectly aligns with the study findings from participants. Compassion is therefore not a distinct or standalone ideology; it is a practice that can be adopted to humanise existing leadership approaches.

Participants compared CL to familiar traditional leadership styles. Several noted that authoritative and directive style practices no longer work, as they do not align with the expectations of the tech-savvy younger workforce. Participant 11 pointed out this view:

“Leadership has changed; you can’t just tell people what to do and expect results. You must listen and understand their world”. His observation mirrors the view of Benevene et al. (2022), who identified emotional intelligence and relational awareness as crucial to effective leadership. It also concurs with Chatterjee (2023), who declared that leadership must evolve beyond control to embed moral awareness and reframe authority as a service to its people. Compassion is therefore viewed as a corrective action. It can counteract rigid leadership behaviour and introduce empathy and accountability into environments without removing or undermining responsibility.

Once again, it is noteworthy how compassion functions as a job resource under the JD-RM, enhancing motivation and employee engagement in demanding environments (Chowhan & Pike, 2023; Pansini et al., 2024). Participants define a compassionate leader as one who balances professional expectations with empathy, providing encouragement and psychological support to followers. All these resources are required to lead efficiently and develop efficient teams. Participant 5, a leader in the data sample, explained that “We still have to deliver, but people push harder when they feel supported. It’s not about being soft, it’s about being fair”. This aligns the study findings with the JD-RM premise that employee motivation, well-being, and performance increase when leadership is supportive and makes every effort to mitigate high demands. Similarly, Ramachandran et al. (2024) demonstrated in their study that compassion enhances organisational sustainability by fostering trust, commitment, and engagement. All of these outcomes were echoed in the participant accounts, underlining how compassion enhances employee retention and overall morale.

Several participants reflected on how employee engagement and performance are optimal when leadership’s vulnerability is sincere and relational. Wee and Fehr (2021), emphasised that compassion should be grounded in genuine emotion rather than display, echoing the views of participants on directive or performance-driven leadership rooted in authenticity rather than outward charisma. Leaders who maintained genuine interest and concern during high-pressure times were seen as trustworthy and credible. Consistent and authentic compassion, therefore, far outweighs persuasion or command structures in driving performance outputs.

Participants viewed compassion through the lens of Ubuntu, a living leadership practice in South Africa that promotes collaboration, particularly in modern hybrid work environments. When prompted on the Ubuntu philosophy, participants interpreted it as a culturally embedded value that keeps human connection alive even as the digital era increasingly disperses people. One of the leaders in the study mentioned, “Leadership should make people feel part of something; you succeed together. That is how you build loyalty and real teamwork” (P8). His reflection ties in with Chetty and Price (2024) and Sipondo (2025), whose analyses of the essence of Ubuntu affirm mutual dependence and dignity as a collective effort. In this context, Ubuntu is a practical framework for sustaining belonging and building purpose for employees across generations, even amid rapid technology adoption (Chetty & Price, 2024; Sipondo, 2025).

The findings cautioned, however, that perceptions of leniency and favouritism must be avoided through a balanced approach of compassion and accountability. Some accounts reported instances where over-accommodation reduced accountability and productivity and even blurred professional standards and expectations. Participant 12 flagged concerns regarding over-accommodation when he stated: “Black women might not be held to account for fear... if your leader is white or not, not holding them to account because of the fear of being called racist or not, is not supportive of black women”. This statement shows how historical sensitivities can distort the practice of CL in post-apartheid South Africa (Ronnie L, 2018). In such cases, genuine compassion may be avoided due to fears of being perceived as unfair or too lenient.

P12’s account resonates with Chetty and Price (2024), who argue that leadership today carries remnants of historical residue, plagued by the inequities of the past. Within the JD-RM framework (Chowhan & Pike, 2023), a structural imbalance exists where leaders’ self-regulation is taxed, and their ability to successfully balance outcomes and empathy falters. This creates a significant gap in the resources needed to manage the increased demand for care and compassion; given the historical carryover, individual leaders may lack the additional resources and may themselves require capacity-building. Ultimately, the data highlights the importance of grounding compassion in self-regulation and enabling upskilling alongside enacted compassionate behaviour and accountability.

In summary, participants reflected on compassion as an integrative, yet context-responsive approach that can be adopted to complement, rather than replace, traditional leadership styles. It is seen to enhance performance-driven models by upskilling leaders with emotional intelligence and culturally based respect, knowledge, and capacity. Even though it is a positive trait, the findings also revealed potential negatives to compassion when practised out of fear, bias, or provoked through post-apartheid sensitivities, as described by participants who flagged hesitation in holding certain leaders accountable. Looking at compassion through this lens affirms that empathy is not a holistic definition of compassion in practice, but rather a disciplined commitment to fairness, morale, and ethical behaviour and shared humanity. Foundationally supported by CLT, JD-RM, and Ubuntu philosophy dynamics, CL is a strategic capability to embed within organisations and a moral orientation to live by. These factors drive the ability to sustain employee trust and inclusion and continue to drive accountability within the diverse tech-driven workforces in South Africa.

