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Multi-Level Leadership Conceptualization and Enactment

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Abstract:

This article presents a conceptual framework for multi-level leadership that recognizes the interconnected nature of individual, group, and organizational processes. At the individual level, leadership styles including authentic, transformational, and servant leadership distinctly influence follower development, engagement, and performance outcomes. The group level examines both task-focused and person-focused leadership approaches, emphasizing role differentiation, team development stages, and the dynamic nature of trust within teams. At the organizational level, leadership centers on exploiting knowledge through systems, structures, and culture, requiring situational adaptation to environmental demands. The framework demonstrates that effective leadership necessitates alignment across all three levels while remaining responsive to contextual challenges. Different leadership approaches yield varying impacts on organizational culture and employee motivation, highlighting the importance of strategic style selection. This multi-level perspective advances leadership theory by integrating micro- and macro-level considerations and provides practical guidance for leaders seeking to optimize performance across individual, team, and organizational contexts.

Keywords: Multi-level leadership, authentic leadership, transformational leadership, team dynamics, organizational culture

Multi-Level Leadership Conceptualization and Enactment

"Know your audience" is the mantra of successful communication. To know the audience is to be able to craft a message in such a way that it will not only be heard, but accepted. Leaders must also know their audience, shaping and forming their approach based on the followers. However, often their audience is comprised of individuals, groups, and entire organizations. This research synthesis explores the complexity of multi-level leadership and offers guidance for navigating the approach to produce engaging leadership at every level.

Elements of Organizations

Individual, group, and organizational factors are interconnected and jointly influence performance. While each can be examined in isolation, a holistic approach is necessary to lead effectively, considering the

complex interplay of personality, group structures, needs, and organizational systems (Abdillah et al., 2024; Hakiki et al., 2023). Bryant (2003) generically categorized the three groups in relation to their knowledge. Knowledge creation via intellectual stimulation, inspiration, and individualized consideration was related to actions at the individual level. At the group level, knowledge sharing was expressed through a shared vision and mutual encouragement. Knowledge exploitation was found at the organizational level via systems, structures, and routinization.

Later work by Hakiki et al. (2023) expanded on the characteristics of the three elements. The main factors identified in their work are found in Table 1. The framework developed by Hakiki et al. offers a foundation on which to conceptualize and enact the role leadership plays in each of the organizational elements

Table 1

Three Elements of an Organization (Hakiki et al., 2023)

Individual Main Factors	
Individual Differences: Personality and Ability	Work Values, Attitudes, Moods, and Emotions
Perception, Attribution, and the Management of Diversity	Learning and Creativity
Work Motivation	Pay, Careers, and Changing Employment Relationships
Stress and Work Life Balance	
Group Main Factors	
The Nature of Work Groups and Teams	Effective Work Groups and Teams
Leaders and Leadership	Power, Politics, Conflict, and Negotiation
Communications and Organization	Decision Making and Organizational Learning
Organizational Processes	
Organizational Design and Structure	Organizational Culture and Ethical Behavior
Organizational Change and Development	

Note. Table adapted from *Individual, group dynamics, and organizational processes in the workplace: Factors for better performance and organizational success*, by Hakiki, M. S., Anggraini, D. A., Fahmi, N. F., Putra, R. S., & Adinugroho, M., 2023, *Journal on Education*

Individual Level Leadership

Building on the notion that leadership is defined as influence over others, the discussion of leadership on the individual level must start with how an individual within an organization is influenced. Not all leadership

actions have an impact on all the factors identified by Hakiki. For example, a manager offering an employee the opportunity to work on a task force for a new marketing campaign may be tapping into the individual's unique abilities, creativity, and perhaps even work motivation. Stress and pay may be unaffected. The key is that, while the marketing campaign may have an impact on the whole organization, the leadership of the individual is influencing them to action on a personal level.

Two positions of individual influence can be observed. The first is the impact of leadership on a follower. From this perspective, numerous theories can be applied. For example, authentic leadership is positively related to work engagement, especially when employees have high intrinsic motivation, whereas authoritarian leadership is negatively related to work engagement (Shu, 2015). Transformational leadership is positively associated with followers' mastery goals, while transactional leadership is positively associated with followers' performance goals (Hamstra et al., 2014).

