

Research Article

People and Leadership: Ontological Foundations, Historical Agency, and the Ethics of Transformative Change

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Abstract

This article develops an integrated theoretical and empirical framework for understanding leadership as a relational, ethical, and historically embedded process co-constructed by leaders and the people. Challenging leader-centric and purely instrumental approaches, the study conceptualizes leadership not as an inherent property of exceptional individuals or formal office holders, but as a morally contingent and socially conferred phenomenon grounded in legitimacy, collective agency, and ethical reciprocity. Drawing upon interdisciplinary scholarship from political theory, sociology, organizational studies, psychology, and governance research, the article advances a people-centered conception of leadership that emphasizes the active role of citizens, followers, and stakeholders in constituting, evaluating, and sustaining leadership legitimacy. The study advances three central arguments. First, leadership is ontologically relational and exists only through the continuous interaction between leaders and the people, whose consent, interpretation, and moral judgment determine the durability of authority. Second, ethical positivity, encompassing hope, empathy, integrity, moral courage, and visionary responsibility, functions not merely as a desirable leadership trait but as a structural precondition for sustainable and transformative leadership. Third, historical and contemporary evidence demonstrates a persistent moral divergence between emancipatory leadership oriented toward justice, inclusion, and collective flourishing, and destructive leadership grounded in coercion, manipulation, exclusion, and domination. The article synthesizes classical leadership theories, including trait, behavioral, contingency, transformational, Weberian, and ethical leadership traditions, while extending them through a relational-normative framework of legitimacy. It further incorporates contemporary political challenges, including electoral legitimacy crises, corruption, populism, regime change, narrative construction, globalization, and the tension between genuine revolution and elite-driven political manipulation. Through comparative historical analysis, the article examines the leadership trajectories of Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman alongside destructive authoritarian cases such as Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin, illustrating how ethical orientation fundamentally shapes leadership outcomes and historical consequences. The study argues that modern leadership legitimacy is increasingly contested within fragmented informational environments where symbolic narratives often compete with empirical realities. Consequently, leadership must be understood as a continuously negotiated social process shaped by institutional constraints, ethical accountability, and the interpretive agency of the people. The article concludes by proposing an integrative framework for people-centered leadership that emphasizes democratic participation, institutional safeguards, moral legitimacy, and active civic consciousness as foundational conditions for humane, sustainable, and transformative governance in the twenty-first century.

Keywords

Leadership, Legitimacy, Democracy, Ethics, People-centered Governance, Corruption, Regime Change, Transformational Leadership

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1. Introduction

Leadership remains one of the most studied yet conceptually contested phenomena in the social sciences, political theory, and organizational studies [44]. Scholars have long sought to understand the conditions under which individuals emerge as leaders, why people choose to follow them, and how leadership shapes the course of social, political, and organizational life [15]. Classical accounts often emphasized the role of heroic individuals, portraying history as the outcome of the actions of exceptional Figures whose vision and character determined the fate of nations [33]. Such “great man” theories, while influential, have been criticized for neglecting the broader social, institutional, and cultural contexts in which leadership is enacted.

At its core, leadership is inherently relational. Leaders do not operate in isolation; their effectiveness is shaped by the communities, organizations, and historical moments in which they act. People, whether citizens, employees, or stakeholders, are not passive recipients of directives. Rather, they actively interpret, negotiate, resist, or endorse leadership initiatives, thereby granting or withholding legitimacy [31]. This recognition underscores the ethical and social dimensions of leadership: leadership is not simply about exercising authority or achieving efficiency, but about engaging meaningfully with others in ways that reflect shared values and collective purpose [20].

Modern leadership scholarship increasingly conceptualizes leadership as a dynamic, processual phenomenon rather than a fixed set of traits or behaviors. Relational and process-oriented approaches emphasize the interactions between leaders and followers, highlighting how leadership emerges from dialogue, trust, and mutual influence [46]. Transformational leadership theory, for instance, stresses the role of vision, moral commitment, and follower engagement in producing enduring social and organizational change [15]. Similarly, contemporary organizational research underscores that ethical, inclusive, and positive leadership practices foster both individual flourishing and collective resilience [16].

This article advances three interrelated propositions that extend these insights. First, leadership should be understood as a relational and ethical process, rather than as a mere function of formal authority, coercive power, or managerial control [37]. Second, positivity, encompassing ethical optimism, empathy, moral courage, and a commitment to the long-term welfare of others, is a critical precondition for authentic and sustainable leadership [16]. Leaders who cultivate these qualities are better equipped to inspire trust, mobilize collective action, and navigate complex ethical dilemmas. Third, historical experience illustrates a stark contrast between leaders who mobilize communities for emancipation, justice, and societal advancement, and those who manipulate collective emotions for destructive ends [32]. Understanding these contrasts not only

informs theory but provides practical guidance for contemporary leadership in both political and organizational contexts.

In sum, leadership is a socially embedded, morally charged, and processual phenomenon that cannot be reduced to individual traits or positional authority. By centering people, relational dynamics, and ethical positivity, this article seeks to contribute to a more holistic understanding of leadership that is both theoretically robust and practically relevant in the complex global contexts of the twenty-first century.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary, and interpretive research design to examine leadership as a relational, ethical, and historically embedded phenomenon. The research combines conceptual analysis, comparative historical inquiry, normative political theory, and interpretive institutional analysis in order to develop an integrated framework of people-centered leadership. Rather than treating leadership as a purely measurable managerial variable, the study approaches leadership as a socially constructed and morally mediated process shaped by interactions among leaders, people, institutions, and historical conditions.

The study is primarily theoretical in orientation, but it incorporates empirical illustrations from political history, organizational scholarship, governance studies, and social movement research to strengthen analytical validity. The objective is not statistical generalization but analytical generalization through theoretical synthesis and comparative interpretation.

2.2. Philosophical and Epistemological Orientation

The research is grounded in a relational and constructivist epistemology combined with a normative-critical orientation. Leadership is understood as socially co-constructed through collective recognition, interpretation, and legitimacy rather than existing as an objective and fixed attribute independent of social perception. This perspective aligns with interpretive social science traditions emphasizing meaning, discourse, and moral evaluation in political and organizational life.

Ontologically, the study adopts a relational understanding of leadership in which leadership emerges through interactions between leaders and the people within institutional and historical contexts. The research therefore rejects strictly positivist and leader-centric assumptions that reduce leadership to traits, behavioral patterns, or administrative efficiency alone.

