Myths of Leadership

Exposing the Reality of Leadership and Positive Leadership Theories

By

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About the Author

Nadeem Yousaf has long strived to bridge the gap between management theory and corporate practice; this current work is the direct outcome of his desire to align leadership theory with actual real-world application. He was educated at the University of Bergen, Norway, where he earned advanced degrees in Organization and Management as well as Psychology. Throughout his distinguished career, he has held senior executive positions in the corporate sector and has taught at higher education institutions globally, including in Denmark, Australia, Oman, and Pakistan. He is the author of *Gestalt Communication and Emotional Intelligence* and has published several research articles in peer-reviewed academic journals.

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Preface

Leadership theories often captivate at first glance, yet many readers surface from the literature deeply disillusioned. Despite an enormous body of research spanning decades, tracing its modern roots back to Thomas Carlyle's 1840 "Great Man" theory, the field has become saturated. Driven by an academic culture that prioritizes quantity over depth, contemporary scholarship frequently suffers from a high volume of low-quality output. Instead of clarifying the dynamics of authority, it offers marginal variations of existing concepts that diminish the practical value of the discipline.

This problem is intensified by a systemic tendency to favor recent publications while overlooking the foundational works that established the field. Modern frameworks, such as the transformational leadership models popularized by James MacGregor Burns and Bernard M. Bass, frequently repackage long-standing classical themes under fresh terminology. This conceptual recycling does little to advance the field; instead, it widens the disconnect between theoretical models and the messy realities of organizational life.

Crucially, this recycling reinforces unrealistic, highly romanticized moral portrayals of leadership. Positive leadership theorists often ignore the reality that leadership is rapidly losing its moral grounding—or perhaps was never as ethical as commonly portrayed. Today, the raw pursuit of power is becoming increasingly central. As recent studies indicate (e.g., Hobolt and Osnabrügge, 2024), the rise of authoritarian tendencies and the growing public tolerance for them in Western democracies demand that we revisit our theories. The expanding influence of populist and opportunistic leaders in both micro-organizational and macro-political settings exposes a vast gulf between idealized theories and actual human behavior. By dismantling the

myths rooted in positive leadership discourse, this work challenges normative assumptions that fail to account for charisma-driven populism, transformational self-interest, and emotional manipulation.

We have granted leaders an extraordinary, almost fairy-tale or mythic level of attention, falsely implying that organizational success or national progress is the work of a solitary individual. No team, corporation, or nation advances because of a single savior. Progress is a collective achievement. Yet, with few exceptions, research has significantly lagged in addressing the critical influence of followers. As Yukl (1999) rightly noted, most leadership theories conceptualize influence as a one-way street flowing downward from the leader, neglecting reciprocal influence and shared dynamics. This book seeks to help redirect the conversation toward these neglected actors. While I do not dismiss the significance of leadership, placing excessive emphasis on a single individual is a narrative suited for spiritual texts, not daily organizational life. If leaders can act constructively, they can also be highly hazardous when left unchecked. Both harmful and beneficial outcomes are shared results, co-created by the actions, responses, and participation of the collective.

To build this argument, this book adopts an analytical, interdisciplinary approach, drawing on scholarship from leadership studies, organizational behavior, political science, psychology, and management. The methodology is qualitative, relying on secondary research, media reports, and insights from my own corporate experience. Rather than analyzing leaders through their calculated public rhetoric or the dramatized accounts often found in qualitative texts, this analysis evaluates their actions.

Ultimately, this book provides a deliberate counterweight to the idealized, heroic portrayals of leaders that dominate the market. By critically interrogating widely accepted models, it challenges the assumption that positive leadership is inherently virtuous, moving toward a more

realistic, nuanced, and multidimensional understanding of leadership in today's complex socio-political and organizational environments.

Structure of the Book

Chapter One lays the foundational groundwork by exploring essential concepts related to micro- and macro-organizations. It begins by defining the modern organization through both classical and contemporary lenses, examining how mission and vision serve as guiding frameworks across both corporate and state levels. The chapter then analyzes the dynamics of organizational development and systemic change, contextualized as "state-building" at the macro level, before explicitly untangling the distinct definitions of leader versus leadership, introducing the core concepts that guide the remainder of this text.

Chapter Two examines a critical aspect of leadership by uncovering the negative traits and behaviors that harm the interests of both stakeholders and organizations. It explores the dark side of leaders through a range of theoretical perspectives, including narcissistic, hubristic, Machiavellian, pseudo-transformational, toxic, and psychopathic leadership. These constructs are deeply interwoven and often share troubling characteristics such as manipulativeness, inflated self-importance, a lack of empathy, and the pursuit of personal ambition at the expense of collective well-being.

The chapter aims to illuminate the dynamics through which destructive leadership emerges, becomes supported, and is ultimately rewarded. Understanding these processes is vital not only for academic reflection but also for practitioners committed to fostering ethical, accountable, and resilient leadership environments. The chapter further highlights the unfortunate reality that such behaviors are not confined to isolated cases but are prevalent in both micro- and macro-organiza-

tions. Destructive leadership reflects a deeper systemic challenge: unless followers critically examine and redefine their attitudes toward leadership, destructive leaders will continue to thrive.

