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ANDRAGOGICAL MECHANISMS FOR DEVELOPING SOFT COMPETENCIES OF LEADERSHIP PERSONNEL IN CORPORATE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: This article examines the persistent gap between the growing demand for leadership soft competencies in corporate higher education and the predominantly child-oriented pedagogical logic that continues to underpin many corporate training programs. Drawing on competence theory and Malcolm Knowles' theory of andragogy, the study investigates how the six core assumptions of adult learning can be systematically translated into concrete developmental mechanisms for leadership personnel rather than being treated merely as a general philosophical orientation.

Using a theoretical-conceptual methodology that combines a comparative-typological analysis of international literature published between 1955 and 2026 with structural-functional modeling, the study first distinguishes andragogical mechanisms from generic pedagogical approaches according to four analytical criteria: locus of control, role of prior experience, orientation of learning content, and source of motivation. On this basis, the article develops an integrated Andragogical Mechanism Model, which maps each of Knowles' six assumptions—self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, internal motivation, and the need to know—onto corresponding clusters of corporate learning mechanisms. These include autonomy-supportive instructional design, experience-based learning cycles, job-embedded learning triggers, problem-centered learning formats, psychologically safe motivational climates, and transparency-based curriculum framing.

The model is further elaborated through the organizational conditions necessary for effective implementation, including trainers' and mentors' andragogical competence, alignment with organizational culture, appropriate diagnostic infrastructure, and institutional integration into human-resource development policies and practices. The study contributes a differentiated and theoretically grounded typology of andragogical mechanisms that can be applied by corporate universities, business schools, and human-resource development practitioners to redesign leadership development programs. It also establishes a conceptual basis for empirical testing of the proposed model and identifies opportunities for future research, particularly in the context of corporate education and leadership development in Central Asian settings.

Keywords: andragogy; soft competencies; leadership development; corporate higher education; adult learning theory; experiential learning; executive coaching; human resource development

1. INTRODUCTION

The shift of national and global economies toward knowledge- and service-intensive activity has made leadership soft competencies — including communication, emotional intelligence, collaborative decision-making, adaptability, and reflective self-management — central to organizational

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effectiveness rather than optional professional additions (Boyatzis, 1982; Klaus, 2008; Robles, 2012). In response, corporations, financial institutions, and public-sector organizations have increasingly established corporate higher-education structures, such as corporate universities, internal academies, and university–enterprise partnerships, to provide continuing competency development for leaders and managerial reserves (Green, 2024; Hamzah et al., 2025). However, many programmes continue to rely on instructional assumptions inherited from child and adolescent education, even though their participants are experienced adults who already carry professional and managerial responsibilities (St. Clair, 2024).

The problem is more substantial than a difference in terminology. Pedagogical and andragogical approaches make different assumptions about learner self-concept, prior experience, readiness, content orientation, motivation, and the need to understand the purpose of learning before participating in it (Knowles et al., 2015). If leadership training treats adults as dependent and inexperienced learners, it can encourage short-term compliance instead of sustained development of the soft competencies demanded by organizations (Hamzah et al., 2025). At the same time, simply declaring a programme to be andragogical, without specifying how each principle is translated into an observable instructional mechanism, can leave andragogy as a rhetorical framework rather than an operational one (Agustian & Hiryanto, 2026).

Accordingly, this article pursues two objectives. The first is to establish explicit theoretical criteria for distinguishing andragogical mechanisms from broadly pedagogical mechanisms used in soft-competency development. The second is to develop an integrated Andragogical Mechanism Model that converts the six classical assumptions of andragogy into concrete and empirically assessable mechanisms for leadership development in corporate higher education (Knowles et al., 2015). Three research questions guide the analysis: (RQ1) Which theoretical features distinguish an andragogical mechanism from a pedagogical mechanism for developing soft competencies? (RQ2) How can the core andragogical assumptions be operationalized as practical mechanisms for leadership personnel in corporate higher education? (RQ3) Which organizational conditions influence faithful implementation of those mechanisms? The following sections examine the theoretical literature, explain the conceptual method, present the proposed model, and consider its implications and limitations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Competence and soft competence in leadership development

