



## Responsibility in the post-crisis organizations: strategic shifts in internal communication for sustainable and resilient organizational culture

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**Abstract:** Purpose of the article: The article examines how internal communication, coaching, and sustainability practices have evolved in Slovenian organisations by comparing two cross-sectional studies from 2019 and 2025. It analyses how crisis experience, digitalisation, and shifting organisational demands shape communication quality, managerial behaviour, and responsibility in post-crisis contexts.

Originality/Value: The study provides a rare longitudinal view of internal communication and coaching before and after major crises. It shows how increased awareness of communication, coaching, and sustainability does not necessarily lead to structural improvements. By integrating ESRS-related sustainability insights, the article offers an updated understanding of responsibility-focused organisational communication.

Research methodology: A mixed-methods approach combines descriptive comparisons of 2019 and 2025 survey data with qualitative thematic analysis of nine leadership interviews conducted in 2025. This design enables exploration of communication deficiencies, coaching use, and sustainability integration.

**Keywords:** internal communication, coaching, sustainability, crisis communication, organizational resilience

**JEL classification:** D83

## Odgovornost v pokriznih organizacijah: strateški premiki v interni komunikaciji za trajnostno in odporno organizacijsko kulturo

**Povzetek:** Namen članka: Ta članek raziskuje spreminjajočo se vlogo coachinga kot orodja notranje komunikacije pri spodbujanju odgovornosti kot dela ciljev odnosov z javnostmi, zlasti v obdobju po krizi.

Izvirnost/vrednost: S ponovnim pregledom in nadgradnjo študije, ki je bila prvotno izvedena leta 2019, študija posebej preučuje, kako je coaching trenutno vključen v prakse notranje komunikacije v slovenskih organizacijah, njegov vpliv na povečanje osebne in organizacijske odgovornosti, njegovo vlogo v skladu s strategijami trajnosti in njegovo zaznano učinkovitost po krizah, kot sta COVID-19 in socialni nemiri. Poleg tega te ugotovitve umešča v okvir ESRS, zlasti v socialno (S) dimenzijo direktive CSRD.

Raziskovalna metodologija: S kvantitativnim in kvalitativnim pristopom študija želi identificirati spremembe v odnosih vodstvenih delavcev, komunikacijskih strukturah, njihovi odgovornosti in njihovem prispevku k spodbujanju trajnosti v negotovih časih.

**Ključne besede:** interna komunikacija, coaching, trajnost, krizno komuniciranje, organizacijska odpornost

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Organizations operating in an increasingly turbulent global environment face mounting pressures related to crises, digital transformation, employee expectations, and sustainability demands. Over the last decade, events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, labour-market disruptions, climate-related risks, and geopolitical uncertainty have underscored the importance of internal communication as a strategic function indispensable for organizational continuity and resilience (Bodolica et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2021). Internal communication is no longer understood as a unidirectional transfer of information but as a relational and systemic process that shapes trust, employee engagement, organisational culture, and crisis responsiveness.

Alongside communication, coaching is increasingly recognised as a leadership competency with the potential to strengthen listening, empathy, feedback, collaboration, and psychological safety—dimensions that are essential in uncertain, crisis-prone environments (Romão et al., 2022). Likewise, sustainability and corporate responsibility have emerged as internal communication themes that influence employee sense-making, identity, and alignment with organizational values (Alemu & Burrell, 2023). Although the relevance of these three practices—communication, coaching, and sustainability—empirical findings continue to indicate a consistent gap between recognition and implementation.

This article examines this gap through a comparative analysis of two studies conducted in 2019 and 2025, both exploring crisis communication, coaching practices, and employees' perceptions of internal communication within Slovenian organizations. The 2019 study offers pre-pandemic baseline insights into communication practices, whereas the 2025 study captures post-pandemic realities characterised by increased digitalization, hybrid work structures, and heightened expectations toward transparency, responsibility, and sustainable behaviour. This longitudinal comparison is therefore both temporal and conceptual in nature: it traces how crisis experiences and contextual shifts reshape communication systems, leadership behaviours, and the perceived value of coaching within organizations.

Despite the widespread assumption that organizations “learn from crises,” early evidence from the 2025 data indicates a contradictory pattern. Proactive crisis preparation decreased from 55% (2019) to 31% (2025), while reactive, ad-hoc responses increased from 38% to 44%. Similarly, while nearly all respondents acknowledge the critical role of internal communication in crisis management (95% in 2019; 98% in 2025), communication quality scores declined, especially regarding horizontal communication among employees. Coaching presents another paradox: familiarity with coaching increased substantially, yet actual use in crisis contexts did not improve.

These inconsistencies highlight an underlying research problem:

It remains necessary to examine the factors that contribute to continued organisational difficulties in these areas: communication, coaching adoption, and sustainability integration—despite increased awareness of their strategic importance.

To address these research questions, the study develops three **analytical propositions** that reflect theoretically grounded expectations regarding developments between 2019 and 2025. These propositions do not imply statistical testing; rather, they provide an interpretive structure that guides the descriptive comparison of empirical patterns across the two time points. This approach is appropriate given the partly non-equivalent nature of the instruments used in 2019 and 2025 and the exploratory purpose of the study.

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## 2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The study pursues four main objectives:

1. To compare internal communication practices in 2019 and 2025, with emphasis on crisis preparedness, communication quality, and the structure of communication gaps.
2. To analyse the role and adoption of coaching as a tool for communication and crisis management in both periods.
3. To evaluate how sustainability values influence internal communication and whether they are operationalized strategically.
4. To identify convergences and divergences between awareness and implementation across the two time points.