At the normative level, the study incorporates ethical eval-

uation as an essential analytical dimension. Leadership is assessed not only in terms of effectiveness or mobilizational capacity but also according to moral legitimacy, inclusivity, accountability, and consequences for human dignity and collective well-being.

2.3. Sources and Data

The study relies primarily on secondary sources drawn from interdisciplinary academic literature, historical records, governance studies, leadership theory, political sociology, and comparative political analysis. Sources include:

- 1) Peer-reviewed journal articles
- 2) Foundational leadership and political theory texts
- 3) Historical biographies and archival materials
- 4) Governance and democracy studies
- 5) Comparative institutional analyses
- 6) Empirical studies on social movements and leadership outcomes
- 7) Contemporary scholarly works on legitimacy, corruption, populism, and political transformation

In addition, the article integrates and extends conceptual insights developed in the author's earlier works on people-centered leadership, democratic legitimacy, ethical governance, and revolutionary transformation.

2.4. Comparative Historical Analysis

Comparative historical analysis serves as a major methodological component of the study. Selected historical leaders and political cases were examined comparatively to identify recurring patterns linking ethical orientation, legitimacy, collective mobilization, and institutional outcomes. The study intentionally contrasts emancipatory leadership cases with destructive authoritarian leadership to illuminate the ethical ambivalence of influence and power.

The cases of Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were selected because they represent historically significant examples of leadership grounded in moral legitimacy, collective mobilization, and transformative social change. In contrast, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin were included as counterexamples demonstrating how leadership detached from ethical accountability may generate destructive outcomes despite organizational or mobilizational effectiveness.

The comparative method allows the study to move beyond culturally isolated interpretations and identify broader theoretical patterns across differing political, historical, and institutional contexts.

2.5. Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is structured around five interrelated dimensions:

- 1) Relational legitimacy: how leadership is socially recognized and sustained through public consent and moral evaluation;
- 2) Ethical orientation: the moral foundations and value systems guiding leadership behavior;
- 3) Collective agency: the role of people as active participants in leadership processes;
- 4) Institutional context: the role of constitutional, organizational, and governance structures in shaping leadership outcomes;
- 5) Historical consequences: the long-term societal implications of leadership practices.

This multidimensional framework enables the study to synthesize normative theory, institutional analysis, and historical interpretation into a unified people-centered conception of leadership.

2.6. Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is primarily qualitative and interpretive; therefore, it does not employ quantitative measurement or statistical modeling of leadership variables. Second, historical interpretations inevitably involve contextual and normative judgment. Third, the article focuses primarily on political and moral dimensions of leadership and does not extensively examine technical managerial competencies or sector-specific leadership practices.

Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary and comparative nature of the research provides substantial analytical depth and theoretical coherence, enabling a broader understanding of leadership as an ethical, relational, and historically situated phenomenon.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

The study relies exclusively on publicly available academic and historical materials and therefore does not involve human subjects, interviews, or confidential data. Ethical responsibility in this research primarily concerns intellectual integrity, balanced interpretation, and accurate representation of historical and scholarly sources. The study seeks to maintain analytical neutrality while engaging critically with questions of legitimacy, morality, and power in leadership practice.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Train Behavior and Contingency Approaches

Early leadership scholarship was dominated by trait and behavioral approaches, which sought to identify stable personal characteristics or observable behaviors that distinguished leaders from non-leaders. Seminal work by Ralph Stogdill [53] demonstrated that no single set of traits consistently predicted

leadership effectiveness across contexts, thereby challenging simplistic heroic notions of leadership. Behavioral theories, later refined through contingency models such as Fred Fiedler's [25] contingency theory, shifted attention toward leadership styles and situational fit. While these approaches contributed significantly to leadership competency analysis, particularly in organizational and managerial settings, they remained largely instrumental. They explained *how* leaders influence followers but offered limited insight into *why* leadership should be considered legitimate, ethical, or socially responsible. Crucially, these theories lacked the conceptual tools to account for moral failure, abuse of power, or the ethical collapse of otherwise "effective" leaders.

3.2. Transformative Leadership and Moral Purpose

A decisive normative shift occurred with the emergence of transformational leadership theory, which redefined leadership as a moral and relational process rather than a technical function. James MacGregor Burns [15] conceptualized leadership as a reciprocal relationship in which leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. In this framework, leadership is inseparable from values, purpose, and collective well-being. Burns explicitly distinguished transformational leadership from transactional exchanges, arguing that the former is anchored in shared ethical aspirations rather than material incentives or coercion. This moral elevation criterion fundamentally differentiated leadership from domination or administrative control.

Building on Burns, Bernard Bass [9] operationalized transformational leadership into measurable dimensions, including idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Although Bass's model expanded empirical research, critics have noted that transformational leadership can become ethically ambiguous when charismatic influence is detached from moral accountability. As such, the theory underscores the importance of embedding ethical constraints within leadership practice to prevent manipulation or cult-like followership.

3.3. People-centred Leadership: A Relational-normative Theory of Legitimacy

This people-centred and ethically grounded understanding of leadership extends and consolidates Alam's earlier contributions into a coherent theoretical framework. In *The People and the Leadership* [2], leadership is conceptualized as a socially conferred and morally contingent process, emerging through the active consent, interpretation, and judgment of the people. Complementing this, *Return of the Hero* [1] articulates the moral and psychological qualities that sustain such legitimacy, including courage in moments of uncertainty, integrity

in the exercise of power, empathy toward collective experience, and the capacity to inspire a vision beyond immediate interests. Taken together, these works provide the foundation for a people-centred relational theory of leadership, in which leadership is neither an inherent attribute of individuals nor merely an institutional designation, but a socially emergent and ethically mediated phenomenon.

Ontologically, this framework departs from leader-centric and trait-based theories by locating leadership in the relational space between leaders and the people. Leadership does not reside "within" the leader as a fixed property but is constituted through ongoing interaction, recognition, and shared meaning [21, 57]. This aligns with relational leadership theory while extending it by embedding explicit ethical foundations. Leadership, therefore, exists only insofar as it is collectively acknowledged and morally validated.

Epistemologically, people-centered leadership challenges positivist approaches that prioritize measurable traits or behaviors. Instead, it emphasizes interpretive and normative processes, where leadership is understood through public judgment, narrative construction, and ethical perception [24]. The people are not passive followers but active co-constructors of leadership reality, continuously evaluating the legitimacy of leadership claims. This perspective resonates with deliberative and communicative theories of legitimacy, where authority is sustained through ongoing processes of justification and recognition [30].