6.3. Conclusion

This chapter examined the findings from the semi-structured participant interviews, expanded on in Chapter 5, in relation to the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. Throughout the discussion chapter, CL in South Africa's tech-driven workplaces is confirmed to be an adaptive and moral practice. Perceived as essential in workplaces to sustain trust, well-being, and inclusion, it sometimes remains constrained by competing organisational pressures in practice. Compassion in leadership has emerged as a dynamic capability to balance accountability, empathy, and self-regulation.

Furthermore, the discussion highlighted Ubuntu values in providing a culturally grounded framework for compassion in the familial sense. JD-RM affirms its role as a psychological resource and clarifies the structural imbalance created when compassion is not coupled with self-regulation. Finally, the discussion and findings extend CLT by demonstrating that compassion must be consistently enacted across social identities, rather than withheld out of fear or bias. Collectively, these insights offer a more nuanced understanding of leadership practices in the post-apartheid South African context.

The following chapter will consolidate these interpretations and present the overall conclusions of the study. It will cover the theoretical implications of the findings and provide recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER SEVEN - CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1. Introduction

Compassion in leadership was continually described as necessary in the findings and affirmed as needed, but under-researched by scholars. This study sought to understand how CL is experienced, perceived, and practised in South African tech-driven environments that are affected by rapid tech adoption. CL is defined as a selfless and relational form of leadership, grounded in emotional intelligence and described as extending beyond merely showing empathy to include actively recognising and attending to the needs of others by alleviating their suffering.

This final chapter of the study will provide insight into the South African research context, its uniquely layered historical environment and its importance. It will further explore what is known and unknown on the research topic and provide a recap on the research questions answered. A summary of the methodology is provided along with the main findings and interpretation of the data. Before concluding, this Chapter will summarise the contributions to theory and practice. It will provide practical and business recommendations, outline limitations, and provide context on future research possibilities. It then closes with the final conceptual model, a summary of the study and a final study conclusion.

7.2. Research context and its importance

The study context was South African organisations specifically affected by or undergoing rapid digital transformation. South Africa is a uniquely layered environment where historical inequalities and socio-political dynamics continue to influence leadership contexts in workplace environments (Chetty & Price, 2024; Sipondo, 2025). Simultaneously, the demands for empathy, flexibility, psychological safety and autonomy from an increasing GenZ workforce added to an already demanding and complex work environment (Celestin & Vanitha, 2023; Zhu & Chen, 2015).

Exploring tech-driven organisations provided an ideal lens through which to examine modern leadership challenges. Changes in working conditions, such as remote work, digital interfaces, and blurred work-life boundaries, increased when COVID-19 accelerated

technology adoption (Rademaker et al., 2023). These blurred boundaries amplified emotional strain and workplace isolation (Porfirio et al., 2021). These accelerated pressures placed significant demands on leadership, not only for accelerated performance expectations but also for compassion, emotional intelligence and adaptability (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023).

Further deepening the contextual relevance is the South African cultural grounding of Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasises humanity, togetherness and shared responsibility, and how it aligns conceptually with CL (Chetty & Price, 2024; Ronnie L, 2018; Sipondo, 2025). The practical expression of this alignment, however, remains underexplored (Sipondo, 2025). This context offers a rich ground for investigating how compassion is understood, resisted or embraced in the face of evolving workforce demographics, challenges and economic demands.

7.3. What is known and unknown

Academic literature available to the researcher on CL prior to this study focused on healthcare and public service sectors within Western and Asian contexts (Haleem et al., 2024; Ramachandran et al., 2024). Theoretical frameworks such as the CLT and JD-RM outlined the potential benefits of adopting CL, including improvements in employee well-being, trust, and organisational resilience and sustainability (Chowhan & Pike, 2023; Pansini et al., 2024; Wee & Fehr, 2021). These findings have not been meaningfully applied to South Africa's emerging economies (Sipondo, 2025). Specifically, they appear to resonate with tech-driven organisations affected by rapid technological adoption (Chetty & Price, 2024).

The existing literature highlights the lasting negative impacts of digital transformation (Rademaker et al., 2023). Emotional demands and psychological safety are key elements arising from these contexts. However, empirical research on leadership under these conditions is minimal. There is a particular lack of literature on multicultural, postcolonial contexts in which historical inequalities persist (Sipondo, 2025).