### 2.1 Research Questions

The comparative design centres on the following research questions:

1. How have internal communication practices changed between 2019 and 2025?
2. What role does coaching play in communication and crisis management in both years?
3. How do employees perceive the integration of sustainability values into internal communication?
4. What contextual, organizational, or behavioural factors explain differences between awareness and implementation?

### 2.2 Analytical Propositions

Drawing on the findings of the 2019 baseline study and the theoretical framework presented in Sections 2.1 and 2.2, this study formulates three analytical propositions. These propositions serve as theoretically informed expectations that orient the descriptive comparative analysis. Because the 2019 and 2025 instruments are only partially equivalent, and due to the exploratory nature of the design, the propositions do not function as statistical hypotheses and are not subjected to inferential testing. Instead, they guide the interpretation of empirical patterns.

#### Proposition 1 (P1):

Between 2019 and 2025, organizations are likely to demonstrate greater formalization of internal communication processes, reflecting digitalization trends and the post-pandemic institutionalization of structured communication routines.

#### Proposition 2 (P2):

Compared with 2019, employees in 2025 are expected to perceive a deterioration in communication quality, particularly in horizontal communication, due to increases in workload, hybrid work patterns, and structural changes within organizations.

#### Proposition 3 (P3):

Coaching is expected to receive greater conceptual recognition by 2025, while its operational implementation in day-to-day managerial practice is likely to remain inconsistent and limited.

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## 2.3 Contribution of the Comparative Approach

Comparing 2019 and 2025 offers a unique opportunity to observe organisational learning (or its absence) across two structurally different contexts—pre-pandemic and post-pandemic. While crises often catalyse communication improvements, the findings suggest deteriorating practices in several areas. The comparative approach therefore reveals not only temporal changes but structural tensions between behaviours, capacities, and organizational priorities.

By integrating perspectives on internal communication, coaching, and sustainability, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of how organizations navigate crises and transitions. It also provides empirical grounding for more robust leadership, communication, and HR development strategies.

## 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Internal Communication as a Strategic Organizational Function*

Internal communication has shifted from being viewed as a transactional process to a strategic, relational system that shapes organizational culture, employee attitudes, and crisis resilience. Contemporary research positions it as a foundational driver of satisfaction, engagement, and psychological safety (Curado et al., 2022; Yue et al., 2021). Yue et al. (2021) describe internal communication simultaneously as a formal infrastructure—comprising tools, protocols, and structured processes—and a dynamic interpersonal system that mirrors organizational values and emotional climate.

During crises, internal communication functions as both an operational and psychological anchor. It provides stability, coherence, and emotional containment in volatile situations (Bodolica et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2023, Chenguang et al., 2022). Transparency, consistency, and dialogic engagement are repeatedly identified as essential attributes of crisis communication (Rathore & Arora, 2024). Leadership visibility—particularly through digital tools—further strengthens trust and morale (Gomes et al., 2023).

Digitalization of communication channels has expanded opportunities for two-way dialogue, social presence, and organizational connectedness. However, it also introduces challenges such as cognitive overload, digital fatigue, and reduced job satisfaction (Zhang, Dai, Chen, Gu & Zhao, 2025; Wang, Hong, Pitafi & Hangeldiyeva, 2024). Recent studies additionally explore how AI-driven tools shape internal communication practices and influence the quality of organizational dialogue (Yue et al., 2024).

Internal communication also mediates the relationship between human capital and organizational resilience, strengthening knowledge sharing, innovation, and adaptability (Lu, Wang & Xu, 2023, Kim, 2021). Nonetheless, persistent barriers—such as cultural misalignment, uneven communication skills among managers, and employee disengagement with corporate platforms—continue to limit its effectiveness (Cvikl Postružnik & Lesar, 2019). These findings underscore the need for organizations to treat internal communication as a strategic capability rather than an operational afterthought.

### *Coaching as a Relational and Communication-Based Leadership Practice*

Organizational and leadership coaching contributes to emotional intelligence, adaptability, and relational competencies—key components of effective communication in uncertain environments (Romão et al., 2022; Seemann et al., 2024). Coaching fosters psychological

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safety, which is crucial for open dialogue, reflective learning, feedback exchange, and rebuilding trust after crises (Kaputzis et al., 2023).

Research emphasizes that coaching behaviors—active listening, constructive feedback, goal exploration, and empathetic communication—directly enhance employee well-being and reduce turnover intentions (Romão et al., 2022). Coaching is also identified as a sustainable leadership style, promoting autonomy, shared responsibility, and long-term engagement (Seemann et al.).

Despite these theoretical advantages, empirical findings from Slovenian organizations show a persistent gap between awareness and implementation. Although awareness of coaching increased sharply between 2019 and 2025, practical adoption stagnated at around one-third of organizations (Insights d.o.o., 2025; Cvikel Postružnik & Lesar, 2019). This mirrors international research highlighting that organizations often recognize the value of coaching but fail to integrate it systematically into leadership development and communication practices (Rathore & Arora, 2024).

Studies also call for more sophisticated measurement of coaching impact, moving beyond satisfaction surveys to behavioral and communication indicators, including trust scores, sentiment analysis, and perceived transparency (Yue et al. 2021).

### *Sustainability, Communication, and Responsible Organizational Culture*

Sustainability in internal communication refers to a transparent, ethically grounded, and long-term-oriented communication approach that aligns daily practices with broader organizational values (Alemu & Burrell, 2023). It includes not only the content of sustainability messages but also the tone, frequency, inclusiveness, leadership role modeling, and feedback mechanisms used within the organization (Gutaman, 2024).