The other position from which to observe the impacts of leadership on the individual is that of the individual's own leadership development. The first question to address is whether leaders are born or made. If born, the impact of leadership on the emerging development of individuals would be irrelevant. If, however, they are made, the question at hand becomes increasingly important. Boerma et al. (2017) presented both sides of the argument. If leaders are born, their traits have a substantial genetic basis, supported by twin studies and personality research; certain core traits (e.g., humility) are innate and necessary for outstanding leadership. If, however, they are made, leadership emerges primarily through deliberate practice, life experiences, and formal development. Their research concluded that about 30% of leadership role occupancy can be attributed to genetic factors, leaving 70% to environmental influences. Afrianty (2020) concluded that leadership development requires both harnessing inherent traits and engaging in continuous learning and ethical growth.

Judge et al. (2002) offered empirical evidence to back the argument of innate leadership abilities. Building upon the Big Five (Goldberg, 1990), Judge et al. (2002) found that extraversion ($\rho = .31$) was the strongest predictor of leadership, followed by conscientiousness ($\rho = .28$), and openness to experience ($\rho = .24$). Mumford et al. (2000; 2007) supported the idea that leadership was grounded in the developing and training of necessary skills. Whether by nature or nurture, whether as a follower or a developing leader, individuals can benefit from the leadership efforts of the organization.

Different approaches to leadership will have varying end results for individuals. Andersen (2018) and Parolini et al. (2009) argued that Greenleaf's (1977) theory of servant leadership is primarily focused on the development and achievement of the individual rather than the organization. Banks et al. (2016), in their comparison of transformation and authentic leadership styles, found that transformation produced a greater predictive weight for individual-level outcomes.

The focus of individual over organization does not discount the impact that more organization-focused approaches can have on the individual. The development of self-awareness**,** self-regulation**,** and clarity of purpose, core attributes to authentic leadership, can lead to an individual's change-oriented behaviors and internal growth (Halliwell et al., 2023). Authentic leaders who model and encourage a strong leader identity

(self-efficacy, reputation, and prototypicality), humility, which creates a safe environment for vulnerability, and spiritual maturity (self-transcendence, self-disclosure, and self-sacrifice), which provide individuals with a guiding moral compass and motivation (Klenke, 2007; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Even transactional leadership can offer individuals clarity and accountability (Lee et al., 2023).

The development of individuals is key to any organization. The success of the individual becomes the building blocks for stronger, healthier, and more efficient groups and teams. Individuals equipped with self-awareness and motivation can offer unique contributions to the organization's larger effort.

Group/Team Level Leadership

The influence of leadership extends beyond the individual. Groups and teams can be influenced by commonality. Like the two perspectives on individuals – followers and leader development – Burke et al. (2006) identified two approaches to team leadership: task-focused and person-focused. Task-focused leaders clarify direction, structure tasks, and manage resources, while person-focused leaders coach, empower, and build teams. Both approaches, according to Burke et al. (2006), correlate with team performance outcomes, and both are needed for teams to be effective.

This idea of person and task focus comes together to encapsulate the objective of group leadership. When Northouse (2021) defined leadership, he said it was influence over a group of individuals. While the group appears to be moving towards a common outcome, its core remains a series of individuals working together. An American football team is comprised of eleven individuals on the field, driving towards a common goal, yet each moving in different ways, performing various functions.

In a similar approach, the Belbin Team Role Model identifies nine key team roles: Implementer, Coordinator, Shaper, Innovator, Resource Investigator, Monitor Evaluator, Team Worker, Completer Finisher, and Specialist (Belbin, 1981, 2017). Each role is associated with specific strengths, contributions, and allowable weaknesses, and recognizing primary, secondary, and tertiary roles enables individuals to better align with team tasks and dynamics (Townend, 2010). A balance of personality types within the group also contributes significantly to team effectiveness (Bradley & Hebert, 1997).

Once roles are identified, leaders of groups must then work to move the group forward in unity. Salas et al. (2005) offered a framework for group leadership named "The Big Five." They stated that there are five components of teamwork – team leadership, mutual performance monitoring, backup behavior, adaptability, and team orientation – and that effective teamwork requires these Big Five core components regardless of team type or task.

With the people in place, the roles assigned, and the components present, the process of leadership and group development begins to take shape. Tuckman (1965) offered a significant contribution to the understanding of group development. His original work offered four stages of development: forming, storming, norming, performing, and a subsequent publication added adjourning as the fifth and final stage (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The progression of the group development has been debated in the literature. While Wheelan et al. (2003) found empirical support for linear, stage-based models of group development in naturalistic work settings, Miller

(2003) found that the development of teams was not strictly linear but that teams sometimes regressed or cycled through earlier stages. Either way, teams have shown to progress, demonstrating in later stages significantly more team learning behaviors, psychological safety, and group potency (Edmondson, 1999; Raes et al., 2015).