Chapter Three explores the optimistic dimensions of leadership by examining models that emphasize integrity, inspiration, and service. In contrast to toxic leaders, these positive approaches portray leaders as individuals who celebrate humanity, uplift others, and contribute to the development of the system. These ideas are reflected in theories such as charismatic, transformational, authentic, servant, and spiritual leadership. Each construct claims a distinct focus yet offers overlapping perspectives on how positive leaders foster trust, empower followers, and cultivate a shared sense of purpose. Collectively, these models suggest idealistically that true leadership is not rooted in control or authority but in compassion, moral conviction, and a commitment to the growth of others and the broader system. It is argued, however, that the overarching theme of these theories is highly idealistic and may not exist in its entirety in real-world contexts. While these models offer a hopeful vision of leadership, their idealism often overlooks the complex power dynamics and institutional constraints that leaders must navigate.

Chapter Four critically engages with the heroic portrayals embedded in many positive leadership theories. It highlights key limitations of these frameworks, arguing that they often present a narrow, idealized version of leaders that is disconnected from the complex realities of organizational life. This chapter challenges the overly optimistic narratives of positive leadership, exposing fundamental conceptual inconsistencies and practical shortcomings. Since the characteristics of positive theories overlap extensively, evaluating each construct individually is not particularly useful. Therefore, the main focus is placed on transformational leadership, while other theories are examined only where it is essential.

The chapter contends that positive theories overlook the complex interaction of various contingencies and place a disproportionate emphasis on individual attributes. It emphasizes that acquiring a leadership position is deeply rooted in contextual and structural factors rather than personal qualities. Furthermore, it scrutinizes the statistical analyses often used to validate these theories, which do not necessarily capture leaders' traits or actual behaviors. Ultimately, the chapter advocates for a grounded understanding of leadership, one that reflects everyday realities, contradictions, and imperfect outcomes, rather than romanticized ideals.

Chapter Five examines the conceptual confusion surrounding the manager-as-leader rhetoric. The chapter argues that researchers unfittingly migrated the term "leader" from macro-level political contexts into micro-organizational settings without appreciating the fact that managers operate under structural constraints and organizational objectives; therefore, they cannot be equated with leaders. By clarifying the distinction between leader and leadership, the chapter exposes how positive leadership researchers of micro-organizations misrepresent the manager's role and overlook the reciprocal, expertise-driven nature of employee behaviors.

Chapter Six delves into the often unheeded yet vital role of followers in shaping leadership. This chapter argues that followers cannot be absolved of responsibility, as they are equally accountable for organizational growth or decline. It distinguishes between types of followership, intentions, and orientations, which influence their ethical standards and decision-making processes. Furthermore, it categorizes followers into three echelons, namely close-circle, distant, and paid groups, examining their motivations and behavioral patterns. The chapter also highlights how broader contextual factors, such as economic pressures, political culture, and climate interact with individual-level psychological and existential concerns to shape follower

conduct. This chapter offers practical insights into how individuals, as followers, can contribute meaningfully to their organizations and avoid complicity in toxic leadership behaviors.

Chapter Seven outlines twenty core strategies, including authenticity, justice, discipline, empathy, and empowerment, that underpin effective management and leadership. These strategies emphasize that leadership excellence is not the privilege of a naturally gifted few; rather, anyone can cultivate the qualities commonly associated with charismatic or transformational leaders. Effective qualities are not innate traits but are developed through intentional cognitive reflection on internal thoughts and emotions, disciplined practice, and refined communication skills.

Finally, an appendix is included that examines the politics of Donald Trump in the United States and Imran Khan in Pakistan, highlighting notable parallels in their leadership approaches. These contemporary political figures are presented to show how individuals from different regions and cultural backgrounds may exhibit similar intentions and leadership patterns. In doing so, the comparison responds to critics who place excessive emphasis on cultural determinism and the positive qualities of leaders in leadership studies. Moreover, this qualitative comparison offers readers an opportunity to engage with lived examples of leadership behaviors, moving beyond purely statistical representations that cannot be directly observed. Their leadership has been extensively documented in public and media discourse, allowing for a rich examination of their patterns and behaviors, thus enabling readers to readily connect theoretical discussions with recognizable real-world examples. Their inclusion is also pertinent, as both figures are referenced at various points throughout the book to illustrate leadership behaviors.

In essence, this book is distinct from the existing literature on leadership, as it moves beyond idealized portrayals of leaders. It scrutinizes

the foundational assumptions of mainstream leadership scholarship, exposing significant gaps, contradictions, and oversimplifications that often go unchallenged. The book aims to foster a deeper understanding of leadership complexities in today's dynamic world. Moreover, it encourages not only readers but also researchers to question dominant narratives and think critically in order to present a more realistic outlook on leaders. The key learning point for readers is to evaluate actual behavior rather than being impressed by statements. For academics and researchers, particularly those inclined toward quantitative data, it emphasizes the importance of designing probing questions rather than relying on questionnaires that merely fulfill the researcher's assumptions. Written with academic rigor that ensures intellectual credibility, the book adopts a plain and accessible English style to engage readers from diverse backgrounds, including scholars, practitioners, and curious minds, in understanding the role of leaders. The content of this book offers a vital resource for a wide range of readers.

