

# REFRAMING LEADERSHIP AS A SYSTEMIC CONSTRUCT IN ORGANISATIONAL MANAGEMENT

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**Abstract:** *This paper clarifies the meaning and positioning of leadership within organisational management. It aims to present a process-oriented approach to leadership, framing it as a structured component of the management system. Rather than treating leadership as an individual skill, the paper advances the original proposition that it should be understood as a systemic construct embedded in formal structures, processes, and management mechanisms. This study is intended for both scholars in management seeking conceptual clarity and practitioners responsible for shaping leadership systems. It also provides a foundation for future research on leadership as an organised and sustainable capability.*

**Keywords:** *leadership, organisational management, management system, leadership systemic approach.*

## 1. Introduction

In the specialised literature, leadership is most commonly defined as a process of social influence through which an individual or a group mobilises others to contribute to the achievement of shared objectives (Northouse, 2010). The concept of leadership is widely used across multiple disciplines, including social sciences, organisational psychology, management, education, political sciences, etc. Its transdisciplinary diffusion indicates that leadership refers to various forms of people organisation and describes a universal phenomenon of human influence and coordination to achieve common goals.

In the field of organisational management, leadership is frequently examined in relation to performance and competitiveness, as a critical success factor. A substantial body of literature refers to the differences between leadership and management, emphasising their distinct yet complementary functions: management is generally associated with planning, organising, and ensuring operational order and coherence, whereas leadership focuses on driving change, setting strategic direction, and aligning people around shared objectives (Bennis, 2009; Kotter, 1990).

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This conceptual differentiation contributed to the definition and expansion of transformational leadership, a key construct for successfully achieving organisational changes (Bass, 1990). Contemporary organisational theory tends to conceptualise leadership as embedded within systemic processes of change, rather than as a merely individual attribute. In recent decades, leadership has been integrated into frameworks for management systems related to quality, environment, innovation etc. (ISO 9001, 2015; ISO14001, 2015; CEN, 2013). In these approaches, leadership is not treated as external to management, but rather as an essential component of the management system itself, shaping an organisation's vision, culture, and strategic adaptation.

Given these apparent contradictory approaches, this paper aims to clarify the meaning and positioning of leadership within the domain of organisational management. It is structured in three parts: first, a literature review of theories and debates on leadership in organisational management; second, a process-based view of leadership as a structured component of the management system; and third, the main conclusions, outlining the theoretical implications of this conceptualisation.

The methodology of this paper is based on a systematic review of leadership literature, with particular emphasis on the leadership conceptualisation within the field of organisational management.

## 2. Literature Review on Leadership in Organisational Management

The leadership issues have been a concern for people since ancient times, but the systematic study of leadership related to organisational management dates back to the early twentieth century, in the context of industrial development and the emergence of management theories. Research in this topic has evolved through multiple theoretical perspectives, summarised in Figure 1 and briefly presented below.

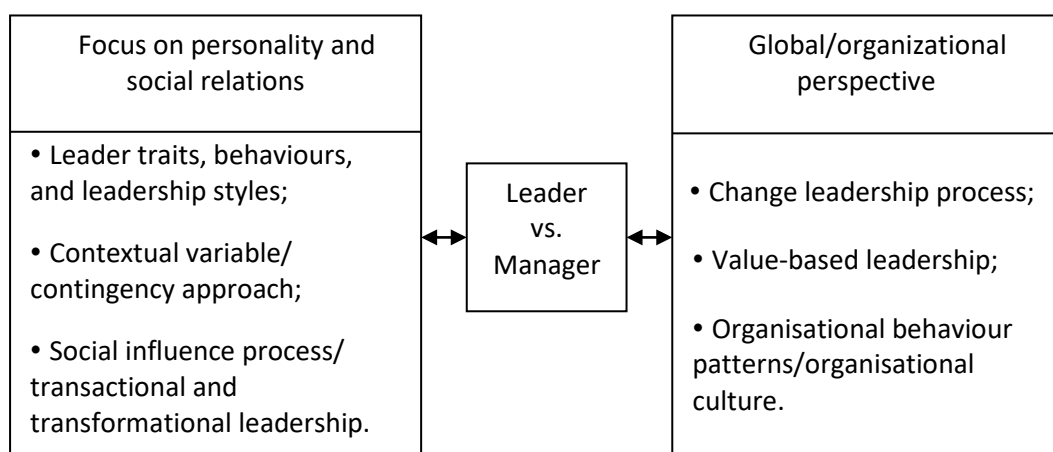


Fig.1. Perspectives of theoretical and practical leadership approaches

1) Trait and behavioural approaches.