At the core of this framework lies the principle of social conferment of authority. While formal mechanisms such as elections or appointments may initiate leadership roles, legitimacy is not guaranteed by institutional procedures alone. Rather, it is continuously renegotiated through collective perception and moral evaluation [59]. This introduces a dynamic understanding of leadership as inherently provisional and contingent, dependent on sustained public trust.

Closely related is the principle of moral contingency, which positions ethical conduct as central to leadership legitimacy. Leadership authority is anchored not merely in legality or efficiency but in moral credibility, derived from perceived integrity, justice, and alignment with shared values [14, 20]. A leader may retain formal authority while losing moral legitimacy, creating a disjunction that often precedes institutional decline or crisis. Alam (2017) anticipates this distinction by emphasizing that leadership endures only where moral authority and collective recognition converge [2].

The framework further advances a model of relational reciprocity, where leadership is co-produced through continuous interaction between leaders and the people. Leaders articulate vision and mobilize action, but the meaning and limits of leadership are shaped by public response and interpretation. This reciprocal dynamic transforms leadership into a dialogical process, rather than a unidirectional exercise of influence [57]. In this sense, leadership is both constructed and constrained by the collective.

A distinctive contribution of this theory is the integration of

the character-legitimacy nexus, drawing on *Return of the Hero* [1]. Moral and psychological qualities: courage, integrity, empathy, and visionary capacity, are not treated as ancillary traits but as structurally constitutive elements of legitimacy. These qualities function as signals through which the public assesses the trustworthiness and moral orientation of leaders. This perspective bridges ethical leadership theory [14] with relational approaches by demonstrating how character becomes socially validated through collective recognition.

Equally important is the recognition of collective agency as the foundation of leadership. People-centered leadership rejects passive conceptions of followership and instead positions the people as active agents of historical change [7]. Leadership becomes effective when it aligns with and activates this collective agency, rather than substituting for it. This shifts the analytical focus from leader dominance to leader-people alignment, a key determinant of sustainable legitimacy.

In the contemporary context, this framework acquires heightened relevance. The expansion of the digital public sphere has intensified the role of public judgment, enabling real-time evaluation and contestation of leadership [18]. Legitimacy is now shaped within decentralized and often fragmented communication networks, making leadership simultaneously more accountable and more volatile. At the same time, a global crisis of institutional trust has increased the salience of ethical authenticity, as citizens evaluate leaders not only by performance outcomes but by perceived sincerity and moral coherence [45].

Furthermore, the rise of populism underscores the importance of distinguishing between authentic people-centred leadership and its distortions. While populist leaders claim to embody the will of the people, they often bypass ethical reciprocity and pluralistic recognition, reducing legitimacy to majoritarian assertion. In contrast, the present framework insists that people-centred leadership must remain normatively bounded, grounded in inclusivity, ethical responsibility, and respect for diverse voices.

In conditions of uncertainty and complexity, ranging from technological disruption to climate challenges, leadership increasingly requires not only technical competence but moral courage and interpretive capacity. Crisis situations, in particular, function as moments of intensified scrutiny, where the alignment between character and action becomes highly visible. As Alam (2017) suggests, it is in such moments that leadership either consolidates or loses its moral foundation [2].

In sum, people-centred leadership can be conceptualized as a relational-normative theory of legitimacy, defined by three core propositions: (1) leadership is socially co-constructed through collective recognition; (2) legitimacy is morally contingent and continuously evaluated; and (3) leadership effectiveness depends on alignment with collective agency. Leadership, therefore, is best understood as a morally mediated social contract, sustained through the convergence of ethical authority and public validation. Where this convergence dissolves, leadership may persist institutionally, but it loses its

substantive legitimacy.

3.4. Weberian Legitimacy and Authority

Insights from political sociology further illuminate the problem of leadership legitimacy, particularly through Max Weber's (1947) typology of authority: traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic. Weber's analysis is especially relevant in understanding how leaders derive legitimacy beyond formal position. Charismatic authority, rooted in perceived extraordinary qualities, can mobilize profound loyalty and social change. However, Weber warned that charisma is inherently unstable and morally ambivalent. Without institutionalization and legal-rational constraints, charismatic leadership risks devolving into authoritarianism or personal domination. This perspective highlights that ethical leadership requires not only virtuous intent but also structural safeguards that limit arbitrary power.

3.5. Ethical Leadership Theory

Contemporary ethical leadership theory integrates these insights by evaluating leadership through both moral processes and outcomes. Ethical leadership emphasizes justice, accountability, transparency, and respect for human dignity as foundational criteria. As articulated by Joanne Ciulla [20], leadership cannot be assessed solely by effectiveness or results; it must also be judged by the moral quality of decisions, methods, and relationships. Ethical leadership thus bridges normative ethics and empirical leadership studies, asserting that leaders are morally responsible for the systems they create, the values they normalize, and the consequences of their actions.

Taken together, these theoretical traditions form an integrated framework in which leadership is understood as a morally embedded social process. Trait and behavioral theories explain capability, transformational leadership addresses moral purpose, Weberian sociology clarifies legitimacy, and ethical leadership theory provides evaluative standards. This synthesis enables a more comprehensive assessment of leadership, one that accounts not only for influence and effectiveness but also for ethical integrity and social responsibility.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Classical and Behavioral Leadership

Leadership studies have undergone significant theoretical evolution, reflecting broader transformations in social science, political theory, and moral philosophy. Early leadership theory was dominated by Great Man perspectives, most notably articulated by Thomas Carlyle (1841), which framed leadership as the product of extraordinary individuals endowed with innate qualities [17]. While influential, this approach was later criticized for its determinism and neglect of social, institutional, and ethical contexts.

Mid-twentieth-century scholarship shifted toward behavioral and contingency models, emphasizing situational adaptability and leader, follower dynamics. The contingency framework advanced by Fred Fiedler [26] challenged universal leadership traits, arguing that effectiveness depended on contextual fit. Although empirically robust, these models largely treated leadership as a value-neutral mechanism for goal attainment, sidelining moral evaluation in favor of efficiency and performance.

4.2. Ethical Reorientation of Leadership Theory

A normative turn emerged with the introduction of transformational leadership, most notably conceptualized by James MacGregor Burns [15]. Burns distinguished transformational leadership from transactional exchange, emphasizing moral purpose, mutual elevation, and collective values. This framework re-centered ethics within leadership studies, arguing that genuine leadership must align means with morally defensible ends. Subsequent theorists, including Bernard Bass, expanded the model empirically, though critics noted that transformational charisma could still be ethically ambivalent if not normatively constrained.

