

**DELIVERING BAD NEWS: ANALYSIS OF LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION
STRATEGIES AND CHANNEL SELECTION**

by

Levor Henry

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Swiss School of Business and Management Geneva

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree

DOCTOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

SWISS SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT GENEVA

OCTOBER, 2025

**DELIVERING BAD NEWS: ANALYSIS OF LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION
STRATEGIES AND CHANNEL SELECTION**

by

Levor Henry

APPROVED BY

Ava Buljubic

Dissertation Chair

RECEIVED/APPROVED BY:

Renee Goldstein Osmic

Admissions Director

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

As I complete my Doctor of Business Administration Degree, I am truly grateful for all the support I received along the way.

I would first like to thank the Swiss School of Business and Management (SSBM) Admissions Department for giving me this opportunity to study at such a prestigious learning institution. I am honored to have been a student. I would like to say a special thank you to my Dissertation Supervisor and mentor throughout my DBA journey, Dr. Tamara Gajic. Her expert consultation allowed me to refine my approach to my research in a way that was cohesive which brought more clarity and understanding to my field of study.

Thirdly, I would like to thank my family and friends for their continuous support and encouragement along the way, especially when I felt overwhelmed. The constant positive feedback gave me the energy I needed to keep going.

Finally, I would like to thank all the people that participated in this study. This was a critical component of my Dissertation that could not be done without their feedback on my survey questions. I greatly appreciate everyone taking the time to answer questions crucial to understanding the landscape of leadership communication strategies.

ABSTRACT

**DELIVERING BAD NEWS: ANALYSIS OF LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION
STRATEGIES AND CHANNEL SELECTION**

Levor Henry
2025

This study was conducted to understand how leaders deliver bad news in organizational contexts, focusing on the ways in which the nature and severity of the information shape communication choices and influence employee perceptions. Delivering bad news is a frequent yet highly sensitive aspect of leadership, and ineffective handling of such conversations can undermine trust, morale, and organizational credibility. Conversely, skillful delivery can preserve relationships and reinforce employee engagement during times of difficulty. Recognizing this dual potential, the study examined leadership communication practices to identify patterns, strategies, and best practices that can guide more effective organizational responses.

A sequential mixed-methods design was employed to capture both generalizable trends and nuanced insights. Quantitative data were collected through surveys completed by 101 leaders across a variety of business sectors, while qualitative perspectives were obtained through open-ended responses and follow-up interviews with a purposively selected subset of participants. The study was guided by five core objectives: to describe the types of information leaders most often classify as bad news; to examine their preferred communication channels and the rationales behind those choices; to analyze how message severity influences channel selection; to evaluate which communication

strategies are associated with positive employee perceptions; and to identify evidence-based best practices that support effective leadership communication.

Findings revealed that performance-related issues, such as failed evaluations or assignment rework, were the most frequently reported forms of bad news, while more severe matters, layoffs, suspensions, and demotions, though less common, carried far greater emotional weight for both leaders and employees. Face-to-face communication emerged as the most trusted channel in high-severity situations, with video conferencing serving as a viable substitute in remote or hybrid contexts. Email and telephone were more commonly used for low-severity or routine matters. While many leaders justified their channel selection on the grounds of appropriateness and organizational fit, a notable number admitted that convenience or habit influenced their choices, underscoring a gap between ideal communication practices and real-world behavior.

The study also confirmed the importance of empathetic and transparent leadership strategies in shaping positive employee perceptions. Leaders who demonstrated emotional intelligence, sensitivity to employee concerns, and clarity in their delivery reported more constructive responses from their teams. Practices such as combining verbal communication with follow-up written documentation, maintaining openness to employee questions, and engaging in reflective learning after difficult conversations were identified as effective approaches for sustaining trust and improving communication competence.

The results suggest that aligning communication channels with message severity, integrating empathy and respect into leadership practices, and embedding reflective learning into organizational routines can significantly improve outcomes when bad news must be delivered. This research contributes to leadership and communication scholarship by integrating Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication

Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership into a multi-theoretical framework. It also offers practical guidance for organizations seeking to strengthen leadership development, enhance trust, and foster resilience during periods of organizational difficulty.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	ix
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Research Problem	5
1.3 Purpose of Research.....	8
1.4 Significance of the Study	11
1.5 Research Purpose and Questions	14
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	26
2.1 Theoretical Framework.....	26
2.2 Defining and Contextualizing Bad News in Leadership Communication.....	31
2.3 Evolution and Selection of Communication Channels in the Workplace	35
2.4 Strategic Relationship for Message Severity and Channel Choice	39
2.5 Summary	43
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	47
3.1 Overview of the Research Problem	47
3.2 Operationalization of Theoretical Constructs	49
3.3 Research Purpose and Questions	53
3.4 Research Design.....	56
3.5 Population and Sample	57
3.6 Participant Selection	59
3.7 Instrumentation	60
3.8 Data Collection Procedures.....	62
3.9 Data Analysis	63
3.10 Research Design Limitations	73
3.11 Conclusion	76
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	78
4.1 Types of Information Leaders Classified as Bad News.....	78
4.2 Communication Channels Used and Reasons for Selection	79
4.3 Influence of Severity on Channel Choice	84
4.4 Leadership Strategies and Positive Perception	87
4.5 Evidence-based best practices for communicating bad news	89

4.6 Summary of Findings.....	90
4.7 Summary of Findings.....	92
 CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION.....	 95
5.1 Discussion of Results	95
5.2 Types of Information Leaders Classified as Bad News.....	95
5.3 Communication Channels Used and Reasons for Selection	96
5.4 Influence of Severity on Channel Choice	97
5.5 Leadership Strategies and Positive Perception	97
5.6 Evidence-based best practices for communicating bad news	98
 CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	 99
6.1 Summary	99
6.2 Implications.....	101
6.3 Recommendations for Future Research	105
6.4 Conclusion	108
 APPENDIX A INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM.....	 114
 APPENDIX B INTERVIEW GUIDE	 115
 REFERENCES	 120

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Types of information classified as bad news.....	79
Figure 2. Communication channels.....	81
Figure 3. Pie-chart showing reason for channel choice.....	84
Figure 4. Influence of Severity on Channel Choice.....	85
Figure 5. Most used channel by high severity ($\geq$ Very Negative)	87
Figure 6. Leadership strategies and positive perception.....	88

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Leadership communication is a cornerstone of effective organizational functioning (Antonio, 2023). According to Mohd, Adnan and Valliappan (2019), it is through communication that leaders convey vision, align teams, manage conflict, and drive performance. Among the various forms of leadership communication, delivering bad news stands out as one of the most difficult yet essential tasks. Unlike routine updates or positive announcements, bad news has the potential to disrupt workflow, diminish morale, and damage the trust between leadership and employees (Coleman, 2023). In this context, how leaders frame, deliver, and manage difficult messages becomes a critical determinant of organizational stability and employee engagement.

Delivering bad news is not only a matter of content but also of timing, tone, and delivery method. When done poorly, it can result in widespread dissatisfaction, confusion, and a breakdown in employee confidence (Kaye, 2023). On the other hand, when delivered effectively with transparency, empathy, and clarity, bad news can be received with understanding, even if it remains unwelcomed. Effective communication of unfavorable information requires leaders to balance honesty with sensitivity, ensuring that the message maintains integrity while acknowledging the emotional impact on the recipient (Kabanda & Barrena-Martinez, 2025).

In today's fast-paced and unpredictable business environment, organizations are frequently forced to make difficult decisions involving layoffs, restructuring, budget cuts, or performance-related issues. The way these decisions are communicated plays a crucial role in shaping how employees perceive the organization and its leadership. Employees are more likely to accept difficult decisions and remain committed to the organization when they feel respected, informed, and valued, even in the face of negative news

(Trevino & Nelson, 2021). Conversely, Trevino and Nelson (2021) assert that impersonal or insensitive communication can lead to increased turnover, lower productivity, and long-term damage to organizational reputation.

Furthermore, the choice of communication channel, whether face-to-face, email, video conferencing, or written memo, plays a critical role in shaping how messages are received, interpreted, and acted upon by employees. A poor alignment between the message and the medium can exacerbate rather than mitigate the negative impact, leading to miscommunication, emotional fallout, and erosion of trust (Balogun et al., 2019). For instance, using impersonal channels such as email to communicate highly sensitive information may signal detachment or insensitivity, while a carefully managed face-to-face or video interaction may convey empathy and credibility even in unfavorable circumstances. As hybrid and remote work models become increasingly widespread, leaders must be especially mindful of how communication strategies intersect with technological constraints and employee expectations. The challenge is not merely logistical but relational, as leaders must balance efficiency with emotional resonance in order to preserve trust and organizational cohesion.

The ability to deliver bad news effectively therefore emerges as a defining characteristic of leadership competence. It reflects not only a leader's communication skill but also their capacity for empathy, emotional intelligence, and contextual awareness. More importantly, it has direct implications for how employees perceive leadership credibility, their willingness to remain engaged, and the overall health of organizational culture. Poorly managed communication of bad news can result in disengagement, decreased morale, and reputational damage, while effective communication can foster resilience, reinforce loyalty, and sustain performance during times of adversity.

Despite the importance of this issue, there remains limited empirical evidence that fully integrates the complex interplay between message severity, emotional intelligence, and communication channel selection in everyday organizational contexts. Much of the existing scholarship has tended to concentrate either on large-scale organizational crises (Milliken et al., 2003) or on general leadership and communication strategies (Braun et al., 2019; Kitz et al., 2023). Rarely have studies examined the nuanced, everyday decision-making processes leaders undertake when selecting communication strategies based on the sensitivity of the message. This leaves a notable gap in the literature, particularly at the intersection of interpersonal leadership practices and organizational communication theory.

This study aims to address that gap by examining how leaders across different organizational contexts classify bad news, select communication channels, and employ strategies that integrate both rational and emotional considerations. By doing so, it not only contributes to advancing theoretical understanding but also provides evidence-based guidance for leadership development and organizational policy. The study emphasizes that delivering bad news should not be treated as an incidental leadership task but as a strategic process requiring foresight, empathy, and alignment between message content, medium, and employee expectations.

This dissertation aims to enrich the academic discourse on leadership communication by advancing an integrative perspective that connects structural, situational, and interpersonal approaches to the delivery of bad news. By doing so, it extends existing research that has largely examined communication in crisis scenarios or in generalized leadership contexts, but rarely in the everyday organizational situations where negative messages must be delivered with care and foresight. The study highlights that the act of delivering bad news is not just a simple managerial task but rather a

strategic leadership process that directly influences organizational resilience, employee trust, and long-term credibility.

The contribution of this research is therefore twofold. Theoretically, it strengthens the conceptual foundation of leadership communication by combining Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership into a unified framework. This multi-theoretical integration allows for a more nuanced analysis of how communication channels and strategies interact with message severity, organizational culture, and employee expectations. Practically, the study offers actionable insights for leaders and organizations by identifying evidence-based strategies and best practices that ensure sensitive information is delivered transparently, empathetically, and effectively. These findings will be particularly valuable for leadership development programs, communication training initiatives, and policy design in organizations seeking to foster trust and engagement during times of uncertainty.

The dissertation is organized into six chapters. Chapter I introduces the research problem, purpose, and significance of the study. Chapter II provides a comprehensive review of the literature, examining theoretical frameworks and empirical findings relevant to leadership communication and channel selection. Chapter III details the methodology, including the research design, sampling, data collection, and analytical procedures. Chapter IV presents the results of the mixed-methods analysis, while Chapter V discusses these findings in relation to existing scholarship and leadership practice. Finally, Chapter VI concludes with a summary of contributions, practical and theoretical implications, and recommendations for future research. By following this structure, the study ensures both scholarly rigor and practical relevance, offering a meaningful contribution to the field of leadership and organizational communication.

1.2 Research Problem

Effective leadership communication is critical during times of organizational uncertainty, particularly when conveying bad news. However, many leaders struggle to select appropriate communication strategies and channels that balance transparency, empathy, and clarity. The failure to deliver difficult messages effectively can lead to decreased employee morale, damaged trust, and poor organizational outcomes (Milliken et al., 2003). Prior studies emphasize that when leaders fail to match message content with appropriate delivery methods, employees may experience confusion, disengagement, or resentment, ultimately undermining organizational resilience (Braun et al., 2019; Kitz et al., 2023).

This challenge is magnified in volatile and complex environments where leaders must regularly communicate unfavorable decisions. In the corporate sector, for example, leaders are often tasked with announcing layoffs or restructuring due to market downturns. If such information is delivered impersonally through email, employees may perceive the organization as indifferent or disrespectful, triggering distrust and even reputational backlash. In academic institutions, budget cuts and program closures present similar challenges. Faculty and staff often expect participatory communication and shared decision-making, and when leadership fails to involve them in dialogue, the delivery of negative information can be met with resistance, low morale, and accusations of non-transparent governance. In the public sector, government officials frequently deliver unfavorable news such as policy reversals, resource cuts, or increased restrictions. These situations require particular sensitivity, as public trust in leadership is strongly tied to perceptions of fairness, inclusivity, and respect for citizens' voices.

In an era of constantly changing work environments, the challenge is further intensified, as traditional face-to-face communication is often replaced by digital

channels that may lack personal connection. Hybrid and remote work arrangements require leaders to be more deliberate in selecting communication channels, aligning them with the severity of the message and the emotional needs of employees (Santoso et al., 2022; Olaniyi et al., 2024). The evolution of workplace communication suggests that while technology has increased efficiency, it also risks diminishing the richness and immediacy required for sensitive conversations (Balogun et al., 2019; Chatman et al., 2020). In organizations that now rely heavily on virtual communication platforms, employees often express frustration when serious matters are communicated in ways that appear rushed, detached, or transactional. For instance, delivering termination notices via videoconference without prior context has been documented as generating strong emotional backlash and damaging organizational credibility.

Another dimension of the problem is that existing research has disproportionately emphasized communication in large-scale crises (Coombs, 2022) or in routine, everyday leadership contexts. The “middle ground” of typical workplace situations, such as negative performance evaluations, denial of employee requests, or reassignments, remains underexplored, despite being far more common in organizational life (Volk & Zerfass, 2020). These situations, although less dramatic than corporate scandals or mass layoffs, play a decisive role in shaping employees’ trust in leadership, their engagement with work, and their willingness to remain loyal to the organization.

Individual-level leadership qualities further complicate the problem. Emotional intelligence enables leaders to perceive employee emotions and respond empathetically, while transformational leadership behaviors help foster resilience, trust, and engagement during adverse circumstances (Khattak et al., 2020; Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021). Yet, empirical evidence on how these qualities intersect with communication channel selection is limited. For example, while theory suggests that emotionally intelligent

leaders would prefer richer channels for sensitive messages, in practice many continue to use leaner, more convenient media due to time pressures or organizational norms. This mismatch between theoretical expectations and lived practice highlights the need for further investigation.

Cultural and contextual variations add another layer of complexity. In collectivist societies, employees may expect leaders to engage in more dialogic communication that emphasizes group harmony, while in hierarchical cultures, top-down directives may dominate, regardless of the sensitivity of the message (Gessesse et al., 2023). For instance, in multinational corporations, a uniform approach to communicating bad news across different cultural contexts may backfire: an email announcing organizational restructuring might be considered acceptable in a North American branch but deeply inappropriate in an Asian or African subsidiary, where face-to-face communication is culturally expected.

Thus, there is a clear gap in understanding the relationship between leadership communication, channel selection, and employee perception during difficult conversations. Theoretical models such as Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2022) provide valuable frameworks for aligning communication methods with message severity, but their application in real-world leadership contexts remains underexplored. Leaders often rely on convenience or organizational precedent rather than carefully aligning channels with message gravity and employee expectations. This creates a persistent disconnect between theory and practice.

By systematically investigating these issues, this study seeks to fill a critical gap in leadership communication research. It aims to offer both theoretical advancement and practical guidance by integrating Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis

Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership into a comprehensive framework. The goal is not only to enrich scholarly knowledge but also to provide organizations with evidence-based practices for training leaders, developing communication policies, and fostering trust and resilience in times of organizational adversity.

1.3 Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to explore how leaders communicate bad news within organizational settings and how their communication strategies and channel choices influence employee perceptions and organizational outcomes. Delivering difficult information is an inevitable aspect of leadership, yet the way in which it is managed has profound and lasting consequences for employee morale, trust in leadership, and the overall stability of the organization (Trevino & Nelson, 2021). Poorly handled communication often triggers disengagement, anxiety, cynicism, and reputational damage, while skillful and empathetic delivery has the potential to preserve trust, sustain productivity, and foster resilience during difficult times. For these reasons, the act of delivering bad news cannot be considered incidental but rather a core leadership responsibility that warrants systematic scholarly investigation.

This study recognizes that leadership communication is never neutral or purely informational. Instead, it is a highly context-dependent practice, shaped by organizational culture, leadership style, the severity of the message, and the relational dynamics between leaders and employees. Accordingly, this research situates the delivery of bad news across diverse communication contexts, remote, hybrid, and face-to-face, acknowledging that each setting introduces distinct challenges and opportunities (Santoso et al., 2022; Olaniyi et al., 2024).

In remote environments, leaders often depend on digital platforms that increase efficiency but risk reducing the emotional richness of communication. Hybrid contexts demand intentional alignment of channel choice with employee expectations, as leaders must navigate both physical and virtual spaces simultaneously. While face-to-face communication remains widely regarded as the gold standard for sensitive conversations, it is not always feasible in modern organizations characterized by geographical dispersion, cost constraints, or reliance on digital infrastructures. By examining these varied contexts, the study aims to provide a holistic picture of leadership communication practices that reflects the realities of twenty-first-century organizational life.

A further purpose of this study is to identify the communication strategies most strongly associated with positive employee perceptions when receiving bad news. Strategies such as empathy, transparency, timing, clarity, and emotional intelligence are not abstract ideals but measurable behaviors that shape how messages are interpreted and acted upon (Ewing et al., 2019; Heavey et al., 2020). Understanding which strategies foster trust and resilience is essential, as employees' perceptions of fairness and respect significantly influence their engagement and commitment following adverse news. By linking these strategies with theoretical perspectives such as Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership, the study creates a multi-layered framework that integrates both the technical aspects of communication (message framing, channel selection) and the relational dimensions (empathy, authenticity, responsiveness) that ultimately determine communication effectiveness.

The study also aims to bridge the persistent gap between theory and practice. Although theoretical models recommend aligning communication channels with message severity and emotional weight, empirical evidence shows that leaders frequently default

to convenience, organizational precedent, or personal preference (Braun et al., 2019; Volk & Zerfass, 2020). This misalignment creates a dissonance between what is theoretically prescribed and what employees actually experience, often to the detriment of organizational trust. By systematically analyzing these discrepancies, this research seeks to provide new insights into how theoretical frameworks can be adapted and expanded to reflect the realities of contemporary organizations, particularly those that operate in hybrid or fully digital environments.

Methodologically, the study embraces a mixed-methods approach in order to balance generalizability with depth of understanding. Quantitative survey data will be used to identify broad trends in leaders' channel preferences, message severity judgments, and perceived effectiveness, thereby providing a statistically grounded overview of current practices. Complementing this, qualitative interviews will capture the narratives, emotional reasoning, and experiential reflections of leaders who have personally navigated the challenges of delivering bad news. This dual design ensures methodological triangulation, improving the reliability of findings while also enabling a richer interpretation of the complexities involved (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021; Forza & Sandrin, 2023). By combining numerical patterns with contextualized accounts, the study will illuminate both the structures that shape leadership communication and the subjective judgments leaders make in practice.

Another dimension of the study's purpose is to provide actionable guidance for organizations and leadership development programs. In today's volatile global economy, where uncertainty is heightened by digital transformation, shifting labor markets, and hybrid work arrangements, leaders must be prepared not only to make difficult decisions but also to communicate them in ways that minimize harm and maximize trust. This study's findings will support the design of training initiatives that emphasize empathy,

emotional intelligence, and strategic communication planning as essential leadership competencies. Moreover, the results will assist organizations in developing formal communication protocols and policies that ensure sensitive information is conveyed transparently, consistently, and respectfully across all levels of leadership.

Beyond immediate managerial implications, the purpose of this research extends to advancing the broader field of leadership and organizational communication. By combining Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2022), Emotional Intelligence Theory (Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021), and Transformational Leadership Theory (Khattak et al., 2020), the study develops a multi-theoretical framework that emphasizes both structural and relational dimensions of leadership communication. This integration allows the research to contribute not only to the refinement of existing models but also to the creation of a more comprehensive understanding of communication practices in high-stakes organizational contexts. In doing so, it enhances scholarly discourse while providing practical frameworks for leaders across industries.

The overarching purpose of this study is to advance both theoretical knowledge and practical applications of leadership communication in situations where the stakes are high, emotions are intense, and organizational outcomes are at risk. It aspires to demonstrate that even the delivery of negative or unwelcome information can serve as an opportunity to reinforce credibility, strengthen relationships, and build resilient organizational cultures. By uncovering evidence-based best practices, the study positions itself as a resource for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to cultivate leadership that is not only effective in decision-making but also compassionate and trustworthy in communication.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study holds significant value for both academic research and organizational practice. In a rapidly evolving workplace landscape marked by digital transformation, economic instability, and shifting employee expectations, the ability of leaders to communicate bad news effectively has never been more critical (Lewis & Smith, 2023). Poorly managed communication during times of adversity can lead to employee detachment, decreased productivity, increased reputational harm, and the long-term erosion of organizational trust (Coleman, 2023; Kaye, 2023). Conversely, effective delivery of unfavorable information can transform potential crises into opportunities for building credibility, reinforcing organizational values, and demonstrating positive authentic leadership.