- Early leadership theories focused primarily on identifying the personal traits and behaviours that differentiate effective leaders from ineffective ones. An effective leader inspires others to take action and guides them toward a common purpose.

Trait theory assumed that leadership effectiveness derives from inherent abilities and personality attributes, such as intelligence, self-confidence, or charisma (e.g., Lord et al., 1986; Fleenor, 2016). In its book, Northouse (2010) remarks that over the past 100 years, many papers identified different sets of leader traits and concludes that, despite its limits, the trait approach still offers useful insights. Currently, research on this topic focuses on better understanding how individual traits interact with situational factors to shape leadership processes and outcomes (Liden et al., 2025).

- Leadership behavioural theories emerged during the early period of scientific management, notably through the research conducted at the University of Michigan (Singh, 2017). These studies led to the systematic examination of management and leadership styles, which are often viewed as behaviour patterns (Carton, 2022).

Leadership style refers to the way managers and leaders enact their roles. In the 1950s and 1960s, researchers such as Linkert, Tannenbaum and Schmidt, McGregor, and Blake and Mouton proposed different models of leading styles (CMI, 2020). At the basic level, leadership is commonly categorised into two styles: democratic and authoritarian. However, the literature offers a wide range of more complex models that extend beyond this basic dichotomy.

Management styles continue to attract scholarly attention, with contemporary research increasingly focused on what makes leadership effective in a global, complex, and fast-changing environment (Darie, 2024).

- Closely related to the leadership style is the contingency approach theory, developed by Fiedler in 1971 (Kuhn, 2007), which emphasises the alignment between a leader's style and situational variables. In this theory, leadership is conceptualised as dependent on contextual factors such as task structure, follower maturity, and the organisational environment.

Models such as situational leadership underscore the importance of adaptability, arguing that effective leaders adjust their style to the context (Vroom and Jago, 2007; Darie, 2024). These perspectives shifted the focus of leadership research from static traits and styles toward a more dynamic understanding of leadership as a process.

## 2) Leader vs. Manager

A significant conceptual development in leadership studies occurred with the distinction between leaders and managers. Proponents of this theory argue that managers and leaders have two distinctive, although complementary, systems of action (Bennis, 2009; Kotter, 1990). Managers are generally focused on planning, organising, and coordinating resources to achieve goals; their primary concern lies in maintaining organisational stability and optimising existing processes. In contrast, leaders are associated with articulating a compelling vision, inspiring and guiding people towards a shared goal; they seek to transform and innovate, striving for progress and change within an organisation. While management emphasises control and short-term efficiency, leadership focuses on direction, transformation, and long-term development. Bennis and Nanus (2012, p.v) expressed this differentiation in their widely cited statement: "Managers are people who do things right, and leaders are people who do the right things".

However, within organisational practice, such a strict dichotomy appears unjustified, as managerial and leadership functions are typically performed by the same individual. Leading people has been defined as a function of management since the early development of management theory (Drucker, 1955). According to Mintzberg (1973), leadership is one of ten managerial roles, probably the most important one. Contemporary perspectives largely converge on the view that managers achieve results through people, with leadership constituting a core dimension of effective management (Popescu, Dascalu, and Albu, 2004). Accordingly, effective management requires each manager to develop leadership skills, particularly the ability to inspire, motivate, and guide others toward the achievement of organisational objectives.

### 3) Transactional leadership and transformational leadership

The abovementioned theory contributed to the emergence of another significant conceptual theory, which occurred with the distinction between transformational and transactional leadership. The concept of transformational leadership was introduced by James MacGregor Burns in 1978 through his study on political leaders. Bernard M. Bass later expanded this concept for organisational psychology and management, combining transactional and transformational dimensions into a comprehensive leadership model (Aniebonam, et al., 2023).

The central element of both transactional and transformational leadership is motivation, particularly the mechanisms through which leaders influence and engage employees. According to Bass, transactional leadership is task-focused, relying on formal authority, and rewards or punishments based on performance. Transformational leadership, by contrast, is relationship-oriented and involves a process through which leaders and followers elevate one another to higher levels of motivation. This approach emphasises the articulation of a compelling vision, the stimulation of employee engagement, and the fulfilment of higher-order intrinsic needs, thereby encouraging employees to exceed expected performance levels.