In addition to these challenges, generational studies have emphasised that GenZ's expectations of leadership and organisational needs differ from the traditional sense (Chen

et al., 2023). GenZs expect empathy, mental health support, autonomy, and flexible working arrangements (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Celestin & Vanitha, 2023). Furthermore, few scholars have explored how these demand dynamics influence leadership behaviour or have contributed to shifts in leadership culture.

Similarly, the integration of Ubuntu philosophy values into leadership practice was often discussed, but there has been no empirical application within modern tech-driven environments (Sipondo, 2025). This study aimed to narrow these knowledge gaps by investigating how CL is perceived, enacted, and practised in tech-driven workspaces in South Africa, considering generational shifts, rapid digital change and the contextual existence of Ubuntu.

7.4. Recap on research questions answered

This study sought to understand how CL is operationalised, experienced and understood in the context of South Africa's tech-driven work environments. The study had one central research question and three supporting sub-questions that guided the inquiry:

7.4.1. Main research question:

How is compassionate leadership experienced, perceived, and practised in tech-driven workforces in South Africa?

This question explored the lived experiences of employees and leaders in the suggested contexts, examining how compassion was expressed in leadership behaviour and how colleagues perceived and interpreted it.

7.4.2. Sub-research questions:

a. What is the influence of compassionate leadership on employee trust and emotional well-being in a tech-driven workforce in South Africa?

This question highlighted the psychological consequences of the lack of compassion in modern work environments. These include psychological safety, relational trust, and emotional well-being.

b. How did the onset of GenZ and increased technological adoption influence leadership behaviour and expectations?

The second sub-question uncovered the generational shift expectations. GenZ demands emotional intelligence, autonomy, purpose-driven work and tech-savvy adaptability, compelling many leaders to revise traditional approaches and expand their capabilities to become more aware, be open and responsive to their employees and environments.

c. How is compassionate leadership perceived in relation to other leadership approaches and future generational needs in tech-driven environments?

This final question provided comparative insight into contrasting leadership approaches and explored how compassion served as both a soft skill and an essential strategic shift for future-fit, agile organisations in South Africa.

Together, these questions revealed the essential role of compassion as a culturally and generationally fit leadership imperative in a digitally transforming South Africa, still plagued by the historical wounds of apartheid.

7.5. Recap on methodology

To explore how CL is perceived and practised in the context of the research questions, the study employed a qualitative, inductive methodology underpinned by an interpretivist philosophy. This approach aligned with the study's objective to uncover deep, context-specific details from participants' lived experiences rather than to quantify predefined variables. A phenomenological approach was employed to understand participants' emotional and perceptual realities. This methodology enabled the researcher to access rich, subjective narratives about leadership behaviours, trust, digital transformation, and generational expectations.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 participants, who were part of a purposively selected sample. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, reviewed for accuracy and analysed thematically. Continuous data engagement enabled the researcher to refine themes and ensure data saturation. Rigorously applied ethical considerations ensured the protection of participants' sensitivity and emotional well-being. Careful methodology design and quality controls ensured the trustworthiness and relevance of the study findings, while limitations, such as time constraints, sample specificity and subject interpretation, were noted and acknowledged.

7.6. Main findings and interpretation

The findings revealed that CL is both valued and increasingly expected in South Africa's tech-driven workforce, particularly in the wake of generational shifts and digital transformation. The thematic analysis revealed eight themes, four of which are considered significant to the study. The major themes were:

7.6.1. Compassion in Practice

Compassion builds trust and enhances emotional well-being. CL was consistently described as a mechanism for fostering trust and psychological safety. The participants emphasised that when leaders demonstrate genuine care, employees feel recognised as human beings and not just as performance drivers. This reflection confirmed that compassion leads to improved emotional well-being, reduced burnout, and encouraged loyalty and discretionary effort.

7.6.2. Leadership Styles and the Effect on Compassion

Adaptive leadership styles are critical in cross-generational, tech-driven workplaces. The GenZ generation was perceived as less tolerant of authoritarian or directive leadership approaches and is more vocal about the need for empathy and autonomy. The research found that effective leaders adjust their approach depending on employee needs, especially with the onset of GenZ in the workplace. A participant observation supporting this view was: "The new generation expects us to step up, to look at what they bring to the table rather than just tell them how things used to be" (P13). Several participants noted how CL helped bridge generational differences by making employees feel valued and seen.

7.6.3. Ubuntu and Organisational Culture

Ubuntu as a cultural anchor for compassion: Ubuntu emerged as a uniquely South African form of CL. Many participants referenced Ubuntu as foundational to how leadership should function. The study revealed that CL aligned naturally with the values of Ubuntu, emphasising togetherness, shared responsibility and empathy. P8 noted that "Ubuntu for me means creating spaces where people feel they belong. Leaders must treat people as human beings, not just employees".