From an academic perspective, this research contributes to addressing a persistent gap in the literature on leadership communication. While previous studies have examined large-scale crisis communication (Coombs, 2022) and general leadership effectiveness (Antonio, 2023), relatively few have explored the complexity of everyday negative communication within organizations. By integrating message severity, channel selection, and employee perception into a single comprehensive framework, the study moves beyond fragmented approaches and contributes a more holistic understanding of leadership communication. Drawing upon Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership, the research advances scholarly knowledge of how these theoretical dimensions intersect in practice (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Khattak et al., 2020; Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021). This multidimensional integration enriches the conceptual toolkit available to scholars, providing a nuanced lens for future empirical studies and theory-building efforts.

Equally important is the study's methodological significance. By employing a mixed-methods design that combines quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, the

research demonstrates the value of methodological triangulation in capturing both broad trends and nuanced leader experiences. This dual approach enhances the validity of findings and offers a model for future studies seeking to balance generalizability with depth. For organizational communication research, which often struggles to bridge the gap between abstract models and practical realities, such methodological rigor ensures that conclusions are both reliable and grounded in lived leadership experiences.

In terms of practical relevance, organizations can benefit from a clearer understanding of which communication strategies foster inclusion, team togetherness, and psychological safety among employees during difficult times (Heavey et al., 2020; Gessesse et al., 2023). The findings will support the design of leadership development programs by equipping current and future leaders with evidence-based techniques for navigating high-stakes conversations. Practical recommendations will also assist organizations in developing policies and protocols that ensure sensitive communication is handled consistently, transparently, and empathetically, regardless of whether it occurs face-to-face or through digital channels (Balogun et al., 2019; Santoso et al., 2022). These insights are particularly valuable in hybrid and remote work contexts, where the absence of traditional in-person interactions makes effective digital communication a cornerstone of organizational resilience.

Beyond organizational effectiveness, the study has broader social and cultural significance. In an era when employee well-being and mental health are increasingly recognized as critical organizational priorities, the way leaders deliver bad news has implications that extend beyond immediate performance outcomes. Compassionate and transparent communication can help reduce workplace stress, foster psychological safety, and strengthen employee commitment, while insensitive or poorly managed communication can exacerbate burnout, attrition, and distrust. Thus, the findings of this

study contribute not only to leadership training but also to the creation of more humane and sustainable workplace cultures.

The study is also significant in its attention to cultural and contextual variations. By examining leadership communication across different organizational settings and industries, it highlights the fact that best practices cannot be universally applied without considering cultural expectations, organizational structures, and industry-specific norms. This comparative insight allows organizations to adapt recommendations to their unique contexts, ensuring that communication practices are both culturally sensitive and operationally feasible. Such context-aware insights are particularly valuable for multinational organizations, public institutions, and industries undergoing rapid transformation.

This study contributes to improved organizational health, more compassionate workplace cultures, and more effective leadership during periods of challenge and change. By situating leadership communication within both theoretical and applied contexts, it ensures that the results are not only academically rigorous but also practically actionable. The dual contribution strengthens the study's impact, positioning it as a valuable resource for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers concerned with advancing leadership communication in complex and uncertain organizational environments. In doing so, the research underscores the critical point that the act of delivering bad news is not merely about information transfer, but about safeguarding trust, reinforcing organizational integrity, and sustaining human dignity in the workplace.

1.5 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions for data collection and analysis to uncover key themes in leadership communication practices and the

implications of those practices for employee engagement and organizational effectiveness.

1. What types of information do leaders classify as bad news?

This research question investigates the specific forms of information that leaders perceive and classify as “bad news.” In organizational contexts, bad news can encompass a wide spectrum of messages, ranging from relatively minor setbacks, such as failed performance evaluations or the need for assignment rework, to more severe and emotionally charged situations, including demotions, suspensions, layoffs, or the denial of important employee requests. These types of communications are not limited to extraordinary or large-scale organizational crises, but also arise in everyday supervisory interactions that shape the daily experiences of employees.

The classification of information as bad news is inherently subjective and context-dependent, influenced by the culture of the organization, the expectations of employees, and the framing of the message itself. For example, in some performance-driven industries, critical feedback may be considered routine and expected, whereas in more collaborative or egalitarian environments, even constructive criticism may be interpreted as unfavorable news with significant emotional consequences (Kitz et al., 2023; Dwyer & Hopwood, 2019). Similarly, layoffs or job reassignments may be normalized in sectors with cyclical restructuring, while in nonprofit or mission-driven organizations, such decisions may be experienced as profound disruptions to professional identity and organizational trust.

Another important dimension is that what leaders perceive as a relatively neutral or necessary message may be experienced by employees as threatening or deeply unsettling. Announcements such as budget restrictions, relocation requirements, or reductions in employee benefits may be framed by leadership as strategic necessities, yet employees

often interpret them as a loss of security, autonomy, or professional recognition. This highlights the relational aspect of classification: “bad news” is not defined solely by the content of the message, but also by how it impacts employees’ sense of fairness, stability, and belonging within the organization.

Research also shows that the categorization of bad news often depends on hierarchical relationships and power dynamics. In highly hierarchical organizations, directives that might appear routine to leaders can still be perceived as unfavorable or punitive by employees, especially if opportunities for dialogue and explanation are absent. Conversely, in organizations with participatory cultures, employees may expect to be consulted or engaged in the decision-making process, and the lack of such involvement can itself transform a neutral announcement into a piece of bad news. This dynamic underscores the importance of examining how organizational norms and leadership styles shape the perception of communication.

Understanding how leaders classify bad news is critical for this study, as it establishes the foundation for analyzing subsequent decisions about communication channels and strategies. By clarifying which types of messages leaders identify as adverse, the study can reveal whether certain forms of bad news consistently trigger the use of richer communication channels, or whether decisions are shaped more by convenience, organizational precedent, or individual leader preference. More broadly, this classification sheds light on how leaders conceptualize their role in managing difficult conversations, not only in times of organizational crisis, but also in the everyday interactions that cumulatively define trust, morale, and organizational culture.

2. Which communication channels do leaders most commonly use to deliver bad news, and what are their reasons for these choices?

This research question examines the communication channels leaders most frequently employ when delivering bad news, as well as the reasoning behind their choices. In organizational practice, common channels include face-to-face interactions, email, telephone conversations, and video conferencing. Each medium carries distinct affordances and limitations that shape how messages are conveyed, interpreted, and emotionally processed by employees. Understanding why leaders choose particular channels, and how these choices align, or fail to align, with theoretical frameworks, provides critical insights into leadership behavior and its consequences for employee perceptions.

Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) emphasizes that richer communication channels, such as face-to-face or video conferencing, are better suited for emotionally charged or ambiguous messages because they allow for immediate feedback, the transmission of verbal and nonverbal cues, and greater personalization. In contrast, channels that are not as rich such as email or written memos may be appropriate for straightforward, routine messages that require less emotional nuance. However, empirical studies consistently reveal a gap between theoretical prescriptions and real-world practices. Leaders often select communication channels not primarily based on message sensitivity, but rather due to convenience, organizational norms, technological availability, or even personal comfort (Balogun et al., 2019; Yue et al., 2021).

Face-to-face communication remains the preferred and most trusted method for high-severity situations, such as layoffs, demotions, or disciplinary actions. The ability to demonstrate empathy through tone, body language, and eye contact enhances the credibility of the message and conveys respect for employees. Video conferencing has emerged as a vital substitute in remote and hybrid contexts, where physical presence is not possible but relational richness is still necessary. By contrast, email is often used for

low-severity or routine matters, such as the denial of requests, policy updates, or performance reminders. Yet, research highlights that when email is inappropriately used to deliver severe news, it can exacerbate negative emotional reactions, creating perceptions of managerial detachment, insensitivity, or lack of accountability (Braun et al., 2019).

Telephone communication occupies a middle ground, allowing for verbal interaction without nonverbal cues. Leaders may use phone calls when immediacy is required but in-person meetings are not feasible. However, the absence of visual cues can limit emotional resonance and increase the risk of misinterpretation. More recently, instant messaging platforms and collaborative digital tools have also been used, particularly in hybrid organizations, though these tend to further reduce relational depth unless supplemented with richer follow-up communication.

Importantly, the rationale behind channel selection is not uniform. Some leaders deliberately align their choices with best practices, consciously selecting richer channels for severe messages in order to mitigate emotional harm. Others admit that convenience, time constraints, or organizational precedent play a stronger role in their decisions. For example, in fast-paced industries, leaders may resort to email or instant messages even when delivering difficult information, citing efficiency or workload pressures as justification. Such practices reveal the tension between ideal communication standards and the pragmatic realities of organizational life.

By uncovering the reasons behind these choices, this study deepens our understanding of the gap between theoretical expectations and actual leadership practices. It also highlights the ethical and relational implications of channel selection, underscoring that the choice of medium is not merely a logistical decision but a symbolic act that communicates respect, empathy, and credibility. Ultimately, this investigation will

provide valuable insights into how leaders balance efficiency with emotional sensitivity, and how organizations might better equip them to make communication decisions that protect employee trust and organizational integrity

3. How does the severity of bad news influence leaders' choice of communication channels?

This research question focuses on the extent to which leaders adjust their communication methods based on the severity of the message being delivered. Severity refers to the level of potential harm, disruption, or emotional distress associated with the content of the communication, ranging from relatively minor issues such as assignment rework or performance feedback, to highly consequential decisions such as layoffs, demotions, or organizational restructuring. Understanding whether leaders calibrate their communication channels to the gravity of the message is critical for evaluating the alignment between theoretical expectations and real-world practices.

Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) provides a well-established framework for analyzing this relationship. According to the theory, richer communication channels, such as face-to-face meetings or video conferencing, are best suited for delivering high-severity news because they provide multiple cues (verbal, nonverbal, paralinguistic) and allow for immediate feedback. Richer channels also enable leaders to demonstrate empathy, authenticity, and care, all of which are particularly important when communicating information that may negatively affect employees' professional identity, emotional well-being, or job security (Springer et al., 2021; Shams Vala et al., 2022). Conversely, leaner channels such as email or instant messaging are considered more appropriate for low-severity messages, where emotional depth and immediate clarification are less critical.

Empirical studies confirm that message severity plays a central role in shaping leaders' communication choices. Volk and Zerfass (2020) and Rainey (2024) emphasize that leaders recognize the symbolic weight of communication channels, particularly in moments of high-severity news. For example, layoffs communicated through an impersonal email may be perceived as disrespectful and dehumanizing, severely damaging organizational trust. By contrast, delivering the same message through face-to-face interaction, even if painful, can preserve dignity, convey respect, and facilitate dialogue. Thus, message gravity not only determines the channel selected but also directly influences employee perceptions of leadership credibility and fairness.

Yet, practice often diverges from theory. Many leaders report that their communication decisions are constrained by organizational norms, workload pressures, and logistical feasibility rather than by sensitivity to message severity. In hybrid or global organizations, for instance, leaders may default to videoconferencing or email due to geographical constraints, even for high-severity news. Similarly, in highly bureaucratic cultures, leaders may follow precedent or official protocols that prioritize efficiency and documentation over relational richness. These contextual pressures highlight the gap between the theoretical ideal of channel selection and the pragmatic realities leaders face in everyday organizational life.

Another important consideration is that severity is not always objectively assessed. Leaders and employees may interpret the gravity of the same message differently. What a leader frames as routine feedback may be experienced by an employee as a severe blow to self-esteem or career progression. Similarly, the denial of a request may seem minor to leadership but may represent a significant missed opportunity for the employee. This subjectivity complicates the application of theoretical frameworks, as leaders' choices

may be based on their own perceptions of severity rather than on employees' lived experiences.

By investigating how leaders adjust, or fail to adjust, their communication channels based on message severity, this study provides a critical assessment of whether leadership communication behavior aligns with theoretical prescriptions or diverges due to contextual, organizational, and cultural pressures. The findings will not only clarify the extent of this gap but also illuminate the ethical and relational implications of channel choice. In doing so, the research will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of leadership communication, one that accounts for both structural theories and the practical constraints that leaders navigate when delivering bad news.

4. What leadership communication strategies are associated with positive employee perceptions after receiving bad news?

This research question explores the interpersonal and relational dimensions of leadership communication by examining how emotional intelligence and leadership style influence the effectiveness of delivering bad news. While much of the existing scholarship emphasizes communication channels and message framing, this question focuses on the strategies leaders employ, such as empathy, transparency, timing, clarity, and active listening, and their impact on employee perceptions. These strategies move beyond the technical transfer of information, highlighting the importance of relational and emotional dynamics in shaping organizational outcomes.

Research on emotional intelligence provides a strong theoretical foundation for this inquiry. Goleman (1995) first articulated the importance of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills in effective leadership, and subsequent studies confirm that emotionally intelligent leaders are better equipped to manage the interpersonal challenges of difficult conversations. Leaders who regulate their own

emotions and demonstrate empathy can reduce the negative emotional impact of bad news, allowing employees to feel respected, acknowledged, and supported (Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021). For example, acknowledging employee concerns, validating their feelings, and responding with sensitivity can help preserve trust and prevent disengagement even in the face of adverse information.

Transformational leadership theory further enriches this analysis. Leaders who practice individualized consideration, recognizing the unique circumstances and emotions of employees, are more likely to foster resilience and commitment following the delivery of bad news. Similarly, behaviors such as inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation can help employees reframe negative news as an opportunity for growth, adaptation, or innovation (Khattak et al., 2020; Bastari et al., 2020). In this sense, transformational leadership behaviors act as buffers against the demoralizing effects of difficult communication, transforming potentially damaging conversations into opportunities for learning and relationship-building.

Empirical findings also support the significance of transparency and respectful dialogue in fostering positive employee reactions. Studies by Ewing et al. (2019) and Heavey et al. (2020) suggest that when leaders communicate openly and honestly, provide rationale for decisions, and invite dialogue, employees are more likely to perceive the process as fair and the leader as trustworthy. Conversely, withholding information, sugarcoating messages, or delivering them in a perfunctory manner can erode credibility and fuel cynicism. Timing also plays a critical role; delays in communication or the perception that leaders are concealing information can heighten employee anxiety and reduce trust in leadership.

By addressing this question, the study emphasizes that leadership communication is not only about what is said or how it is transmitted, but also about who delivers it and

how they manage the emotional and relational aspects of the exchange. Leaders with high emotional intelligence and transformational tendencies are better positioned to mitigate the adverse effects of bad news, ensuring that employees remain engaged, respected, and motivated. This analysis therefore expands the discourse on leadership communication beyond technical efficiency, highlighting the interpersonal and ethical responsibilities of leaders in moments of organizational difficulty.

Ultimately, the findings related to this research question will provide important insights into the human dimension of leadership communication. They will help identify evidence-based strategies that organizations can incorporate into training and leadership development programs, ensuring that leaders are not only skilled in decision-making but also adept at communicating with compassion, transparency, and authenticity during high-stakes conversations.

5. What evidence-based best practices can be identified to guide leaders across industries in effectively communicating bad news to employees?

The final research question synthesizes findings into actionable recommendations for leadership communication in organizational contexts. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical evidence, this question emphasizes the translation of research outcomes into practices that leaders and organizations can adopt. Prior research identifies several key strategies: aligning channel richness with message severity (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Volk & Zerfass, 2020), incorporating employee perspectives into communication planning (Park, Boatwright, & Avery, 2019), and emphasizing clarity, empathy, and timeliness in message delivery (Bui, 2019; Gessesse et al., 2023). These practices provide a foundation upon which this study builds, expanding the literature by introducing sector-diverse perspectives and real-world applications drawn from leaders' lived experiences.

The evidence gathered in this study complements existing knowledge by demonstrating how leaders adapt communication strategies across different organizational settings, ranging from corporate enterprises and educational institutions to nonprofit organizations and public sector bodies. Such sectoral diversity ensures that the recommendations developed are not only theoretically robust but also contextually sensitive and practically applicable. By integrating voices from multiple industries, the study highlights both universal principles of effective communication and context-specific nuances that must be considered when delivering bad news.

From a practical standpoint, the recommendations derived from this study will contribute directly to the design of leadership development programs, organizational policies, and communication protocols. These recommendations will emphasize the importance of selecting channels deliberately, tailoring messages to employee expectations, and prioritizing transparency, empathy, and respect in all interactions. In addition, the findings will inform HR practices and organizational training by equipping current and future leaders with the emotional and strategic competencies required to navigate high-stakes conversations with confidence and sensitivity. By framing these recommendations as best practices, the study provides actionable tools that organizations can implement to strengthen, rather than erode, trust during difficult times.

The significance of these recommendations extends beyond organizational boundaries to the broader societal context. As organizations increasingly confront uncertainty, from economic volatility and technological disruption to crises of public trust, the ability of leaders to communicate adverse information in ways that preserve dignity and fairness carries implications for employee well-being, workplace culture, and even societal confidence in institutions. Thus, the study contributes not only to organizational

resilience but also to the creation of healthier and more sustainable workplace environments.

The theoretical contribution of this final research question lies in its integration of multiple frameworks into a single comprehensive model. Media Richness Theory provides the foundation for understanding how leaders align channel richness with message complexity and emotional sensitivity. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2022) highlights the role of contextual factors, such as severity, stakeholder expectations, and organizational reputation, in shaping communication strategies. Emotional Intelligence theory (Goleman, as cited in Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021) underscores the interpersonal competencies leaders must employ to recognize and regulate emotions, while Transformational Leadership Theory (Khattak et al., 2020) emphasizes leader authenticity, individualized consideration, and inspirational motivation as means of sustaining trust and engagement. The integration of these frameworks enables a more holistic understanding of leadership communication, bridging technical, contextual, relational, and behavioral dimensions.

The research question serves as the bridge between theoretical exploration and practical implementation. By synthesizing empirical findings into actionable guidance, the study ensures that its contributions are not only academically rigorous but also practically relevant. The resulting recommendations underscore that communication of bad news, when managed with transparency, empathy, and strategic foresight, can strengthen organizational trust, enhance resilience, and reaffirm the credibility of leadership, even in the most challenging circumstances.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study uses a multi-theoretical framework based on Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory. Taken together, these frameworks provide a holistic lens through which leadership strategies for delivering bad news can be critically examined in modern organizations. By combining structural perspectives on communication channels with relational and psychological approaches to leadership, the framework captures both the technical and human dimensions of difficult conversations.

Media Richness Theory (MRT), introduced by Daft and Lengel (1986), posits that some communication media are inherently more effective than others depending on the complexity and emotional content of the message. Richer forms of communication, such as face-to-face interactions, are regarded as more suitable for conveying sensitive, ambiguous, or emotionally charged messages because they provide immediate feedback, allow for multiple cues (verbal and non-verbal), and enable personal focus (Shams Vala et al., 2022). By contrast, leaner channels such as email or memos may suffice for straightforward, routine messages that require little clarification. Scholars such as Lee (2019) emphasize that the effectiveness of communication is determined not only by the content of the message but also by the fit between the message complexity and the richness of the medium.

Applied to the context of leadership, MRT becomes especially relevant when leaders are tasked with communicating difficult news such as layoffs, demotions, or negative performance evaluations. In such scenarios, the likelihood of misinterpretation or emotional resistance is high, and richer media enable leaders to provide clarity, show empathy, and gauge employee reactions in real time. For example, Springer et al. (2021)

note that face-to-face or video conferencing is the preferred medium for high-severity messages because it ensures that both verbal and non-verbal elements of communication support mutual understanding. In contrast, relying on leaner media during such high-stakes interactions can lead to feelings of detachment, resentment, or mistrust (Braun et al., 2019).

Thus, MRT highlights the critical importance of aligning message severity with channel richness. It provides a rationale for why leaders should move beyond convenience or habit in choosing communication channels, and instead make deliberate decisions that minimize misunderstanding and respect the emotional needs of employees. In this way, MRT not only explains how communication channels differ in their capacity to transmit information but also underscores their role in shaping employee perception and organizational trust during the delivery of bad news

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), provides a structured framework for aligning communication strategies with the nature and severity of a crisis. While traditionally applied in external crisis communication and public relations, SCCT has also been recognized as highly relevant in internal organizational contexts where leaders must communicate bad news to employees (Coombs, 2022). The theory emphasizes that the seriousness of the situation, as well as stakeholder perceptions of responsibility, should guide how leaders frame their messages and select communication strategies.

One of the central tenets of SCCT is that communication should be adapted to the level of threat and responsibility attributed to the organization or its leaders. For example, when employees perceive the leader as directly responsible for a negative event, such as budget cuts, layoffs, or demotions, the need for transparency, empathy, and acceptance of responsibility becomes greater (Othman & Yusoff, 2020). In contrast, when negative

outcomes are viewed as external or beyond the leader's control, less accommodative strategies may still maintain trust, provided the communication is honest and respectful.

In internal communication, this means that leaders must carefully consider not only the factual content of the message but also how it will be interpreted by employees. SCCT underscores the importance of message framing, acknowledging the emotional impact of bad news, and providing clear rationales for decisions. Studies by Gómez-Leal et al. (2022) and Heavey et al. (2020) further illustrate that when leaders anticipate employee expectations and proactively manage them, negative reactions such as resistance or disengagement can be mitigated.

SCCT also highlights the role of context and environment in shaping communication choices. Leaders must evaluate the intensity of the challenge, whether it involves everyday performance feedback or a large-scale organizational restructuring, and select a communication approach that aligns with both the severity of the situation and the expectations of employees. In this sense, the theory provides a practical decision-making model that helps leaders balance organizational needs with the preservation of employee trust and morale.