The complexity of group dynamics can impact group leadership. Bachiochi et al. (2000) identified twenty qualities of effective team leaders, organized into six related categories. Task-oriented skills and interpersonal skills made up 53% of the effective traits, followed by expertise, communication, personal characteristics, and liaison skills. Balliet and Van Lange (2013) found that larger groups had higher levels of trust and cooperation. In contrast, Wheelan (2009) found that larger groups exhibited more dependency, conflict, and lower perceived trust, structure, and work focus.

The idea of trust in groups is a recurring and popular topic of study. This conflicting research on trust in groups relative to size reflects a larger approach to the understanding of trust in teams. Dumitru and Mittelstadt (2020) offered a review of the various studies, concluding that trust is dynamic and highly context-dependent. Lee et al. (2023) noted that leaders who prioritize fostering an emotional relationship with their employees based on trust, friendship, partnership, support, and guidance create an environment where conflict is less likely to occur. A loss of trust within a group, especially due to despotic leaders, can have a devastating effect, diverting energy away from productive tasks to coping with stressors (Jabeen & Rahim, 2021).

Both transformational and authentic leadership have demonstrated an increase in trust among followers. Authentic leaders act as role models, creating trust, transparency, and supportive environments that help employees align work and personal life demands (Braun & Peus, 2018). The empathy and emotion often displayed as part of authentic leadership enable leaders to form emotional bonds, create trust and cooperation, thus fostering group cohesion and affective climates (Kellett et al., 2006). Similarly, transformational leadership is positively associated with empowerment through social identification with a group (Kark et al., 2003). Transformational leaders create an atmosphere of trust, motivating followers to go beyond their own self-interests (Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016).