The competence-oriented approach to contemporary leadership development emerged from the recognition that professional effectiveness involves more than accumulated knowledge and technical skills. Raven (1984) defined competence as an interrelated set of knowledge, ability, motivation, and values that enables effective functioning in a given domain, explicitly including a volitional, "wanting to do," component alongside the cognitive one. Boyatzis (1982) and Spencer and Spencer (1993) extended this view through the "iceberg model," in which visible knowledge and skill sit above the waterline while self-concept, traits, and motives — the deeper, harder-to-change determinants of superior performance — remain submerged. In the post-Soviet pedagogical tradition, Zimnyaya (2004) and Khutorskoy (2003) elaborated parallel competence taxonomies that assign a central place to competencies governing a person's relations with others, which correspond closely to what the Western literature terms "soft" competencies.

Within this framework, leadership soft competencies are commonly grouped into communicative, organizational-managerial, socio-emotional, creative-innovative, and adaptive-self-regulatory domains (Goleman, 1995; Belbin, 2010; Katz, 1955; Mintzberg, 1973). Katz's (1955)

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classical distinction between technical, human, and conceptual skill, and its association with managerial level, remains a useful anchor: as a manager rises through the hierarchy, the relative weight of human and conceptual skill increases relative to technical skill, which is precisely the trajectory along which soft-competency development becomes most consequential for leadership personnel specifically, as distinct from the general workforce.

2.2. Corporate higher education as an institutional setting

Corporate higher education can be understood as the institutional learning infrastructure through which an organization prepares, retrains, and continuously develops its personnel — corporate universities, in-house academies, and consortia formed with external universities (Green, 2024). Unlike traditional higher education, corporate higher education content is tied directly to organizational strategy and real operational tasks; its learners are adults with established professional identities and managerial experience; its formats are flexible and modular; and its outcomes are evaluated against business indicators rather than academic ones alone. These four features are precisely what make corporate higher education a distinctive — and, we argue, andragogically demanding — instructional context, because the learner population, by construction, does not resemble the dependent, inexperienced learner around whom much conventional pedagogy is designed.

2.3. Andragogy: theoretical foundations

Malcolm Knowles' formulation of andragogy describes adult learning through six interconnected assumptions that provide a clear contrast with conventional pedagogy (Knowles et al., 2015). First, self-concept: as a person matures, self-concept moves from dependency toward increasing self-directedness, so the adult learner resists being treated as a passive recipient of instruction. Second, the role of experience: adults accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning — and, for leadership personnel specifically, a resource that is professionally significant and identity-relevant, so that ignoring it is experienced as a personal, not merely instructional, slight. Third, readiness to learn: adults become ready to learn what they need to know in order to cope effectively with real-life tasks or problems associated with their developmental stage or social role — for a manager, this readiness is frequently triggered by a role transition, an unresolved conflict, or a performance gap rather than by a syllabus. Fourth, orientation to learning: unlike the subject-centered orientation typical of childhood education, adults are life-centered or problem-centered in their orientation to learning, and are motivated to learn to the extent that they perceive learning will help them perform tasks they confront in their life situations. Fifth, motivation: while adults are responsive to external motivators, the most potent motivators are internal — self-esteem, quality of life, job satisfaction, and self-actualization. Sixth, the need to know: adults need to know why they need to learn something before undertaking to learn it — a requirement that is frequently violated by mandatory compliance-style corporate training.