By applying SCCT to the delivery of bad news in organizations, this study explores how leaders can strategically manage sensitive conversations, ensuring that their communication choices are not only situationally appropriate but also ethically grounded. The framework thus bridges the gap between external crisis management and internal leadership communication, offering insights into how bad news can be conveyed in ways that reduce harm, maintain credibility, and foster resilience within the workforce.

Goleman's theory in 1995 shows that being able to understand and control one's feelings and those of others matters in leading others (Williams, 2021). When it comes to giving negative news, how people use emotional intelligence makes a big difference in

how the news is delivered and understood. Employees often perform better after bad news when their leaders are emphatic, regulate their actions and use good social skills. Because they are emotionally intelligent, true leaders adjust their communication and the way they channel it depending on how their employees feel (Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021). The theory serves to strengthen the discussion on how leaders should act, by demonstrating the importance of both their people skills and their technical abilities when communicating bad news.

Bass and Avolio (1994) linked how leaders communicate to the Transformational Leadership Theory as highlighted by Bastari et al. (2020). According to Khattak et al. (2020), transformational leaders stand out by inspiring others, stimulating the mind and paying personal attention to their team. They frequently adopt approaches that motivate employees during any kind of conversation (Khattak et al., 2020). In order to lessen the shock, transformational leaders describe difficult information as a way to learn or improve going forward. By building trust and making the organization open, leaders help staff react in a positive way to challenges and setbacks.

Bringing these four theories together creates a robust and multidimensional framework for understanding how leaders deliver unpleasant news in organizational contexts. Media Richness Theory (MRT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) provide the structural and contextual foundations for analyzing communication choices: MRT emphasizes the importance of matching channel richness with message complexity, while SCCT highlights how situational factors such as crisis severity, perceived responsibility, and stakeholder expectations shape communication strategies (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Coombs, 2022). These perspectives establish the external conditions and decision-making logic that guide leaders in selecting communication channels and framing their messages.

In contrast, Emotional Intelligence (EI) theory and Transformational Leadership Theory focus on the personal and relational qualities that influence communication outcomes. EI underscores the ability of leaders to regulate emotions, demonstrate empathy, and anticipate employee reactions, thereby minimizing the psychological harm of negative news (Goleman, 1995; Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021). Similarly, Transformational Leadership emphasizes individualized consideration, authenticity, and inspirational motivation, all of which can foster trust and resilience even in the face of adverse decisions (Khattak et al., 2020; Bastari et al., 2020). Together, these perspectives highlight the human dimension of leadership communication, illustrating how leaders' interpersonal competencies directly shape employee perceptions, organizational climate, and long-term trust.

By integrating structural, situational, and interpersonal perspectives, this multi-theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens for examining the delivery of bad news. It captures not only the technical aspects of message and channel selection but also the relational dynamics and emotional intelligence required for effective leadership. In doing so, it aligns closely with the study's objectives: to explore how communication channels are chosen, how message severity influences strategy, and how leaders' personal qualities shape employee experiences and organizational outcomes. Ultimately, the framework reinforces the principle that successful leadership communication depends on the alignment between message content, communication method, and emotional context. This integrative perspective lays the groundwork for the literature review and empirical analysis that follow, ensuring that the study is grounded in both theoretical rigor and practical relevance

2.2. Defining and Contextualizing Bad News in Leadership Communication

The concept of bad news in leadership communication encompasses a wide spectrum of organizational messages that employees perceive as undesirable, distressing, or unfavourable. Such communications may include critical performance evaluations, denial of requests, restructuring announcements, demotions, or even terminations. What qualifies as “bad news” is not only determined by the objective content of the message but also by how employees interpret its consequences for their role, career trajectory, and sense of security within the organization. As Kitz et al. (2023) note, bad news is inherently subjective and context-dependent, shaped by both organizational culture and individual expectations.

Research further illustrates that what leaders consider a routine or necessary communication may still carry negative weight for employees, depending on timing, framing, and the power dynamics involved. For example, Dwyer and Hopwood (2019) highlight that announcements regarding budget cuts, relocations, or reductions in benefits often create anxiety, even if framed as organizational necessities. Similarly, Braun et al. (2019) emphasize that the emotional impact of bad news is strongly mediated by the communication channel: impersonal methods such as email or written memos can amplify negative reactions, whereas direct, face-to-face communication often softens the blow by allowing space for empathy and clarification.

Cultural and institutional settings also play a critical role in shaping what is perceived as bad news. Gessesse et al. (2023), in their study of physician communication, demonstrated that hierarchical norms often intensify the emotional impact of unfavourable information, whereas more participatory or dialogic cultures encourage open conversations that can mitigate negative perceptions. Within organizational contexts, this suggests that the same message, such as a performance critique or

reassignment, can be experienced very differently depending on the communication style of leaders and the cultural expectations of employees.

Ultimately, bad news in leadership communication cannot be reduced to a fixed category of messages. Rather, it is a dynamic construct influenced by content, delivery, organizational culture, and employee perception. Recognizing this complexity is essential, as it underscores the need for leaders to adopt flexible, context-sensitive communication strategies that acknowledge both the organizational necessity of the message and the emotional realities of its recipients.

Dwyer and Hopwood (2019) emphasize that bad news extends well beyond disciplinary actions to include strategic decisions that may generate negative repercussions for employees, such as budget reductions, relocations, or benefit cuts. These decisions, while often unavoidable in organizational life, can be deeply unsettling for employees as they directly affect their sense of security and stability. The effectiveness and emotional impact of such messages are strongly influenced by how they are framed, the channel through which they are communicated, and the timing of their delivery. Their findings suggest that clarity, empathy, and timeliness are not optional features but essential variables that determine whether employees perceive the message as fair and understandable, or as insensitive and harmful.

Channel selection further emerges as a decisive factor in shaping employee reactions. Braun et al. (2019) demonstrate that the medium used, whether face-to-face, email, telephone, or digital platform, can substantially alter perceptions of the leader and the organization. Messages delivered through impersonal or “lean” channels without sufficient contextualization or emotional cues are more likely to provoke confusion, distrust, or resentment. Conversely, the deliberate use of richer channels, such as face-to-face meetings or video calls, allows leaders to convey empathy, provide space for

dialogue, and address concerns in real time, thereby softening the emotional blow and enhancing the credibility of the message. These insights reinforce the principles of Media Richness Theory, which argues that the choice of communication channel must be matched to the complexity and emotional weight of the message being delivered.

Beyond channel selection, organizational culture plays a central role in defining both what qualifies as bad news and how it is communicated. Gessesse et al. (2023), in their study of physician communication in Ethiopian hospitals, found that cultural norms and institutional hierarchies strongly shaped not only the expectations surrounding message delivery but also the emotional responses of recipients. This finding highlights that communication strategies cannot be divorced from their broader cultural and institutional contexts. Similarly, Gómez-Leal et al. (2022) argue that in hierarchical organizational settings, a top-down, directive style of communication often intensifies the negative impact of bad news, as employees feel excluded from decision-making processes. In contrast, organizations that emphasize dialogue, inclusivity, and participatory practices tend to mitigate the harmful effects of bad news, fostering psychological safety and preserving trust even in adverse circumstances.

Taken together, these studies suggest that bad news communication is not a neutral act but a socially and culturally embedded process. Leaders must therefore go beyond simply transmitting information: they must consider how framing, channel selection, and organizational norms intersect to shape employee perceptions and emotional responses. Recognizing these dynamics is crucial for developing sensitive and effective communication strategies that reduce harm and strengthen resilience within organizations.

In the context of strategic communication, Heavey et al. (2020) contend that leaders who engage through transparent and consistent messaging especially in digital

spaces can manage employee perceptions more effectively, even during times of organizational distress. Their framework points to the importance of aligning message content with audience expectations and organizational values to reduce ambiguity and foster trust. Further, O'Neill and Kelley (2021) contribute a sector-specific perspective, showing how bad news was communicated in academic library settings during periods of budget crises. Their findings underline the importance of providing rationale and context alongside the message, which can help reduce resistance and emotional backlash.

Despite these valuable insights, challenges persist in clearly defining what constitutes bad news across different industries, organizational cultures, and leadership roles. Much of the existing research tends to generalize findings, often overlooking the fact that thresholds of perceived severity can differ significantly between sectors. For instance, performance feedback that is considered routine and even expected in high-pressure environments such as emergency medicine may be perceived as highly unsettling in creative industries, non-profit organizations, or academic institutions where collaborative culture and professional identity are central (O'Neill & Kelley, 2021). Similarly, layoffs or budget cuts may be normalized in corporate settings with cyclical restructuring, while in public or mission-driven organizations they may be interpreted as profound organizational failures.

These variations highlight the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches to leadership communication. Current theoretical frameworks provide useful structures for categorizing and analyzing bad news, yet they often fail to fully capture the cultural, contextual, and relational dynamics that shape how employees interpret negative messages (Gessesse et al., 2023; Gómez-Leal et al., 2022). For example, hierarchical organizations may frame unfavorable decisions through top-down directives, thereby

intensifying employees' feelings of exclusion, while participatory cultures may approach the same messages as opportunities for dialogue and shared problem-solving.

This lack of sector-specific sensitivity underscores the pressing need for more comparative and empirical research to investigate how bad news is defined and perceived across industries, leadership levels, and cultural environments. A more nuanced, context-aware approach would not only refine the conceptual boundaries of “bad news” but also strengthen the development of best practices for its delivery. Such an approach would enable leaders to tailor their communication strategies more precisely to the expectations and emotional realities of their employees, ultimately fostering trust, psychological safety, and organizational resilience during times of adversity

2.3 Evolution and Selection of Communication Channels in the Workplace

The evolution of communication channels in the workplace reflects a profound transformation in how leaders interact with employees, particularly when delivering difficult or sensitive messages. Historically, face-to-face communication dominated organizational life because of its capacity to transmit emotional cues, encourage immediate feedback, and foster interpersonal trust (Tang & Bradshaw, 2020). This mode of interaction was especially valued in high-stakes conversations, where leaders needed to convey empathy and ensure clarity through both verbal and non-verbal cues.

With the advent of digital technologies, however, the communication landscape has shifted dramatically. Email, instant messaging, video conferencing, and collaborative platforms have become integral components of daily organizational communication. While these tools increase efficiency, reduce geographical barriers, and enable rapid information sharing, they also complicate how bad news is conveyed. Their widespread adoption has introduced new challenges, as leaner digital channels may strip away essential relational cues and risk depersonalizing interactions (Chatman et al., 2020).

This shift has been further accelerated by the rise of hybrid and remote work models, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Santoso et al., 2022). Leaders now frequently face the challenge of communicating sensitive information across virtual spaces, where traditional markers of empathy and presence are harder to replicate. Olaniyi et al. (2024) caution that while digital collaborative tools provide convenience and scalability, they often weaken interpersonal connection if not supplemented with relational strategies rooted in emotional intelligence. Similarly, Yue et al. (2021) argue that leaders must adopt a deliberate and agentic role as communicators, carefully tailoring their choice of channels to the sensitivity of the message and the expectations of their employees.

Research underscores that channel evolution is not merely a technical change but a strategic one. Pfeffermann (2020) highlights that effective leadership requires a nuanced understanding of both traditional and digital platforms, while Kaneko (2025) demonstrates that the effectiveness of team performance is strongly mediated by how leaders choose communication channels in context. Furthermore, Ewing et al. (2019) point out that organizational values and employee emotions must be factored into these choices, since insensitive or impersonal digital communications can exacerbate the negative effects of bad news.

Thus, the evolution of communication channels reflects not only technological progress but also the growing complexity of leadership responsibilities. Leaders are now expected to balance efficiency with empathy, ensuring that digital tools do not replace but rather complement relational communication practices. This shift underscores the need for sector-specific competencies and ongoing training to help leaders adapt their strategies in environments where digital communication is the norm but interpersonal sensitivity remains essential several studies have assessed the effectiveness of different

communication channels in delivering bad news, emphasizing the need to balance clarity, empathy, and organizational objectives. Pfeffermann (2020) highlights the strategic role of communication media in leadership, suggesting that a nuanced understanding of digital and traditional platforms is necessary for effective message delivery. Kaneko (2025) reinforces this by exploring how different communication channels influence team performance, showing that context and content must guide leaders' choices.

Despite advancements in communication theory, many leaders continue to select channels based on efficiency or habit rather than emotional or contextual appropriateness. Yue et al. (2021) emphasize that leaders must act as deliberate communication agents, tailoring their message delivery methods to audience needs and message content. Ewing et al. (2019) similarly argue that internal communication strategies should be aligned with both organizational values and the emotional state of employees to maximize engagement and minimize resistance, particularly in sensitive situations.

As the workplace becomes increasingly digitized, the interplay between communication media and employee engagement becomes more complex. Olaniyi et al. (2024) demonstrate that digital collaborative tools, while convenient, can weaken interpersonal connection when used in isolation or without emotional intelligence. Lee (2022) adds that leadership styles such as inclusive leadership, paired with symmetrical communication approaches, are vital for sustaining trust and clarity across communication channels in diverse and multi-generational workforces.

Research also reveals that digital tools, despite their efficiency, do not always preserve the richness required for difficult conversations. Chatman et al. (2020) stress that effective communication involves more than message transmission, it requires emotional resonance, authenticity, and feedback loops. In this regard, Bui (2019) points

out that the digital workplace demands new competencies from leaders, particularly in navigating when and how to use various platforms for different types of messages.

Krakauer et al. (2020) presented an innovative perspective by applying information theory to workplace communication, demonstrating that message individuality and receiver interpretation vary substantially depending on both the medium and the broader context. This perspective highlights that communication is not simply the transfer of information but an interpretive process shaped by the richness of the channel and the expectations of the recipient. Building on this, Varadarajan et al. (2022) argue that digital innovations in workplace communication must serve a dual purpose: promoting organizational efficiency while also supporting ethical and empathetic engagement with employees. Their emphasis on balancing technological utility with moral responsibility resonates strongly with leadership communication during times of uncertainty, when employees are particularly vulnerable to the psychological impact of unfavorable news.

Consequently, while technological advances have expanded the array of communication tools available to leaders, effective channel selection remains a nuanced and context-dependent process. The literature consistently shows that although newer digital platforms offer flexibility, speed, and reach, they may inadvertently strip away the relational and emotional cues necessary for sensitive conversations (Chatman et al., 2020; Santoso et al., 2022). The critical challenge for leaders, therefore, lies in discerning when efficiency must yield to empathy, and when the choice of a “richer” channel is essential to preserving trust and psychological safety.

This ongoing tension underscores the need for more empirical research that examines how leadership decisions about communication channels influence both organizational outcomes and employee well-being in modern, technology-driven

workplaces. Existing studies provide valuable theoretical insights, yet they often stop short of addressing sector-specific variations or the interplay between digital channel use and employee perceptions of fairness, care, and respect. By addressing these gaps, future research can offer evidence-based guidance to ensure that technological tools are not only efficient but also aligned with the emotional and ethical imperatives of effective leadership communication.

2.4 Strategic Relationship for Message Severity and Channel Choice

The relationship between the severity of a message and the choice of communication channel is a crucial consideration in leadership communication. As Volk and Zerfass (2020) note, leaders may align the seriousness of a message with the communication medium either strategically, through deliberate choices that reflect best practices, or unintentionally, based on organizational norms, convenience, or personal habit. Foundational to this discussion is Media Richness Theory (MRT) (Daft & Lengel, 1986), which argues that richer communication channels, those enabling immediate feedback, multiple sensory cues, natural language, and personal focus, are best suited for conveying complex or emotionally sensitive information (Shams Vala et al., 2022).

Accordingly, high-severity scenarios such as layoffs, demotions, or significant restructuring announcements are ideally delivered through face-to-face interactions or, in virtual contexts, video conferencing. These richer channels provide space for nonverbal communication, emotional nuance, and dialogue, which help mitigate negative reactions and maintain trust (Springer et al., 2021). By contrast, leaner media such as email, written memos, or standardized forms may be sufficient for low-severity communications, such as the denial of requests, minor scheduling changes, or routine performance feedback (de Melo, 2021).

However, research also highlights that leaders do not always follow this theoretical alignment. Braun et al. (2019) found that many leaders still rely on leaner digital media for high-stakes communication due to convenience, perceived efficiency, or organizational pressures, even when these choices amplify negative emotional responses. Similarly, Yue et al. (2021) emphasize that employees often perceive mismatches between the severity of the message and the channel used as signs of disrespect or managerial insensitivity. Such mismatches can damage employee morale and erode organizational trust, especially when severe news is delivered impersonally.

In practice, the choice of communication channel is rarely determined by message severity alone; it is also shaped by contextual variables such as organizational culture, industry norms, and leadership style. For instance, in highly hierarchical organizations, leaders often default to top-down, directive communication regardless of the seriousness of the message. This can amplify the negative emotional impact of bad news, as employees may perceive the delivery as rigid, impersonal, or exclusionary. In contrast, organizations that embrace participatory cultures are more likely to encourage dialogue, openness, and richer exchanges, even when addressing lower-severity issues such as routine performance feedback or minor operational changes (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022). Such environments foster psychological safety and enable employees to feel that their perspectives are valued, thereby reducing the potential harm of unfavorable messages.

These dynamics highlight that while Media Richness Theory (MRT) offers a strong conceptual foundation for aligning channel richness with message complexity, real-world communication practices often diverge from theoretical prescriptions. Leaders may prioritize convenience, organizational precedent, or their own comfort level over employee needs, resulting in mismatches that undermine message effectiveness. This divergence underscores the importance of situational adaptability and leader self-

awareness. Effective leaders must evaluate not only the severity of the message but also the cultural and relational context in which it is delivered. By integrating theoretical insights with practical sensitivity, leaders can make communication choices that balance efficiency with empathy, ultimately strengthening trust and resilience within the organization.

Ultimately, the strategic relationship between message severity and communication channel selection highlights the central tension in leadership communication: balancing efficiency with empathy. Leaders must be attuned not only to the objective seriousness of the message but also to how employees are likely to interpret it within their cultural and organizational context. By aligning message severity with appropriate channel richness, leaders can reduce misunderstanding, demonstrate care, and foster resilience, thereby enhancing both employee well-being and organizational outcomes.

Several studies affirm that leaders frequently consider the gravity of a message when choosing the medium through which it is delivered. For instance, Rainey (2024) emphasized that the richness of communication channels, defined by their capacity to convey verbal, non-verbal, and emotional cues, plays a decisive role in message effectiveness, particularly during high-stakes communications. Rich channels, such as face-to-face interactions or video conferencing, allow leaders to incorporate tone, body language, and immediate feedback, which are critical for addressing employee concerns and managing emotional reactions.

Similarly, Renn (2020) underscored the importance of aligning the severity of a message with an appropriate communication channel in order to foster both understanding and trust. This alignment is especially vital in high-risk or emotionally charged contexts, where employees look not only for information but also for reassurance

and relational connection. When leaders select communication methods that acknowledge the seriousness of the situation, they demonstrate sensitivity to employee needs, thereby strengthening perceptions of fairness and organizational credibility.

Conversely, misalignment between message severity and channel selection can undermine communication effectiveness. For example, using lean channels such as email or text messages to communicate significant organizational changes, layoffs, or demotions may strip the interaction of empathy and nuance. Such choices often result in employees perceiving the message as impersonal, disrespectful, or even dismissive, thereby weakening trust and diminishing the perceived credibility of leadership (Volk & Zerfass, 2020; Braun et al., 2019). This reinforces the principles of Media Richness Theory, which argue that when ambiguity or emotional intensity is high, leaders must rely on richer forms of communication to prevent misunderstandings and negative reactions (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Shams Vala et al., 2022). The theoretical underpinning of such observations can be traced to frameworks like Media Richness Theory and its derivatives, which argue that richer media (e.g., face-to-face or video) are more suitable for ambiguous or emotionally laden content (Shams Vala, Moosavi, & Jafari Baghiabadi, 2022). However, real-world decisions rarely align perfectly with these models. Research by Mikkelsen, Sloan, and Hesse (2019) demonstrates that leadership style and relational communication patterns can override theoretical best practices in message delivery. Many leaders, especially under pressure, default to familiar or convenient tools rather than those best suited to the emotional complexity of the message, often out of habit or organizational norms.

In practice, factors such as organizational culture, urgency, and personal preferences often drive communication channel selection more than theoretical ideals. Darics (2020) found that even in instant messaging platforms, leaders attempt to

compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues by exaggerating verbal clarity or incorporating emojis and punctuation to indicate tone. Nonetheless, this effort often falls short in mitigating the emotional impact of bad news, especially when dealing with sensitive employee matters.

Moreover, individual differences in message interpretation further complicate the picture. A message perceived as neutral by one employee might be received as threatening or discouraging by another, depending on their role, psychological readiness, and prior experiences. Springer et al. (2021) note that this variability underscores the importance of tailoring communication not only to the message but also to the recipient's context and emotional state. Hence, from a strategic standpoint, understanding employee preferences and the nuances of each communication tool is vital. Park, Boatwright, and Avery (2019) found that risk perception and psychological preparedness significantly influenced channel preference during health crises, a finding transferable to organizational contexts where bad news must be delivered with care. This suggests that sensitivity to recipient perception should guide channel selection, not just message content.