Although transactional and transformational leadership are often presented as opposites, Bass (1985) contends that transformational leadership does not replace transactional leadership but rather augments it. Specifically, transformational leadership enhances the effectiveness of transactional practices by fostering deeper commitment, engagement, and performance beyond contractual exchanges. These behavioural transformations make transformational leadership a strategic approach for supporting change initiatives in contemporary organisations (Usman, 2020).

Many papers underscore the pivotal role of transformational leadership in facilitating effective organisational change, particularly within dynamic and uncertain environments (Middleton et al., 2015; Steinmann, Klug, and Maier, 2018; Jun and Lee, 2023). According to Matzler et al. (2007), transformational leadership requires leaders who communicate a clear vision, inspire employees, align individual and organisational goals, boost intrinsic motivation, and improve change effectiveness. It prioritises the articulation of organisational mission and outcomes, while promoting participatory management principles that foster collaboration and shared responsibility. This approach also promotes empowerment, innovation, proactive behaviour, and the development of an organisational culture that supports change and makes it more effective.

Overall, transformational leadership frames leadership as a dynamic, relational process focused on vision, inspiration, and change. However, even within these models, leadership is often still viewed as a style or set of behaviours rather than a structured organisational process.

#### 4) Contemporary perspectives.

- Contemporary organisational theory tends to conceptualise leadership as embedded within systemic processes of organisational change.

Many papers examine the nature of change leadership and management and their pivotal roles in driving successful organisational change initiatives (Shvindina, 2017; Ford, Ford, and Polin, 2021; Jango, 2024). According to Zel (2016), leadership is intrinsically linked to change, as challenging the status quo constitutes one of the defining characteristics of effective leaders. Leaders play a central role in the organisational change process by: setting a clear vision, developing a coherent strategy, communicating the reasons for the change initiative to foster understanding and motivate employees, demonstrating commitment to the change effort and engaging employees through participatory methods, and, finally, monitoring progress.

This change-focused approach implicitly supports the leadership understanding as a continuous, interactive process that relies on feedback. Successful change leaders need a mix of interpersonal skills and strategic thinking.

- Closely related to the ideas above is the concept of value-centred leadership. According to Jaakson (2010), “organisational values” is a widely recognised concept in today’s management literature and, from a system perspective, serve as a managerial tool. At present, it is common for organisations to formulate a values statement, which represents a specific set of publicly articulated beliefs or principles intended to guide organisational conduct.

These statements are widely used in modern management, their primary role being to regulate employee behaviour to achieve superior performance. In this regard, Peters and Waterman (1982, p.281) remark that high-performing companies all have clearly defined sets of guiding beliefs. Likewise, Belias and Koustelios (2014) stress that managers and leaders are responsible for fostering shared values, particularly during economic change. Establishing common values provides a foundation for influencing behavioural change among organisational members and supports successful adaptation to new conditions.

- Another contemporary leadership perspective refers to the focus on organisational culture. The concept of organisational culture has been defined in various ways. According to Hofstede (1991, p.5), it represents “the collective programming of the mind, which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”. This concept synthesises the norms and shared values within an organisation and is primarily reflected in employees’ behavioural patterns.

The concept of organisational culture entered management literature in the late 70’s (Hofstede, 1991; Schein, 2010) and gained popularity through Peters and Waterman’s (1982) work on achieving excellence, which highlighted that the key features of successful companies are mainly cultural. Cultural transformation is also essential for effective organisational changes. Numerous studies indicate that the failure to

implement modern management systems or other change initiatives often results from misalignment between existing organisational culture and newly introduced values, principles, and methods (Cameron and Quinn, 2006, pp. 7–16).

Today, cultural change is a strategic priority, developing the right organisational culture being seen as a core leadership responsibility (Schein, 2010). Shaping organisational culture has recently received great attention in relevant theoretical and empirical research, referring to models and tools (Schein, 2010; Mingaleva et al., 2022), specific dimensions of organisational culture, and transformational/transactional leadership styles (Kargas and Varoutas, 2015; Surucu and Yesilada, 2017; Nguyen, et al., 2023).

### **Conclusion**

As the literature review shows, leadership is a dynamic construct whose meaning and approaches have evolved over time.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, leadership was primarily conceptualised as a relationship between leaders and followers, with attention focused on the traits and behaviours of effective leaders. Later in the century, the focus shifted to leadership's role in driving organisational change. Rather than being confined to influencing people's behaviours, leadership came to be understood as a transformative and strategic process that involves establishing a vision and shared objectives, and guiding people to achieve them.