4.3. The Dark Side of Leadership

Responding to this concern, later scholarship interrogated the dark side of leadership. Barbara Kellerman [33] offered a pivotal corrective by examining destructive, unethical, and ineffective leadership, warning against equating influence with virtue. This body of work underscored that leadership capacity can be morally corrosive when divorced from accountability, ethical norms, and institutional checks. Studies on toxic leadership and narcissistic authority further reinforced the dangers of charisma unmoored from ethical responsibility.

4.4. Legitimacy and Soft Power

Within political leadership research, legitimacy and persuasion occupy a central analytical position. Joseph Nye [45] introduced the concept of *soft power*, emphasizing attraction, credibility, and normative appeal over coercion. This framework aligns leadership effectiveness with ethical persuasion rather than force, suggesting that moral credibility constitutes a strategic resource. Political sociologists such as Weber, however, caution that legitimacy, whether traditional, legal-rational, or charismatic, can operate independently of moral goodness, necessitating further ethical scrutiny.

4.5. Rational and Distributed Leadership

Contemporary leadership studies increasingly explore shared, distributed, and relational leadership, particularly in democratic and networked environments. Craig Pearce and Jay Conger [46] argue that leadership emerges through collective processes rather than hierarchical command. While this

literature advances inclusivity and participation, it often assumes, rather than theorizes, the ethical orientation of leadership outcomes. Positivity, trust, and moral coherence are frequently treated as desirable byproducts, not as structural preconditions.

Complementing these developments, Alam (2017) offers an early normative articulation of people-centered leadership, arguing that leadership derives its meaning and legitimacy from the active moral and political engagement of the people [2]. Unlike models that treat followers as passive recipients, this perspective emphasizes their role as evaluators, participants, and co-authors of leadership processes. This contribution anticipates later developments in relational and participatory leadership theory while foregrounding the ethical centrality of public agency.

4.6. Historical Illustrations

Historical and comparative analyses provide vivid illustrations of leadership's moral divergence. Abraham Lincoln exemplified principled political leadership by preserving constitutional unity during civil war while gradually advancing moral opposition to slavery [40]. Mahatma Gandhi mobilized mass resistance through disciplined nonviolence rooted in ethical self-restraint and spiritual conviction [13]. Nelson Mandela institutionalized reconciliation following apartheid, transforming personal moral authority into durable democratic norms [49]. Martin Luther King Jr. fused moral theology with democratic reform, framing justice as both a legal and ethical imperative [12]. Within the Global South, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman articulated a people-centered vision of sovereignty grounded in mass political mobilization, cultural dignity, and social justice, demonstrating leadership rooted in ethical solidarity rather than elite domination.

By contrast, authoritarian Figures such as Adolf Hitler [33] and Joseph Stalin (Service, 2005) reveal how leadership devoid of ethical constraint can mobilize collective energy through fear, repression, and mythic narratives. These cases illustrate that leadership effectiveness, when measured solely by mobilization or control, can coexist with profound moral devastation.

4.7. Positive Leadership

Emerging scholarship on positive leadership seeks to bridge this gap. Kim Cameron [16] demonstrates that positivity fosters trust, resilience, and sustainable performance within organizations. Related research in positive psychology and ethical governance confirms that moral optimism enhances institutional legitimacy and long-term effectiveness. Yet much of this literature remains confined to organizational settings, insufficiently theorized at the political and historical level.

Despite extensive scholarship, ethical positivity remains under-theorized as a structural condition of leadership, particularly in comparative analyses contrasting leaders with moral

vision against those driven by domination. Existing models acknowledge ethics, legitimacy, and values but rarely integrate them into a unified framework that explains why positivity functions as a foundational requirement rather than an optional attribute. Addressing this gap enables a more rigorous understanding of leadership not merely as influence or authority, but as a moral architecture shaping collective futures.

5. Reframing Leadership and People: Ethics, Power, and Historical Transformation

5.1. Defining “People” in Leadership Contexts

In discussions of leadership, the term *people* carries a more robust meaning than simply followers or subordinates. “People” denotes active participants in collective life who shape, contest, and sustain social structures [8]. In democratic contexts, people are *citizens* endowed with agency, rights, and responsibilities that function as moral and political checks on leadership. In organizational environments, people include *stakeholders, employees, communities, partners, and co-creators of value* whose engagement and interpretation of leadership outcomes influence organizational legitimacy and effectiveness [27, 46].

This expanded conception of “people” aligns with Alam’s (2017) argument that people are not merely followers but the primary locus of legitimacy and moral authority in leadership [2]. In this view, leadership exists only insofar as it is continuously validated, interpreted, and, when necessary, contested by the people. Such a perspective underscores the dynamic and dialectical relationship between leadership and collective agency, particularly in democratic and transitional political contexts.

Empirically, research shows that people contribute to leadership dynamics in at least four ways:

- 1) Legitimacy: People confer permission for leaders to act. Leadership perceived as illegitimate often collapses quickly under contestation [54].
- 2) Cultural meaning: Collective narratives and norms influence how leadership is interpreted and enacted [56].
- 3) Social capital: Networks of trust and reciprocity enable coordinated action, which is foundational to leadership effectiveness [47].
- 4) Moral evaluation: People collectively judge leaders’ ethical standing, influencing support, resistance, and historical memory [29].

Without people, leadership is void; without leadership, people may lack coordinated direction, a dialectical relationship rather than a hierarchy. This dialectic echoes Weber’s concept of *legitimacy* where authority is recognized not by force alone but by collective belief and consent [58, 59].

5.2. Leadership Versus Similar Roles: Conceptual and Empirical Distinctions

Terminological clarity is essential in leadership studies, as the concepts of management, authority, power, and domination are frequently used interchangeably despite their distinct ontological and functional meanings. A rigorous differentiation not only refines theoretical precision but also strengthens empirical analysis by preventing category errors that obscure the relational and normative dimensions of leadership.

5.2.1. Leadership vs. Management

Management is conventionally associated with planning, organizing, budgeting, and controlling processes aimed at maintaining order and efficiency. As articulated by John P. Kotter [38], management sustains system stability, whereas leadership is fundamentally concerned with direction-setting, alignment, and adaptive change. This distinction is further deepened by the recognition that managers and leaders differ not only in their functional responsibilities but also in their psychological orientation: managers generally emphasize institutional stability, coordination, and continuity, whereas leaders are more inclined to challenge existing paradigms, inspire change, and mobilize transformative vision. Empirical evidence suggests that organizations that prioritize managerial control while neglecting leadership capacity may achieve procedural efficiency, yet often struggle with strategic adaptability and long-term innovation.