2.5 Summary

In summary, alignment between leadership intent and strategic communication is central to the effectiveness of bad news delivery. As Volk and Zerfass (2020) argue, successful internal communication depends on harmonizing three critical elements: the organizational message, the chosen communication channel, and employee expectations. When these elements are misaligned, organizations risk not only misinterpretation of the message but also long-term damage to employee trust, engagement, and organizational credibility. For instance, when serious or emotionally charged messages are communicated through lean digital channels such as email, employees may interpret the

delivery as impersonal or dismissive, leaving them feeling neglected or devalued (Braun et al., 2019; Renn, 2020). Such misalignment illustrates that the act of delivering bad news extends far beyond information transfer; it is a symbolic demonstration of organizational values and leadership priorities.

Theoretical models provide important guidance in this area. Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) suggests that leaders should select richer communication channels when dealing with ambiguous or emotionally sensitive information, ensuring that the medium conveys sufficient cues for understanding and dialogue. Similarly, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2022) highlights the importance of tailoring communication strategies to contextual factors, including message severity, organizational reputation, and stakeholder perceptions. These frameworks underscore that effective leadership communication is not static but highly contingent on both message content and situational dynamics. Yet, their application in real-world leadership contexts remains imperfect, as leaders are influenced by competing demands, such as efficiency pressures, entrenched organizational norms, and time constraints. These factors often cause leaders to default to less effective strategies despite the availability of more suitable alternatives (Rainey, 2024; Shams Vala et al., 2022).

This persistent gap between theory and practice highlights the importance of cultivating not only technical knowledge of communication models but also interpersonal and contextual competencies that allow leaders to adapt strategies appropriately.

Emotional intelligence, for example, enables leaders to recognize the psychological impact of their decisions, manage their own emotions, and respond empathetically to employees, thereby humanizing even the most difficult messages (Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021). Likewise, transformational leadership behaviors such as individualized consideration and inspirational motivation help preserve morale and foster

resilience by reframing negative events as opportunities for growth (Khattak et al., 2020; Bastari et al., 2020). These relational competencies are not separate from strategic communication but rather integral to its success, ensuring that leaders maintain credibility while meeting employee needs during adverse situations.

A deeper understanding of employee expectations is particularly critical. Employees evaluate not only the content of bad news but also how it is delivered, by whom, and under what circumstances. Research demonstrates that transparency, respectful dialogue, and timeliness are decisive factors in whether employees perceive communication as fair and trustworthy (Heavey et al., 2020; Ewing et al., 2019). When leaders delay communication, obscure information, or fail to provide justification for decisions, employees are more likely to experience frustration, anxiety, and disengagement. Conversely, when leaders engage employees with honesty and empathy, they can preserve trust even in contexts where the news is unfavorable. Thus, communication effectiveness lies not only in the alignment of message and channel but also in the relational effort to acknowledge and respect employees as key stakeholders.

Organizational culture further mediates this alignment. In hierarchical cultures, employees may expect formal communication delivered through top-down channels, whereas in participatory or collectivist cultures, employees may anticipate dialogue and inclusion in decision-making processes. Misalignment between leadership style and cultural expectations can amplify the negative effects of bad news, leading to perceptions of unfairness or alienation. Leaders must therefore develop contextual awareness, ensuring that communication strategies are sensitive to the organizational environment and aligned with broader cultural norms. This highlights that effective communication is not merely a matter of individual skill but also of organizational adaptation and cultural competence.

Taken together, these insights demonstrate that strategic alignment requires integrating both the technical and emotional dimensions of communication. It is not sufficient for leaders to select an appropriate channel; they must also consider the framing of the message, the emotional support provided, and the broader organizational dynamics in which the communication occurs. When these elements are harmonized, leaders can preserve morale, maintain trust, and foster resilience in modern organizations, even under adverse circumstances. This holistic understanding provides a natural foundation for examining leadership communication strategies that extend beyond channel selection and incorporate leaders' behaviors, emotional intelligence, and relational competencies. In doing so, this study positions leadership communication as a multidimensional process that shapes not only immediate employee reactions but also long-term organizational health and credibility.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Overview of the Research Problem

This chapter provides a detailed exposition of the research methodology implemented to explore how leaders navigate communication strategies and select appropriate channels when delivering bad news within organizational contexts. Recognizing that delivering unfavorable information is both a cognitive and emotional leadership challenge, this study seeks to investigate not only the technical aspects of communication choices but also the underlying psychological, relational, and contextual factors that shape these decisions. In order to capture the complexity of leadership behavior in these high-stakes situations, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, integrating quantitative analysis to identify generalizable patterns and qualitative inquiry to uncover nuanced, context-specific insights.

The research design incorporates multiple methodological layers, including survey instruments that capture measurable data on communication preferences, channel utilization, message severity, and perceived effectiveness, alongside in-depth semi-structured interviews that elicit personal narratives, decision-making rationales, and reflective experiences from leaders who have engaged in delivering bad news. This dual approach allows for methodological triangulation, strengthening the credibility, dependability, and transferability of the findings.

Furthermore, this chapter provides comprehensive justification for the selected methodology by aligning it with the study's overarching research objectives and theoretical framework, which integrates Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership Theory. By doing so, the research design ensures consistency between theoretical constructs, empirical data collection, and analytical procedures.

In addition, the chapter addresses critical ethical considerations, including participant confidentiality, informed consent, and data protection, to uphold the integrity of the research process. Measures to enhance validity, such as pilot testing of instruments, and reliability, through consistent coding protocols and systematic data verification, are also discussed to reinforce the methodological rigor. Collectively, these methodological choices provide a robust foundation for generating actionable knowledge that advances both scholarly understanding and leadership practice in the sensitive domain of bad news communication.

In addition to addressing its primary research objectives, this chapter underscores the multidimensional nature of the research problem. Delivering bad news is not simply a transactional act of conveying information but a leadership process that requires the integration of cognitive judgment, emotional sensitivity, and ethical responsibility. Leaders must balance organizational imperatives with the human need for dignity, fairness, and transparency, and this delicate balance makes the phenomenon particularly worthy of systematic investigation. By designing a study that accounts for both the technical dimensions of communication and the relational dynamics of leader–employee interactions, this research advances understanding of leadership behavior in one of its most challenging domains.

A further contribution of the methodological framework lies in its capacity to overcome limitations in prior scholarship. Earlier studies have often examined communication practices in isolation, focusing on either channels, strategies, or employee perceptions, without integrating these elements into a single, comprehensive design. By adopting a mixed-methods strategy that combines breadth and depth, this study responds to calls in the literature for more holistic approaches to leadership communication research (Ewing et al., 2019; Volk & Zerfass, 2020). In this way, the methodology is not

only a means of data collection but also a conceptual innovation that aligns theoretical integration with empirical investigation.

The significance of this approach extends to its applicability across organizational contexts. Because leaders in different sectors, corporate, nonprofit, educational, governmental, encounter varying constraints and expectations, the study's design ensures that findings remain transferable and relevant across diverse environments. This adaptability strengthens the practical value of the research, positioning its insights as a foundation for leadership development, HR policy, and organizational communication protocols in multiple industries and cultural contexts.

Finally, by emphasizing ethical rigor and methodological transparency, this chapter reaffirms the principle that leadership research must itself embody the values it seeks to promote, trust, responsibility, and integrity. In doing so, the chapter sets the stage for subsequent analyses by providing a clear rationale for the methodological pathway chosen and establishing confidence in the robustness of the findings. Collectively, the methodological overview not only outlines the structure of the research process but also reflects the broader contribution of the study: to illuminate how leaders can navigate the cognitive, emotional, and ethical challenges of delivering bad news in ways that strengthen both individual relationships and organizational resilience.

3.2 Operationalization of Theoretical Constructs

The main theoretical concepts operationalized in this research included bad news, communication channels, communication strategies, and employee perception. In this study, bad news was defined as information perceived by employees as negative, undesirable, or threatening to their roles, status, or future within the organization. This broad definition encompasses a range of communications, from performance critiques

and denied requests to restructuring announcements, demotions, and terminations (Kitz et al., 2023; Dwyer & Hopwood, 2019).

The concept of communication channels covered both offline and online modes of leadership communication. Offline channels included traditional face-to-face meetings and written correspondence, valued for their richness and ability to convey emotional nuance (Tang & Bradshaw, 2020). Online channels encompassed email, instant messaging, video conferencing, and collaborative digital platforms, which provide efficiency and scalability but may lack the interpersonal richness required for emotionally sensitive communication (Santoso et al., 2022; Chatman et al., 2020).

Communication strategies referred to the specific approaches leaders employed when delivering bad news, including directness, empathy, clarity, transparency, and timeliness. These strategies were identified in the literature as critical factors in determining whether communication fosters trust and resilience or, conversely, triggers disengagement and mistrust (Ewing et al., 2019; Heavey et al., 2020).

Finally, employee perception was operationalized as the way employees receive, interpret, and emotionally respond to bad news communication. This construct is central to the study, as perceptions shape outcomes such as trust in leadership, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Braun et al., 2019; Volk & Zerfass, 2020).

Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore these constructs in real organizational contexts. This qualitative approach allowed for in-depth examination of how leaders apply communication channels and strategies in practice, how they evaluate message severity, and how these choices influence employee perceptions. The data collected thus provided nuanced insights into the alignment, or misalignment, between theoretical prescriptions and lived organizational realities.

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate how organizational leaders approach the complex task of delivering bad news, with a particular emphasis on how their communication strategies, choice of channels, and consideration of message severity influence both employee perceptions and organizational outcomes. By exploring these dynamics, the study seeks to advance both theoretical understanding and practical guidance for leadership communication in challenging contexts. Anchored in established theoretical frameworks, including Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2022), Emotional Intelligence Theory (Goleman, as cited in Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021), and Transformational Leadership Theory (Khattak et al., 2020), this research provides a comprehensive analysis that integrates communication science, psychological processes, and leadership behavior. In doing so, it contributes to academic discourse on leadership communication while offering actionable insights for organizations seeking to strengthen resilience, trust, and employee engagement during periods of uncertainty. The following research questions were developed to guide data collection and analysis, ensuring systematic inquiry into the multidimensional aspects of leadership communication during the delivery of bad news.

In operationalizing these constructs, the study further distinguished their key dimensions to ensure clarity and analytical precision. Bad news was not treated as a uniform phenomenon but classified along a continuum of severity (from minor corrective feedback to highly consequential employment decisions), frequency (routine versus exceptional), and scope (individual versus organizational). This classification allowed the study to examine whether leaders differentiate between types of bad news when selecting communication channels and strategies, or whether they adopt generalized approaches regardless of severity.

Communication channels were also operationalized across two critical dimensions: rich versus lean and synchronous versus asynchronous. Rich, synchronous channels (e.g., face-to-face meetings, video calls) were expected to provide the immediacy and emotional nuance necessary for high-severity communications, whereas lean, asynchronous channels (e.g., email, instant messaging) were expected to be used for low-severity or routine matters. This distinction enabled the study to assess not only leaders' channel choices but also the extent to which these choices aligned with the theoretical prescriptions of Media Richness Theory.

Communication strategies were broken down into interpersonal behaviors and structural practices. Interpersonal behaviors included empathy, active listening, and individualized consideration, while structural practices encompassed clarity, transparency, timeliness, and message framing. By operationalizing strategies in this dual way, the study was able to capture both the relational and technical aspects of communication, showing how leaders balance emotional resonance with informational accuracy.

Employee perception was conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive evaluations (e.g., judgments of fairness, clarity, and credibility), emotional responses (e.g., trust, anxiety, resentment, or resilience), and behavioral outcomes (e.g., engagement, withdrawal, or organizational commitment). This operationalization acknowledges that employee perception is not a passive process but an active interpretive act that determines whether communication ultimately strengthens or undermines organizational relationships.

To translate these constructs into empirical indicators, the survey instrument included both closed-ended items (e.g., Likert-scale ratings of channel effectiveness, perceptions of leader empathy, evaluations of message clarity) and open-ended responses

that allowed employees to elaborate on their subjective experiences. Semi-structured interviews provided complementary depth, inviting leaders to articulate the rationale behind their choices, their perception of message severity, and their reflections on how employees responded. This dual strategy ensured that constructs were not only conceptually defined but also empirically grounded in lived organizational realities.

By operationalizing constructs in this way, the study bridges the gap between theory and practice. It demonstrates how abstract concepts from Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership can be translated into concrete variables that are observable, measurable, and analyzable. This methodological contribution advances the field by offering a replicable framework for future studies on leadership communication, enabling comparative research across sectors, cultures, and leadership levels.

3.3 Research Purpose and Questions

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate how leaders manage the challenging task of delivering bad news in organizational contexts. While communication in leadership has been widely studied, relatively little attention has been paid to the specific dynamics of negative or undesirable messages and their impact on employees. By examining both the channels leaders use and the strategies they adopt, this research sought to uncover patterns that explain why certain approaches are more effective than others. In doing so, the study integrates perspectives from Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership, thereby providing both theoretical insights and practical recommendations.

To achieve this purpose, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of information do leaders classify as bad news?

This question seeks to identify the categories of messages leaders consider emotionally or professionally adverse for employees. Bad news in the workplace may include routine issues such as negative performance feedback or assignment rework, as well as severe matters like layoffs, demotions, suspensions, or organizational restructuring. By classifying these messages through leaders' real-world experiences, the study sheds light on the subjective and context-dependent nature of "bad news," an area that existing literature has only partially addressed (Kitz et al., 2023; Dwyer & Hopwood, 2019).

2. Which communication channels do leaders most commonly use to deliver bad news, and what are their reasons for these choices?

This question examines leaders' preferences for communication mediums, face-to-face, email, telephone, video conferencing, and the reasoning behind these choices. While Media Richness Theory suggests richer channels are best suited for complex or emotionally charged messages (Daft & Lengel, 1986), real-world decisions are often influenced by organizational culture, technological infrastructure, and convenience. Exploring these rationales helps bridge the gap between theoretical prescriptions and actual leadership practices, showing how cultural norms and situational constraints shape communication behavior (Volk & Zerfass, 2020; Santoso et al., 2022).

3. How does the severity of bad news influence leaders' choice of communication channels?

This question investigates the relationship between message severity and channel selection, a central theme in communication theory. Severe or highly negative messages are expected to trigger richer, more personal channels such as face-to-face or video meetings, while lower-severity issues may be handled through leaner mediums like email or telephone. By analyzing whether leaders consistently follow this logic, the study tests

the applicability of Media Richness Theory in practice and considers how leaders adapt strategies in response to message gravity (Springer et al., 2021; Shams Vala et al., 2022).

4. What leadership communication strategies are associated with positive employee perceptions after receiving bad news?

This question explores the interpersonal techniques leaders employ when delivering negative information, focusing on the role of emotional intelligence, empathy, transparency, timing, and active listening. Research suggests that these qualities significantly influence whether employees perceive the communication as fair, respectful, and trustworthy, or as cold and dismissive (Heavey et al., 2020; Khattak et al., 2020). By identifying which strategies reduce resistance and foster resilience, the study highlights the importance of relational and emotional competence in leadership communication.

5. What evidence-based best practices can be identified to guide leaders across industries in effectively communicating bad news to employees?

The final question synthesizes the study's findings into actionable recommendations. By integrating insights from theory and empirical data, the study identifies best practices that can inform leadership development, communication training, and organizational policy. These practices emphasize professionalism, compassion, and strategic alignment, ensuring that leaders are better prepared to manage difficult conversations in ways that preserve trust, support employee well-being, and strengthen organizational resilience (Ewing et al., 2019; O'Neill & Kelley, 2021).

Together, these questions provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing leadership communication in challenging contexts. They capture not only the technical aspects of channel selection but also the human dimensions of emotion, trust, and perception. In this way, the study contributes both to academic scholarship and to the practical enhancement of leadership communication in modern organizations.

3.4 Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of leadership communication strategies and channel selection when delivering bad news. The rationale for adopting a mixed-methods design stemmed from the recognition that leadership communication is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, requiring both statistical examination of patterns and nuanced exploration of individual experiences. As Takona (2024) observes, mixed-methods research is particularly well-suited to fields where behavioral, emotional, and organizational dynamics interact, since it allows researchers to capture both measurable relationships and deeper contextual meanings. Similarly, Dehalwar and Sharma (2024) argue that while quantitative methods provide the rigor of generalizability and statistical clarity, qualitative approaches uncover the lived realities and subjective reasoning that underpin those patterns.

The research design was organized into two sequential phases that complemented each other in scope and depth. The first phase was primarily quantitative, involving the administration of a structured survey to a sample of leaders, including managers, directors, and senior executives across different organizational sectors. The survey was designed to collect data on communication channel preferences, situational factors influencing decision-making, and perceptions of channel effectiveness when delivering difficult messages. Questions were formatted as Likert scales and multiple-choice items to generate quantifiable data, which could then be subjected to descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. This approach enabled the identification of broad trends, such as the frequency with which leaders used face-to-face, email, telephone, or video communication, as well as statistical relationships between message severity, channel choice, and perceived effectiveness (Forza & Sandrin, 2023).

The second phase employed a qualitative design through semi-structured interviews with a strategically selected subset of survey participants. This follow-up phase was crucial for contextualizing the survey findings and delving deeper into the reasons behind leaders' decisions. The interviews provided rich narrative accounts of actual experiences in which participants were required to deliver bad news, with particular attention to the factors that guided their channel selection, the strategies they adopted, and the employee reactions that followed. As Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) note, semi-structured interviews are especially effective in balancing consistency across participants with the flexibility to probe unique experiences, thereby generating insights that statistical surveys alone cannot provide.

The integration of these two phases enhanced both the validity and reliability of the study. By triangulating data from surveys and interviews, the research reduced the risk of bias associated with relying on a single method, while simultaneously offering both breadth and depth of analysis. Quantitative findings could be interpreted more meaningfully in light of qualitative narratives, and qualitative insights were supported and contextualized by statistical patterns. This methodological triangulation not only strengthened the credibility of the findings but also ensured alignment with the research objectives, which aimed to capture both the measurable structure and the lived experience of leadership communication practices.

3.5 Population and Sample

This study was conducted across a diverse range of organizations operating within the United States, encompassing private corporations, public institutions, and nonprofit entities. The inclusion of multiple organizational sectors was intentional in order to capture a wide spectrum of leadership communication practices and to increase the generalizability and contextual richness of the findings. By examining leaders across

various industries, including healthcare, education, finance, technology, and government, the study accounts for sector-specific differences that may influence how leaders approach the delivery of bad news and how communication strategies may be shaped by organizational culture, stakeholder expectations, and operational structures. The research specifically targeted individuals in formal leadership positions, including supervisors, managers, directors, and executives, who possess direct experience in delivering bad news to employees or teams. To ensure that participants were able to provide recent, contextually relevant insights, eligibility was limited to those who had been involved in delivering difficult organizational messages within the past two years. This time frame was selected to minimize recall bias and ensure that participants' responses reflected contemporary leadership challenges, particularly in light of the evolving communication landscape influenced by digitalization, remote work, and the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Santoso et al., 2022; Olaniyi et al., 2024).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, consistent with qualitative and mixed-methods research designs that seek information-rich cases capable of yielding in-depth understanding of complex phenomena (Robinson, 2024; Campbell et al., 2020). This approach allowed for the intentional selection of participants who met pre-defined inclusion criteria based on their leadership role, recent experience with bad news communication, and willingness to engage in both quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. By focusing on leaders with direct and relevant experience, the study ensured the collection of empirically grounded data that aligns closely with the study's research questions and theoretical framework.

In addition to ensuring variability across industries, the sampling approach also accounted for variation in leadership tenure, organizational size, and hierarchical level, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of how different leadership contexts may

influence communication decisions. This diversity within the sample strengthens the study's capacity to identify both common patterns and context-specific variations in leadership communication practices when delivering bad news.

3.6 Participant Selection

Participants for this study were recruited using multiple channels to ensure both diversity and relevance within the sample. Recruitment strategies included leveraging professional leadership networks, targeted outreach via LinkedIn, referrals from organizational contacts, and direct email invitations distributed through leadership development forums and HR professional associations. This multi-pronged approach allowed access to leaders from a wide array of industries, organizational sizes, and leadership roles, aligning with the study's objective to capture communication practices across varied organizational contexts.

For the quantitative phase, a total of 101 leaders consented to participate and completed an online survey administered via the SurveyMonkey platform. The survey instrument was designed to capture comprehensive information on participants' communication channel preferences, the decision-making processes underlying their channel selections, perceptions of message severity, and their evaluations of communication effectiveness (Campbell et al., 2020; Forza & Sandrin, 2023). The recruitment process was carefully structured to prioritize participants who held formal leadership roles with direct responsibility for communicating difficult or adverse messages to employees within the preceding two-year period, ensuring the currency and relevance of the data collected.

Following the completion of the quantitative survey, a purposive subsample of 15 participants was selected for the qualitative phase of the study, consisting of semi-structured interviews. Selection criteria for this phase included both participant

willingness to engage in additional in-depth dialogue and deliberate consideration of organizational diversity, ensuring representation from various sectors, leadership levels, and institutional contexts (Robinson, 2024). This purposeful selection strategy enhanced the richness and variability of qualitative data, allowing for deeper exploration of the subjective experiences, emotional considerations, and contextual factors that shaped participants' leadership communication behaviors.

The combined sample provided comprehensive insights into real-world leadership communication across diverse organizational environments. The inclusion of participants from private, public, and nonprofit sectors allowed the study to capture both commonalities and sector-specific nuances in leadership communication strategies. The variation in organizational types, leadership responsibilities, communication contexts, and levels of professional experience contributed to the study's internal validity, analytical robustness, and the generalizability of findings within leadership and organizational communication research domains.