Recent scholarship has both reaffirmed and refined these assumptions in contemporary organizational contexts. St. Clair (2024) argues that andragogy's continuing relevance lies less in its original six-point taxonomy as a fixed doctrine and more in the underlying commitment to learner self-direction and experience, which must be reinterpreted for each institutional context rather than applied mechanically. Green (2024) connects andragogical principles with transformational leadership in adult instruction, showing that instructors who combine andragogical respect for learner autonomy with inspirational, individualized engagement achieve stronger motivational outcomes among adult and executive learners. Agustian and Hiryanto (2026), synthesizing peer-reviewed studies on workplace training published between 2017 and 2025, find that self-directed learning, relevance of content to actual work needs, deliberate use of participant experience, problem-based formats, and intrinsic motivation are the recurring factors that make andragogically informed workplace training

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effective, while noting that many organizations continue to apply these principles only partially and unsystematically. Hamzah et al. (2025), in a systematic scoping review grounded in behavioural science, show that the durability of soft-skill training outcomes — whether newly developed competencies actually transfer into sustained on-the-job behaviour — depends on structural reinforcement mechanisms (spaced practice, environmental cues, social accountability) that are conceptually continuous with several of Knowles' assumptions, particularly experience-based reinforcement and internal motivation, but are rarely built into corporate programs by design.

2.4. The gap: andragogical assumptions without andragogical mechanisms

The literature reviewed points to two complementary conclusions. The competence-theory literature specifies what soft competencies leadership personnel need to develop (Section 2.1). The andragogy literature specifies why adult learners, including leadership personnel, learn differently from children (Section 2.3). What remains comparatively underdeveloped is the middle term: a systematic, mechanism-level translation connecting each andragogical assumption to a specific, implementable instructional practice for soft-competency development in the corporate higher education setting. Existing pedagogical-mechanism frameworks for soft-competency development (encompassing trainings, business games, mentoring, coaching, and digital tools) are frequently andragogically compatible in practice but are rarely derived explicitly from andragogical theory, which makes them difficult to diagnose, adapt, or defend when they underperform. This article addresses that gap.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Because the purpose is to construct a theoretical model rather than establish causal effects, the study adopts a theoretical-conceptual design based on comparative-typological analysis and structural-functional modelling. The comparative-typological analysis proceeded through a narrative synthesis of the international literature on competence theory, andragogy, and corporate leadership development published between 1955 and 2026, drawn from foundational monographs in management and educational psychology (Raven, Boyatzis, Spencer and Spencer, Knowles, Goleman, Belbin, Kolb, Whitmore, Mintzberg, Katz, Edmondson, Klaus, Robles, Lombardo and Eichinger) together with recent peer-reviewed articles (2023–2026) retrieved through conceptual database searches (combining the terms "andragogy," "soft skills," "leadership development," and "corporate training") in sources indexed by Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC, supplemented by targeted retrieval of highly cited recent reviews. Sources were included if they addressed either (a) the theoretical structure of adult-learning or competence theory, or (b) empirical or conceptual findings on the effectiveness or design of soft-competency development mechanisms for adult or leadership learners; sources addressing child or adolescent pedagogy without direct relevance to adult or corporate learning were excluded. Each source's treatment of Knowles' six andragogical assumptions, where addressed explicitly or implicitly, was extracted and compared against existing typologies of corporate learning mechanisms (trainings, business simulations, project-based learning, mentoring, coaching, digital/adaptive learning, and reflective-evaluative practices) identified in the same literature.

The structural-functional modeling method was then used to construct the Andragogical Mechanism Model presented in Section 4: each of Knowles' six assumptions was treated as a structural anchor, and the mechanisms surfaced through the comparative-typological analysis were functionally mapped onto the assumption(s) whose underlying learner characteristic they most directly address, following the logic that a well-designed instructional mechanism operationalizes a specific assumption about how the adult leader learns rather than existing as a generic "best practice." Where a given mechanism served more than one assumption, it was assigned to its primary function and cross-

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referenced elsewhere. It should be stated explicitly that this article is theoretical-conceptual rather than empirical: it does not report new primary data on training outcomes, and the model it proposes is offered as a testable framework rather than as an already-validated causal account. Section 5.4 outlines the empirical validation this implies as a direction for subsequent research.