5.2.2. Leadership vs. Authority

Authority derives from formal position within an institutional hierarchy and is typically enforced through codified rules and sanctions. In contrast, leadership is relational and contingent upon legitimacy as perceived by followers. The classic framework of John R. P. French and Bertram Raven (1959) distinguishes between positional power and referent or expert influence, the latter being more aligned with leadership. Empirical political studies [42] demonstrate that formal authority does not ensure trust or compliance; legitimacy often emerges outside institutional structures, particularly in grassroots or participatory movements.

5.2.3. Leadership vs. Power

Power, defined by Robert A. Dahl [22] as the capacity to influence outcomes, is a broader construct that encompasses coercion, control, and resource allocation. Leadership, while it may utilize power, is distinguished by its reliance on persuasion, shared meaning, and voluntary alignment. Michel Foucault [20] re-conceptualized power as diffuse and embedded within institutional and discursive structures, implying that leadership cannot be reduced to mere possession of power but must be understood as a socially mediated process of influence within these structures.

5.2.4. Leadership vs. Domination

Domination represents the imposition of will through coercion, fear, or structural subjugation. In contrast, leadership is normatively grounded in legitimacy and collective purpose. Hannah Arendt [6] draws a sharp distinction between power as collective action and violence as coercion, situating domination closer to the latter. Empirical evidence from authoritarian regimes shows that compliance is often enforced rather than internalized, leading to fragile and unsustainable governance outcomes. By contrast, participatory and transformational leadership models [10] consistently demonstrate higher levels of trust, commitment, and long-term effectiveness.

In sum, while leadership may intersect with management, authority, power, and domination, it remains analytically distinct due to its relational, ethical, and legitimacy-based foundations. This distinction is critical for both theoretical development and empirical evaluation of leadership in diverse institutional contexts.

5.3. Leadership and Historical Change: Empirical Patterns

History offers powerful case studies where leadership intertwines moral vision with collective mobilization. Comparative research confirms that transformative leaders often emerge in moments of crisis, transition, or societal rupture [15].

- 1) Abraham Lincoln: Lincoln's deliberative leadership during the American Civil War involved not only preservation of the Union but the reframing of national identity through emancipation. Quantitative analyses of Civil War speeches show that Lincoln repeatedly linked national purpose with moral inclusion, contributing to durable political change [41].
- 2) Mahatma Gandhi: Gandhi's leadership of India's independence movement was grounded in nonviolent resistance (*satyagraha*). Empirical studies of anti-colonial campaigns conclude that nonviolent strategies were statistically more effective than violent ones in achieving independence and sustaining post-conflict stability [19].
- 3) Nelson Mandela: Mandela's leadership in post-apartheid South Africa emphasized reconciliation and shared citizenship. Institutional reforms under his leadership helped avoid violent backlash, as documented in longitudinal political stability indices.
- 4) Martin Luther King Jr.: King advanced civil rights through moral persuasion combined with strategic coalition building. Social movement researchers have documented how nonviolent civil rights campaigns significantly shifted public opinion and policy outcomes in the United States [43].
- 5) Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Bangabandhu): Rahman's leadership in the political evolution of East Pakistan, from 1947 through the Bangladesh Liberation War, represents a paradigmatic case of mass-based emancipatory

leadership under conditions of systemic discrimination and authoritarian rule. Through sustained mobilization against political, economic, and cultural marginalization imposed by West Pakistan, Rahman articulated a unifying vision of autonomy, democracy, and national dignity.

His formulation of the Six-Point Movement provided a coherent institutional framework for regional self-determination, transforming diffuse grievances into a structured political program. Despite enduring imprisonment for nearly 14 of the 24 years of Pakistani rule, Rahman maintained symbolic and organizational centrality within the Bengali nationalist movement.

His historic 7th March Speech, delivered at the Ramna Race Course (now Suhrawardy Udyan), functioned as a de facto declaration of independence, effectively coordinating mass civil resistance and preparing the people for armed struggle. Scholars of political mobilization note that this speech exemplifies how rhetorical leadership can synchronize collective action at scale, bridging moral legitimacy with strategic clarity. Rahman's role as the undisputed leader of the Bengali nation during the Liberation War underscores how leadership, when rooted in popular mandate and moral authority, can catalyze state formation under extreme repression.

These leaders demonstrate that leadership effectiveness often depends on the alignment of moral vision, broad-based participation, and institutional articulation. Across contexts, from the United States and India to South Africa and Bangladesh, comparative evidence suggests that durable transformation emerges when leaders successfully integrate ethical legitimacy with mass mobilization and strategic political frameworks.

5.4. Ethical Positivity and Sustainable Leadership

Positivity in leadership is more than optimistic rhetoric; it is an ethical disposition supporting constructive change. Research in *positive organizational scholarship* empirically links positive affective states in leaders to team engagement, resilience, and performance outcomes.

- 1) Hope enables leaders to articulate feasible futures and sustain collective morale [52].
- 2) Moral courage underpins resistance to corruption and ethical blind spots [35].
- 3) Empathy fosters psychological safety, which correlates with innovation and adaptability [23].
- 4) Vision provides cognitive frameworks around which people organize action [10].

This emphasis on positivity and ethical disposition resonates with Alam's (2017) earlier articulation of leadership as grounded in courage, integrity, and a deep sense of responsibility toward the collective [1, 2]. In that account, leadership is not defined by authority alone but by the ability to embody moral conviction, inspire confidence in uncertain times, and align individual action with broader social purpose. Such

qualities function not as optional enhancements but as foundational conditions for sustaining trust and collective engagement.

Meta-analytic evidence indicates that positive leadership traits (e.g., transformational leadership behaviors) are strongly correlated with employee job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behaviors, and performance [32]. During crises, leaders embodying positivity are more likely to sustain trust and collective resilience, a finding reinforced by psychological research on coping and hope under adversity [28].

5.5. Ethical Divergence in Historical Leadership

Leadership is morally ambivalent. Charisma and influence can mobilize liberation or destruction depending on ethical orientation.

- 1) Adolf Hitler manipulated nationalist sentiment and institutional channels to implement genocidal policies. Scholars linking psychological profiling with historical outcomes have shown that Hitler's rhetoric exploited frustration and scapegoating, generating mass mobilization toward destructive ends [34].
- 2) Joseph Stalin consolidated power through repression, purges, and propaganda, illustrating how authority plus coercive power can suppress people's agency while maintaining structural control [36].

These cases are often contrasted with leaders whose moral frameworks explicitly expanded rights and dignity. The moral distinction lies not in the capacity to influence but in ethical orientation, respect for people, recognition of plurality, and commitment to shared flourishing. Comparative moral leadership studies confirm that ethical legitimacy is a stronger predictor of long-term social stability than coercive power [51].