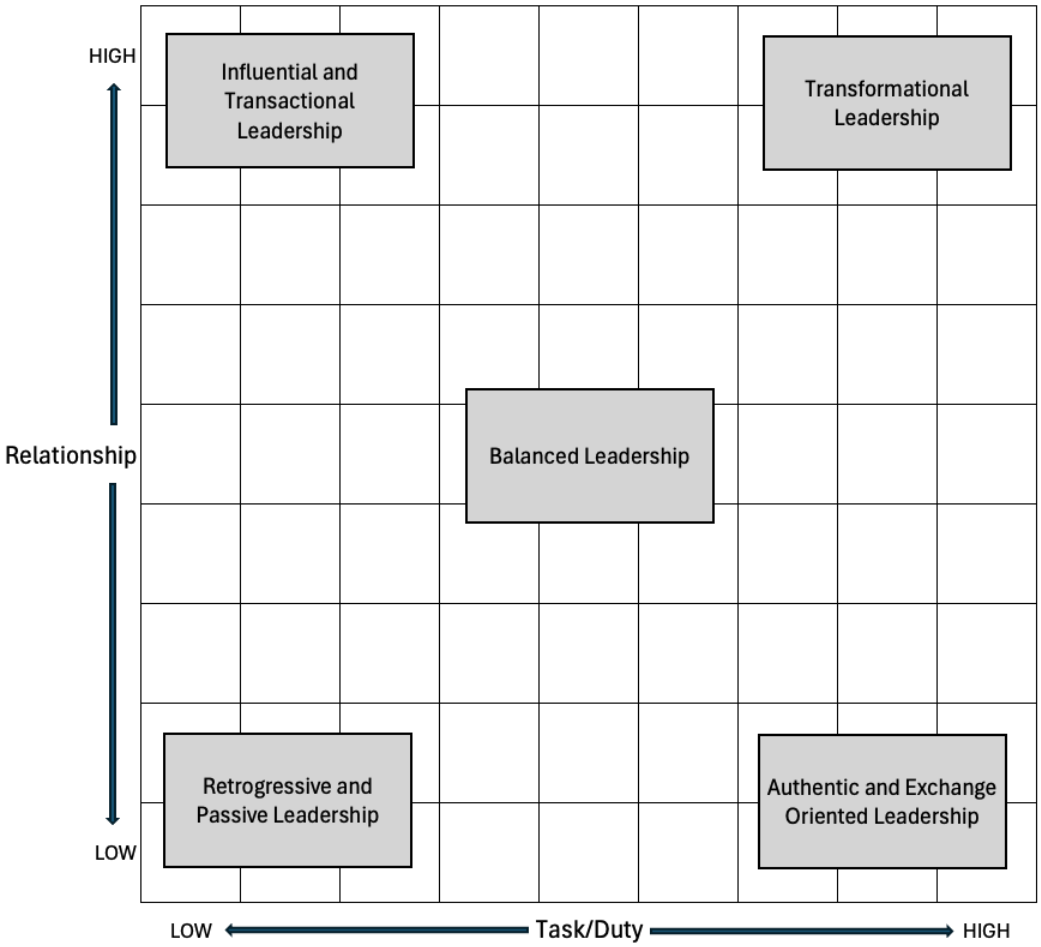
Organizational Level Leadership

The processes at the organizational level center around systems, structures, and cultural behavior, exploiting the knowledge developed at the individual and group levels (Bryant, 2003; Hakiki et al., 2023). The complexity of group dynamics intensifies when raised to the level of an organization, requiring an even more intentional and systematic approach to leadership.

There is no conclusive agreement on the number of leadership theories that can be applied to organizations. Instead, leaders are offered a menu of approaches from which they can choose to apply to their given environment. Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2024) noted that the sheer amount of leadership theories and styles published over the decades demonstrates the complexity of the subject and the difficulty a leader may have in arriving at a single, unified model. Dehghanan et al. (2021) identified the characteristics of 40 different leadership models, plotting them on a 9x9 matrix relative to their emphasis on task and relationship focus. Their structure for categorization is seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1

9x9 Leadership Categorization (Dehghanan et al., 2021)



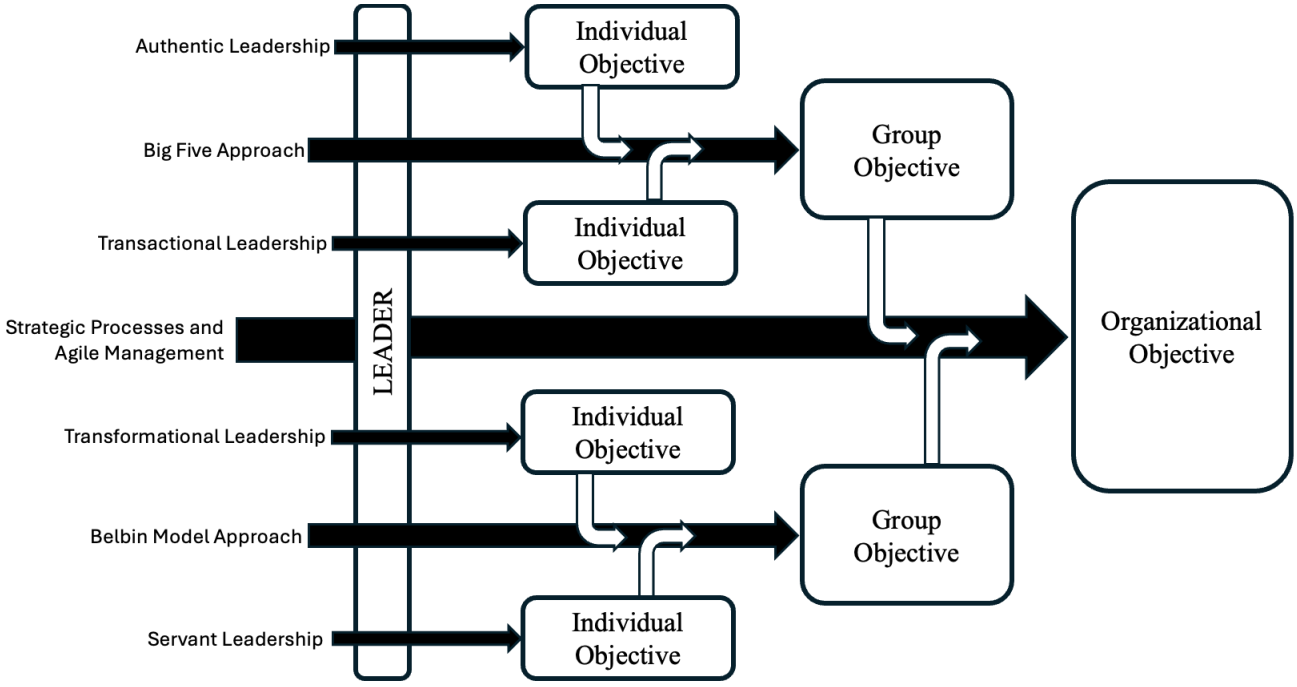
Note. Figure adapted from *A systematic review of leadership styles in organizations: Introducing the concept of a task-relationship–change leadership network*, by Dehghanan, H., Gheitarani, F., Rahimi, S., & Nawaser, K., 2021, *International Journal of Innovation and Technology Management*