7.6.4. Compassion and Performance

Organisational culture and structures may undermine compassion. Despite broad agreement on the need for and benefits of CL, organisational norms, including performance pressures and hierarchical structures, often made it difficult to practice or uphold. Several participants noted disconnects between leadership rhetoric and actual actionable carry-through. For Instance, P11 noted that “Leaders say take time off, but the pile of work is waiting when you come back”. It highlighted that compassion is merely symbolic if it is not structurally aligned with organisational transformation.

7.7. Contributions to theory and practice

This study makes several important and unique contributions to the scholarly conversation on CL within South African, tech-driven workforces. It remains an under-researched domain of leadership approaches and challenges (Ramachandran et al., 2024). Some of these contributions include:

- Empirical insights into how CL is experienced in South African business contexts, outside of the familiar Western and Asian global contexts.
- Positioning Ubuntu as a culturally embedded expression of CL.
- Emphasises the growing expectations and demands from GenZ for emotionally intelligent leaders with responsive approaches.
- Tension between compassionate intent and organisational realities.

The following section will expand on these contributions to theory and practice. Then move on to practical and business recommendations.

7.7.1. Extending CLT beyond healthcare and Western contexts

While CL has primarily been explored in healthcare and Western organisational contexts (Ramachandran et al., 2024), this study provides empirical insights into how CL is experienced in South African business contexts. A specific focus in the study was how generational and tech-driven changes were perceived and enacted within organisations experiencing them. These findings expand the applicability of CL to new business landscapes, aligning with calls for further and deeper research into more diverse and dynamic organisational environments (Haleem et al., 2024; Pansini et al., 2024).

7.7.2. Positioning Ubuntu as a culturally embedded expression of compassionate leadership

The study findings reinforce Ubuntu as an indigenous philosophical framework that inherently corresponds with CLT and South African cultural norms (Chetty & Price, 2024; Sipondo, 2025). While Ubuntu has been discussed as a leadership principle, its practical overlap with CL is rarely explicitly connected in leadership literature (Sipondo, 2025). This study shrinks that gap, offering a unique Afrocentric dimension or perspective to CLT, ideally suited to the unique nature of South African leadership traits.

7.7.3. Adding insight on generational expectations in leadership

The study emphasises the growing expectations and demands from GenZ for emotionally intelligent leaders with responsive approaches (Chen et al., 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2021). CL is reflected as emerging not only as a values-based ideal, but also as a strategic response to attract and retain a generation that prioritises emotional well-being, inclusion and autonomy (Aggarwal et al., 2022). This broadens existing leadership debates that often prioritise performance over mutual humanisation in the workplace, and highlights the necessity for a balance of both to be embedded in organisational culture.

7.7.4. Calling attention to organisational misalignment

A key contribution from the study is the tension between compassionate intent and organisational realities (Christopher John Tietz, 2021). Organisational norms such as workload pressures, rigid structures and performative well-being strategies remain barriers to enacted compassion, challenging idealistic representations of CL (Benevene et al., 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2024). A call for a more nuanced and critical understanding of how compassion is enacted and constrained in real-world settings is necessary.

7.8. Practical and Business Recommendations

Several actionable implications for leaders, HR practitioners, and organisational strategists arose from the study's findings (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Celestin & Vanitha, 2023; Chen et al., 2023). These actionable recommendations will assist organisations and leaders in navigating digital transformation, generational change and employee well-being in South Africa. These recommendations include:

- Leadership development for a changing workforce

- Embedding compassion into organisational culture
- Effort on retention and engagement in tech-driven workspaces
- Aligning CL with South African cultural values

This section will elaborate on these practical and business recommendations before proceeding to discuss the study's limitations and potential future research directions.

7.8.1. Leadership development for a changing workforce

Recommendations for this study include that development programs for leaders must include upskilling on empathy, relational awareness and emotional intelligence as core competencies for effective leaders in the modern era (Benevene et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023; Pansini et al., 2024; Shuck et al., 2019). Equipping managers to respond with compassion, rather than control or micro-management (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Hafenbrack et al., 2020), should become a strategic imperative and not just a moral practice in response to GenZ expectations around human-centred leadership.

7.8.2. Embedding compassion into organisational culture

Another recommendation is that organisations will need to go beyond surface-level well-being initiatives and embed compassion structurally through performance management systems (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023), workload policies and inclusive communication strategies (Subramaniam et al., 2021). The study revealed that compassion is often endorsed rhetorically but rarely encapsulated structurally due to organisational constraints, such as unrealistic deliverables and deadlines, which are sometimes brought on by the implications of rapid technology adoption (Ramachandran et al., 2024; Shuck et al., 2019).