The contrast between ethical and destructive leadership further underscores the importance of the moral qualities identified in Alam (2017). Where courage becomes aggression, vision becomes manipulation, and charisma becomes domination, leadership transforms into a vehicle of harm rather than collective advancement [2].

5.6. Psychological and Sociological Dimensions of Leadership

Leadership involves profound *identity work*. Social identity theory suggests that leaders embody group prototypes, acting as representatives and shapers of collective identity [31]. Leaders succeed not merely by directing behavior but by helping people *understand who they are and what they can become* as a collective.

Sociologically, leadership both stabilizes institutions and enables adaptation. Institutional theory posits that leaders help align organizational routines with changing environments while preserving core cultural values [55]. Empirical studies of institutional change underscore leadership's role in legitimation, sense-making, and coordination during periods of flux.

5.7. Globalization and Networked Leadership in the 21st Century

With globalization and digital connectivity, leadership has become increasingly distributed, networked, and participatory. Social network analyses demonstrate that influence no longer resides solely in hierarchical positions but circulates across nodes of interaction, from civic networks to digital publics [11].

Digital platforms enable decentralized movements [56]. For instance, research on online mobilization reveals that digital ties can facilitate rapid coordination while lowering participation costs, expanding the possibilities for collective action beyond traditional leadership channels. However, networked leadership also faces challenges of fragmentation and misinformation, necessitating renewed attention to ethical accountability.

5.8. Ethical Accountability and Institutional Constraints

For leadership to remain democratic and humane, ethical accountability and institutional constraints are essential. Checks and balances are not obstacles to leadership but safeguards against authoritarian drift. Political science research demonstrates that constitutional constraints, independent judiciaries, and free media reduce executive overreach and protect citizens' rights [38].

Institutional constraints also anchor leadership within ethical frameworks that elevate people's agency. For example, comparative studies of democratic governance show that countries with strong institutional oversight exhibit higher public trust and lower corruption rates, illustrating the symbiotic relationship between institutional accountability and ethical leadership outcomes [48].

5.9. Contemporary Crises in Leadership Legitimacy

While classical and modern leadership theories offer enduring conceptual foundations, contemporary political realities demand a re-centering of analysis around legitimacy, perception, and ethical agency. The relationship between leadership and people is no longer mediated solely through institutional design; it is increasingly shaped by crises of trust, contested narratives, and the shifting boundaries of sovereignty. Taken together, the works of Zahurul Alam published in the *Journal of Public Policy and Administration* provide a coherent framework for understanding these transformations [3-5].

The contemporary crisis of legitimacy and trust further reflects insights articulated in Alam (2017), where leadership is described as inherently dependent on the people's moral recognition rather than procedural validation alone. The erosion of trust in modern political systems illustrates the conse-

quences of disconnecting leadership from its foundational social and ethical base [2].

5.9.1. Elections and the Fragility of Procedural Legitimacy

In *Resetting the Compass: Bangladesh's Road to Participatory and Fair Elections*, Zahurul Alam re-conceptualizes legitimacy as a continuous moral and institutional process, rather than a discrete outcome of electoral procedures. Elections, while necessary, are insufficient as standalone sources of authority when detached from transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness [3].

The central insight is that governance crises emerge not from the absence of democratic forms, but from their hollowing out. Leadership may claim electoral validation while simultaneously weakening institutions, constraining civic participation, and eroding trust. In such contexts, procedural legitimacy becomes a façade, sustaining authority in form while undermining it in substance.

This reframing shifts the analytical focus from “whether elections occur” to how legitimacy is sustained between elections, through ethical conduct, responsiveness, and institutional integrity. Leadership, therefore, must be understood as an ongoing negotiation with the people, not a mandate secured at a single moment in time.

5.9.2. Corruption and the Crisis of Moral Orientation

Extending this argument, *Resetting the Compass* also situates corruption as a crisis of orientation, rather than merely a governance failure. Corruption represents a breakdown in the ethical relationship between leadership and people, transforming public authority into an instrument of private gain.

This breakdown operates across three interrelated dimensions:

- 1) Institutional: the erosion of accountability and rule-based governance
- 2) Relational: the collapse of trust between citizens and leadership
- 3) Normative: the normalization of unethical conduct within political culture

What emerges is not simply inefficiency, but a deeper transformation in how leadership itself is perceived. Citizens begin to disengage or adapt to diminished expectations, while leadership becomes increasingly insulated from moral scrutiny. In this sense, corruption is both a symptom and a driver of declining legitimacy, reinforcing the structural fragility identified in contemporary democratic systems.

5.9.3. Revolution, Conspiracy, and the Ambiguity of Collective Agency

In *Ethics of Revolutionary Change: Distinguishing People's Revolution from Conspiracy, Elite-Driven Regime Change and the Exploitation of Popular Sovereignty* (Alam,

2026), Zahurul Alam challenges binary conceptions of political transformation that rigidly separate revolution from conspiracy. Instead, political upheaval is theorized as a continuum of agency, within which authentic popular mobilization and elite-driven orchestration may coexist, overlap, and interact [4]. This reconceptualization extends the People-Centered Leadership framework by situating leadership within structurally contested fields of power rather than treating it as a purely intentional or leader-driven phenomenon (Alam, 2017; Alam, 2026).

This perspective directly complements the distinctions developed in Section 4.2. While management emphasizes order, control, and procedural stability [36], and authority derives from institutional legitimacy [59], revolutionary contexts destabilize both categories. Similarly, power, as the capacity to shape outcomes, and domination, as its institutionalized and asymmetrical form, often operate beneath or alongside visible mobilization. Alam's (2026) intervention demonstrates that collective action cannot be analytically separated from these underlying structures, as they may actively configure the trajectory and meaning of popular participation.

From a People-Centred Leadership perspective, collective agency is not reducible to observable participation. Mass mobilization, frequently interpreted as an expression of popular will, may be conditioned by hidden architectures of influence, including political elites, organized networks, and external actors. As Alam (2026) argues, participation without autonomy does not constitute sovereignty. This insight resonates with Steven Lukes's [35] three-dimensional view of power, particularly the capacity to shape perceptions and preferences in ways that obscure domination [39].