Sustainable internal communication fosters employee commitment, organizational trust, and responsible behavior (Rys et al., 2024). Research shows that organizations that embed sustainability in internal communication—rather than treating it as a compliance exercise—achieve higher levels of employee pride, belonging, and engagement (Insights d.o.o., 2025; Romão et al., 2022).

Still, survey findings from 2025 reveal substantial implementation gaps: 40% of organizations do not prioritize sustainability in internal communication, and 8% deem it irrelevant, despite growing awareness of ESG imperatives. Integrating sustainability with communication and leadership practices strengthens organizational resilience and cultural cohesion (Rathore & Arora, 2024). Furthermore, communication mediates the influence of skilled employees on sustainable transformation, indicating the need for consistent messaging, shared values, and inclusive policies (Lu et al., 2023, Kim, 2021).

### *Synthesis: A Triadic Framework of Resilience*

Across all theoretical strands—internal communication, coaching, and sustainability—recent studies converge on a single insight: relational competencies such as authenticity, empathy, and dialogic engagement are as crucial as technical systems for organizational success in complex environments (Romão et al., 2022; Rathore & Arora, 2024). Post-crisis resilience relies on a triadic alignment of:

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- strategic communication,
  - emotionally intelligent leadership and coaching, and
  - values-based sustainable HR and CSR practices.

Organizations that integrate these elements create cultures capable of navigating complexity, retaining trust, and fostering long-term adaptability.

## **4 METHODS**

### **4.1 Research Design**

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining a repeated cross-sectional quantitative survey (2019 and 2025) with a qualitative, semi-structured interview study conducted in 2025. The design enabled both longitudinal comparison of communication practices and in-depth exploration of leadership perspectives. The study followed the logic of methodological triangulation, integrating descriptive statistics and reflexive thematic analysis.

### **4.2 Sampling and Participants**

#### **Quantitative Component**

A total of 112 respondents participated in the 2025 survey. The sample comprised employees across diverse Slovenian organisations varying in size, ownership, and sectoral orientation. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The 2019 dataset utilised an instrument with largely similar constructs, enabling descriptive comparison.

Demographic composition in 2025 included:

- 81% female, 19% male
- highest age representation in 40-49 (34%) and 50-60 (34%) groups
- organisational sizes ranging from micro to large firms

#### **Qualitative Component**

Nine participants were recruited purposefully to ensure sectoral and organisational diversity. Interviewees included HR Directors, PR managers, senior leaders, and representatives of public, private, family-owned, and multinational companies. Inclusion criteria required participants to hold decision-making responsibilities related to communication or HRM.

### **4.3 Data Collection**

#### **4.3.1 Quantitative Survey**

The survey was administered online. The core structure replicated the 2019 instrument to preserve construct continuity, with new items added in 2025 to capture post-COVID changes in communication tools and sustainability practices.

The instrument included:

- demographic and organisational descriptors
- crisis communication preparedness
- internal communication deficiencies
- behavioural consequences of communication gaps
- use of coaching in crisis communication

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- perception of sustainability in internal communication
  - a 7-point scale assessing overall communication quality

Full survey items are provided in Appendix A.

#### 4.3.2 Qualitative Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via video-call, each lasting 45-60 minutes. Interviews followed a standardised guide (Appendix B), allowing flexibility for probing while maintaining consistency across participants.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### 4.4 Measurement and Analytical Strategy

#### 4.4.1 Quantitative Data

Given the exploratory and comparative purpose, analysis relied on descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and distribution shifts) rather than inferential testing. This aligns with the goal of comparing patterns across two cross-sectional datasets with non-identical instruments, making inferential comparability inappropriate.

Coding rules for multiple- and single-response items are detailed in Appendix A.

#### 4.4.2 Qualitative Data

Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The coding protocol included:

1. familiarisation
2. open coding
3. axial coding
4. theme development
5. reflexive validation through peer-debriefing

Coding was inductive; no pre-existing codebook was imposed. Themes were integrated with quantitative findings during synthesis.

#### 4.4.3 Positioning of Analytical Propositions

The analytical propositions formulated in Section 2.3 were explored through descriptive comparative analysis. Because the 2019 and 2025 questionnaires are not fully identical—owing to the addition of new sustainability- and practice-related items in 2025—direct statistical comparison is not methodologically appropriate. For this reason, the study does not employ inferential statistical tests, nor does it attempt to draw causal conclusions.

Instead, the propositions serve as interpretive guides that structure the analysis of quantitative distributions and qualitative themes. This approach aligns with the exploratory purpose of the study and ensures that interpretations remain within the boundaries of descriptive evidence and conceptual reasoning.

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## 4.5 Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

- Content validity was ensured through replication of the 2019 instrument and expert review.
- Construct reliability was supported by consistent coding rules and methodological transparency.
- Qualitative trustworthiness was strengthened by triangulation, analytic memos, and an audit trail
- Ethical compliance included informed consent, confidentiality assurances, voluntary participation, and anonymised reporting.
- No identifying information was collected.

## 5 RESULTS

The results presented below reflect the descriptive empirical patterns observed in 2019 and 2025. Given the exploratory design and the non-equivalent structure of the two instruments, these findings do not evaluate the analytical propositions statistically. Instead, they indicate the degree to which the observed patterns appear to align or diverge from the propositions formulated in Section 2.3.

### 5.1 Quantitative Results

#### 5.1.1 Organizational Crisis Management Approaches

A comparison of the 2019 and 2025 survey responses shows a notable shift in crisis management strategies. Respondents in 2025 relied more heavily on reactive, ad-hoc responses and less on proactive planning than those surveyed in 2019.