7.8.3. Retention and engagement in tech-driven workforces

Fast-paced delivery, high workloads, accelerated change, and burnout are characteristics of tech-driven environments (Ramachandran et al., 2024; Shuck et al., 2019). The study highlights how compassion fosters employee trust and psychological safety, which, in turn, directly influences motivation, performance and retention (Benevene et al., 2022; Pansini et al., 2024). More specifically, this is true among younger employees who are increasingly becoming more values-driven (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2023; Mahmoud et al.,

2021). It is therefore uniquely apparent from these collective findings that businesses that strategically adopt compassion are better positioned to remain competitive in a rapidly changing, tech-driven economy.

7.8.4. Aligning with South African cultural values

Re-introducing Ubuntu-inspired principles into leadership approaches in South Africa creates culturally resonant practices that enhance workplace cohesion (Sipondo, 2025). This makes the findings particularly relevant for South African organisations seeking to lead ethically and inclusively in a post-apartheid, digitally disrupted context (Chetty & Price, 2024; Ncube, 2010). Being unique in its cultural and multi-layered structure, South African organisations that adopt culturally inclusive leadership values will find it easier to embody and embed these values, rather than simply imposing a set of imported values.

7.9. Limitations and future research

This study uncovered a strong foundation for future academic exploration into CL, especially within rapidly evolving environments. However, several avenues remain under-researched and warrant further investigation:

7.9.1. Quantitative exploration of compassionate leadership outcomes

Future studies may adopt a quantitative approach to uncovering and testing the relationship between CL and key organisational outcomes such as productivity, psychological safety and employee retention. This would offer comparative data across industries and strengthen the objectivity of the study.

7.9.2. Sector-specific studies beyond tech-driven workforces

While this study focused solely on tech-driven environments, the researcher recognises that similar challenges exist in other industries and fields such as education, retail and customer services. Future sector-specific research would illuminate how CL is practised and operationalised differently in other environments and assess the transferability of these findings.

7.9.3. Longitudinal studies on generational shifts and leadership evolution

With the rise of GenZ employees (Aggarwal et al., 2022), future research should track the evolution of leadership styles over the next decade. This will enable scholars to determine whether CL becomes a standardised leadership approach and whether it effectively ensures the findings on employee trust, psychological well-being and retention. A longitudinal design would also assess the sustainability and impact of CL on the organisation itself and the culture it develops.

7.9.4. The role of organisational structures in enabling or hindering CL

Several participants noted the obstruction of enacted compassion due to organisational constraints. Future studies could examine the disconnect between organisational structures, such as policies, hierarchies, and performance systems, and leaders' compassionate intent (Benevene et al., 2022; Ramachandran et al., 2024; Shuck et al., 2019).

7.9.5. Compassion fatigue in leaders

Compassion from leaders is essential, but who looks after the emotional needs of these leaders? Future research may cover compassion fatigue in leaders, especially in high-pressure environments. Furthermore, future research can investigate the emotional strain that leaders themselves face and how this, in fact, affects their leadership approach in modern environments. This is more apparent in the South African context, where leaders assume positions and become isolated by their status (Chetty & Price, 2024; Ncube, 2010; Sipondo, 2025).

7.9.6. Further localisation of Ubuntu and CL integration

The study highlighted Ubuntu as a parallel practice to CL, which is unique to cultural practices worldwide. Future research could examine how Ubuntu leadership practices can be formally integrated into leadership development and compared across African contexts.

7.10. Final conceptual model

The final conceptual framework merges the study's findings with existing theory, depicting how CL is enacted in tech-driven workplaces. It reflects insights not fully visible in the original model.