4. RESULTS: THE ANDRAGOGICAL MECHANISM MODEL

4.1. Distinguishing andragogical from pedagogical mechanisms

Prior to introducing the model, the criteria for separating an "andragogical" mechanism from a generally "pedagogical" one must be made explicit, since both may superficially resemble each other (both may use, for instance, a training session or a case study). We propose four differentiating criteria, derived directly from the contrast between pedagogical and andragogical assumptions (Knowles et al., 2015). The locus of control criterion asks whether the mechanism positions the learner as the object of instruction or as a co-designer of their own developmental trajectory. The role-of-experience criterion asks whether the mechanism treats the learner's prior professional experience as a resource to be mobilized or as a deficit to be corrected. The content-orientation criterion asks whether the mechanism is organized around abstract subject matter or around a real problem or task the learner currently faces. The motivational-source criterion asks whether the mechanism relies primarily on external inducement (compliance, certification, evaluation) or cultivates internal motivation (self-esteem, mastery, relevance to the learner's own goals). A mechanism that scores toward the second pole on all four criteria is, in the sense used here, andragogical; a mechanism that scores toward the first pole on most of them, even if it nominally targets adult learners, remains pedagogical in structure. This four-criterion distinction directly answers RQ1 and provides the diagnostic basis for the mapping in Section 4.2.

4.2. Mapping andragogical assumptions to developmental mechanisms

The following subsections present the proposed mapping between each of Knowles' six assumptions and a corresponding cluster of mechanisms for developing the soft competencies of leadership personnel in corporate higher education, directly addressing RQ2.

First, the self-concept assumption — the adult's movement toward self-directedness — corresponds to autonomy-supportive mechanisms. Concretely, this includes individual development plans co-authored by the learner rather than assigned to them; self-diagnosis instruments (self-assessment questionnaires preceding external evaluation) that give the learner interpretive ownership of their own competency profile; and learner-controlled pacing, in which leadership personnel select the sequence and depth of modules relevant to their own role rather than following a fixed curriculum. Because self-directedness is a matter of degree, these mechanisms are most effective when combined with structured scaffolding (a mentor or coach available on request) rather than left entirely unstructured, since leadership personnel new to self-directed formats can otherwise experience excessive ambiguity.

Second, the experience assumption corresponds to experience-based mechanisms. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle — concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation — provides the operational template: training and coaching sessions are structured so that participants' own managerial experience supplies the "concrete experience" stage, rather than treating experience as something to be supplied afresh by the trainer. Action-learning projects addressing real organizational problems, peer coaching in which leadership personnel coach one another using their respective experience, and case-based reflection drawing on participants' own prior decisions operationalize this assumption further. This mechanism cluster also encompasses "reverse mentoring," in which a less experienced but digitally fluent employee mentors a senior leader,

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which explicitly treats the senior leader's experience as a resource to be complemented rather than replaced.

Third, readiness to learn corresponds to job-embedded, trigger-timed mechanisms. Because adult readiness to learn is activated by real developmental tasks and role transitions rather than by a calendar, corporate higher education structures benefit from designing learning interventions around identifiable trigger points — promotion into a new managerial level, formation of a new team, or a diagnosed performance gap — rather than delivering uniform training irrespective of the learner's current situation. The widely used "70-20-10" heuristic, whereby roughly seventy percent of professional learning occurs through on-the-job experience, twenty percent through social and mentoring interaction, and ten percent through formal instruction (Lombardo & Eichinger, 1996), operationalizes this readiness principle at the level of program architecture: it allocates the largest share of developmental effort to the moments and settings in which readiness is naturally highest.