Table 1. Crisis Management Approaches (2019 vs. 2025)

Crisis Management Strategy	2019 (%)	2025 (%)
No crises experienced	8	8
Proactive (predict and prepare)	55	31
Ad-hoc (reactive)	38	44
Hiring external experts	26	22
PR team involvement	25	25

#### 5.1.2 Key Deficiencies in Internal Communication

The 2025 results show deterioration in horizontal (employee-to-employee) communication, while some leadership-to-employee communication indicators show marginal improvement.



Table 2. Reported Communication Deficiencies (2019 vs. 2025)

Communication Weakness	2019 (%)	2025 (%)
Between leadership and employees	66	56
Between employees	42	58
Lack of transparency	—	27
Lack of organizational understanding	18	23
Unawareness of goals/vision/values	25	27

### 5.1.3 Impact of Communication Gaps on Daily Work

Respondents in 2025 reported more dissatisfaction and misunderstandings regarding managerial decisions, though fewer noted decreased motivation compared to 2019.

Table 3. Consequences of Communication Gaps (2019 vs. 2025)

Consequence	2019 (%)	2025 (%)
Employee dissatisfaction	27	36
Low productivity	11	10
Misunderstanding leadership decisions	27	31
Decreased motivation	29	23

### 5.1.4 Perceptions of Crisis Risk

Respondents in both years overwhelmingly agreed that poor communication can trigger crises.

Table 4. Poor Communication as a Crisis Trigger (2019 vs. 2025)

Response	2019 (%)	2025 (%)
Yes	92	96
No	8	4

### 5.1.5 Quality of Internal Communication

Internal communication quality declined between 2019 and 2025, with a pronounced shift toward lower ratings.

Table 5. Internal Communication Quality (Scale 1-7)

Score	2019 (%)	2025 (%)
1	0	5
2	11	14
3	12	19
4	30	23
5	23	29
6	21	7
7	7	4

### 5.1.6 Importance of Internal Communication for Crisis Management

Agreement with the statement that internal communication is crucial in a crisis increased further in 2025.

Table 6. Importance of Internal Communication in Crisis Management

Response	2019 (%)	2025 (%)
Yes	95	98
No	5	2

### 5.1.7 Use of Coaching During Crises

Awareness of coaching increased significantly from 2019 to 2025, while actual use showed little change. Non-use increased.

Table 7. Coaching Use in Crises (2019 vs. 2025)

Coaching Use	2019 (%)	2025 (%)
Yes	34	35
No	43	58
Unaware of the concept	23	7

### 5.1.8 Post-COVID Internal Communication Practices (2025 only)

This item was introduced in the 2025 survey to capture post-crisis digitalization trends.

Table 8. Post-COVID Communication Changes (2025)

Response Option	2025 (%)
No change	13
Fewer tools than before	4
More digital tools (do not prefer)	13
More digital tools (excellent solution)	23
More traditional tools (effective)	4
More traditional tools (outdated)	6
Combination of digital and traditional (effective)	20
Both tool types introduced → confusion	17

### 5.1.9 Awareness of Sustainability in Internal Communication (2025 only)

Respondents varied widely in their perceptions and practices regarding sustainability.

Table 9. Sustainability in Internal Communication (2025)

Response Option	2025 (%)
Sustainability not emphasized	40
Sustainability irrelevant	8
New sustainability tools introduced	18
Sustainability one of core values	27
Sustainability integrated before ESRS	7

## 5.2 Qualitative Results (2025 Interviews)

Nine semi-structured interviews with HR, PR, and leadership professionals provided deeper insights into communication and leadership practices. Using reflexive thematic analysis, four overarching themes were identified.

### *Theme 1: Communication as a Structural Weakness in Organizations*

Interviewees consistently described internal communication as fragmented, inconsistent, or overly dependent on individual managers. Several noted that horizontal communication deteriorated during and after COVID-19, mirroring the quantitative findings that employee-to-employee communication problems increased from 42% in 2019 to 58% in 2025.

### *Theme 2: Leadership Communication Behaviours and Their Limitations*

Participants highlighted gaps in managerial communication competencies, citing insufficient feedback practices, low transparency, and inconsistent messaging. Many linked these issues to organizational culture rather than individual responsibility.

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### *Theme 3: Coaching as an Underused but Valued Tool*

Respondents viewed coaching positively but described its implementation as sporadic, unstructured, and dependent on “champions” rather than systems. The qualitative insights correspond to quantitative results showing stagnant coaching usage (34% in 2019; 35% in 2025) despite rising awareness.

### *Theme 4: Sustainability as an Emerging but Uneven Value*

Interviewees reported growing interest in sustainable practices, yet noted that many organizations lacked a systematic approach. This aligns with survey results showing 40% of organizations do not prioritize sustainability in communication.

## **5.3 Summary of Key Comparative Findings and alignment with the propositions**

To support clarity and preparation for the Discussion chapter, the core findings can be summarised as follows:

1. Crisis preparedness declined, with proactive strategies falling from 55% to 31%.
2. Communication quality deteriorated, especially among employees.
3. Awareness of coaching increased, but adoption stagnated.
4. Sustainability remains weakly integrated in most organizations.
5. Digital communication expanded, but tool overload created confusion for 17% of respondents.

These results reflect a complex post-crisis landscape in which awareness of good practices increases, but structural implementation often lags.

These results partially align with P1, showing clearer procedural formalization in several organizations, although implementation remains uneven. These findings strongly align with P2, as the perceived inadequacy of employee-to-employee communication increased from 42% in 2019 to 58% in 2025. The patterns observed moderately align with P3, indicating stable recognition of coaching but continued inconsistency in its practical application.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

This discussion interprets the findings in relation to the analytical propositions introduced in Section 2.3. Because the propositions serve as interpretive anchors rather than testable hypotheses, their evaluation is grounded in descriptive patterns rather than statistical inference. The purpose of this discussion is therefore not to confirm or reject propositions, but to assess the degree to which the observed empirical trends align with theoretically informed expectations and with insights from prior research.