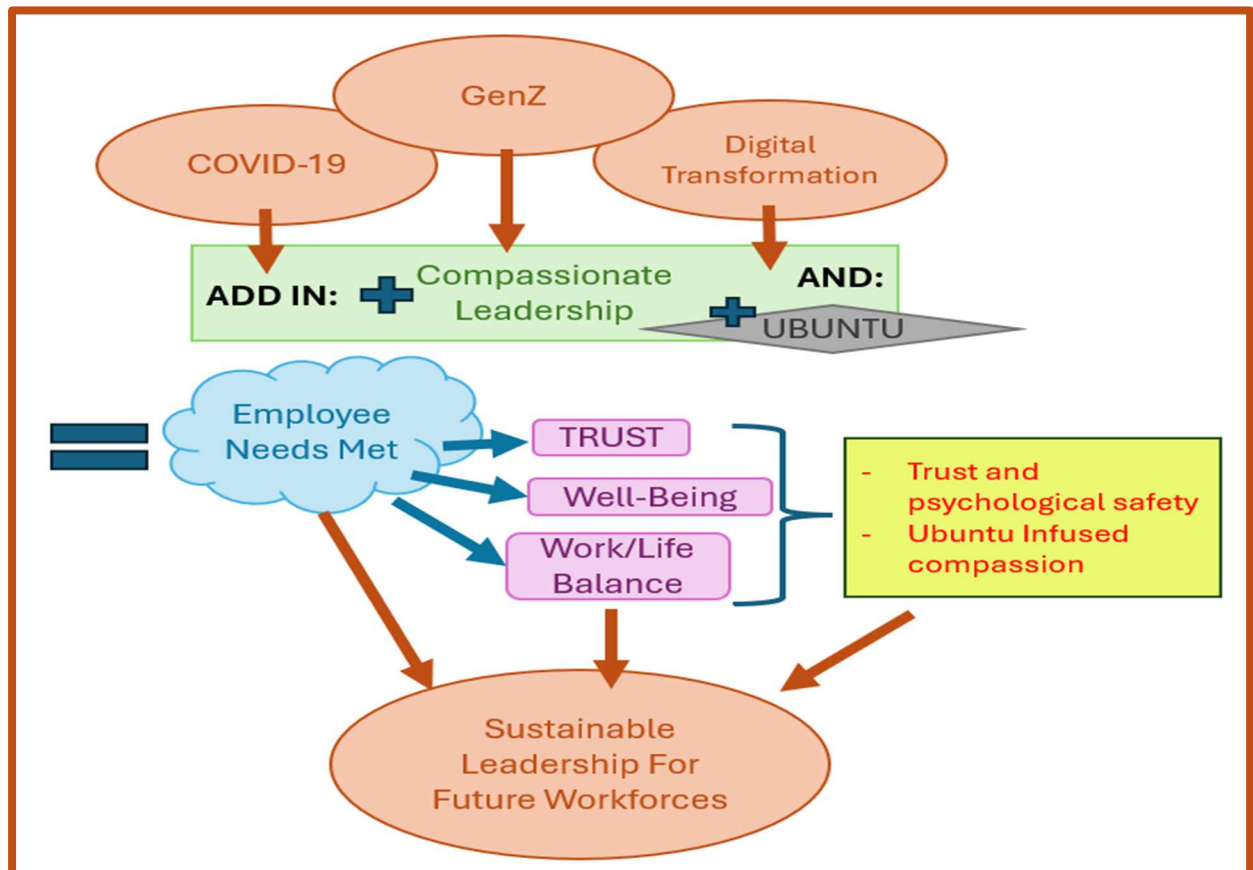


Figure 7.1: Final Conceptual Model

The final conceptual framework represents the emergent themes derived from the study's findings. It highlights the similarities of the external constructs, such as COVID-19, GenZ and Digital Transformation, as constraints on the working world. Adding CL as a non-limiting factor, with the culturally familiar influence of Ubuntu, ensures that employee and organisational needs are met.

The study highlights how the mentioned constraints negatively impacted employee well-being, trust and work-life balance. By adopting characteristics of Ubuntu and CL, leaders will create environments that foster positive employee well-being and psychological safety. It will develop trust and a positive work-life balance internally. These factors result in a

sustainable leadership approach for future workforces and organisational continuity, while prioritising the needs of employees.

Figure 7.1 highlights four key contextual drivers: COVID-19, GenZ, Digital transformation (tech-driven workforce) and Ubuntu into CL as a strategic response.

- i. **Digital Transformation:** Employee needs have reshaped since the rapid onset of digital transformation. Making compassion essential for navigating change and emotional strain (Chatterjee et al., 2023; Pansini et al., 2024; Rademaker et al., 2023; Shuck et al., 2019).
- ii. **GenZ:** Younger generation employees prioritise empathy, purpose and emotional safety above all else. CL is increasingly seen as a non-negotiable trait of effective leadership (Aggarwal et al., 2022; Celestin & Vanitha, 2023; Chen et al., 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Ronnie L, 2018).
- iii. **COVID-19:** The pandemic and post-COVID shift accelerated awareness of mental health and work/life balance, requiring leaders to show vulnerability and support (Chowhan & Pike, 2023; Wee & Fehr, 2021).
- iv. **Ubuntu Values:** Compassion in leadership in South Africa is strongly influenced by the Ubuntu philosophy. Centring on community, connection, and mutual care (Chetty & Price, 2024; Ncube, 2010; Sipondo, 2025).

These inputs converge into three core leadership outcomes: trust, psychological safety and sustainable leadership. The updated framework demonstrates that CL is not only responsive but strategic. It is essential for resilience and future workplaces. This conceptual model finalises the findings based on the preliminary conceptual model presented in Chapter 2 of the study, drawing on the literature explored.

