

Digital Emotional Intelligence: Transforming Emotional Intelligence in Shaping Digital Empathic Leadership

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Keywords

Emotional Intelligence; Digital Intelligence; Leadership Transformation

ABSTRACT

The world is currently experiencing accelerated digitalization, a transformation that is changing the culture of work, communication, and leadership. Consequently, the emotional touch in leadership is slowly declining. Many leaders possess technical digital acumen, but fail to build emotional bonds in the digital space, often resulting in a rigid work culture that leads to misunderstandings in coordination. Conversely, conventional leadership, which relies on physical presence, is now experiencing disorientation. Leaders who are emotionally intelligent in the real world are not necessarily able to manifest that empathy through digital platforms. This research examined how a leader can validate emotions without physical presence and detect emotional distress in the team through digital communication patterns. The aim of this research is to formulate a leadership model, Digital Emotional Intelligence, as a transformation of emotional intelligence, an absolute prerequisite for empathetic leadership in the digital era. Using a qualitative comparative case study method, data were collected through literature study on Travis Kalanick (Uber) and Mark Zuckerberg (Meta) and analyzed based on Goleman's emotional intelligence theory. The findings reveal that Kalanick failed to transform his emotional intelligence, leading to his downfall, while Zuckerberg successfully transformed by admitting mistakes and recruiting high-EQ leaders. This study formulates DEQ as the blend of traditional and modern skills in the digital era, recommending a paradigm shift from Digital Command to Digital Connection, with practical applications including empathetic grammar, emojis in virtual chats, and emotionally-attuned performance assessments.

INTRODUCTION

A new paradigm is present in all industries as a result of digital transformation, namely the incorporation of leadership styles by utilizing and adopting technology (Tulungen et al., 2022). So that digital leadership must be able to rely on technical skills in making data-based decisions and managing virtual work teams. However, digital systems are often unable to provide maximum benefits due to difficulty reading emotions that hinder understanding of the feelings and needs of others (Syarqowi et al., 2025). Changes in digital transformation in an organization include many things, including changes in structure and value achievement. However, aligning technology strategies with other strategies is still difficult and controversial because digital transformation strategies have a cross-functional character and need to be aligned with other functional and operational strategies (Matt et al., 2018). Therefore, it takes a human aspect to be able to determine the success of digital transformation.

“the key to digital transformation success in 2020 and beyond lies with an organization’s ability to change not only its technology stack but also the attitude and mindset of its employees and leaders. For most organizations, the human aspects of change will be a greater challenge than the technology” (Malhotra, 2020).

Thus, a leader must have emotional intelligence, it does not mean that technical skills are not important. With emotional intelligence, a leader will be able to have self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. The emotional intelligence possessed by a leader will contribute greatly to the effectiveness of leadership because it tends to have a positive outlook in experiencing a policy and creating motivation for his subordinates. Although digital transformation has improved operational efficiency and communication speed, there are situations where if a leader only focuses on digitizing the company in various aspects, both in the company's operations and virtual communication procedures, it often eliminates body language such as tone of speech, facial expressions that are the main basis of emotional intelligence. This phenomenon creates *Digital Empathy Gap* That is the gap to be able to understand other people's emotions in the implementation of the digitalization system (Nkwabi, 2018).

This study examines *Digital Empathy Gap* on the failure of digital leadership Travis Kalanick (Uber), where the sophistication of algorithms is unable to replace the role of empathy in managing the organization (Lidia, 2017) and efforts to change the leadership model of Mark Zuckerberg (Meta). Although at first it was considered rigid and lacked empathy (Utami, 2023), Zuckerberg was able to adapt by building a more inclusive leadership system and demonstrating self-awareness (*self-awareness*) to continue to learn to understand the social impact of the technology (Parr, 2012) (*Facebook’s Old Motto Was “Move Fast and Break Things,”* 2018).

The novelty of this research lies in three main aspects. First, this study introduces the concept of Digital Emotional Intelligence (DEQ) as a transformation of conventional emotional intelligence theory (Goleman) into the digital context, an area that has received limited empirical attention. Second, unlike prior studies that focus separately on digital leadership or emotional intelligence, this research integrates both by conducting a comparative case study analysis of two contrasting digital leaders Travis Kalanick (failure) and Mark Zuckerberg (successful transformation). Third, this study identifies and analyzes the Digital Empathy Gap phenomenon, providing a new diagnostic framework for understanding leadership failures in the digital era.