Fourth, orientation to learning corresponds to problem-centered and project-based mechanisms, as opposed to subject-centered ones. Business simulations and strategic games that place leadership personnel inside realistic, high-stakes managerial scenarios; project-based learning organized around a genuine organizational problem that must be resolved and presented by a deadline; and scenario-based coaching that works through a specific unresolved managerial situation rather than a general competency area, all instantiate this orientation. The case method, in this framing, is andragogically appropriate specifically because it withholds a single "correct answer" and instead requires the learner to reason through a complex, realistic situation, which mirrors the structure of the problems leadership personnel actually face.

Fifth, internal motivation corresponds to psychologically safe, autonomy-respecting motivational mechanisms. Edmondson's (2019) construct of psychological safety — a shared belief that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, including admitting error or uncertainty — is a precondition for the internal motivation Knowles identifies, because leadership personnel who fear reputational damage from exposing a competency gap will engage with development activity only superficially, in a compliance mode, regardless of how the activity itself is designed. Structured goal-setting frameworks such as GROW — Goal, Reality, Options, Will (Whitmore, 2009) — used in coaching conversations operationalize internal motivation by anchoring development goals in the learner's own stated aspirations rather than in externally imposed targets. Recognition practices that reward demonstrated growth and initiative, rather than only compliance with a training schedule, reinforce this same internal orientation.

Sixth, the need to know corresponds to transparency-based curriculum framing. Concretely, this includes presenting the diagnostic rationale for a developmental intervention before the intervention itself — for instance, sharing 360-degree feedback results with a leader prior to, rather than only after, assigning a corresponding coaching or training activity; explicitly connecting each competency-development module to a business outcome or career consequence that the leader already values; and involving leadership personnel in interpreting their own diagnostic data rather than delivering it as a unilateral verdict. This mechanism directly targets the andragogical requirement that adults be shown why an activity is worth their engagement before being expected to engage.

4.3. The integrated model

When the six mechanism clusters are integrated, andragogical practice emerges as a coherent system rather than as a collection of "adult-friendly" techniques added to a conventional training programme, but as a structurally coherent system in which each cluster answers a specific question the adult leadership learner is, implicitly or explicitly, asking of the developmental process: "Do I control this?" (self-concept/autonomy-supportive mechanisms), "Does this use what I already know?"

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(experience/experience-based mechanisms), "Is this relevant to my situation right now?" (readiness/job-embedded mechanisms), "Does this help me solve a real problem?" (orientation/problem-centered mechanisms), "Do I want to do this, and is it safe to try?" (motivation/psychologically-safe mechanisms), and "Why does this matter?" (need to know/transparency-based mechanisms). Because these six questions typically arise together rather than sequentially in the mind of an adult learner, the model treats the six mechanism clusters as operating in parallel and reinforcing one another — for example, job-embedded timing (readiness) is considerably less effective if the learner does not also understand the diagnostic rationale (need to know), and problem-centered formats (orientation) are undermined if the organizational climate does not support psychological safety (motivation).

4.4. Organizational conditions for implementation

In relation to RQ3, the analysis identifies four organizational conditions that influence the quality and fidelity of implementation. First, trainer and mentor andragogical competence: facilitators must themselves be trained in andragogical method, since a facilitator who defaults to a subject-centered, lecture-based style will undermine an andragogically designed curriculum regardless of its formal structure. Second, organizational culture fit: hierarchical, compliance-oriented cultures tend to implement autonomy-supportive and problem-centered mechanisms only superficially unless deliberately supported by senior sponsorship, while more adhocratic cultures adopt them more readily but may under-invest in the structure (job-embedded timing, transparency-based framing) that keeps such mechanisms coherent. Third, diagnostic infrastructure: several mechanism clusters (readiness, need to know) presuppose functioning diagnostic instruments — competency assessments, 360-degree feedback, and structured self-assessment — without which the "trigger points" and "rationale" on which those mechanisms depend cannot be identified. Fourth, institutionalization within human-resource policy: mechanisms sustained only through the initiative of individual trainers or managers tend to lapse when personnel change, whereas embedding them in career-progression criteria, mentoring-program charters, and budget allocation gives the model organizational durability.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis contributes to the existing literature in three principal respects. First, they operationalize St. Clair's (2024) argument that andragogy's value lies in its underlying commitments rather than in the mechanical application of a fixed six-point checklist: the model presented here treats the six assumptions not as a checklist to be individually satisfied but as six interdependent design questions that must be answered jointly. Second, they extend Green's (2024) finding that transformational leadership qualities strengthen andragogical instruction by specifying which structural mechanisms, and not only interpersonal style, are required to realize that strengthening in a corporate higher-education setting. Third, they respond directly to the concern raised by Hamzah et al. (2025) regarding the durability of soft-skill training: by embedding reinforcement directly into the readiness (job-embedded triggers) and experience (Kolb-cycle-based) mechanism clusters rather than treating transfer as a separate, additional stage appended after training, the model builds durability into the design rather than relying on post hoc reinforcement.