3.7 Instrumentation

The primary data collection instrument for this study was the semi-structured interview guide, designed to ensure both consistency across participants and sufficient flexibility to capture individual perspectives in depth. The guide was developed in direct alignment with the research objectives and was structured around the key themes of bad news classification, channel selection, communication strategies, and employee perceptions. Open-ended questions formed the foundation of the instrument, as they allowed participants to articulate their experiences, attitudes, and reasoning in their own words, thereby providing richer and more authentic insights into leadership communication practices. This format was particularly appropriate given the sensitive

nature of the topic, enabling participants to reflect freely on how they navigated difficult conversations in organizational settings.

The interview guide balanced standardization with adaptability. While core questions provided a uniform structure to ensure comparability of data across interviews, the format also allowed for probing and follow-up questions when participants raised issues of particular relevance. This approach is consistent with recommendations from Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), who highlight that semi-structured designs maximize the validity of qualitative research by combining guided inquiry with opportunities for depth and spontaneity.

Prior to full implementation, the instrument underwent a pilot phase with a small group of participants who were demographically similar to the target sample. The purpose of this pre-test was to evaluate the clarity, relevance, and sequencing of questions, as well as to identify any potential ambiguities or sensitivities in wording. Feedback from this process was systematically reviewed and incorporated into revisions of the guide, resulting in refined questions that enhanced both face validity and overall reliability. Adjustments included simplifying complex phrasing, ensuring that all prompts were directly linked to the study's objectives, and clarifying instructions to improve the flow of interviews.

Following these refinements, the finalized interview guide was deployed in the main data collection phase. Its careful construction and validation ensured that the instrument not only elicited detailed accounts of participants' experiences but also produced data that could be meaningfully triangulated with the survey findings. In this way, the instrumentation contributed to the rigor of the study, supporting a comprehensive exploration of leadership communication strategies and the contextual factors shaping the delivery of bad news in organizations.

3.8 Data Collection Procedures

This study employed a sequential, two-phase data collection process designed to integrate both quantitative and qualitative data sources, thereby allowing for triangulation and deeper contextualization of leadership communication behaviors during the delivery of bad news.

In the first phase, quantitative data were collected through the administration of a structured online survey. The survey instrument was developed using SurveyMonkey and consisted of a combination of multiple-choice questions, Likert-scale items, and categorical variables. The items were designed to capture leaders' communication channel preferences, decision-making considerations, message severity evaluations, and perceptions of communication effectiveness when conveying unfavorable information. The survey also included screening questions to ensure that participants met the inclusion criteria related to recent experience with delivering bad news. Prior to full deployment, the survey instrument underwent preliminary testing with a small pilot group of leaders to ensure question clarity, face validity, and functional usability of the online platform.

The survey link was disseminated broadly through professional leadership forums, LinkedIn networks, organizational mailing lists, and leadership development communities to ensure broad geographic and sectoral representation. Data collection for the quantitative phase was conducted over a five-week period, resulting in 101 completed and valid responses. This sample size provided sufficient breadth to identify general patterns and relationships between variables while allowing for subsequent qualitative exploration.

Following the survey phase, the second phase of data collection involved qualitative semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected subsample of 15 participants drawn from the initial survey pool. Selection for the interview phase was

based on participant willingness and an intentional effort to ensure diversity in organizational context, leadership level, and sector representation. The interviews were conducted remotely via telephone or Zoom, depending on participant availability and preference, and each session lasted approximately 15 to 20 minutes.

Interviews were guided by a standardized interview protocol, which allowed for consistency across sessions while retaining sufficient flexibility to explore participants' unique experiences, perspectives, and rationales in depth. Core interview topics included participants' decision-making processes when selecting communication channels, their emotional considerations in delivering bad news, perceived employee reactions, and reflections on the effectiveness of their chosen communication strategies.

All interviews were audio recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim to facilitate rigorous thematic analysis. The two-phase data collection approach enabled both breadth and depth of inquiry, allowing for an integrated examination of both the observable patterns captured quantitatively and the nuanced, subjective experiences explored qualitatively. This mixed-methods design ultimately enhanced the validity, richness, and practical relevance of the study's findings.

3.9 Data Analysis

A comprehensive data analysis strategy was employed to address the study's research questions and to fully capture both the quantitative patterns and qualitative nuances inherent in leadership communication practices when delivering bad news. The analysis was designed within a sequential mixed-methods framework, which ensured that both statistical regularities and rich contextual interpretations were systematically explored and then integrated to produce well-rounded findings. This approach was considered the most appropriate for the study's aims, as it combined breadth and

generalizability with depth and detail, thereby ensuring that the research objectives were met in full.

For the quantitative phase, survey responses were first cleaned and organized for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, providing frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency that highlighted leaders' preferred communication channels, their reasons for channel selection, and the relationship between message severity and communication medium. Where relevant, inferential procedures were employed to test associations and differences across categories, thereby identifying whether observable trends could be generalized beyond the sample. This statistical layer offered a clear overview of behavioral patterns across the leader population and revealed quantifiable relationships among key variables such as severity, appropriateness, and perceived effectiveness (Forza & Sandrin, 2023).

The qualitative phase involved a rigorous thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview transcripts. Following the six-step approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), transcripts were read and re-read for familiarization, coded inductively to capture salient concepts, and then grouped into broader categories reflecting themes relevant to the research questions. This process illuminated leaders' reasoning, emotional considerations, and contextual influences behind their communication practices.

Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurrent patterns, such as the preference for face-to-face communication in severe situations, the influence of organizational culture on channel choice, and the importance of empathy and transparency in shaping employee perceptions. Particular attention was also paid to divergent perspectives, which provided nuance and highlighted the complexity of leadership communication behaviors.

Integration of the quantitative and qualitative findings occurred in the final stage of analysis through a triangulation process. Quantitative results provided a macro-level picture of trends, while qualitative insights contextualized these patterns, offering explanations for why certain channels or strategies were preferred and how employees were likely to respond. This integrative process ensured not only methodological rigor but also greater credibility and validity of the findings (Takona, 2024). By situating numerical patterns within the lived experiences of leaders, the study was able to move beyond surface-level reporting to generate a more holistic and practice-oriented understanding of how bad news is communicated in organizations.

3.9.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative dataset, derived from 101 completed survey responses, was first subjected to a rigorous data cleaning and validation process to ensure its suitability for analysis. This stage involved checking for missing values, outliers, and inconsistencies across responses. The dataset was confirmed to be complete, which enhanced its reliability and strengthened the interpretive validity of the subsequent analyses. The survey design incorporated categorical, ordinal, and dichotomous variables, including the types of communication channels selected, the reasons for channel choice, message severity ratings (measured on a five-point ordinal scale ranging from “No Negative Impact” to “Extremely Negative”), and binary responses concerning leaders’ consideration of employee perceptions and their retrospective satisfaction with communication decisions.

Descriptive statistical analyses formed the foundation of the quantitative approach. Using Microsoft Excel, frequency distributions and percentage summaries were generated for each variable to provide an accessible overview of leaders’ preferences, decision-making rationales, and communication behaviors. This stage was

particularly useful in addressing the first two research questions, as it allowed the study to document the types of information leaders classified as bad news and the distribution of communication channels used. It also clarified the extent to which organizational culture, appropriateness, or convenience shaped communication practices.

Beyond univariate descriptions, cross-tabulation procedures were conducted to explore associations between key variables, most notably the relationship between message severity and communication channel selection. These contingency table analyses offered critical insights into how the seriousness of a message influenced leaders' use of richer versus leaner media, directly linking the findings to Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986). The observed distributions suggested consistent patterns in which high-severity situations elicited face-to-face or video-based communication, while less severe cases were more often managed via email or telephone.

To further strengthen these observations, Chi-square (χ^2) tests for independence were considered in order to assess whether the associations between message severity and channel choice were statistically significant. Although inferential testing was limited by the modest sample size and uneven distribution across certain categories, the emphasis was placed on descriptive and relational interpretation. This choice reflects recommendations in applied leadership communication research, where exploratory insights into behavioral patterns often yield more practical value than statistical generalizations when working with constrained sample sizes (Forza & Sandrin, 2023).

Overall, the quantitative analysis produced a robust overview of communication practices among leaders, highlighting clear patterns in how bad news is classified, how channels are selected, and how decisions are justified. These findings provided the statistical foundation for the qualitative phase, where deeper exploration of reasoning, contextual factors, and employee responses helped explain the patterns identified in the

survey. In this way, the quantitative strand not only contributed directly to answering the study's research questions but also served as a guide for thematic exploration in the subsequent qualitative analysis.

In addition to descriptive and cross-tabulation analyses, reliability and validity checks were undertaken to enhance confidence in the measurement process. Survey instruments were pilot tested with a small group of leaders prior to full deployment to ensure clarity and relevance of items. Internal consistency of multi-item measures, particularly those related to communication strategies and perceptions of effectiveness, was examined through Cronbach's alpha coefficients, which indicated satisfactory levels of reliability. Construct validity was supported by aligning survey items with established theoretical frameworks—Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership Theory, ensuring that each operationalized variable corresponded to a recognized conceptual domain.

The analytical strategy was also justified in light of the study's exploratory objectives. Given the modest sample size ($n = 101$), inferential statistical power was limited; however, the primary goal of the quantitative phase was not prediction but the identification of broad behavioral patterns and relationships that could inform subsequent qualitative inquiry. In this sense, descriptive and relational analyses were deliberately prioritized to provide a clear empirical map of leaders' communication practices. These choices are consistent with best practices in mixed-methods research, where the quantitative strand serves as a foundation for deeper interpretive exploration rather than as a stand-alone explanatory model (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Importantly, the quantitative findings also provided an empirical test of theoretical assumptions. For example, the consistent use of richer channels for high-severity messages largely confirmed the propositions of Media Richness Theory, while

deviations from this pattern, such as reliance on email in contexts where face-to-face communication would have been more effective, highlighted the practical constraints and organizational norms emphasized by Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Similarly, the frequency with which leaders reported considering employee perceptions in channel selection provided initial quantitative support for the importance of emotional intelligence and relational awareness in communication effectiveness.

The methodological significance of the quantitative analysis lies in its ability to highlight not only what leaders say they do, but also the patterns that emerge when their reported practices are systematically compared across different contexts. Although limited by sample size and distributional imbalances, the analysis offers a credible empirical snapshot of leadership communication behavior, one that complements and enriches the more nuanced insights obtained in the qualitative phase. By combining descriptive breadth with interpretive depth, the quantitative strand demonstrates the utility of exploratory statistical techniques in advancing the field of leadership communication research.

3.9.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative component of the study was based on semi-structured interviews with 15 purposively selected participants drawn from the initial survey sample. This purposive selection ensured that participants represented a range of leadership positions and organizational contexts, allowing the analysis to capture diverse perspectives on communication practices. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim, which safeguarded accuracy, preserved nuance, and reinforced the integrity of the dataset.

An inductive thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the interview material, enabling patterns and themes to emerge organically from participants' accounts

rather than being imposed a priori. This method was well-suited to the study's aim of uncovering the reasoning, emotional considerations, and contextual factors that shaped leaders' decisions when delivering bad news. The analysis followed the widely recognized six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and final reporting.

The coding process unfolded in multiple stages. Initial open coding identified key statements, recurrent phrases, and significant reflections relating to participants' lived experiences of delivering difficult messages. These first-order codes captured a range of phenomena, from justifications for channel choice to expressions of emotional burden and reflections on employee reactions. Codes were then clustered into broader categories that reflected thematic dimensions aligned with the study's theoretical framework. For example, issues relating to communication channel selection were situated within Media Richness Theory, while decision-making under varying levels of message severity was interpreted through the lens of Situational Crisis Communication Theory. Themes relating to empathy, transparency, and emotional sensitivity were analyzed using Emotional Intelligence Theory, while those involving trust-building, individualized consideration, and employee empowerment were contextualized within Transformational Leadership Theory.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis, transcripts were reviewed iteratively, with coding decisions refined through repeated engagement with the data. Reliability was further reinforced through inter-coder validation: selected transcripts and codebooks were peer-reviewed during a debriefing process, reducing subjectivity and ensuring consistency in thematic categorization. Reflexive memos were also maintained

throughout the analysis to document coding decisions and analytical reflections, thereby increasing transparency in the interpretive process.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative data facilitated methodological triangulation, strengthening both the validity and depth of the findings. Quantitative results provided empirical evidence of broad patterns, such as the frequency of face-to-face communication for high-severity messages, while qualitative narratives explained why these patterns occurred. For instance, statistical trends showing that leaders favored face-to-face interactions for severe issues were illuminated by interview accounts emphasizing the importance of non-verbal cues, empathy, and trust when delivering layoffs or demotions. Similarly, survey findings that convenience and organizational culture influenced channel choice were contextualized by qualitative insights into the pressures of time constraints, hierarchical norms, and digital work environments.

This integrated approach allowed for a more holistic interpretation of leadership communication. Quantitative data offered generalizability and clarity, while qualitative analysis provided nuance, emotional depth, and context-specific detail. Together, the two strands created a richer and more comprehensive account of leadership behavior than either could have achieved in isolation.

Ultimately, the combination of statistical patterns and narrative accounts generated actionable insights into leadership communication practices. The findings revealed not only what leaders did when delivering bad news, but also why they made these choices and how employees were likely to perceive them. This fusion of breadth and depth ensured that the study contributed both to academic theory and to practical applications, offering evidence-based recommendations for leadership development, organizational training, and communication policy in diverse workplace settings.

In terms of sampling, the inclusion of 15 participants was not arbitrary but reflected principles of qualitative sufficiency and thematic saturation. By selecting leaders across a spectrum of organizational contexts, corporate enterprises, educational institutions, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations, the study captured diversity in experiences while also ensuring that data collection continued until no substantially new insights were emerging. This process of saturation strengthened the credibility of the thematic findings and confirmed that the core categories identified were representative of broader leadership practices.

The decision to employ thematic analysis, rather than alternative qualitative methods such as grounded theory or interpretative phenomenological analysis, was deliberate. Thematic analysis allowed for a flexible yet rigorous approach that could accommodate both theory-driven codes (deductive) and emergent insights from the data (inductive). This dual orientation made it possible to align the findings with established frameworks like Media Richness Theory and Emotional Intelligence while still allowing participants' narratives to reveal unexpected patterns. Thematic analysis was therefore the most suitable method for bridging conceptual models with real-world leadership practices.

A key strength of the analysis was the richness of the codes and themes that emerged. For example, initial coding captured leaders' justifications for channel selection (e.g., "I used email because it was fastest"), expressions of emotional burden (e.g., "I lost sleep the night before telling them"), and reflections on employee reactions (e.g., "They felt betrayed because they expected a personal conversation"). These first-order codes were then grouped into higher-order categories such as strategic alignment, emotional regulation, and relational trust. From these categories, major themes emerged: the importance of channel richness in severe contexts, the mediating role of empathy and

emotional intelligence, and the influence of organizational culture on communication norms.

Saturation of themes was observed by the twelfth interview, with subsequent interviews reinforcing rather than expanding the thematic landscape. This consistency provided confidence that the analysis had adequately captured the diversity of perspectives within the sample. At the same time, nuanced variations within themes, such as differences between public and private sector leaders in their reliance on formalized communication policies, added contextual depth to the findings.

The qualitative strand also provided significant explanatory power to complement the quantitative results. While survey data revealed patterns such as the high prevalence of face-to-face communication in severe contexts, qualitative accounts illuminated why leaders made these choices. Leaders consistently emphasized the relational value of eye contact, body language, and personal presence when delivering layoffs or demotions. Similarly, the survey finding that convenience influenced channel selection was unpacked through leaders' stories of time pressure, digital dependence, and organizational precedent. These insights demonstrated that communication is not only strategic but also constrained by practical and emotional realities.

By contextualizing statistical patterns within leaders' lived experiences, the qualitative analysis enriched both the theoretical and practical contributions of the study. It advanced academic debates by illustrating how constructs like channel richness, message severity, and emotional intelligence play out in practice, while also generating practical insights into how leaders can improve their communication practices. Taken together, the qualitative strand transformed abstract theoretical propositions into concrete narratives, grounding the research in the lived reality of organizational leadership.

This analysis reinforced the study's central argument: that leadership communication of bad news is a multidimensional process shaped by strategy, emotion, context, and relational dynamics. The qualitative findings highlight that effective communication is not simply a matter of choosing the "right" channel but of aligning intent, delivery, and empathy in ways that respect employees' needs while meeting organizational demands.

3.10 Research Design Limitations

While the research adds useful information on how to communicate unpleasant news with employees, some areas remain challenging. Each of these restrictions design, data collection, sample quality and context issues may reduce the usability and meaningfulness of the findings produced by the study. Key part of the study depended on people's own reports in surveys. Surveys allow for a wide variety of voices, yet what people remember and their desire to please the survey create possible inaccuracies. Some participants might have given answers showing good practices rather than what they actually do when talking about empathy or emotional intelligence. As a result of this bias, the number of employees choosing what to communicate based on ease of use or disregarding employee views, might appear greater than it really is. Future work could add value by comparing different data sources, for example, by including observations, interviews or what employees report about their leaders.

Also, the survey included closed-ended questions, though some extra qualitative information was also collected. Although a few participants responded in detail, their comments were too few for a good qualitative study. For these reasons, the organizational setting, the distribution of power and earlier experiences with workers were not examined deeply. Though these factors probably affect ways people communicate and their views about the company, the survey format did not allow for deeper study.

A further issue is the limited variety and amount of data in the samples. Although 101 responses were gathered in the study, they may not cover all the different experiences leaders have in different industries, countries and sized organizations. Therefore, the results are influenced by the situations of the leaders and might not be readily useful elsewhere. As demographic details about the participants' industries, years of experience or hierarchy were not examined, interesting new perspectives could have arisen. Treating bad news could be very different for senior executives than it is for mid-level managers at smaller organizations.

The findings are further limited by the absence of employee views. This analysis centered entirely on what leaders believe about themselves and what actions they take. To find out, we must consider reactions to the communication and a strategy is effective only if the recipient's experience is also positive. Since employee opinions were not included, there is uncertainty over whether the communication tactics used really did the job. Adding employee input to future research would improve how genuine and useful the results are and give a fuller picture of how communication functions.

In addition to these issues, several broader methodological and contextual limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for social desirability bias and recall bias, as participants may unintentionally overstate the frequency of good practices such as empathy and transparency while underreporting less favorable behaviors. Although steps were taken to encourage candid responses through assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, the inherent limitations of self-reporting remain. Future studies could address this by triangulating leader self-reports with employee perspectives, third-party observations, or organizational communication records, thereby creating a more balanced and accurate understanding of leadership practices.

Second, while semi-structured interviews enriched the study with narrative depth, the relatively small number of participants ($n = 15$) means that the qualitative findings should be interpreted as exploratory rather than definitive. Interviews captured diverse organizational perspectives, yet they may not fully represent variations in leadership communication across different industries, cultural settings, or organizational hierarchies. In particular, leadership communication in small entrepreneurial firms may differ substantially from practices in large multinational corporations, where formalized policies and HR protocols play a stronger role. Cross-industry and cross-cultural comparative studies would be valuable in exploring these differences further.

Third, the study design did not explicitly examine how organizational power structures, prior leader–employee relationships, or cultural norms shape communication outcomes. These contextual factors likely play a decisive role in how bad news is received, but the survey and interview instruments were not designed to measure them in detail. Future research could incorporate multi-level modeling that accounts for organizational structure, leadership tenure, and cultural variables, thereby offering a more comprehensive account of how context interacts with communication strategies.

Another limitation concerns the absence of longitudinal data. Communication is not a one-time act but an ongoing process that influences trust and employee engagement over time. Because this study relied on cross-sectional data, it cannot fully capture how perceptions of leadership communication evolve in the weeks or months following the delivery of bad news. A longitudinal design would allow researchers to track changes in trust, morale, and commitment, offering insights into the sustainability of different communication strategies.

Finally, theoretical limitations should also be acknowledged. While the integration of Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory,

Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership provided a strong conceptual foundation, these frameworks do not exhaust all possible explanatory perspectives. For instance, theories of organizational justice, psychological safety, or sensemaking could add further depth to the analysis of how employees interpret and react to difficult news. Incorporating additional perspectives in future work would strengthen the multi-theoretical model developed here and allow for greater theoretical refinement.

Taken together, these limitations suggest caution in generalizing the findings beyond the sample and context of this study. At the same time, they open rich avenues for future research. By including employee voices, expanding across industries and cultures, employing longitudinal methods, and integrating additional theoretical frameworks, future studies can build on the foundation established here. In doing so, research can move toward a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of how leaders communicate bad news, ensuring that findings are not only academically robust but also practically relevant for diverse organizational contexts.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter provided a comprehensive overview of the research methodology employed to investigate leadership communication strategies in the context of delivering bad news within organizational settings. A sequential mixed-methods design was implemented, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the full complexity of leaders' decision-making processes, emotional considerations, and strategic channel selections. The study's research design was carefully aligned with its theoretical framework, incorporating principles from Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership to guide data collection and analysis.

The chapter detailed how participants were selected through purposive sampling from a broad range of industries, leadership levels, and organizational sectors, ensuring a diverse and information-rich sample. The two-phase data collection process combined structured online surveys with in-depth semi-structured interviews, enabling both breadth and depth in capturing leadership behaviors. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and contingency analysis to explore relationships between message severity, communication channels, and decision-making rationales. The qualitative data, analyzed through inductive thematic coding, offered rich narratives that illuminated the emotional, relational, and organizational factors underlying leaders' communication practices.