Accordingly, the distinction between a people's revolution and an elite-driven regime change cannot rely solely on empirical indicators such as scale, intensity, or visibility of participation. It requires a multidimensional evaluative framework grounded in:

- 1) Origin of mobilization: whether collective action emerges organically from historically embedded grievances or is initiated and strategically amplified by elite actors;
- 2) Direction and control of political processes: whether the movement remains responsive to the evolving will of the people or becomes increasingly centralized and managed;
- 3) Ethical and structural outcomes of change: whether transformation advances justice, inclusivity, and institutional accountability, or reproduces domination in reconfigured forms [2].

Within this framework, leadership assumes a relational, contingent, and contested character, consistent with relational leadership theory [57]. Leadership is neither inherently representative nor inherently manipulative; rather, it is co-constructed through dynamic interactions between people and organized power. This aligns with Alam's (2017) conception of leadership as socially conferred and morally contingent, yet

extends it by recognizing that such conferral may occur under conditions of partial information, asymmetrical influence, and strategic intervention.

The result is a condition of ambiguous collective agency, in which the boundaries between empowerment and manipulation remain fluid and contested. Popular sovereignty may be invoked symbolically while being substantively constrained. In such contexts, legitimacy cannot be inferred solely from participation; instead, it must be critically evaluated in relation to autonomy, intent, and outcome. This reinforces the distinction drawn in Section 4.2 between leadership and domination: where leadership depends on voluntary alignment, domination persists even under the appearance of consent.

For People-Centered Leadership and Governance (PLG), this has significant implications. Leadership effectiveness cannot be assessed merely by mobilizational capacity or strategic success; it must also be evaluated in terms of Leadership-People Alignment (LPA), ethical orientation, and institutional consequences. In this sense, Alam's continuum model provides a critical bridge between normative leadership theory and empirical political analysis, enabling a more rigorous differentiation between transformative change and its simulated or appropriated forms.

In sum, by embedding revolution within a continuum of agency shaped by power, authority, and influence, Alam (2026) advances a more nuanced theory of political transformation. This framework deepens the analytical coherence of People-Centered Leadership by foregrounding the interdependence of people, leadership, and structures of power under conditions of epistemic uncertainty and normative contestation.

5.9.4. Narrative vs. Empirical Reality

In *Between Myth and Metrics: The 240 Billion Question and Bangladesh's Development*, Zahurul Alam (2026) identifies a defining feature of contemporary leadership: the growing divergence between narrative construction and empirical reality [5]. Leadership increasingly operates within two overlapping yet often disjunctive domains:

- 1) A symbolic domain, shaped by narrative, identity, and emotional resonance
- 2) A material domain, defined by measurable indicators, institutional performance, and policy outcomes

The expansion of modern communication ecosystems has significantly amplified the symbolic domain. In this environment, leaders can construct, project, and sustain legitimacy through compelling narratives even when empirical performance remains contested, uneven, or subject to technical ambiguity. As a result, leadership legitimacy is no longer strictly anchored in governance outcomes alone but is increasingly mediated through perception, interpretation, and symbolic alignment.

Alam (2026) illustrates this tension in the context of Bangladesh's development trajectory. While empirical indicators over recent decades suggest substantial socio-economic pro-

gress, alternative political narratives have emerged that reinterpret this trajectory through claims of systemic mismanagement and large-scale resource extraction. Some of these claims invoke extraordinarily large financial figures that, if taken at face value, would imply unprecedented macroeconomic distortions.

From an analytical standpoint, such assertions require rigorous empirical validation. At the macroeconomic level, claims of this magnitude would typically be reflected in observable structural anomalies, such as sustained balance of payments crises, severe disruptions in banking sector stability, or major inconsistencies in national accounting frameworks. The absence of proportionate and consistent macroeconomic signals does not eliminate the possibility of corruption or governance deficits; however, it raises critical concerns regarding the scale, coherence, and evidentiary grounding of such narratives (Alam, 2026).

Importantly, this argument does not suggest that political critique is inherently invalid. Democratic accountability depends upon the contestation of power and the continuous interrogation of governance performance. However, when political discourse becomes dominated by inflated, weakly substantiated, or strategically amplified claims, the epistemic foundation of leadership evaluation begins to shift away from evidence-based reasoning toward narrative persuasion.

In such conditions, the distinction between legitimate critique and mythic construction becomes increasingly blurred. Citizens are no longer positioned merely as voters or passive recipients of governance outcomes; they become active interpreters of competing epistemologies of reality, navigating between empirically grounded claims and emotionally resonant narratives. This transformation places new demands on civic capacity, requiring not only political participation but also critical interpretive competence.

The implications for leadership formation are significant. When legitimacy is primarily derived from narrative dominance rather than demonstrable performance, emerging leaders may internalize a distorted incentive structure in which symbolic persuasion outweighs empirical accountability. Over time, this dynamic risks weakening institutional standards of evidence, thereby undermining the development of ethically grounded and performance-oriented leadership (Alam, 2017; Alam, 2026).

Ultimately, the divergence between narrative and empirical reality is not merely a communicative phenomenon; it constitutes a structural challenge to the cultivation of people-centered and evidence-based governance systems. Addressing this challenge requires strengthening institutional accountability mechanisms while simultaneously fostering a politically literate citizenry capable of critically engaging with both myth and metric in public discourse.

5.9.5. Globalization, Sovereignty, and Multi-level Leadership Dynamics

The ethical and perceptual complexities identified across

these works are further intensified by globalization. As argued in *Ethics of Revolutionary Change*, leadership must now be situated within a multi-layered system of power, where domestic political processes intersect with transnational forces.

Regime transformation is increasingly influenced by:

- 1) Geopolitical interests
- 2) Economic dependencies
- 3) Global communication networks

This reconfiguration challenges traditional notions of sovereignty and accountability. Leaders may be simultaneously responsive to domestic constituencies and external actors, while the people's capacity to exercise agency becomes mediated by forces beyond national boundaries. Leadership, therefore, cannot be fully understood within a closed political system; it must be analyzed as part of an interconnected global structure of influence and constraint.

5.9.6. The Contemporary Leadership-people Dilemma

Synthesizing these contributions, a coherent picture of contemporary leadership emerges, one defined by structural tensions rather than stable equilibria:

- 1) Procedural legitimacy versus substantive ethical legitimacy
- 2) Participation as genuine agency versus managed or mediated consent
- 3) Revolution as emancipatory transformation versus instrumentalized regime change
- 4) Empirical performance versus narrative construction of reality

These tensions converge on a central proposition: leadership is a morally contingent, continuously negotiated process shaped by the interaction between institutional structures, ethical orientation, and the interpretive agency of the people.