The objectives of this research are threefold. First, to analyze the phenomenon of the Digital Empathy Gap through the failure of Travis Kalanick's leadership at Uber and the successful transformation of Mark Zuckerberg's leadership at Meta. Second, to formulate the concept of Digital Emotional Intelligence (DEQ) as a transformation of emotional intelligence required for empathetic leadership in the digital era. Third, to develop a Digital Empathic Leadership model that can validate emotions without physical presence and detect emotional distress in teams through digital communication patterns.

The benefits of this research are expected to provide concrete advice so that future digital leaders are not trapped in the *Digital Empathy Gap* experienced by Travis Kalanick, which leads to the destruction of reputation and careers and inspires leaders who are currently still

technocratic like the early phase of Mark Zuckerberg, to transform into more humanist and inclusive leaders. In addition, it helps companies build a healthy digital work culture. As for science, this research is expected to add new literature on the concept of *Digital Emotional Intelligence* (DEQ) as an evolution of conventional Emotional Intelligence theory in the digitalization process and become an academic reference in analyzing real cases of failure and leadership success in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a comparative case study method to explore the phenomenon of *Digital Emotional Intelligence* (DEQ) in the context of modern leadership. The main focus of the study is to observe the leadership crisis that occurred to Travis Kalanick at Uber as well as the evolution of Mark Zuckerberg's leadership values at Facebook/Meta. Through this approach, the researcher aims to formulate a leadership model that is able to validate emotions and detect team pressure in digital communication patterns without requiring an in-person physical presence.

The data collection technique was carried out through a literature study by searching for various relevant secondary data, including company policies, organizational mottos, and the leadership style of the two figures in a certain period of time. The data collected was then analyzed by comparing the aspects of *Self-Awareness*, *Social Awareness*, and *Relationship Management* based on Daniel Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence. This analysis instrument was used to identify how self-awareness and empathy transform from conventional interactions into digital platforms.

The data analysis process is directed to identify *the Digital Empathy Gap*, which is the gap in understanding other people's emotions when implementing a digitalization system. The researchers dissected Kalanick's failure to change his emotional intelligence as well as the success of Zuckerberg's transformation that began to adopt social responsibility and recruit leaders with high EQ. The results of this comparison are expected to provide an academic reference regarding the evolution of conventional emotional intelligence theory into *Digital Emotional Intelligence* in the process of organizational digitalization.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. The Failure of Travis Kalanick

Travis Kalanick was the CEO of Uber from 2009 to 2017. Uber is the world's largest online transportation company under his leadership, Uber is growing rapidly and expanding globally. Although Uber is a \$70 billion company, the loss of empathy value in a digital work culture is leading to a widespread crisis of trust. History records the failure of Travis Kalanick's leadership at Uber as a clear example of how the ambition to digitize and master algorithms without emotional intelligence can bring destruction to the company. After conducting a special investigation, the Board of Directors fired Kalanick for creating a toxic culture that the Board of Directors ordered all managers to improve their emotional intelligence and leadership skills by employing the services of executive consultants (Lidia, 2017).

Kalanick's leadership prioritizes aggressive strategies with common sense without considering empathy and ethical behavior. This imbalance leads to internal and external

conflicts, damaging the brand and morale of Uber employees (*Lead with Mind and Heart*, n.d.). Leadership transformation has a real impact both directly and indirectly on employee performance, job satisfaction and work behavior of the leader himself (Prajogi et al., 2025).

“Uber did not have a technical or innovation problem. Uber had a human problem which required a human solution”(Lidia, 2017).

2. The Transformation of Mark Zuckerberg

Although their career outcomes are different, Travis Kalanick and Mark Zuckerberg have many fundamental similarities, especially in the early phases of their company's growth. Showing digital leaders who tend to ignore empathy for the sake of company growth. Mark Zuckerberg shows how a leader encourages others to think creatively to face challenges in a different way (*Facebook's Old Motto Was “Move Fast and Break Things,”* 2018). *“Move Fast and Break Things”* (Vardi, 2018) which means moving fast and destroying obstacles is the most effective strategy motto implemented by Mark Zuckerberg (*Facebook's Old Motto Was “Move Fast and Break Things,”* 2018) When it started building Facebook in 2004 it focused on aggressive growth and experimentation. Zuckerberg set it up to encourage developers to take risks and launch new features quickly, despite potential technical errors. The most significant failure of this strategy that is often highlighted by leadership and psychology experts is the inability to empathize with the social and privacy impacts of users in pursuit of metric growth (B. George, 2022).