### **6.1 Internal Communication: Awareness Without Structural Strengthening**

The most salient finding is the deterioration of internal communication quality between 2019 and 2025. Ratings shifted downward, with a marked increase in low-quality assessments (scores 1-3) and a decline in high-quality ratings. This trend signals an erosion of consistency, clarity, and relational quality—dimensions that the literature identifies as foundational for resilient communication systems (Curado et al., 2022; Yue et al., 2021, Shatilo, 2019).

The quantitative results show that communication deficiencies between employees increased significantly (from 42% in 2019 to 58% in 2025). Qualitative interviewees confirmed

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that horizontal communication became “fragmented,” “unclear,” and “overly dependent on informal channels,” echoing the view that digitalization often increases information flow while weakening sensemaking if not strategically orchestrated. The post-COVID shift to digital and hybrid tools, reported by 23% of respondents as “an excellent solution” but by 17% as a source of confusion, reinforces the idea that technological adoption without harmonized communication structures generates overload and ambiguity.

These findings align with research stating that digital transformation enhances communication efficiency only when supported by clear protocols, relational leadership behaviours, and an integration of tools into coherent systems (Gomes et al., 2023; Kumar & Hart, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). The observed decline in communication quality despite the proliferation of digital tools corroborates this perspective.

At the same time, nearly all respondents—95% in 2019 and 98% in 2025—recognised internal communication as crucial for crisis management. This near-universal acknowledgment suggests that awareness is not the primary barrier. Rather, the gap lies in capability, structural integration, and leadership behaviours. This distinction between conceptual awareness and operational practice mirrors earlier research noting that organizations often espouse communication values without embedding the corresponding competencies (Yue et al., 2021).

## **6.2 Crisis Preparedness: Declining Proactivity Despite Crisis Experience**

One of the most unexpected findings is the reduced prevalence of proactive crisis preparedness. In 2019, 55% of respondents reported proactive planning, which declined to 31% in 2025. Meanwhile, reactive, ad-hoc responses increased from 38% to 44%. This trend stands in contrast to the theoretical expectation that crisis exposure—most notably COVID-19—should intensify preparedness behaviours (Rathore & Arora, 2024).

The qualitative data help explain this shift. Leaders described crisis management as “overwhelming,” “constant,” and “difficult to separate from daily operations,” suggesting that the frequency and intensity of crises may have normalized uncertainty to the point where structured crisis planning is frequently deprioritised. This phenomenon is consistent with complexity leadership theory, which suggests that prolonged volatility increases reliance on adaptive, short-term responses rather than structured preparedness.

Additionally, increased digital communication fragmentation may have weakened the capacity for coordinated planning. If communication systems are inconsistent or overburdened, sustaining proactive crisis processes becomes more difficult—especially in resource-constrained environments.

Thus, paradoxically, crises may have reduced organizations’ structural readiness for future crises, not due to lack of understanding, but due to overstretched capacities.

## **6.3 Coaching: Rising Awareness, Stagnant Application**

Coaching awareness improved substantially between 2019 and 2025: respondents unfamiliar with the concept decreased from 23% to 7%. However, coaching use in crisis communication remained nearly unchanged (34% to 35%), and non-use increased (43% to 58%). This pattern suggests the presence of cultural and structural barriers that limit operationalization.

The qualitative insights show that while leaders value coaching, it is viewed as a supplementary activity rather than an embedded component of routine communication

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practices. Interviewees described coaching as dependent on individual champions, echoing literature that emphasizes the need for systemic integration—training, incentives, modelling—to embed coaching across leadership levels (Passmore, 2021; Seemann et al., 2024).

The stagnation in coaching adoption aligns with research suggesting that awareness alone is insufficient; organizations require deliberate structures, leadership modelling, and reinforcement mechanisms to translate coaching principles into daily communication practices (Romão et al., 2022). The increase in awareness without an increase in use therefore reflects a misalignment between conceptual recognition and systemic integration.

#### **6.4 Sustainability: Emerging Value, Limited Internalization**

Sustainability appeared in the 2025 data as an emerging but inconsistently implemented communication value. While 27% of respondents considered sustainability one of their core organizational values and 7% described sustainability as integrated prior to ESRS, 40% reported that sustainability was not emphasised internally and 8% regarded it as irrelevant to internal communication.

Interview participants highlighted several sustainability initiatives that appear primarily symbolic, with limited observable operational implementation —“talked about, but not lived”—which aligns with research emphasizing the danger of superficial sustainability messaging that does not translate into internal behavioural norms (Alemu & Burrell, 2023).

This pattern is consistent with global findings showing that organizations often articulate sustainability externally before internal communication and HR practices are aligned. Internal communication is essential for fostering shared meaning, behavioural change, and identification with sustainability values (Rys et al., 2024), yet the data suggest that Slovenian organizations are still in the early stages of this internal alignment.

#### **6.5 Integration of Communication, Coaching, and Sustainability**

The findings show limited integration between the three domains. Communication is recognised as critical, coaching is valued but not structurally embedded, and sustainability is inconsistently applied. The theoretical framework proposed a triadic model in which communication provides structure, coaching provides relational depth, and sustainability provides purpose. The empirical findings indicate that organizations rarely implement this integrated approach.

Instead, the three domains remain functionally isolated:

- communication practices are hindered by tool overload and uneven managerial skill;
- coaching remains underutilised and is primarily driven by individual initiative rather than organisational systems;
- sustainability-related communication often lacks internal consistency and is not systematically linked to behavioural expectations.