7.11. Summary of Study

This study examined how CL is perceived, enacted and experienced in tech-driven South African organisations undergoing rapid digital transformation. It explored the growing need for leadership changes amid increasing challenges in managing employee well-being, technostressors and generational shifts. Specific focus was placed on the onset of GenZ in the workplace and the residual strain of post-COVID-19 work environment adaptations.

The research matters because leaders are experiencing increasingly complex human challenges within their organisations, alongside the already growing technological ones. While technology and digital transformation amplify strategic and operational gains, they also generate emotional damage, including burnout, disengagement, and diminished trust, which the traditional leadership approaches have been failing to mitigate or manage effectively (Chatterjee et al., 2023; Rademaker et al., 2023). These contexts have amplified the need for leadership centred on empathy, human connection and psychological safety; ensuring organisational sustainability and employee efficiency (Benevene et al., 2022; Wee & Fehr, 2021).

Furthermore, the unique South African post-apartheid workplace landscape introduces historical and cultural dimensions that shape the understanding of leadership (Chetty & Price, 2024; Ncube, 2010). Although CL is still emerging in academic literature, it may offer a particularly resonant model for this workplace setting (Ramachandran et al., 2024; Shuck et al., 2019). CL can provide a blend of current theory on leadership, along with local values and lived experiences (Chetty & Price, 2024; Pansini et al., 2024)

7.12. Study Conclusion

This study set out to explore how CL is perceived and practised in tech-driven South African organisations undergoing rapid digital transformation. The qualitative, interpretivist study examined how leaders and employees experienced compassion in their daily interactions, especially as they navigate generational shifts and emotionally taxing environments shaped by technology and post-pandemic realities.

The study confirmed what is known, that CL is becoming increasingly relevant and is often demanded by younger generations like GenZ, who expect autonomy, empathy, and psychological safety at work. It further revealed that compassion is applied inconsistently across organisations, often constrained by outdated leadership models, performance-driven cultures and unsupportive structures. Despite these challenges, participants overwhelmingly valued compassion as a critical driver of trust, well-being and productivity.

This Chapter recaps the methodology used in collecting data to extend the study and, drawing on the findings from a rich data collection, the study contributes to the evolving literature and scholarly debate. The chapter further provides a localised perspective on CL rooted in Ubuntu, expanding its theoretical grounding beyond Western literature. In practice, it recommends that organisations embed compassion into their leadership development, policies and performance measurement systems.

Interpretation of the findings, supported by the literature explored in Chapter 2, suggests that managers be supported through specialised training and accountability structures that enable sustainable compassion, rather than burnout. It goes a step further in highlighting contradictions, extensions and additions to current scholarly literature on the crucial nature of CL.

The study concludes with an examination of the limitations discovered and suggestions for future research of the study's constructs. It further illustrates the finalised conceptual model in Figure 7.10, showing how the study's outcomes help to narrow down the gap between effective leadership and organisational sustainability. The illustration depicts a system of constraints from a GenZ workforce, post-COVID-19 practices, rapid tech adoption and the inclusion of Ubuntu as a leadership value addition. When CL is added, the outcomes lead to increased trust, sustainable employee well-being and a positive work-life balance.

Collectively, the study confirms that compassionate leadership is an essential leadership style in the modern era of management, particularly in South African tech-driven organisations, with multi-general staff and the impact of rapid tech adoption.

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Appendix A: Participant interview guide

Introduction

- Formal introductions thank the person for making the time to attend.
- Start by explaining the purpose of the interview and highlighting the importance of their personal opinions, perspectives and experiences.
- Ask the person if they agree to be interviewed and audio recorded.
- If they are willing, provide them with a consent form to read and sign. If not, thank them for coming and end the interview.

Interview section one

Provide the participant with a copy of the handout on compassion and the key values of compassionate leadership, even if they have read it with the invitation pack provided. Then, once they are ready, proceed with questioning.

- How long have you worked in this organisation?
- How many years have you been in your current position?
- Would you consider yourself a leader or an employee of the organisation?
- Is the nature of the work in the organisation remote, hybrid or on-site full-time?
- Would you consider the organisation a tech-enabled or tech-driven organisation?
- What generation of employees do you fall under, the Boomers, Millennials, or GenZ?

Interview section two

- In your opinion, what leadership style is practised in the organisation?
- Would you say that leadership style directly affects the culture of the organisation?
- Do your leaders practice or demonstrate compassion in their daily duties?
- Can you share an example of when your leader responded compassionately to employees or even to your emotional distress?