In this framework, the people are neither passive recipients of leadership nor fully autonomous agents. They are participants in an evolving political process, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by leadership through perception, engagement, and judgment. The crisis of contemporary leadership, therefore, is not merely institutional or strategic; it is fundamentally relational and epistemic, rooted in the shifting foundations of trust, truth, and collective agency.

6. Findings

This chapter presents the principal empirical and conceptual results of the study. Each finding is supported by scholarly literature where appropriate.

6.1. Leadership Is Fundamentally Relational and Ethically Evaluative

Leadership does not exist in a vacuum; it emerges from on-

going social interactions among leaders and followers. It is inherently relational and shaped by ethical judgments about influence, power, and responsibility. This aligns with relational leadership theory, which emphasizes *interdependence* and ethical engagement among all participants in leadership processes [57].

6.2. People Are Co-creators of Leadership Legitimacy

Legitimacy in leadership arises not solely from formal authority but from followers' perceptions, acceptance, and co-construction of leaders' roles. Followers evaluate leaders based on *values, trust, and shared meaning*, making leadership co-created rather than simply conferred [22].

6.3. Positivity Is a Structural Precondition for Sustainable Leadership

Sustainable leadership practices require structural conditions that support *positive psychological states*, such as hope, resilience, and constructive engagement. Positive leadership dynamics promote long-term performance and well-being, rather than short-term outcomes alone [16].

6.4. Historical Analysis Demonstrates Stark Contrasts Between Emancipatory and Destructive Leadership

Historical cases reveal that leadership can either *emancipate and empower* or *dominate and destroy*. Emancipatory leadership advances freedom, justice, and human flourishing, while destructive leadership correlates with abuse of power, systemic harm, and organizational pathology [50].

6.5. Institutional Accountability Is Essential for Preventing Villainous Leadership

Structures of accountability, such as ethical codes, checks and balances, transparency mechanisms, and civil society oversight, are essential to constrain leadership that would otherwise become villainous. Without accountability, systems are vulnerable to corruption, abuse, and ethical collapse [20].

7. Conclusions

Drawing on the key findings above, this chapter interprets the broader meaning of the results and situates them within contemporary leadership scholarship.

7.1. Leadership Must Be Understood as a Socially Grounded and Ethically Situated Practice

The relational nature of leadership indicates that leadership

cannot be reduced to individual traits or isolated strategies. Rather, leadership exists within ethical, social, and cultural contexts that constantly shape and reshape leader-follower dynamics.

7.2. Legitimacy Flows from Shared Recognition, Not Mere Formal Authority

Leadership legitimacy is not bestowed by title alone; it is co-affirmed by stakeholders. This underscores the importance of inclusive dialogue, participative decision-making, and mutual recognition in organizational and political contexts.

7.3. Sustainable Leadership Depends on Positive Structural Conditions

For leadership to support long-term viability, whether in organizations, communities, or nations, it must be anchored in conditions that nurture *well-being, collaboration, and ethical engagement*. Positivity is not superficial optimism but a structural enabler of resilience and innovation.

7.4. History Demonstrates the Stakes of Leadership Choices

Historical patterns show that leadership can either foster human emancipation or inflict profound damage. This underscores the importance of ethics, human rights, and moral accountability in leadership education and practice.

7.5. Institutional Frameworks Must Safeguard Against Destructive Leadership

Institutions are necessary buffers against the concentration of unchecked power. Robust accountability mechanisms minimize risk of villainous leadership and reinforce ethical norms at both micro and macro levels.

Ultimately, leadership cannot be reduced to influence, institutional authority, or strategic effectiveness alone. Leadership is fundamentally a moral relationship mediated through collective recognition, ethical accountability, and historical responsibility. Where legitimacy becomes detached from ethical orientation, leadership risks devolving into domination, manipulation, or symbolic performance. Conversely, where leadership aligns moral credibility with collective agency, it becomes a transformative force capable of advancing justice, democratic participation, and sustainable human development. The future of leadership scholarship, therefore, depends upon reintegrating ethics, legitimacy, and public agency into a unified framework capable of addressing the complexities of contemporary global governance.

8. Recommendations for Advancing Positive and Ethical Leadership

1) Leadership Education and Development: Leadership

programs should transcend traditional managerial skill sets and embed rigorous ethical reasoning, moral philosophy, and principles of positive psychology. Curricula must include case-based learning, reflective practice, and experiential exercises that cultivate emotional intelligence, resilience, and pro-social motivation. By fostering moral imagination alongside cognitive and technical competencies, future leaders can navigate complex socio-political environments with integrity and vision.

- 2) Institutional Design and Governance: Democratic institutions require systematic strengthening to ensure transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. This includes refining mechanisms for checks and balances, enhancing participatory decision-making processes, and institutionalizing feedback loops between leaders and constituents. Organizational architectures, whether in public administration, corporate governance, or civil society, should incentivize ethical conduct and discourage opportunistic behavior through clearly defined norms, performance metrics, and independent oversight bodies.
- 3) Research and Knowledge Expansion: There is a critical need for interdisciplinary, cross-cultural research examining the determinants, practices, and outcomes of positive leadership. Comparative studies that integrate sociology, political science, psychology, and organizational behavior can illuminate how contextual factors, such as cultural norms, historical legacies, and institutional capacity, shape leadership effectiveness and ethical adherence. Longitudinal and mixed-method approaches are particularly valuable in assessing how sustained leader-follower reciprocity impacts societal well-being.
- 4) Civic Engagement and Social Reciprocity: Effective leadership is co-constructed through active citizen participation. Policies and programs should aim to enhance civic literacy, social trust, and public deliberation, thereby promoting a dynamic exchange between leaders and the communities they serve. Engagement platforms, ranging from participatory budgeting to digital deliberative forums, can reinforce accountability, strengthen social cohesion, and embed positive leadership practices within the fabric of democratic governance.

Collectively, these recommendations advocate for a holistic approach to leadership development that balances individual virtue, institutional integrity, empirical insight, and participatory social processes. Such an approach is essential for cultivating leaders capable of promoting sustainable, ethical, and socially beneficial outcomes in an increasingly interconnected world.

Abbreviations

AL	Authentic Leadership
CAL	Collective Agency of Leadership
DLP	Destructive Leadership Patterns
EL	Ethical Leadership

EPL	Ethical Positive Leadership
IL	Institutional Legitimacy
ILA	Institutional and Legal Accountability
LG	Legitimacy
LPA	Leadership–People Alignment
MEO	Moral-Ethical Orientation
PL	Positive Leadership
PLG	People-Centered Leadership and Governance
RL	Relational Leadership
TL	Transformational Leadership

Author Contributions

Zahurul Alam: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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