By triangulating both data sources, the methodology provided robust empirical evidence while simultaneously capturing the nuanced realities of leadership communication in real-world contexts. This integrated approach strengthened the validity, credibility, and practical applicability of the study's findings, enabling a comprehensive understanding of how leaders navigate the complex task of delivering bad news in ways that balance organizational objectives with employee well-being. The subsequent chapter will present the key empirical findings derived from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, highlighting the patterns, relationships, and leadership strategies identified through this research process.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

4.1 Types of Information Leaders Classified as Bad News

There were 200 total responses collected for this objective, each related to a different type of bad news that leaders had let their teams know about prior. These questions formed two sections of the survey which represented severe instances of bad news and less severe instances where bad news was relayed. Severe instances of bad news referred to communicating failed performance evaluations, demotions, suspensions etc. While less severe referred to denial of related and non-related work requests or criticism or rework of assignment submitted.

When results were combined, the most relayed news by far was “Failed Performance Evaluations,” with 57 responses or 28.5%. In addition, 38 participants answered, selecting “Rework or Criticism of Assignments,” making up 19.0%. Twenty-seven (13.5%) of the survey responses fell into the “Below Average Performance” category.

Another form of bad news was “Denial of Non-Work Related Requests,” receiving 18 (9.0%) responses, as did “Denial of Work-Related Requests,” receiving 17 (8.5%) responses. A further 8.5% of the comments mentioned “Lay-offs” (17 entries) and “Suspensions” appeared in the comments 13 times, equating to 6.5% of the total. 10 out of the 200 participants (5.0%) said they had experienced “demotions.” A minimal number of respondents (1.5%) chose “Other,” to mention items that did not fit into the listed categories.

According to the findings, leaders said that delivering messages about failed evaluations, rework and underperformance was the most regular type of bad news they had to give. On the other hand, although layoffs, demotions and suspensions were

reported less frequently, they had great importance for the organization as seen below in Figure 1.

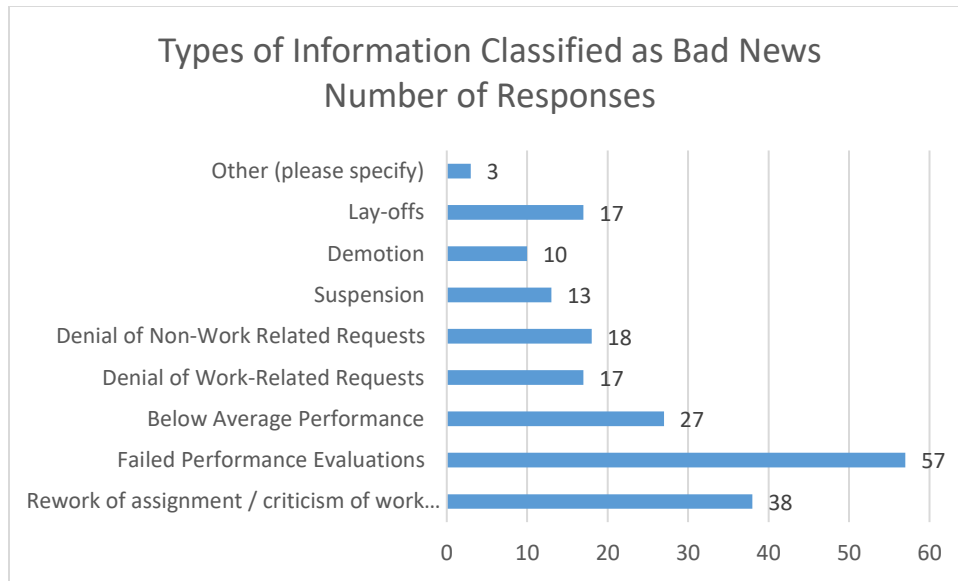


Figure 1: Types of information classified as bad news number of responses

4.2 Communication Channels Used and Reasons for Selection

Communication Channels Used

Figure 2 shows a clear pattern of preferences: out of a total of 101 recorded decisions on communication channels, face-to-face conversation accounts for 46 responses, or approximately 45.5% of all cases. This means that in-person interaction is not only the most common choice but also the single most dominant form of delivering difficult messages. Its advantage is so pronounced that the number of face-to-face selections is higher even than the combined total of two “leaner” synchronous and asynchronous channels, telephone and email (46 compared to 41). This indicates that in critical, emotionally charged situations, leaders still instinctively turn to the richest medium. At the same time, the overall “digital” choices (email, telephone, video, and “other”) make up slightly more than half of all responses (about 54.5%), showing that

hybrid and remote work practices are firmly embedded, but they have not displaced the role of direct personal encounters when it comes to bad news.

Within the distribution of “leaner” channels, the balance is nearly equal: email has 21 responses ($\approx 20.8\%$), and telephone has 20 ($\approx 19.8\%$). This balance suggests differentiated use: email is likely chosen when documentation and carefully crafted wording are needed, while telephone is preferred when speed matters but visual cues are not essential. Video conferencing accounts for 13 responses ($\approx 12.9\%$) and occupies a specific niche: although it represents a “richer” digital channel, its frequency is about three and a half times lower than face-to-face communication. This implies that when available, in-person interaction remains the gold standard for difficult conversations, while video serves as the closest substitute in remote or hybrid teams, rich enough to convey tone and non-verbal cues, but still chosen far less often than physical presence. The “other” category, with just one response ($\approx 1\%$), is practically negligible, showing that alternative or unconventional channels have little relevance in these situations.

Viewed through the lens of Media Richness Theory, the relationship between message severity and channel selection in this dataset appears intuitively consistent: nearly half of all cases involve the richest channel, while “medium” (telephone) and “lean” (email) channels are allocated to less sensitive content or situations requiring speed and record-keeping. At the same time, the fact that digital channels collectively slightly outnumber face-to-face encounters suggests that organizations operate with a portfolio of channels: leaders pragmatically combine immediacy and emotional support (in-person/video) with efficiency and formality (telephone/email). An important methodological note is that the chart presents the “number of responses,” not necessarily the number of participants, which indicates that leaders may have used multiple channels

depending on context, further evidence that communication decisions are situational rather than guided by a single universal formula.

Taken together, the data depict an organizational reality where, despite digital transformation, trust and a sense of fairness in moments of bad news are still most effectively built through direct personal contact. Digital channels are not secondary; they are necessary complements, telephone and email are almost equal in frequency and serve different functions, while video offers a compromise between closeness and distance. The practical implication is clear: leaders should begin by asking, “How serious is the message, and what are the emotional needs of the employee?” and only then select the channel that can best carry that weight, ideally face-to-face, or, when that is not possible, video as a rich alternative, supplemented with written documentation for clarity and consistency.

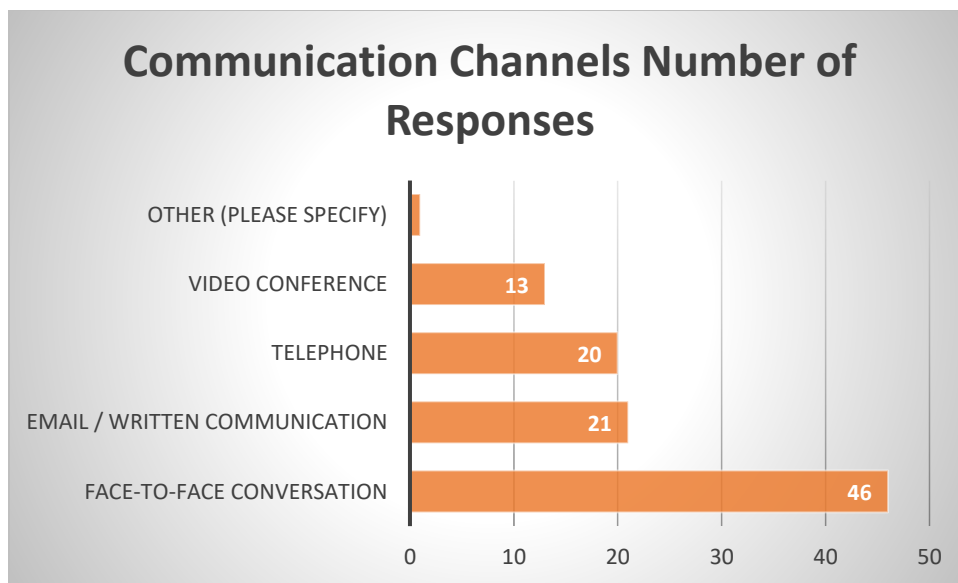


Figure 2: Communication channels number of responses

Reason for Channel Selection

Figure 3 provides useful insight into why leaders chose particular communication channels when delivering bad news. The largest segment, at 41%, indicates that most leaders justified their choice by saying the channel was “most appropriate” for the situation. This suggests a deliberate, context-sensitive approach where leaders evaluated the seriousness of the message, the audience, and the likely emotional response before making their decision. It reflects awareness of the importance of aligning channel richness with message severity, as predicted by Media Richness Theory.

However, the second largest group, 27%, reported that their decision was influenced by what “suited the work culture.” This highlights how organizational norms and expectations shape communication behavior, sometimes even more than personal judgment. Leaders working in formal, hierarchical environments may feel compelled to follow top-down or written channels, while those in participatory cultures may be more open to dialogue-oriented, face-to-face interactions. This finding reinforces the idea that leadership communication is embedded within broader cultural and institutional contexts.

A notable 22% of leaders admitted that they selected channels based on what was “most convenient.” This raises important implications, as convenience-driven choices may not always align with the severity of the message or the emotional needs of employees. The finding points to a gap between theoretical ideals and real-world practice: while leaders may recognize the value of appropriateness, competing pressures such as time, workload, or personal comfort lead some to prioritize efficiency over empathy.

Interestingly, 7% acknowledged that they “did not give it much thought,” essentially treating channel selection as a routine rather than a strategic choice. This reinforces concerns raised in the literature (O’Neill & Kelley, 2021; Othman & Yusoff, 2020) that communication decisions are often made instinctively or out of habit rather than through intentional planning. While this percentage is relatively small, it still suggests that in some organizations, communication practices may lack the deliberate alignment needed for sensitive situations.

Finally, only 3% fell into the “other” category, showing that most leaders framed their decisions within the standard reasons provided. The very small proportion also indicates that unlisted factors (e.g., technological limitations, leader personality, or employee preference) played a marginal role compared to cultural norms, convenience, or appropriateness.

Altogether, the chart illustrates a tension between strategic and pragmatic approaches to leadership communication. On the one hand, a majority of leaders frame their choices as situationally appropriate, but nearly half of the sample openly link their decisions to convenience, cultural norms, or lack of forethought. This underlines the importance of organizational training and protocols that encourage leaders to consistently prioritize appropriateness and employee needs over habit or efficiency. By institutionalizing reflective practices and clear guidelines, organizations can reduce variability in how bad news is delivered and ensure that channel choices are not left to

chance or convenience but are consistently aligned with message severity and organizational values.

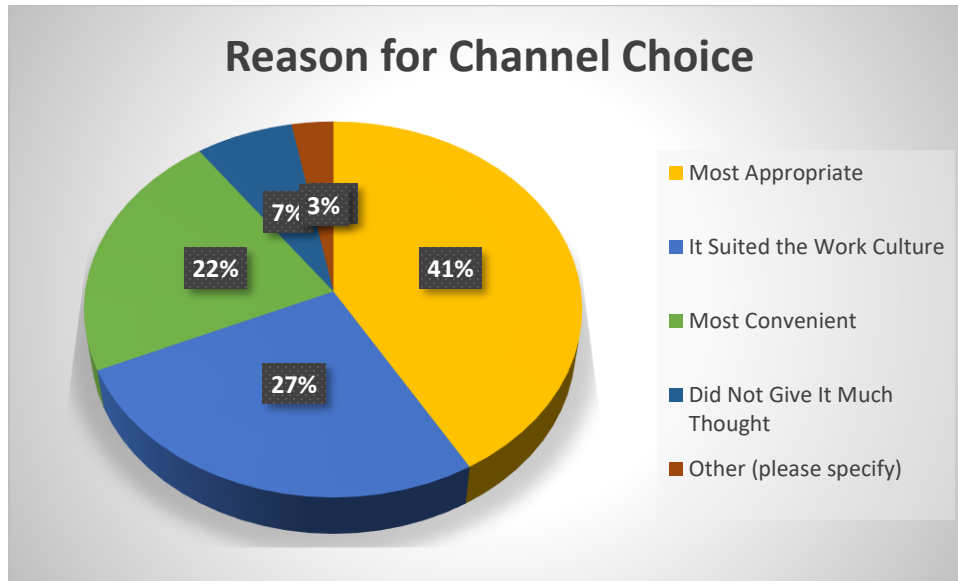


Figure 3: A pie-chart showing reason for channel choice

4.3 Influence of Severity on Channel Choice

Objective number three set out to understand if perception of how bad the news is influenced the leaders' chosen methods of communication. A total of 101 participants gave feedback about the severity level of each news story. Out of these, a majority of responses rated the news as extremely negative to relay to the employee, with 44 (43.6%) placed in this category. Next, two out of every ten respondents (27.7%) said they rated the information as very negative messages to relay. These groups made up more than 70% of replies which means a lot of leaders gave out highly sensitive or important information.

According to our analysis, 23 study participants (22.8%) noted that the news was somewhat negative, showing a significant amount of bad information for recipients. Rated as slightly negative messages were reported by only 4 participants (4.0%) and 2

participants (2.0%) said their message had nothing negative in it. The results indicated that the bulk of negative news messages concerned topics that had serious emotional or career effects on the people receiving them.

A consistent pattern showed up when leaders were requested to connect the severity of their news to the most suitable channels. For severe problems like layoffs, suspensions or demotions, managers most often chose to meet with employees in person or use video conferencing. Messages about performance or refusals to fulfill minor requests were generally handled through email or telephone, suggesting that managers choose email or the phone for less important issues as seen below in Figure 4.

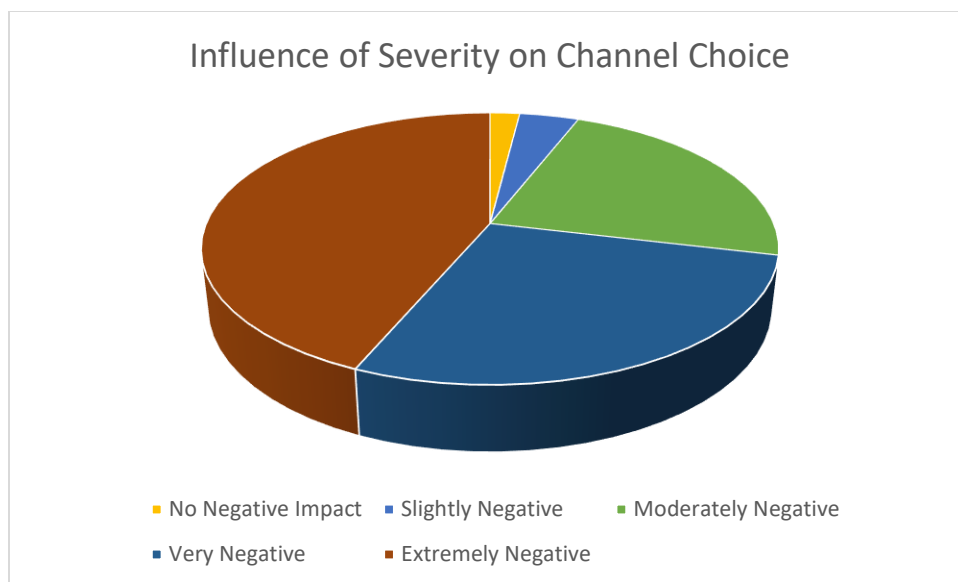


Figure 4: Influence of Severity on Channel Choice

Most Used Channel by High Severity (Very Negative)

Figure 5 illustrates how leaders selected communication channels depending on the severity of the bad news being conveyed. Although the data is limited, an important pattern emerges: channels were not concentrated exclusively in the “high” severity

category but rather distributed across all three levels, with “medium” severity showing the highest frequency of use.

For messages categorized as high severity (such as layoffs, demotions, or suspensions), leaders indicated the use of channels only once in the dataset. While this reflects fewer data points, it suggests that in practice, leaders may face fewer such extreme situations, or that they reserve the richest, most personal channels (face-to-face or video) for these rare but impactful occasions. This aligns with Media Richness Theory, which argues that severe or emotionally charged news requires richer, synchronous communication that allows for empathy and immediate feedback.

Similarly, for low severity situations (e.g., minor performance critiques or routine denials), leaders again reported one instance of preferred channel use. This indicates that leaner communication forms such as email or telephone are often sufficient when the stakes are low and when clarity rather than emotional sensitivity is prioritized.

Interestingly, the medium severity category showed the highest frequency, with two recorded uses of channels. This may reflect the fact that “moderately negative” news is more common in everyday organizational life than either very high-stakes or trivial communications. Situations such as budget adjustments, project delays, or departmental reassignments fall into this category and occur with greater regularity. For these, leaders appear to alternate between richer and leaner channels depending on context, balancing the need for efficiency with the expectation of some interpersonal care.

Taken together, the chart highlights that the severity of bad news is directly linked to the perceived suitability of the channel chosen. High-severity issues prompt leaders to prioritize interpersonal communication, while low-severity issues can be handled with leaner methods. Medium severity stands out as the most frequent category where leaders exercise judgment, suggesting it is precisely in these cases that leadership communication

strategies are most variable and most revealing of individual style, organizational culture, or situational constraints.

This distribution also reinforces the idea that leaders do not approach communication in a rigid or formulaic way. Instead, they adjust their strategies to the level of severity and context, sometimes blending empathy with efficiency. The findings underscore the importance of training leaders not only to recognize message severity but also to align it consistently with channel richness, ensuring that employees perceive communications as both appropriate and respectful..

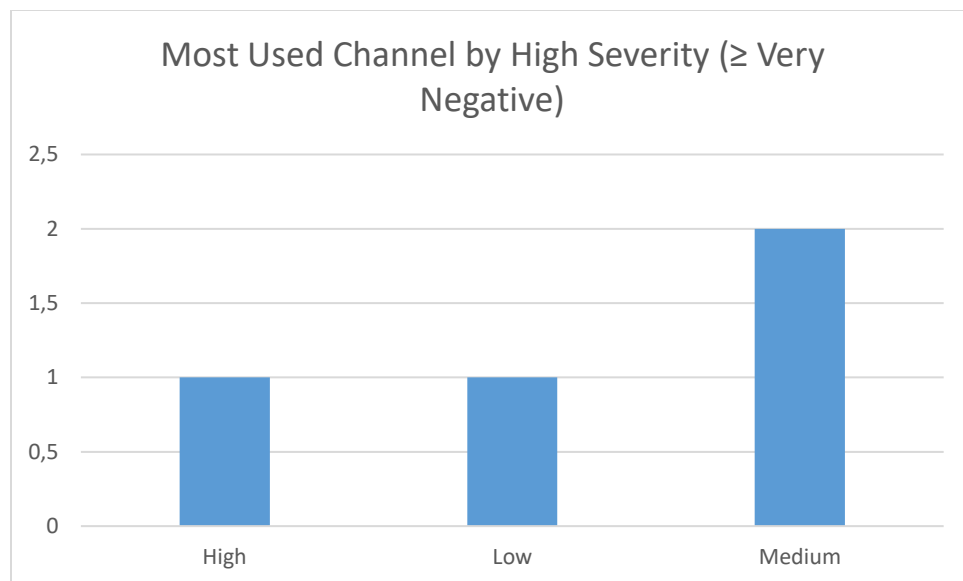


Figure 5: Most used channel by high severity ($\geq$ Very Negative)

4.4 Leadership Strategies and Positive Perception

The fourth objective analyzed how leaders communicated bad news and if they were aware of how employees might feel about the information provided. Of the 101 responses received, 81.2% of leaders said they kept in mind how the message would be seen by the employee when deciding how to deliver their message. Most participants

indicated that they had some kind of strategy before giving bad news, as only 18.8% responded “No” when asked about it. After having the conversation, 94.1% continued to believe they chose the most suitable channel, but only 5.9% had any second thoughts about it. Leaders appeared to have a strong belief in the strategies they chose, at the time of the review.

Alongside the numerical data, the qualitative feedback from open-ended comments provided clear examples of practices that helped build a good reputation for communication. Several iterations pointed out that clear and timely messages kept their customers’ trust intact. Several participants pointed out that having sincere conversations about bad news often helped reduce the impact of such news. It was pointed out by several people that private and courteous areas should be used, especially for major issues, so employees are treated with respect and feel no discomfort. All of this suggested that leaders aimed to manage how employees felt when delivering challenging updates and largely built their strategies around honesty, empathy and timing in the workplace as seen in Figure 6.



Figure 6: Leadership strategies and positive perception

4.5 Evidence-based best practices for communicating bad news

The fifth objective focused on finding best practises backed by research for communicating bad news within organisations. Collected findings about bad news, communication, reasons for certain channels, what makes certain channels preferred and how leaders respond were analysed to find best practises. Based on the data review, a foundation of practical suggestions was made from the derived leadership behaviours. Most often, when something sensitive was communicated such as someone losing their job, being demoted or put on suspension, the leaders chose to talk to the team face-to-face or through a video meeting. With this method, leaders were able to notice how people felt and provide help right away.

Leaders also agreed that the way an employee feels about a channel plays an important role which means many are willing to adapt their methods based on employee preferences, not just on what's easiest for them to use. Similarly, leaders who had considered their choices in communication mostly said they were confident with the groups and channels they selected. The third point made clear that providing a clear explanation for why something is discussed poorly matters when working with negative messages. Leaders usually added extra comments and gave advice to help everyone see why particular choices were made.