This functional separation constrains organisational resilience by preventing the emergence of mutually reinforcing capacities such as shared meaning, trust, and long-term orientation—capacities that the post-crisis literature identifies as essential for navigating complexity (Rathore & Arora, 2024; Romão et al., 2022).

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To summarize in the terms of propositions:

**P1 - Formalization of communication structures**

The findings show partial alignment with P1. Several indicators suggest growing procedural clarity and increased use of structured communication formats by 2025, consistent with digitalization and post-pandemic adaptations. However, discrepancies between formal structures and actual managerial behaviours remain.

**P2 - Perceived communication quality**

The findings strongly align with P2. Employees report a noticeable decline in horizontal communication quality between 2019 and 2025, which aligns with broader literature on role overload, hybrid work tensions, and organizational fragmentation.

**P3 - Conceptual vs. operational coaching**

The findings moderately align with P3. While coaching continues to be recognized and valued conceptually, implementation remains inconsistent. Practical uptake has not advanced proportionally to growing organizational awareness.

## **6.6 Explaining Differences Between 2019 and 2025**

Three systemic factors contribute to explaining the observed changes:

**1. Pandemic-Induced Digitalization**

The accelerated shift to digital communication produced both new possibilities and new dysfunctions. Without harmonized structures, the use of digital tools increased fragmentation and inconsistency, resulting in communication overload –reflected in both quantitative and qualitative findings.

**2. Leadership Overextension**

Interviewees repeatedly described leaders as “overwhelmed,” suggesting that the frequency of crises may have reduced leaders’ bandwidth for strategic communication, coaching behaviours, and crisis planning.

**3. Value-Practice Misalignment**

The rising awareness of communication, coaching, and sustainability reflects cultural change. Yet insufficient structural reinforcement—training, role modelling, communication systems—has inhibited the translation of values into stable practices.

The findings suggest that organisational change is constrained not by resistance, but by the absence of enabling systemic conditions that enable the institutionalization of communication and leadership behaviours over time.

## **6.7 Theoretical Implications**

The findings contribute to scholarship in three ways:

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1. They challenge assumptions about organizational learning after crises. Contrary to theoretical expectations, crisis experience did not enhance preparedness; instead, it revealed structural vulnerabilities.
  2. They highlight the interdependence of communication, coaching, and sustainability. The triadic framework is empirically supported: weaknesses in one domain amplify weaknesses in the others.
  3. They show the limits of awareness-based change. Conceptual recognition does not produce behavioural or structural change without systemic reinforcement.

## 6.8 Managerial Implications

For practitioners, the findings emphasize the need to:

1. Redesign internal communication systems to reduce tool overload, increase transparency, and strengthen horizontal communication.
2. Embed coaching competencies into leadership development and performance frameworks rather than offering coaching as an isolated intervention.
3. Integrate sustainability into daily communication routines, not only external reporting, to avoid symbolic implementation.
4. Prioritize crisis preparedness by establishing clear structures and roles, even in environments characterised by constant change.

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study formulated three analytical propositions to orient the descriptive comparison between 2019 and 2025. The findings reveal varying degrees of alignment with these propositions, offering insight into the evolution of communication structures, perceived communication quality, and managerial coaching practices in Slovenian organizations. While the observed trends support theoretically grounded expectations, they remain descriptive and cannot be generalized beyond the studied samples.

Three overarching conclusions emerge.

First, internal communication remains broadly recognized as a critical organisational function, yet its structural quality deteriorated between 2019 and 2025. Although nearly all respondents acknowledged its importance for crisis management, communication systems became more fragmented, less transparent, and increasingly burdened by digital tool proliferation. The findings demonstrate that awareness alone does not translate into coherent communication architecture or relational communication competence.

Second, coaching demonstrates a similar awareness-practice gap. While familiarity with coaching grew markedly over the six-year period, its application did not increase in any meaningful way. Coaching behaviours were rarely institutionalised and remained dependent on individual leaders rather than organizational systems. This stagnation highlights the persistent difficulty organizations face in embedding relational leadership practices into everyday communication routines.

Third, sustainability surfaced as a growing but unevenly internalised value. Although some organizations began integrating sustainability into internal communication, the majority did not prioritise these practices, and some respondents considered them irrelevant. This indicates that sustainability discourse has not yet matured into a coherent internal communication norm capable of shaping shared meaning or behaviour.



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Taken together, the findings depict organizations positioned at the intersection of rising expectations and insufficient structural reinforcement. Communication, coaching, and sustainability—three domains theoretically capable of generating organisational resilience—remain only partially integrated. The empirical evidence shows that while values and intentions evolved between 2019 and 2025, organisational systems, processes, and competencies did not develop at a rate consistent with contextual changes.

The study contributes to theory by challenging the assumption that crises naturally generate organisational learning, showing instead that persistent volatility may constrain the development of more formalised organisational structures. It underscores the importance of alignment across communication structures, leadership behaviours, and sustainability values as a prerequisite for resilient organisational cultures. For practitioners, the research highlights the necessity of deliberate system design: communication protocols, leadership development frameworks, and sustainability narratives must be explicitly connected rather than treated as isolated initiatives.

Overall, the study concludes that Slovenian organizations possess a clear conceptual understanding of the importance of internal communication, coaching, and sustainability, but face enduring challenges in translating this understanding into consistent, institutionalised practice. Strengthening this translation process is essential for developing resilient, adaptive, and purpose-driven organizational cultures capable of navigating future crises.

## 7.1 Limitations

Several methodological and contextual limitations should be acknowledged to ensure an accurate interpretation of the findings.