In 2014 at F8, Facebook development conference. Mark Zuckerberg officially changed his motto to "move fast with stable infra" which means move fast while still providing infrastructure stability (Parr, 2012).

“it may not be quite as catchy as move fast and break things, but it's how we operate now”, Mark Zuckerberg (Parr, 2012).

The change in motto from "Move Fast and Break Things" to "Move Fast with Stable Infra" is not just a technical change, but a key indicator of Mark Zuckerberg's evolution of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) as a leader. In the first ten years, from 2004 to 2014, Zuckerberg had emotional intelligence that tended to be low in terms of awareness of the impact of his actions. "Breaking things" is considered cool, but it emotionally shows indifference to users and developers who are harmed by a broken system.

Mark Zuckerberg's leadership transformation began with the growth of *Self-Awareness* i.e. self-awareness) and *Social Awareness* which means having social awareness and empathy which are the main pillars of emotional intelligence. Transition to *Stable Infra* shows that Zuckerberg is starting to realize that constantly breaking things creates an emotional and technical burden for his team and distrust of users. This is the first step toward emotional maturity, acknowledging that the old ways are no longer effective. He began to shift from focusing on the egoism of growth to responsibility for the work environment. Emotionally, it's a form of empathy for the work team and the millions of developers and users (McPheat, 2023).

“you are better off trying something and having it not work and learning from that than not doing anything at all”, Mark Zuckerberg (McPheat, 2023).

At the end of 2021, Facebook did *rebranding* Being Meta, Zuckerberg introduced the company's new values in an internal memo in February 2022. The new motto has become simpler, but coupled with several other core values, namely *move fast, build awesome things, live in the future* (Paul, 2022) Which means moving fast, building amazing things, living in the future. This change shows Zuckerberg's leadership transformation from a leader who focused only on digital development with a rigid leadership style to a more empathetic leader even though it didn't take away from his prowess as a *digital leadership* (Parr, 2012).

"Leadership is about bringing people together, not dividing them. It's about empathy. It's about listening. It's about doing what's best for the community you serve", Mark Zuckerberg.

3. Digital Emotional Intelligence

In the era of digitalization, a leader is not only required to have technological skills but also must have emotional intelligence, and vice versa, leaders who only have emotional intelligence without digital intelligence in this era will not be able to carry out company operations optimally (Wiley, 2016). The combination of emotional intelligence and digital intelligence results in a digital empathy called concept *Digital Emotional Intelligence* (DEQ) is the transformation of a leader's emotional intelligence that effectively blends traditional and modern skills in the digitalization era to guide his organization towards the future (Kane et al., 2019). Even with emotional intelligence a leader can be open about the changes that will arise from digital transformation, especially with regard to technological complexity and technological uncertainty (Ertiö et al., 2024).

“digital empathy : the ability to be aware of, be sensitive to, and be supportive of one’s own and other’s feelings, needs and concern online” (Park, 2019).

CONCLUSION

Travis Kalanick and Mark Zuckerberg, both are true technocrats. They are very cognitively geniuses with high intellectual abilities. Initially, both had difficulties in interpersonal communication, they were more comfortable talking with data than talking heart-to-heart with the team or the public. This is what creates *Digital Empathy Gap* in their respective companies. Kalanick failed to transform, he remained aggressive and defensive when the crisis hit. He failed to change his emotional intelligence, so investors lost trust and he fell. While Zuckerberg chose to transform, he admitted his mistakes, began learning about social responsibility, and recruited people with high emotional intelligence like Sheryl Sandberg. In organizational processes, the scope of digitalization is quite wide, can the concept of digital *empathic leadership* be applied in all organizational processes such as work culture, communication and coordination, human resource development and even in the decision-making process? The main suggestion of this research is not just to adopt new technology, but to humanize technology. Leaders are advised to shift the paradigm from *Digital Command*,

which is to rule with a digital system, to *Digital Connection*, which is to connect inwardly with the digital system. Real behavior on how to apply digital empathy leadership in organizational processes can start from cultural transformation by building new norms in interaction between subordinate leaders or fellow employees in the digital space, namely with grammar and behavior that shows empathy. An example of a simple is adding emojis to the virtual chat column. In addition, it still attaches an emotional aspect to technology-based employee performance assessments.

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