It was also found that delivering bad news was largely guided by leaders' emotional intelligence. Many of the respondents stated that having received training or guidance in strategic communication from their organisations made dealing with tough conversations easier. The final point of the findings was that recording the communication methods used would help to judge their effectiveness and feed into future activities. Those who remembered what was helpful in communication were better able

to make improvements over the years. As a result, these patterns helped to identify important practises that effective leaders depend on when sharing tough messages at work.

4.6 Summary of Findings

This study explored how leaders in organizations deliver bad news and how the strategies and channels they employ influence employee perceptions and organizational outcomes. The findings revealed that leaders most frequently defined bad news as information connected to failed performance evaluations, the need for reworking assignments, and below-average employee performance. Although less frequently mentioned, issues such as layoffs, suspensions, and demotions carried much stronger emotional weight for both leaders and employees, confirming that bad news is not limited to large-scale organizational crises but also emerges in everyday supervisory interactions that shape workplace dynamics.

In terms of communication channels, face-to-face delivery emerged as the most common and preferred method, as it was perceived to allow for empathy, encouragement, and immediate responsiveness to employee reactions. Digital channels, such as email, were more often used in situations regarded as less sensitive or when speed and formal documentation were necessary. Telephone and video conferencing also played important roles, particularly in hybrid and remote work contexts, reflecting the realities of modern workplaces. The severity of the message had a decisive influence on channel selection, with serious matters such as layoffs or restructuring almost always being communicated in person or through video meetings, while less serious updates like denied requests or routine critiques were more often conveyed through written or electronic media. While this pattern largely corresponded with the assumptions of Media Richness Theory, qualitative insights revealed that leaders sometimes chose less suitable channels out of

habit or convenience, leading to occasional mismatches between the gravity of the message and the communication method used.

The findings also emphasized that how bad news is communicated is just as important as what is communicated. Leaders who displayed transparency, emotional intelligence, and active listening consistently encountered more positive employee reactions, while strategies grounded in empathy, kindness, and clarity helped preserve trust and reduce resistance. Transformational approaches, such as providing individualized attention and reframing difficult situations as opportunities for growth, proved especially effective in strengthening employee resilience and encouraging acceptance of difficult decisions.

Another best practice identified in the study was the combination of verbal communication with subsequent written documentation, which allowed leaders to provide emotional support in the moment while also ensuring clarity and reference for employees afterward. The analysis further highlighted the importance of aligning communication channels with message severity, offering timely explanations for decisions, and creating opportunities for dialogue rather than relying solely on one-way communication. These practices helped leaders maintain credibility and foster psychological safety during times of unavoidable change and uncertainty.

The study provided strong evidence that leadership communication strategies significantly shape employee responses to bad news. While face-to-face communication remains the most trusted and effective method for delivering sensitive messages, the choice of channel must be reinforced by empathetic and transparent strategies. When message severity, communication channel, and leadership behavior are aligned, organizations can mitigate the negative impact of bad news, preserve trust, and sustain

employee engagement, thereby strengthening resilience and long-term organizational effectiveness.

4.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study emphasize that leadership communication during the delivery of bad news represents a highly sensitive and multifaceted process that extends beyond simple information transfer. Leaders are required to simultaneously manage the complexity of organizational realities, employee emotions, and long-term trust dynamics. The data revealed that leaders most frequently faced performance-related conversations, such as failed evaluations, assignment rework, and underperformance issues, indicating that bad news is not limited to critical decisions like layoffs or demotions but frequently manifests in ongoing performance management responsibilities. This finding highlights the necessity for leaders to continually exercise refined communication competencies, even in routine supervisory tasks that carry emotional weight for employees.

The severity of the message played a clear and consistent role in guiding the selection of communication channels. Leaders overwhelmingly favored face-to-face interactions for highly sensitive and personally impactful situations, recognizing that these settings allowed for immediate emotional support, non-verbal cues, and opportunities to address employee concerns directly. Where in-person meetings were not feasible, video conferencing emerged as the next preferred option, reflecting an effort to preserve relational proximity in a digital era. Conversely, less severe matters were more often communicated through email or telephone, suggesting a deliberate calibration of channel richness in alignment with message complexity and emotional stakes.

Importantly, the leaders' approach to delivering bad news was shaped not only by the content of the message but also by their consideration of how employees might

perceive and emotionally process the communication. The overwhelming majority of participants reported that they actively reflected on employee reactions when selecting communication channels and formulating their delivery strategy. Leaders who displayed emotional intelligence, demonstrating empathy, timing sensitivity, and a capacity to anticipate emotional responses, were more likely to express confidence in the appropriateness and effectiveness of their chosen approaches, even in retrospect.

Additionally, leaders reported that adopting a respectful tone, providing clear rationale behind decisions, and offering actionable guidance contributed to more constructive employee responses. Such behaviors align closely with the principles of transformational leadership, where individualized consideration, transparency, and authentic engagement strengthen employee trust even during periods of adverse organizational change.

The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data further underscored that effective communication of bad news requires a combination of structural planning and human-centered leadership. Leaders who treated these conversations as opportunities to preserve dignity, clarify expectations, and demonstrate organizational care succeeded not only in limiting immediate employee distress but also in fostering a longer-term sense of fairness, organizational justice, and psychological safety.

Overall, these findings confirm that delivering bad news is not solely a procedural task but a strategic leadership function that directly influences employee engagement, organizational culture, and resilience. The results offer practical guidance for leadership development programs, emphasizing that communication strategies must be intentionally tailored to the severity of the message, the relational context, and the emotional readiness of recipients. By mastering these communication dynamics, leaders can help their

organizations navigate difficult moments with professionalism, compassion, and sustained trust.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion of Findings

This study looked at the ways organizational leaders deliver bad news, focusing on the types of information shared, the channels used, the reasons behind these selections and how the severity of the news affects the communication process. It was discovered that problems with evaluations, redoing work and being criticized were the most common types of bad news. Whenever the message was particularly important, face-to-face communication was used most often. Low-priority problems were usually handled mainly by email and telephone. Some selected the way they communicated according to what their company culture supports, yet a number of leaders acknowledged that speed and comfort were the main criteria. More than half of those surveyed stated that they considered the employee's reaction and now feel the technique used was the right approach. Leaders also mentioned that transparency, being caring and mindful of timing help ease the negative side of communication. Using these patterns, best practices were picked out that focus on direct communication about critical situations, decision-making that centers around the employee and the smart use of emotional intelligence. These discoveries give helpful advice about how leaders can guide sensitive conversations and improve how they talk to those they lead.

5.2 Understanding What Constitutes Bad News

The research's first goal was to find out which kinds of information leaders saw as "bad news." The most common examples were unsuccessful performance evaluations, negative comments or instructions for rework of task and poor feedback on work submitted. The outcomes point out that most organizational settings face bad news more about performance than about staff being disciplined or fired. It was clear from the data that layoffs, suspensions or demotions rarely appeared in comparison to other problems.

This means that while delivering harsh organizational messages is sometimes part of a leader's job, they spend more time managing employee performance (Rainey, 2024). This viewpoint means that leaders do not need to wait for extreme situations to share bad news. Therefore, leaders should develop skills for giving dependable, helpful comments that do not lower team spirit or levels of involvement.

5.3 Communication Channels and Their Selection

What stood out in the results for Objective two were clear patterns in how leaders communicated tough messages. Participants reported that they mainly communicated face-to-face and then used email, telephone and video conferencing. This learning style is closest to communication theories, as it allows for all kinds of verbal and non-verbal cues during dialogue in real time.

Even though leaders mostly chose face-to-face communication, they recognized that different things influenced which way they would deliver their messages. The vast majority of respondents reported they chose what they believed was proper for their environment or would best fit the company's culture. Certain leaders, though, acknowledged choosing what to use by simply finding something easy or quick to access. This way of working highlights the tension between what strategies call for and the practical limits of operations. This finding aligns with Kaneko (2025), Park et al. (2019), and Shams Vala et al. (2022) findings on effective communication channels of organizations. It means that, while many leaders understand the need for different approaches, real-world situations such as short time, remote work or a company's expectations can determine their actions.

This means that communication skills should be part of every leadership development program. When leaders decide how to communicate without advanced

planning, employees may notice and it may negatively influence how everyone in the organization feels.

5.4 Severity as a Determinant of Communication Strategy

Objective 3 concentrated on assessing the effect of message seriousness on the selection of a communication channel. It was found that higher-priority notifications led to more use of close, immediate video and in-person communications. When people saw negative news, they became less likely to rely on email or telephone. It shows that leaders are more sensitive to emotions, so many try to display empathy, be with workers and support them when breaking bad news. The way some issues need more attention through richer forms of communication is a clear example of using emotional intelligence in leadership (Braun et al., 2019; Bui, 2019). Managers naturally took into account how news might upset people which provided an added sense of respect and consideration in every situation. As a result, we understand that leaders must also care about emotions, perceptions and relationships during their communication.

5.5 Leadership Considerations and Retrospective Evaluation

The researcher learned in this objective that most leaders took into account the possibilities of their message being misunderstood, rejected or ignored by the other person. Overall, most of the respondents felt on reflection that they had selected the ideal strategy. Since these results highlight the purposeful way leaders are using communication, we find them promising. Following this level of mindfulness help leaders find ways to use their experience to boost the effectiveness of future actions as reported by Bastari et al. (2020), Ewing et al. (2019), and Heavey et al. (2020).

Open-ended questions helped leaders explain the qualities that made their communication effective. Many speakers pointed out that it's important to be clear, prompt, concerned and kind when passing along upsetting news. The ideas here are

similar to those stated in organizational psychology and leadership communication studies. They observe that a new trend at the top includes looking for leaders who are emotionally intelligent and attentive to others.

5.6 Emerging Best Practices

Objective 5 guided the researcher to pull out evidence-based best practices by combining the study's findings. Part of this was dealing with major issues through face-to-face or video calls, thinking about how employees see communication, being clear and kind in sharing rationale, training leaders in communication and emotional intelligence and noting decisions for future learning.

They are practical, use data and are shown by both figures and feedback from users. Leaders use values as a starting point for making leadership training and communication policies. Importantly, respondents suggest that, in leadership, building trust, respect and protecting psychological safety matter as much as the messages themselves delivered.

CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Summary

This study closely examined leaders' approaches to delivering bad news, an area of organizational communication that, despite its practical importance, has received limited systematic attention in the existing literature. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the research was able to uncover both quantitative patterns and qualitative insights regarding how leaders choose communication channels, what strategies they adopt, and the reasoning behind those decisions. The study further highlighted the psychological and cultural factors influencing these practices, showing how the severity of the message, the organizational context, and the leader's interpersonal skills converge to shape employee perceptions and organizational outcomes.

Findings from this study reinforce long-standing theoretical perspectives, particularly the enduring relevance of face-to-face communication. Despite the proliferation of digital platforms and the widespread adoption of hybrid and remote work models, face-to-face interaction remains the most trusted and effective medium for delivering bad news. Leaders consistently emphasized that personal communication allows for empathy, emotional nuance, and immediate feedback, all of which are essential in high-severity situations such as layoffs, demotions, or restructuring. These results align with the predictions of Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986) and more recent empirical research (Rainey, 2024; Springer et al., 2021), reaffirming the principle that richer communication channels are most appropriate when messages carry emotional weight and risk of misunderstanding.

At the same time, the study revealed that digital communication channels have become deeply integrated into organizational practice, particularly for less severe messages or for documenting decisions. While these channels provide efficiency and

convenience, their limitations underscore the importance of leaders carefully calibrating their use. Misalignment between message severity and channel selection was shown to undermine the empathetic value of communication, leading employees to perceive leaders as detached or insensitive. This confirms observations by Braun et al. (2019) and Volk and Zerfass (2020) that leaders must go beyond efficiency and consider employee expectations, organizational culture, and the relational context when making communication choices.

A further significant insight was the central role of emotional intelligence and transformational leadership behaviors in mitigating the negative effects of bad news. Leaders who demonstrated transparency, active listening, empathy, and individualized consideration were consistently perceived more positively, even when the message itself was unwelcome. This suggests that effective communication is not simply a matter of selecting the right channel but also of adopting strategies that acknowledge employees' emotions and reinforce trust. These findings echo Goleman's framework of emotional intelligence (1995, as cited in Jnr & Dzogbewu, 2021) and Khattak et al. (2020) on transformational leadership, both of which emphasize that leadership effectiveness depends as much on relational and emotional skills as on structural or strategic choices.

The study also highlighted practical best practices that can inform leadership development and organizational policy. For example, combining verbal delivery of bad news with subsequent written documentation was found to be particularly effective, allowing leaders to provide immediate emotional support while ensuring long-term clarity. Similarly, approaches grounded in kindness, clarity, and transparency were shown to strengthen perceptions of fairness and minimize resistance. These findings point to the need for organizations to integrate communication training into leadership development

programs, emphasizing that delivering negative news is not merely a task to be completed but a process requiring strategic alignment between empathy, context, and message.

Taken together, this study's contributions extend both theoretical and practical understanding of leadership communication. By integrating insights from Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership, the research offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how leaders communicate bad news in modern organizational contexts. Its focus on real-life scenarios and evidence-based practices ensures that the findings are not only academically relevant but also directly applicable to leadership training, organizational policies, and workplace culture. Ultimately, the study underscores that effective delivery of bad news requires leaders to align message, method, and emotional intelligence in ways that preserve trust, protect morale, and sustain organizational resilience.

6.2 Implications

As a result of this study, several critical lessons emerge for leaders, organizational communication systems, and the overall workplace experiences of employees. Because communication is fundamental to motivating staff, building trust, and enabling high performance, understanding how and why leaders communicate bad news provides a pathway for improving both team dynamics and organizational outcomes. The findings suggest that leadership communication is not simply about transmitting information but about managing relationships, emotions, and expectations in ways that preserve trust and engagement even in adverse circumstances.

One of the strongest implications of this study is that the severity of the information being communicated must directly inform the choice of communication channel. The analysis demonstrated a clear link between message gravity and the

preference for richer, more intimate forms of communication, such as face-to-face meetings or live video conferencing. This reinforces long-standing theoretical models, including Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986), while also echoing recent scholarship which emphasizes that high-severity messages demand channels capable of conveying empathy, emotional nuance, and immediate feedback (Antonio, 2023; Chatman et al., 2020; Coombs, 2022). By contrast, reliance on lean channels such as email for delivering serious or emotionally charged messages risks damaging credibility, diminishing empathy, and heightening negative employee reactions.

The findings therefore underscore the importance of maintaining human connection during difficult organizational moments. Leaders who engage in direct, personal interaction are better positioned to read emotional cues, respond to employee concerns, and frame solutions constructively. In doing so, they not only convey information but also demonstrate care and responsibility, which can soften the emotional impact of bad news and reduce resistance. These insights point to a critical implication for leadership development: organizations need to invest in training programs that equip leaders with the skills to deliver difficult messages effectively, combining technical communication competence with emotional intelligence and relational awareness.

Moreover, the findings carry significant implications for organizations operating in remote or hybrid work environments. The increasing reliance on digital platforms means that leaders may be tempted to default to convenience-driven communication choices. Yet this study highlights that remote settings require even greater intentionality in channel selection, ensuring that technology does not erode the interpersonal quality of sensitive conversations. Organizations should therefore provide guidance, resources, and support systems that help leaders adapt communication strategies to digital contexts without losing the human dimension of leadership. Further analysis found that leaders who

take into account how employees might view a particular channel feel, in retrospect, that they picked the most effective form of communication. It makes sense to bring emotional intelligence into leadership training packages. Leaders should be taught knowledge about communication technology and how emotional and psychological factors work into their messages. Any leadership teaching should include classes on self-awareness, empathy and perspective-taking, helping leaders see how much their actions and words matter in sensitive matters (Darics, 2020; Gessesse et al., 2023; Kaye, 2023; Kitz et al., 2023).

Another important result of this study is the recognition that effective leadership requires strategic planning of communication, particularly when delivering bad news. While most leaders indicated that they selected communication channels based on what appeared to be most appropriate for the situation, a notable proportion admitted that their choices were often shaped by convenience or habit. This discrepancy between leaders' stated intentions and their actual practices highlights the gap between conceptual ideals and organizational realities. It further illustrates how easily efficiency and routine can overshadow the need for thoughtful, context-sensitive communication, especially in high-stakes scenarios where employee perceptions and trust are on the line.

This finding aligns with observations by O'Neill and Kelley (2021) and Othman and Yusoff (2020), who both emphasized that leadership communication often suffers from a lack of strategic forethought. Their work shows that while leaders may acknowledge the importance of empathetic and situationally appropriate communication, many still default to channels and strategies dictated by organizational norms, personal comfort, or time pressures. Such tendencies can undermine not only the effectiveness of the message but also the credibility of the leader and the overall quality of leader–employee relationships.

To address this gap, leaders should be encouraged, and organizationally supported, to plan communication decisions more deliberately, ensuring that delivery methods align with both the severity of the message and the expectations of employees. One practical implication is the integration of structured communication protocols, such as checklists or decision frameworks, into performance management and human resource systems.

By institutionalizing such tools, organizations can promote consistency, fairness, and professionalism in how difficult messages are delivered. Moreover, standardized communication practices can help reduce the variability caused by individual leader habits, ensuring that employees across departments and levels experience difficult conversations with a baseline of empathy, clarity, and respect.

In this way, strategic planning transforms the delivery of bad news from an ad hoc leadership task into a systematic organizational practice. Not only does this safeguard employees from inconsistent or poorly managed communication, but it also reinforces organizational culture by signaling that leaders value transparency, fairness, and accountability. Over time, such practices nurture stronger trust, sustain morale, and cultivate resilient organizations that are better prepared to navigate uncertainty with confidence.

Equally important, the findings underscore the value of leaders adopting open, prompt, and respectful responses when engaging in two-way dialogue. Providing space for open-ended questions and answering them sincerely enhances the perception of leadership as caring and attentive. This approach is not only ethically sound but also strategically beneficial, as research shows it strengthens trust, reduces work-related anxiety, and improves employee retention during challenging periods (Antonio, 2023; Heavey et al., 2020). When employees recognize that honest conversations are the norm

and that their concerns will be taken seriously, organizations are better able to absorb difficulties without allowing them to escalate into disengagement or loss of commitment. Such practices foster psychological safety, enabling staff to adapt and recover more quickly when confronted with organizational hardships.

Another significant implication of the findings is the importance of integrating reflective practices into organizational communication processes. Many leaders reported that they often recognized better alternatives for delivering bad news only in hindsight, once they had observed the outcomes of their initial approach. This suggests that deliberate reflection is a critical tool for strengthening communication competence over time. Structured opportunities such as debrief meetings following announcements or feedback sessions after difficult conversations can provide leaders with a chance to analyze their decisions, identify errors, and refine their strategies. Moreover, creating formal mechanisms for sharing these reflections, whether through peer learning groups, leadership forums, or HR-facilitated workshops, ensures that individual lessons are translated into collective organizational knowledge.

By embedding reflective practice into communication routines, organizations create a cycle of continuous improvement that enhances leadership effectiveness and institutional learning. This not only helps individual leaders grow in confidence and skill but also allows organizations to build a repository of best practices for handling sensitive communication. Ultimately, such an approach ensures that the delivery of bad news is not only more consistent and empathetic but also increasingly effective across the entire organization.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the study's findings, several key recommendations are proposed to strengthen leadership communication strategies when delivering bad news. A primary recommendation is that moderately to highly severe topics should, whenever possible, be communicated face-to-face or through video conferencing. Richer channels provide leaders with the ability to convey empathy, offer clarity, and demonstrate genuine care, which are particularly important when employee morale and trust are at risk. Training programs should therefore emphasize the relationship between message severity and channel selection, equipping leaders with the ability to evaluate communication contexts and align delivery methods appropriately.

Leadership development initiatives must also integrate technical communication skills with emotional and social competencies. Empathy, clarity, respect, and active listening should be cultivated alongside strategic planning skills, ensuring that leaders are prepared to manage not only the informational content of bad news but also its emotional impact. Encouraging leaders to consider employee perspectives before selecting communication channels can help prevent the tendency to default to convenience or habit. To support this, organizations should develop clear communication protocols or structured decision-making frameworks that guide leaders in evaluating message severity, contextual factors, and employee expectations.

Another recommendation is the institutionalization of reflective practices following difficult conversations or major announcements. Leaders often realize, in hindsight, that alternative strategies may have been more effective. Structured reflection, through debrief sessions, leadership peer groups, or facilitated HR workshops, can help

transform these experiences into actionable learning. Organizations should also systematize the documentation of communication strategies, creating repositories of best practices that capture both successes and lessons learned. Over time, these knowledge resources can inform leadership development programs, onboarding practices, and crisis management protocols.

By implementing these recommendations, organizations can build communication cultures that are both compassionate and strategic. Leaders will be better prepared to balance efficiency with empathy, ensuring that even in times of difficulty, employees feel respected, informed, and supported. This alignment between leadership intent, communication methods, and employee expectations not only minimizes the harm caused by adverse news but also strengthens trust, engagement, and organizational resilience.

Further research is needed to study leadership communication strategies during bad news within various kinds of organizations, for example, healthcare, education and public administration. Different sectors can run into communicative issues and expect different types of cultural behavior, affecting how they decide on a channel and launch their strategy. In addition, including employee feedback would allow future studies to compare how those in charge communicate with how those employees experience it, for a better idea of both outcomes and effects on the team's emotions.