First, the study relies on non-probabilistic convenience samples in both 2019 and 2025. Although this approach ensured comparability across the two periods, it restricts the generalizability of results to the broader population of Slovenian organizations. Respondents self-selected into the surveys and may disproportionately represent individuals with stronger views on internal communication and leadership practices.

Second, the quantitative component is limited to descriptive and comparative analysis. Because the 2019 instrument did not include validated multi-item scales or inferential indicators, introducing statistical modelling or hypothesis testing in the 2025 dataset would have violated methodological continuity. As a result, differences between 2019 and 2025 are interpreted as indicative trends rather than statistically confirmed effects.

Third, the study relies on self-reported perceptions of communication, leadership behaviour, and sustainability. These perceptions may be shaped by personal experiences, organizational culture, and retrospective biases. Objective measures—such as communication audits, document analyses, or behavioural observations—were beyond the scope of the original research design and therefore not included.

Fourth, the qualitative sample in 2025 consists of nine interviewees, purposefully selected for their roles in leadership, HR, and communication. Although their insights enrich the interpretation of survey findings, the sample does not capture the full diversity of employee perspectives across sectors, hierarchical levels, or organizational types. Moreover, qualitative data reflect post-pandemic interpretations that may differ from earlier or future experiences.

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Fifth, contextual differences between 2019 and 2025 complicate longitudinal comparison. The COVID-19 pandemic, rapid digitalization, regulatory changes (e.g., ESRS), labour-market fluctuations, and economic uncertainty all shaped the 2025 context in ways that could not have been anticipated in 2019. These external factors likely influenced communication systems, leadership behaviour, and sustainability expectations.

Sixth; because the propositions were interpretive rather than statistical, the findings cannot serve as a basis for causal or inferential claims.

Finally, the integration of sustainability items occurred only in the 2025 study. As a result, longitudinal comparison in this dimension is limited, and the analysis of sustainability-related communication reflects only contemporary attitudes and practices.

Despite these limitations, the mixed-method design, methodological consistency with the 2019 study, and triangulation between quantitative and qualitative evidence provide a robust foundation for examining change processes in internal communication, coaching adoption, and sustainability integration within Slovenian organizations.

## **7.2 Future Research Directions**

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several avenues for future research emerge that may deepen theoretical understanding and support the development of more effective internal communication, coaching, and sustainability practices in organizations. Future studies should operationalize these analytical propositions into statistically testable hypotheses using standardized instruments and probabilistic sampling, which would enable more robust inferential analysis and stronger external validity.

First, future studies should employ probability-based or stratified sampling strategies to ensure broader representativeness across sectors and organizational types. While convenience sampling provided valuable initial insights, a more systematic sampling approach would strengthen external validity and allow for sector-level comparisons—for example, between public and private organizations or between SMEs and large enterprises.

Second, future research should incorporate validated multi-item measurement scales for constructs such as communication quality, psychological safety, coaching leadership behaviours, and sustainability orientation. The 2019 survey's design restricted the analytical depth of the longitudinal comparison. Developing a standardized instrument would enable inferential statistics, structural modelling, and robust hypothesis testing in future longitudinal or cross-national studies.

Third, researchers should complement self-reported data with objective or behavioural measures of communication and leadership. These could include communication audits, content analysis of internal messages, network analysis of communication flows, or observational assessments of leadership interactions. Such methodological diversification would reduce perceptual bias and enrich the understanding of how communication and coaching behaviours are enacted in practice.

Fourth, the qualitative component should be expanded to include a wider range of employee voices. Future studies might incorporate focus groups or narrative interviews across hierarchical levels, departments, and demographic groups. This would capture organizational communication as a multivocal phenomenon and yield deeper insights into how employees make sense of leadership signals, sustainability messages, and crisis communication processes.

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Fifth, future research should examine the integration of sustainability within internal communication systems in greater depth. As sustainability-related communication was introduced only in the 2025 dataset, longitudinal evidence is still lacking. Studies could investigate how employees interpret sustainability values, how sustainability narratives evolve within organizations, and how communication practices influence alignment between external CSR commitments and internal culture.

Sixth, comparative international research would provide valuable contextual insights. Comparing Slovenian organizations with those in neighbouring EU countries could highlight cultural, regulatory, and institutional factors that shape communication, coaching adoption, and sustainability integration. Given the growing impact of ESRS and CSRD across the EU, such cross-country comparisons would also illuminate readiness levels and implementation trajectories.

Seventh, future research should investigate the effects of hybrid and digital communication ecosystems on relational communication quality, trust, and leadership visibility. Digitalization emerged in this study as both an enabler and a source of fragmentation. Longitudinal digital ethnographies or diary studies could offer nuanced perspectives on how employees navigate information overload, digital fatigue, and tool proliferation.

Finally, studies should explore the mechanisms through which communication, coaching, and sustainability interact as a system. The triadic framework proposed in this research provides a conceptual starting point, but empirical testing—potentially through mediation or moderation models—could clarify whether and how these domains reinforce one another. Such research would contribute to a more systemic understanding of organizational resilience and cultural adaptation in post-crisis environments.

Taken together, these research directions underscore the need for more rigorous measurement, greater methodological diversity, broader sampling, and deeper analysis of dynamic interactions between communication, leadership, and sustainability. Addressing these gaps will support both theoretical advancement and more effective organizational practice.

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## APPENDIX A. SURVEY INSTRUMENT (QUANTITATIVE STUDY)

The 2025 survey replicated the core structure of the 2019 instrument, with several additional items introduced in 2025 to capture pandemic-related communication changes and sustainability practices. Unless otherwise stated, response options were closed-ended and single-choice.