This evolution is linked to the emergence of new management paradigms in the 1980s, driven by the intensive global competition, higher societal expectations, and accelerated technological and environmental changes. Modern management emphasises strategic orientation, innovation, human resource development, employee participation in decision-making, organisational flexibility, and teamwork (Popescu, 2011; Hussein, 2024). In this context, leaders' role expanded to include shaping organisational vision and strategy, not just influencing people.

Simultaneously, approaches to motivation and influencing employees shifted toward value-based and inspirational models, particularly those associated with transformational leadership. Leaders have been increasingly viewed as agents of change who shape meaning, cultivate commitment, and align individual aspirations with organisational goals. Recent theories conceptualise leadership as a distributed or shared phenomenon, emerging from interactions among organisational members rather than residing solely in a single individual. Within this broader framework, leadership is deeply interconnected with organisational culture. Leaders contribute to the creation, reinforcement, and transformation of shared values, norms, and assumptions, while organisational culture simultaneously shapes leadership practices and expectations. Thus, leadership and organisational culture are mutually constitutive elements in the ongoing process of organisational development and change.

These contemporary approaches provide a broader understanding of effective leadership. However, there is still no clear model of leadership as a structured process integrated within the overall management system of organisations. This theoretical gap motivates the development of a generic leadership framework that treats leadership not just as a trait, style, or relationship, but as a structured and systemic process embedded in managerial practice.

### 3. Leadership Framework as a Process of Management System

Given the complexity of leadership approaches in organisations, conceptualising the leadership framework is useful for understanding and achieving effective leadership.

The model presented in this section draws on the literature review, as well as on leadership approaches from standardised management models for quality, innovation, environment, and other similar systems applied worldwide. In these models, leadership is seen as a basic principle and a distinct process of management systems. It is generally defined as a process of setting the organisation's vision and goals, building commitment, and mobilising staff to achieve them.

The proposed leadership framework is presented in Figure 2, which illustrates two interconnected dimensions: leading change and influencing people. Each direction encompasses specific activities listed in Table 1 along with the key documents that describe their processes and outcomes.

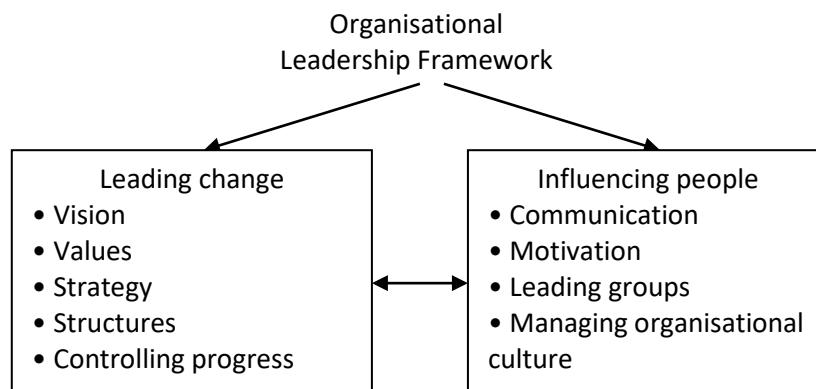


Fig.2. *Organisational leadership framework*

*Generic leadership framework: processes and documents*

Table 1

<b>Leadership sequences/ processes</b>	<b>Formal results/ Documents</b>
Establishing vision	Vision description;
Establishing values	Values' statement;
Establishing strategy	Strategic objectives and ways of action;
Defining employee role and responsibilities	Organisational documents, job description;
Motivation	General regulations of HR department, including specific tools for the evaluation of motivation;
Communication	Formal communication procedures and plans;
Managing organizational culture	Methodologies and tools for assessing and developing organisational culture;
Monitoring and improving performance	Methodologies for the evaluation of leadership and organisational performance.

This leadership framework adopts an organisation-wide perspective, conceptualising leadership as a comprehensive construct that encompasses leaders' expanded responsibilities. Rather than treating leadership as an individual capability, the paper advances the original proposal that it should be understood as a systemic construct embedded in formal structures, processes, and management mechanisms.

The formalisation of leadership processes may seem like a rational and bureaucratic approach to management; however, such documentation is essential for effective leadership. For instance, a document outlining the organisation's vision serves as a key communication tool for securing the commitment and support of both internal and external stakeholders. Similarly, clearly defining organisational values provides a foundation for shaping employee attitudes and behaviours.