The model also carries a practical implication of some consequence for corporate universities and human-resource development practitioners: it offers a diagnostic tool, not only a design tool. A program that is underperforming can be examined against the four differentiating criteria in Section 4.1 and the six mechanism clusters in Section 4.2 to identify specifically which andragogical assumption its current design fails to operationalize, rather than prompting a generic conclusion that "the training did not work." For instance, a leadership program with strong problem-centered content

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(orientation) that nonetheless produces low engagement may be failing on the need-to-know or motivation clusters rather than on content design as such — a diagnosis that leads to a different corrective response (clarifying rationale, strengthening psychological safety) than a content redesign would.

The study has several limitations that should be considered. As a theoretical-conceptual study, the model has not yet been tested against outcome data, and its predictive validity — whether programs redesigned according to the model in fact produce more durable soft-competency development than programs that are not — remains an empirical question. The literature synthesized is predominantly drawn from North American, European, and Southeast Asian sources; the model's applicability to Central Asian and other post-Soviet corporate education contexts, where organizational culture and existing pedagogical traditions differ in documented ways (Zimnyaya, 2004; Khutorskoy, 2003), requires context-specific empirical examination rather than direct transfer. Finally, the six-cluster mapping simplifies what are, in practice, overlapping and mutually reinforcing mechanisms; the model should be read as an analytically useful decomposition rather than as a claim that any given real-world mechanism serves only a single assumption.

These limitations also indicate several priorities for subsequent research. Priority directions include a mixed-methods validation study comparing leadership soft-competency outcomes between programs designed according to the six-cluster model and programs following conventional pedagogical design; a diagnostic instrument operationalizing the four differentiating criteria in Section 4.1 for use in auditing existing corporate training programs; and comparative research examining how the model's organizational conditions (Section 4.4) manifest in the corporate higher education systems of Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, where the expansion of corporate universities and reserve-personnel training programs makes such research both timely and practically consequential.

6. CONCLUSION

The study addressed a specific gap in the literature: the frequent absence of a systematic, mechanism-level link between the theory of andragogy and the practical design of soft-competency development programs for leadership personnel in corporate higher education. By articulating four criteria that differentiate andragogical from pedagogical mechanisms, and by mapping each of Knowles' six andragogical assumptions onto a corresponding, theoretically grounded cluster of developmental mechanisms — autonomy-supportive, experience-based, job-embedded, problem-centered, psychologically safe and motivation-supportive, and transparency-based — the article offers corporate universities, business schools, and human-resource development practitioners a differentiated and diagnostically usable framework in place of an undifferentiated list of "adult-friendly" best practices. The framework further specifies the organizational conditions — facilitator competence, cultural fit, diagnostic infrastructure, and institutionalization — that determine whether the model can be implemented with fidelity rather than merely declared. While the model requires empirical validation, including in Central Asian corporate education contexts where its practical relevance is particularly high, it provides a theoretically coherent starting point for redesigning leadership development programs around the way adult professionals actually learn, rather than around inherited pedagogical convention.

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