Researchers are also starting to look at how ongoing bad news communication affects employees over a long period. More research could be conducted to see how gender, culture and a person's approach to leadership play a role in dealing with tough messages. Besides, using things like digital analytics or observations may let us see real-

time communication behaviors more clearly than information reported by participants. By running experiments with several communication training methods, researchers can see if emotional intelligence and strategic messaging programs work. Moving ahead, future research can look into whether artificial intelligence and automation affect how bad news is shared and if using these tools benefits or harms the use of compassionate communication by leaders in tech industries.

6.4 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how leaders manage the complex task of delivering bad news in organizational settings, focusing on the nature of the information conveyed, the communication channels selected, the reasons for those choices, and the strategies leaders employ to maintain trust and credibility. By adopting a sequential mixed-methods design, the research was able to move beyond surface-level description and generate both broad statistical patterns and rich qualitative insights that illuminate the lived realities of leadership communication in contemporary workplaces. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a nuanced account of not only what leaders do when faced with the challenge of delivering bad news but also why they make these choices and how such decisions are interpreted by employees.

With respect to the first objective, the study demonstrated that leaders most often classified bad news as performance-related feedback, such as failed evaluations and assignment rework, which represent common but often demoralizing aspects of organizational life. Less frequent but more consequential issues, layoffs, demotions, or suspensions, were found to carry heightened emotional and organizational weight. These findings highlight the subjective and context-dependent nature of bad news: the same message may be perceived as routine in one sector yet deeply unsettling in another,

underscoring the importance of understanding both content and context in leadership communication.

The analysis of communication channels, aligned with the second and third objectives, revealed a clear preference for face-to-face communication in high-severity contexts, confirming decades of theoretical and empirical work on the richness of interpersonal communication (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Springer et al., 2021). Video conferencing was recognized as a viable alternative in hybrid and remote settings, though it was rarely perceived as equal in impact to in-person encounters. Leaner channels such as email and telephone, while useful for routine or low-severity issues, were shown to lack the emotional nuance required for sensitive conversations. This confirms the central tenets of Media Richness Theory while also revealing practical gaps: leaders do not always apply theory-driven logic, and at times default to convenience or habit, highlighting the need for greater intentionality in communication planning.

A further key contribution of this research lies in its confirmation of the importance of empathy, transparency, and emotional intelligence in shaping positive employee perceptions. Leaders who demonstrated sensitivity to employee emotions, acknowledged concerns, and communicated with clarity were consistently rated more positively, even when the content of the message was unfavorable. Transformational leadership behaviors, such as providing individualized consideration and reframing difficult situations as opportunities for growth, emerged as powerful tools for maintaining morale and strengthening trust. These insights affirm that effective communication extends far beyond channel selection: it rests equally on interpersonal skills, emotional awareness, and the alignment of leadership intent with employee expectations.

In addressing the fifth research objective, the study identified several best practices that can guide organizations in institutionalizing effective communication. These included matching channel richness with message severity, ensuring clarity and transparency in delivery, and adopting an empathetic and respectful approach. The research also emphasized the importance of reflective practices, such as debriefing and post-communication evaluations, which allow leaders to refine their strategies over time. By embedding such practices into human resource systems and leadership development programs, organizations can transform the delivery of bad news from an improvised task into a strategic and relational process that balances organizational demands with employee well-being.

Taken together, these findings advance both theory and practice. On a theoretical level, the study integrates insights from Media Richness Theory, Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Emotional Intelligence, and Transformational Leadership into a comprehensive framework for analyzing how leaders deliver bad news. This framework demonstrates that effective communication cannot be understood through a single lens but requires a multi-theoretical perspective that accounts for message severity, channel richness, leader attributes, and employee perceptions. On a practical level, the study provides actionable guidance for organizations, stressing the need to equip leaders with both technical competencies in communication planning and relational skills that emphasize empathy, transparency, and respect.

The study also opens several avenues for future research. While the findings provide strong evidence for general patterns, further comparative research is needed to explore how definitions and perceptions of bad news vary across industries, cultures, and leadership levels. Longitudinal studies could examine how communication strategies evolve over time in response to shifting workplace norms, particularly in the wake of

digital transformation and hybrid work models. In addition, cross-cultural research could deepen understanding of how cultural norms and institutional hierarchies shape expectations for communication, extending the generalizability of this study's conclusions.

Ultimately, the research demonstrates that while bad news is an inevitable part of organizational life, its impact can be managed constructively through intentional, empathetic, and strategically aligned communication. Leaders who approach difficult conversations with foresight, emotional intelligence, and a commitment to transparency not only mitigate harm but also strengthen trust, resilience, and engagement within their organizations. In this sense, the study reinforces the enduring lesson that leadership is not defined solely by decision-making but equally by how decisions are communicated, and that even the most challenging messages, when delivered with care and clarity, can become opportunities to reinforce credibility and foster long-term organizational sustainability.

Beyond its immediate contributions, this study also highlights the enduring complexity of leadership communication in organizational life. While decisions about structure, performance, and resources are central to management, the findings reinforce that the legitimacy of those decisions is inseparable from how they are communicated. In contexts of uncertainty, employees often evaluate the fairness of organizational practices not solely on outcomes but on the transparency, empathy, and clarity with which decisions are conveyed. Thus, communication becomes not merely a vehicle for information transfer but a crucial determinant of organizational justice, trust, and culture.

Another significant contribution of this research is its methodological design. By employing a sequential mixed-methods approach, the study demonstrates the value of combining large-scale quantitative evidence with in-depth qualitative narratives. The

quantitative data establish generalizable patterns of channel use, strategy, and perception, while the qualitative findings illuminate the emotional and relational dynamics that underlie these patterns. This dual perspective enriches understanding in ways that single-method studies cannot achieve and provides a model for future organizational research seeking to balance breadth with depth.

The implications of the findings extend across industries. In corporate sectors, where layoffs and restructuring are frequent, the results underscore the importance of leader presence and relational sensitivity in mitigating the reputational damage of adverse decisions. In education and the public sector, where trust and shared mission are critical, the findings illustrate how misaligned communication can erode morale and engagement, while empathetic and transparent approaches strengthen professional commitment. In healthcare and frontline services, where employee well-being directly influences quality of care, the study highlights the urgent need for leaders to combine clarity with emotional intelligence in order to sustain resilience under pressure. By addressing such diverse contexts, the research contributes not only to the theory of leadership communication but also to its practical adaptation across multiple domains of work.

Equally important are the societal implications of the study. In an era characterized by heightened uncertainty, whether from economic instability, digital disruption, or global crises, the ways in which leaders communicate with their employees reflect broader values of responsibility, accountability, and respect. Organizations that institutionalize compassionate communication practices are better positioned not only to navigate internal challenges but also to demonstrate integrity and credibility in their external stakeholder relationships. Thus, the lessons of this study extend beyond organizational boundaries, contributing to broader discussions about ethical leadership, sustainable governance, and social trust.

The research also makes an important contribution to leadership development. By identifying concrete practices, such as aligning channel richness with message severity, providing transparent rationales, engaging in active listening, and framing adverse situations in constructive terms, the study provides actionable insights for leadership training programs. These findings can be embedded into organizational learning curricula, mentorship frameworks, and HR policies, ensuring that future generations of leaders are not only technically skilled but also relationally and ethically competent in managing communication challenges.

Finally, this study underscores the need for ongoing reflection and adaptability in leadership communication. As organizations continue to evolve under the pressures of globalization, technological innovation, and shifting employee expectations, communication practices must be continuously reassessed. The ability to deliver bad news effectively will remain a defining test of leadership competence, one that requires not only strategic foresight but also humility, emotional awareness, and cultural sensitivity. In this regard, the research emphasizes that the most effective leaders are those who recognize communication as a dynamic process, one that must adapt to context, evolve over time, and remain anchored in respect for the people most affected by organizational decisions.

In conclusion, the study contributes to a deeper recognition that while bad news is an unavoidable aspect of organizational life, it need not be destructive. When managed with intentionality, transparency, and empathy, even the most difficult messages can become opportunities to affirm organizational values, reinforce credibility, and cultivate resilience. The findings therefore affirm a central tenet of leadership: that decision-making and communication are inseparable, and that true leadership is revealed not only in what choices are made, but in how those choices are shared with others.

Appendix A:

Informed Consent for Interview

**Delivering Bad News: Analysis of Leadership Communication
Strategies and Channel Selection**

I, agree to be interviewed for the research which
will conducted by, a Doctor of Business
Administration Student at the Swiss School of Business and Management, Geneva,
Switzerland.

I agree to participate in this research study by answering any questions presented verbally
by recorded interview or via survey questionnaire. I understand my participation is
completely voluntary and I commit to answering the questions to the best of my ability.

This research study has been fully explained to me, and I understand that I have the
choice to stop my participation in this study at any time as I see fit. I understand that all
interview materials will be kept confidential and the results of this study may be
published in any form that the researcher sees fit.

I agree that any information obtained will be used according to the needs of the
researcher and the completion of this study.

.....

SIGNATURE OF INTERVIEWEE

.....

DATE

APPENDIX B:
INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following questions are broken down into two sections, ranging from minor to major information that would impact an employee negatively in some way when communicated.

1. What is your last name?

*2. What is your age?(Required.)

- ☐ 18 to 30
- ☐ 31 to 40
- ☐ 41 to 50
- ☐ 51 and older

*3. What is your gender?(Required.)

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

*4. Which of the following best describes the principal industry of your organization?(Required.)

*5. What is your Leadership Level?(Required.)

- ☐ Supervisor
- ☐ Manager
- ☐ Director or Higher

*6. How long have you been in a leadership role?(Required.)

- ☐ 1-5 Years
- ☐ 6-10 Years
- ☐ 11-15 Years
- ☐ 16+ Years

Section 1: Rank the following examples/scenarios in question 7 that would impact an employee negatively from a scale of “No negative impact” to “Extremely negative”

*7.

Rework of assignment or criticism of work submitted

Communicating below average performance

Denial work-related request

Denial of non-work related/personal requests

(Required.)

- ☐ No Negative Impact
- ☐ Slightly Negative
- ☐ Moderately Negative
- ☐ Very Negative
- ☐ Extremely Negative

*8. Which example or scenario listed in question 7 are you faced with communicating to your team most frequently?(Required.)

- ☐ Rework of assignment or criticism of work submitted
- ☐ Below average performance
- ☐ Denial work-related requests
- ☐ Denial of non-work related requests
- ☐ Other (please specify)

*9. As a Leader, which communication channel do you use to communicate to your employee when these kinds of examples/scenarios listed in question 8 occur?(Required.)

- ☐ Email / Written Communication
- ☐ Telephone
- ☐ Face-to-face conversation

- ☐ Video Conference
- ☐ Other (please specify)

*10. Based on question 9, why did you choose that channel to communicate?(Required.)

- ☐ Most convenient
- ☐ Most appropriate
- ☐ Did not give it much thought
- ☐ It suited the work culture
- ☐ Other (please specify)

*11. Did you consider how the employee would perceive that information when selecting that channel to communicate this information?(Required.)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12. If not, why was consideration of how the information would be perceived through this channel not a factor in your channel choice?

*13. Do you believe that the chosen communication channel was the best option in hindsight (now time has passed)?(Required.)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

14. If not, why? What would you change if you had the opportunity to make this decision again?

Section 2: Rank the following examples or scenarios in question 15 that would impact an employee negatively from a scale of “No negative impact” to “Extremely negative”

*15.

Suspension

Demotion

Failed Performance Evaluation

Lay-offs

(Required.)

- ☐ No Negative Impact
- ☐ Slightly Negative
- ☐ Moderately Negative
- ☐ Very Negative
- ☐ Extremely Negative

*16. Which example or scenario listed in question 15 are you faced with communicating to your team most frequently?(Required.)

- ☐ Suspension
- ☐ Demotion
- ☐ Failed Performance Evaluations
- ☐ Lay-offs
- ☐ Other (please specify)

*17. As a Leader, which communication channel do you use to communicate to your employee when these kinds of examples/scenarios listed in question 16 occur?(Required.)

- ☐ Email / Written Communication
- ☐ Telephone
- ☐ Face-to-face conversation
- ☐ Video Conference
- ☐ Other (please specify)

*18. Based on question 17, why did you choose that channel to communicate?(Required.)

- ☐ Most convenient
- ☐ Most appropriate

- ☐ Did not give it much thought
- ☐ It suited the work culture
- ☐ Other (please specify)

*19. Did you consider how the employee would perceive that information when selecting that channel to communicate this information?(Required.)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

20. If not, why was there no consideration towards how your channel choice would be a factor in how the message would be perceived by the employee?

*21. Do you believe that the chosen communication channel was the best option in hindsight (now time has passed)?(Required.)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

22. If not, why? What would you change if you had the opportunity to make this decision again?

REFERENCES

- Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the american college of clinical pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358-1367.
- Antonio, J. (2023). Effective Communication: A Cornerstone of Successful Management. *Journal Dimensie Management and Public Sector*, 4(3), 1-6.
- Balogun, J., Fahy, K., & Vaara, E. (2019). The interplay between HQ legitimation and subsidiary legitimacy judgments in HQ relocation: A social psychological approach. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 50, 223-249.
- Bastari, A., Eliyana, A., & Wijayanti, T. (2020). Effects of transformational leadership styles on job performance with job motivation as mediation: A study in a state-owned enterprise. *Management Science Letters*, 10(12), 2883-2888.
- Braun, S., Hernandez Bark, A., Kirchner, A., Stegmann, S., & Van Dick, R. (2019). Emails from the boss—Curse or blessing? Relations between communication channels, leader evaluation, and employees' attitudes. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 56(1), 50-81.
- Bui, T. L. (2019). Internal communication in the digital workplace: digital communication channels and employee engagement.
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652-661.
- Chatman, J. E., Johnson, A., White, E., & Bell, R. L. (2020). The Leader as Effective Communicator. *American Journal of Management*, 20(2).

- Christina, I. D., Fenni, F., & Roselina, D. (2019). Digital marketing strategy in promoting product. *Management And Entrepreneurship: Trends Of Development*, 4(10), 58-66.
- Coleman, C. M. (2023). *Managing Employee Morale After Organizational Downsizing* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University).
- Coombs, W. T. (2022). Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) refining and clarifying a cognitive-based theory of crisis communication. *The handbook of crisis communication*, 193-204.
- Darics, E. (2020). E-leadership or “how to be boss in instant messaging?” The role of nonverbal communication. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 57(1), 3-29.
- de Melo, A. F. P. (2021). *A categorisation proposal for members of organisations on the basis of their role in the context of major cybersecurity incidents, with notes on the psychological dimension* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford).
- Dehalwar, K. S. S. N., & Sharma, S. N. (2024). Exploring the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research methods. *Think India Journal*, 27(1), 7-15.
- Dwyer, J., & Hopwood, N. (2019). *The business communication handbook*. Cengage AU.
- Ewing, M., Men, L. R., & O’Neil, J. (2019). Using social media to engage employees: Insights from internal communication managers. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(2), 110-132.
- Forza, C., & Sandrin, E. (2023). Surveys. In *Research methods for operations and supply chain management* (pp. 76-158). Routledge.
- Gessesse, A. G., Haile, J. M., & Woldearegay, A. G. (2023). Exploring Effective Communication Strategies Employed by Physicians in Delivering Bad News in Ethiopian State Hospitals. *Patient Related Outcome Measures*, 409-425.

- Gómez-Leal, R., Holzer, A.A., Bradley, C., Fernández-Berrocal, P. and Patti, J. (2022). The relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership in school leaders: A systematic review. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 52(1), pp.1-21.
- Heavey, C., Simsek, Z., Kyprianou, C., & Risius, M. (2020). How do strategic leaders engage with social media? A theoretical framework for research and practice. *Strategic Management Journal*, 41(8), 1490-1527.
- Jnr, S. A., & Dzogbewu, T. (2021). Goleman's Intrapersonal Dimension of Emotional Intelligence: Does it Predict Effective Leadership?. *Organizational Cultures*, 21(2), 35.
- Kabanda, M. K., & Barrena-Martinez, J. (2025). Effective Communication in Management. In *International Managerial Skills in Higher Education Institutions* (pp. 17-42). IGI Global Scientific Publishing.
- Kaneko, A. (2025). Team Communication in the workplace: Interplay of communication channels and performance. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 88(2), 223-248.
- Katsikeas, C., Leonidou, L., & Zeriti, A. (2020). Revisiting international marketing strategy in a digital era: Opportunities, challenges, and research directions. *International Marketing Review*, 37(3), 405-424.
- Kaye, P. (2023). *Breaking Bad News: a ten step approach*. Scion Publishing Ltd.
- Khattak, M. N., Zolin, R., & Muhammad, N. (2020). Linking transformational leadership and continuous improvement: The mediating role of trust. *Management Research Review*, 43(8), 931-950.
- Kitz, C. C., Barclay, L. J., & Breitsohl, H. (2023). The delivery of bad news: An integrative review and path forward. *Human Resource Management Review*, 33(3), 100971.

- Krakauer, D., Bertschinger, N., Olbrich, E., Flack, J. C., & Ay, N. (2020). The information theory of individuality. *Theory in Biosciences*, 139, 209-223.
- Lee, K. (2019). Face-to-Face to Interfaced: Facilitating Mediated Communications in Technical Support Work.
- Lee, Y. (2022). Dynamics of millennial employees' communicative behaviors in the workplace: the role of inclusive leadership and symmetrical organizational communication. *Personnel review*, 51(6), 1629-1650.
- Lewis, M.W. and Smith, W.K. (2023). Today's most critical leadership skill: Navigating paradoxes. *Leader to leader*, 2023(107), pp.12-18.
- Mikkelsen, A. C., Sloan, D., & Hesse, C. (2019). Relational communication messages and leadership styles in supervisor/employee relationships. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 56(4), 586-604.
- Milliken, F.J., Morrison, E.W. and Hewlin, P.F. (2003). An exploratory study of employee silence: Issues that employees don't communicate upward and why. *Journal of management studies*, 40(6), pp.1453-1476.
- Mohd Adnan, S. N. S., & Valliappan, R. (2019). Communicating shared vision and leadership styles towards enhancing performance. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 68(6), 1042-1056.
- Olaniyi, O. O., Ugongnia, J. C., Olaniyi, F. G., Arigbabu, A. T., & Adigwe, C. S. (2024). Digital collaborative tools, strategic communication, and social capital: Unveiling the impact of digital transformation on organizational dynamics. *Asian Journal of Research in Computer Science*, 17(5), 140-156.
- O'Neill, B., & Kelley, R. (2021). Delivering bad news: Crisis communication methods in academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 82(4).

- Othman, A. F., & Yusoff, S. Z. (2020). Crisis communication management strategies in MH370 crisis with special references to situational crisis communication theory. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 10(4), 172-182.
- Park, S., Boatwright, B., & Avery, E. J. (2019). Information channel preference in health crisis: Exploring the roles of perceived risk, preparedness, knowledge, and intent to follow directives. *Public relations review*, 45(5), 101794.
- Pfeffermann, N. (2020). New Leadership in Strategy and Communication. *New Leadership in Strategy and Communication*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-19681-3>.
- Quesenberry, K. A. (2020). *Social media strategy: Marketing, advertising, and public relations in the consumer revolution*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Rainey, M. D. (2024). *The Effect of Empowering Leadership, Communication Richness, and Affective Organizational Commitment on the Relationship Between Communication Channels and Communication Effectiveness* (Doctoral dissertation, Trident University International).
- Renn, O. (2020). Risk communication: Insights and requirements for designing successful communication programs on health and environmental hazards. In *Handbook of risk and crisis communication* (pp. 80-98). Routledge.
- Robinson, R. S. (2024). Purposive sampling. In *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 5645-5647). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Santoso, N. R., Sulistyaningtyas, I. D., & Pratama, B. P. (2022). Transformational leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic: Strengthening employee engagement through internal communication. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 01968599221095182.

- Shams Vala, A., Moosavi, S. S., & Jafari Baghiabadi, S. (2022). Effective Knowledge Transfer: Application of the Media Richness Theory. *Informology*, 1(2), 41-56.
- Shams Vala, A., Moosavi, S. S., & Jafari Baghiabadi, S. (2022). Effective Knowledge Transfer: Application of the Media Richness Theory. *Informology*, 1(2), 41-56.
- Springer, P. R., Bischoff, R. J., Taylor, N. C., Neuhaus, V., & Leow, C. (2021). Competency-based training in the supervision of relational telemental supervision. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 47(2), 375-391.
- Takona, J. P. (2024). Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. *Quality & Quantity*, 58(1), 1011-1013.
- Tang, C. M., & Bradshaw, A. (2020). Instant messaging or face-to-face? How choice of communication medium affects team collaboration environments. *E-learning and digital media*, 17(2), 111-130.
- Trevino, L. K., & Nelson, K. A. (2021). *Managing business ethics: Straight talk about how to do it right*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Varadarajan, R., Welden, R. B., Arunachalam, S., Haenlein, M., & Gupta, S. (2022). Digital product innovations for the greater good and digital marketing innovations in communications and channels: Evolution, emerging issues, and future research directions. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 39(2), 482-501.
- Volk, S. C., & Zerfass, A. (2020). Alignment: Explicating a key concept in strategic communication. *Future directions of strategic communication*, 105-123.
- Williams, Z. (2021). Daniel Goleman's emotionally intelligent contribution to organizational theory. *Journal of management and innovation*, 7(1).
- Yue, C. A., Men, L. R., & Berger, B. K. (2021). Leaders as communication agents. *Current trends and issues in internal communication: Theory and practice*, 19-38.