With respect to the regulatory leadership framework, different methodologies and procedures can guide each process, such as setting the organisation's vision, values, and strategy, defining the motivation system, assessing organisational culture, etc. However, excessive formalisation can lead to bureaucratic rigidity and operational inefficiency. Therefore, a leadership-related documentation system should be tailored to each organisation's context, needs, and characteristics, recognising that they can vary widely. Unless required by law and other mandatory norms, decisions regarding the set of leadership documents should be made at the organisational level.

These written documents constitute only the visible part of the leadership process - analogous to the tip of an iceberg- and represent its formal or "hard" side. However, leadership also encompasses many psychosocial dimensions that arise from the relationship between the leader/manager and employees, which cannot be fully formalised. These relational and behavioural aspects represent the "soft" side of leadership, yet they are equally critical to organisational effectiveness.

Finally, it should be emphasised that leadership is not the exclusive prerogative of senior management; rather, it is a process enacted in diverse forms across all hierarchical levels of the organisation. Managers/leaders at every level influence employee behaviour and, therefore, both individual and organisational performance. Contemporary perspectives underscore the distributed and relational character of leadership, highlighting that influence, responsibility, and orientation toward shared objectives may be demonstrated by organisational members irrespective of their formal positions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper aims to clarify the meaning and positioning of leadership within the field of organisational management.

As the literature review states, leadership has been studied systematically since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, it has evolved from a focus on individual traits and leader-follower relationships to a more comprehensive and multidimensional construct centred on vision, influence, and organisational change. Today, leadership is seen as a strategic, relational, and dynamic process that sets direction, defines overall purpose, and engages people to achieve sustainable performance and long-term change. Contemporary

scholarship also emphasises that managers need leadership skills, such as strategic thinking and the ability to motivate, guide, and align people with shared goals to ensure organisational success.

Although modern approaches offer a broader understanding of effective leadership in organisations, the literature still lacks a clear model of leadership as a structured process integrated within the overall management system of an organisation. The leadership framework proposed by the authors addresses this gap and has several important implications.

1) First, defining a general leadership framework at the organisational level highlights the extended responsibilities attributed to leaders. Leadership is seen as a strategic process through which leaders:

- set the organisation's direction by defining its vision, mission, and long-term goals,
- establish organisational values and ensure these are reflected in actions, decisions, and resource allocation,
- shape organisational culture, influencing norms and behaviours to support adaptability, learning, and performance,
- manage change in a systematic way, creating conditions for innovation, learning, and resilience.

This perspective implies a paradigm change: leadership is no longer just an individual skill, but a strategic function essential for long-term success. Leaders act as architects of direction and culture, shaping not only individual behaviour but also the organisation's identity and ability to evolve.

2) Second, distinguishing between the "hard" aspects of leadership (formal structures, documented vision, values, and strategies) and "soft" aspects (psychosocial and relational) shows the need for more holistic frameworks.

Traditional managerial models that focus on formal systems and procedures must be complemented by approaches that consider trust, influence, identity construction, and informal power dynamics. Accordingly, leadership theory should move beyond dichotomous thinking and advance toward integrative models that recognise the interdependence between formal structures and emergent social processes.

3) Third, recognising leadership as distributed across all levels supports the idea of distributed leadership. This reconceptualisation broadens the analysis from the individual leader to networks, teams, and organisational systems. It suggests that leadership capacity should be understood as an organisational property rather than merely an individual competency, encouraging multi-level and system-wide approaches in both theoretical and empirical investigations.

4) Finally, the emphasis on adapting leadership to context –especially the level of formalisation– shows that the leadership system depends on the situation. It highlights the need to consider factors like organisational culture, regulations, and structure when understanding effective leadership.

Considering the above, the proposed leadership framework can be viewed as a systemic construct that innovatively integrates the key ideas from different leadership approaches adapted to the contemporary organisational context.

The paper's findings are intended to be a foundation for students and managers'

practical approaches as well as for future academic research. Overall, the generic leadership framework proposed by the authors supports students in management and leadership, and also managers in organisations to better understand the meaning and practical approaches to leadership. In addition, the reconceptualisation of the leadership framework contributes to the theoretical evolution of leadership research by promoting a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of leadership as a distributed organisational process rather than a function associated with formal authority.

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