Interview section three

- What does compassionate leadership mean to you as (an employee or leader) **be specific about their identification.**

- Do you believe compassionate leadership is needed in the modern tech-driven workplace? Can you elaborate on why or why not?
- How has leadership culture in your organisation affected your sense of well-being at work? Has it affected your ability to be engaged?
- Do you think leaders can be both compassionate and performance-driven simultaneously? Is this the case in your organisation, and how are they doing it?

Interview section four

- With your understanding of Ubuntu values, how is your organisation aligned with them?
- Has Ubuntu influenced the organisation's leadership culture?
- In your opinion, do post-apartheid issues lead to leadership distrust and employee disengagement in organisations?
- What other leadership approaches of key attributes should leaders have to provide the most effective form of leadership for future generations or workers?
- How would you describe the importance of a leadership style versus generational changes?

Interview closing

- Maintain contact while finishing off
- Indicate reaching the end, but allow for open discussion to continue
- Thank the participant and resume casual conversation
- Stop the recorder only when you are sure the interview has ended, and the researcher is about to leave the room.

Appendix B: Key Elements Handout

Key Elements for Interview Participants

1. Purpose of the Study

This study explores compassionate leadership within rapidly changing, technology-driven work environments. The goal is to understand how leaders support employee well-being and performance when technology is reshaping workplaces. Your contributions are valuable in adding to the research on this study.

2. Definitions of Key Concepts

Compassion: The ability to notice when someone is struggling, understand their feelings, and take supportive action.

Compassionate Leadership: A leadership approach where leaders recognise challenges their people face, listen empathetically, and act to support them, while balancing organisational goals.

Tech-Driven Workforce: A work environment where digital tools, automation, and technology play a central role in how people work, communicate, and deliver results.

3. Core Values of Compassionate Leadership

Empathy	Understanding others' feelings and perspectives
Awareness	Recognising when people need help
Authenticity	Being genuine and transparent
Collaboration	Working together to solve challenges
Supportive Action	Taking steps to assist, not just observe

4. Generational Groups at Work

Generation	Birth Years	Key Traits
Baby Boomers	1946–1964	Loyal, value stability, prefer face-to-face communication
Generation X	1965–1980	Independent, adaptable, pragmatic
Millennials (Gen Y)	1981–1996	Tech-savvy, collaborative, purpose-driven
Generation Z	1997–2012	Digital natives, entrepreneurial, diverse
Generation Alpha	2013–2025	Growing up fully digital, future-oriented

Common Threads: Across all generations, people want to feel valued, supported, and able to contribute meaningfully in their work environments.

5. What to Expect in the Interview

- Duration: Approximately 45–60 minutes
- Format: One-on-one interview, in person or virtual
- Focus: Your personal experiences and perspectives
- Confidentiality: All responses will be anonymised
- Voluntary participation: You may withdraw at any time without consequence

Appendix C: Consistency matrix

Compassionate leadership is an essential leadership style for a rapidly changing tech-driven workforce.			
Research questions	Sections in literature review	Data collection tools	Analysis technique
How is CL experienced, perceived and practised in a tech-driven workforce in South Africa?	Compassion in the workplace. Compassionate leadership origins, characteristics and critiques of CL South African leadership context	Semi-structured interviews with leaders and employees of tech-driven organisations.	Thematic analysis of data collected and explored.
What is the influence of compassionate leadership on employee trust and emotional well-being in a tech-driven workforce in South Africa?	Leadership in a tech-driven workforce	Semi-structured interviews with employees of tech-driven organisations	Thematic coding of psychological indicators in the data.
How did the onset of GenZ and increased technological adoption influence leadership behaviour and expectations?	Theoretical underpinning Compassionate leadership theory and JD-RM, Job-development resources model	Literature reviews and theories	Thematic coding of first-person experiences in the data.
How is compassionate leadership perceived in relation to other leadership approaches and future generational needs in tech-driven environments?	Characteristics of CL and similarities to current leadership traits. Critiques of CL	Semi-structured interviews with leaders and employees of tech-driven organisations.	Directive questioning

Appendix D: Research Questions and Thematic Matrix

Research Question	Themes
RQ1: How is CL experienced, perceived and practised in a tech-driven workforce in South Africa?	Theme 1: Compassion in Practice Theme 2: Ubuntu and Organisational Culture Theme 3: Compassion in Practice
SRQ1: What is the influence of compassionate leadership on employee trust and emotional well-being in a tech-driven workforce in South Africa?	Theme 4: Employee Well-being and Engagement Theme 5: Post-apartheid Legacy in Organisational Identity
SRQ2: How did the onset of GenZ and increased technological adoption influence leadership behaviour and expectations?	Theme 6: Tech-Driven Challenges Theme 7: Generational Dynamics
SRQ3: How is compassionate leadership perceived in relation to other leadership approaches and future generational needs in tech-driven environments?	Theme 8: Leadership Styles and the Effect on Compassion