### A1. Demographic Items

1. Gender
  - Female
  - Male
  - Other / Prefer not to say
2. Age group
  - Up to 30
  - 31-39
  - 40-49
  - 50-60
  - 61+
3. Type/size of organisation
  - Micro (1-10 employees)
  - Small (11-50 employees)
  - Medium (51-250 employees)
  - Large (250+)

### A2. Crisis Management Practices

Q1. How does your organisation respond to crisis situations?  
(multiple responses allowed)

- We do not experience crises.
- We anticipate crises and prepare proactively.
- We respond ad-hoc when the crisis occurs.
- We hire external experts.
- Our PR department prepares crisis communication plans and conducts communication training.

### A3. Internal Communication Challenges

Q2. Where do you observe shortcomings in internal communication?  
(multiple responses allowed)

- Insufficient leadership-employee communication.
- Insufficient communication among employees.
- Lack of transparency.
- Lack of understanding of organisational operations.
- Employees do not understand goals, vision, and values.

### A4. Impact of Communication Gaps

Q3. How do these shortcomings manifest in everyday work?  
(multiple responses allowed)

- Employee dissatisfaction.
- Low productivity.
- Misunderstanding of leadership decisions.
- Loss of motivation.

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#### A5. Crisis Risk Perception

Q4. Can poor communication cause a crisis within the organisation?

- Yes
- No

#### A6. Internal Communication Quality

Q5. How would you assess the quality of internal communication in your organisation?

Scale: 1 = Very poor ... 7 = Excellent

Options: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

#### A7. Perceived Importance of Internal Communication

Q6. Is internal communication crucial for crisis management?

- Yes
- No

#### A7. Use of Coaching in Crisis

Q7. Do you use coaching as a communication tool in crises?

- Yes
- No
- I am not familiar with this tool

#### A8. Post-COVID Changes in Communication Tools (Introduced in 2025)

Q8. How has communication with employees changed after COVID-19 and other crises?  
(multiple responses allowed)

- No change.
- We have fewer tools than before COVID-19.
- We introduced more digital tools, which we do not like.
- We introduced more digital tools, which we like.
- We introduced more classical tools.
- We use more classical tools, which feels outdated.
- We introduced both classical and digital tools, which works well.
- We introduced both classical and digital tools, which causes confusion.

#### A9. Sustainability in Internal Communication (Introduced in 2025)

Q9. How does your organisation integrate sustainability in communication with employees?  
(multiple responses allowed)

- We do not emphasise sustainability.
- Sustainability is irrelevant.
- We introduced one new sustainability-related tool.
- We introduced several sustainability tools; sustainability became a core value.
- We used sustainability tools before ESRS and continued afterwards.

#### A10. Coding Procedures

- Multiple-response items were coded dichotomously (0 = option not selected; 1 = option selected).
- Single-response items were coded according to ordinal or nominal logic as applicable.

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- Items Q8-Q9 were coded only in 2025, and treated as non-comparable with the 2019 dataset.
  - No imputation was applied; only fully observed responses were included.

## **APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDE AND QUALITATIVE CODING PROTOCOL**

### **B1. Purpose and Structure**

The 2025 qualitative component followed a semi-structured design to explore leadership perspectives on internal communication, crisis management, coaching use, and sustainability. The guide included 11 core questions with optional prompts.

Participants included HR Directors, PR leads, and senior managers across organisations of different sizes and sectors.

### **B2. Interview Guide**

1. Leadership perspective on employees
  - How do you view employees from the perspective of organisational leadership?
2. Employees as organisational pillars
  - Do you agree that employees are the core pillar of any organisation? Please explain.
3. Employee satisfaction and motivation
  - How does your organisation foster employee satisfaction and motivation?
4. Internal communication processes
  - How does internal communication function in your organisation?
5. Role of PR / communication structures
  - What role does the PR department play?
  - If absent, who fulfils this communication role?
  - Are other departments involved?
6. Experience with crisis situations
  - Has your organisation faced crises?
  - How often?
  - Can you describe them?
7. Communication in crisis
  - How did internal communication unfold during the crisis?
8. Role of communication in resolving crises
  - Can appropriate communication and employee relations resolve a crisis?
  - Which other factors contribute?
9. Role of employees in crisis management
  - How did employees contribute to resolving the crisis?
10. Quality of internal communication before and after crisis
  - How do you assess communication quality before and after COVID-19?
11. Tools and sustainability
  - Did you change communication tools after COVID-19?
  - Do you communicate corporate social responsibility and sustainability to employees?

### **B3. Qualitative Analytic Procedure**

A reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was applied. The following protocol was adhered to:

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### Stage 1: Familiarisation

- Interviewers transcribed all responses verbatim.
- Researchers independently read transcripts multiple times.

### Stage 2: Initial Coding

- Line-by-line open coding was performed using inductive logic.
- Coding captured semantic content (e.g., “employees as co-creators”) and latent meaning (e.g., “emotional safety”).
- No pre-defined codebook was imposed.

### Stage 3: Axial Coding and Categorisation

- Codes were clustered into higher-order categories (e.g., Leadership-Employee Relations, Crisis Communication Practices, Post-COVID Tool Evolution).
- Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through peer-debriefing among the three authors.

### Stage 4: Theme Construction

- Categories were synthesised into thematic clusters aligned with research questions (e.g., “Employees as Strategic Co-Creators,” “Communication as Crisis Infrastructure,” “Partial Adoption of Coaching”).

### Stage 5: Validation

- Member checking was not feasible for confidentiality reasons.
- Internal audit trail and analytic memos ensured transparency.
- Themes were reviewed for internal coherence and external distinctiveness.

### Software

No qualitative software was used; coding was done manually and stored in shared documents following an audit-trail procedure.