Leaders must navigate a complex landscape shaped by the vast array of available theories and their varied outcomes. Amghar (2022), building on traditional contingency theories (Fiedler, 1964; Hersey, 1988; House, 1996; Kerr & Jermier, 1978; Yukl, 2013), emphasized the need for leaders to adapt the style of leadership to the special requirements of their environment. The variety of restraints, resources, opportunities, and objectives requires leaders within an organization to adjust their approach in order to optimize their effectiveness. Mirčetić et al. (2020) mirrored the approach of Dehghanan et al. (2021), stating that "Situational leadership models emphasize that the leader must adapt their style depending on the development level of their followers, balancing between task orientation and relationship orientation" (p. 95).

Leadership at the organizational level is at once both the sum of influenced individuals and the overarching movement of the organization towards the desired goal. Figure 2 illustrates the simultaneous influence of leaders and an example of a possible combination of leadership methods applied to each objective.

Figure 2

Variable leader influences throughout an organization.



Note. The figure is an original creation by the author to demonstrate the hierarchical relationship of multi-level leadership influences.

Discussion

The necessity for a situational approach does not mean that models should be chosen at random or applied without constraint. Instead, it is imperative that the approaches applied by the leader maximize both their own strengths and those of their team. Because leadership styles have a significant influence on creating the organizational culture, which affects the satisfaction, motivation, and efficiency of employees (Enku & Dimovska, 2024), attention to tangential or collateral effects needs to be maintained.

The effect on culture, and in turn, the satisfaction, motivation, and efficiency of employees, cannot be ignored in a conversation about organizational leadership. Mykolayivna and Qiaolying (2024) noted that motivation theories like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Herzberg's two-factor theory, Vroom's expectancy theory, and Adams' equity theory provide frameworks for understanding employee behavior, and that those theories need to be tailored to the needs of employees and the culture of the organization. Different leadership styles have different impacts on employee motivations (Sitthiwarongchai et al., 2020), and the choice of leadership methods must take into account both the impact on followers and on the culture of the organization.

Aside from employee motivations, other factors can be impacted by leadership methods applied throughout the organization. For example, transformational and democratic leadership positively affect innovation of employees (Costa et al., 2023), while a two-pronged approach—motivating (transformational) and capacity-building (empowering)—was found to be most effective for fostering innovation (Günzel-Jensen et al.,

2018). Authentic leadership taps into psychological resources that create environments supportive of dialogue, learning, and participation (Alavi & Gill, 2017). As noted by Aksakal and Ucucan (2024), even generational differences, such as Gen Z employees, require a combination of approaches to meet their needs for collaborative, emotionally aware, and digitally savvy leadership.

Limitations and Future Research

There has been a historical precedence of the leader as the primary focus of leadership research, with followers and their behaviors studied only in the context of leader development (Matshoba-Ramuedzisi et al., 2022). Despite the historical emphasis on the leadership perspective, the role of followership must be addressed. Ribbit et al. (2024) noted that, since 2014 and Uhl-Bien's (2014) casting the spotlight on the subject, there has been considerable work demonstrating how far followership can influence the leader, the leadership process, and organizational outcomes, alongside and beyond the leader's influence. Arshad et al. (2022) highlighted the recurring theme of institutional and organizational success being linked to followership as well as leadership. While this research synthesis explores the complexity of multi-level leadership, future research should address "the other side of the leadership coin" (Ekundayo, 2010). Just as various leadership models can be applied at differing organizational levels, so too should the diversity of followership be explored.

An additional limitation of this research synthesis is the lack of empirical research on cross-level leadership effects. Future research should be aimed at identifying specific interactions of various leadership approaches and the trickle-down, or trickle-up effects that may be present between organizational levels. Similar studies targeting specific leadership theories and their trickle effects (Bormann & Diebig, 2021; Mayer et al., 2009; Stollberger et al., 2019) could serve as a model for future empirical research.

Conclusion

The vastness and complexity of organizational leadership can be daunting, leaving leaders questioning their effectiveness in the face of ever-evolving challenges. The good news is that leaders can position themselves to receive critical feedback as to the needs and expectations of followers. Dedahanov et al. (2022) found that benevolent and moral leadership styles positively affect trust and encourage employees to voice their needs and concerns. That, for leaders, seems to be a good place to start.

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