- Academics and researchers in leadership, politics, public administration, and management can use this book as a textbook or reference work. It offers a constructive critique of existing frameworks, supported by evidence and analysis that challenge conventional wisdom and open new avenues for inquiry. Real-Life examples are included, wherever relevant.
- Students in these fields will benefit from its clear explanations and thought-provoking questions, which provide a foundation for deeper exploration and learning.
- Leadership consultants and practitioners will find practical insights to refine their approaches, bridging the gap between theory and real-world application. This connection helps them recognize both the positive and negative dimensions of leadership.

- Beyond academia, the book may also be useful for the general public, as it clarifies the complexities of leadership and provides relatable insights into how it shapes organizations, communities, and societies in contemporary contexts. By blending scholarly depth with accessible language, the book enables readers from all walks of life to critically engage with leadership and its broader implications.

Chapter One

Foundations of Organizations and Leadership

Introduction

This chapter introduces the fundamental concepts of organizations and leadership. It outlines the definition of organizations and clarifies the distinction between micro- and macro-organizations, terms that will be used throughout the book. The discussion then turns to the role of mission and vision, emphasizing their importance in guiding organizational direction and aligning structure with purpose. Whether micro or macro in scale, organizations are not static, but dynamic. The dynamic nature of organizations is highlighted through a brief examination of organizational change and the need to address resistance effectively.

The chapter also distinguishes between leadership as a process and leaders as individuals. It outlines major leadership constructs and presents positive and negative attributions associated with leaders. In addition, it identifies key roles of leaders within organizations.

Definition of Organization

The definitions offered by Weber, Scott, and Heffron emphasize complementary dimensions of what constitutes an organization. Weber (1978) describes an organization as an organized social rela-

tionship that restricts outsider access and operates through formal rules and regulations. Scott (1987) defines an organization as a structured arrangement that regularizes interactions among participants and pursues clearly defined goals that shape member behavior. Heffron (1989) adds that an organization consists of coordinated activities carried out by individuals working together to achieve shared objectives. These perspectives highlight two central dimensions of organizations: 1) they are formalized systems governed by rules and procedures, and (2) and they are social systems in which individuals interact and form relationships that extend beyond formal structures. Understanding both dimensions is essential for managers and leaders, as effective practice requires navigating formal arrangements while working with the social dynamics that influence organizational functioning.

The definitions above suggest that any entity, whether a small institution or the state itself, qualifies as an organization when it is legally and normatively recognized, possesses a formal structure, and operates through defined rules, duties, and role assignments. In this sense, the concept of organization is broader than its common usage in business studies, where it is often restricted to micro-level entities such as firms or departments. In political science, however, the term organization also encompasses macro-level entities, including the state, which is understood as a complete and independent entity with a large-scale institutional system, formal authority, administrative structures, and legally sanctioned roles. Throughout this book, the term organization will therefore refer to both micro and macro entities unless otherwise specified.

Micro-organizations are entities that operate with a limited workforce and a compact managerial structure, where decision-making is concentrated among a small number of managers. They typically

feature simple hierarchies, close communication among members, and a high degree of managerial involvement in daily operations.

Macro-organizations may be small, medium, or large, and they can take various structural forms ranging from simple units to highly divisionalized systems. Elaborating on these classifications is beyond the purpose of this work, as such complexity does not contribute to the central argument of this study. What matters here is that macro-organizations possess their own internal structures and policies, and they recruit personnel across all hierarchical levels, from senior executives to administrative staff, service workers, and support roles such as messengers and custodial employees. However, these internal arrangements must always operate within and never contradict the legal framework of the state. Regardless of their size or sophistication, macro-organizations remain subordinate to state authority and function within the boundaries established by national law.

In contrast, a macro-organization refers to the state as a large-scale social and political institution. The state is a sovereign political entity that governs a defined territory, maintains a monopoly over public institutions, and possesses legitimate authority to use coercive force. State organizations consist of both political and bureaucratic positions, and the allocation of these positions follows entirely different processes from one another. Bureaucratic positions are filled through procedures that resemble those used in micro-level private organizations: they operate with internal structures, administrative hierarchies, and established routines, but they do so under the authority of the macro-level state.

Finally, the primary tasks of managers in macro-organizations—whether private or public—differ significantly from those of state leaders. The top political positions of the state and the top managerial positions of macro-organizations are acquired through entirely different processes, shaped by distinct institutional logics and expec-

tations. Political leaders emerge through electoral competition, party mechanisms, or political appointments, whereas managerial roles are obtained through administrative recruitment, professional qualifications, and organizational selection procedures. Therefore, it is neither accurate nor analytically useful to treat these roles as equivalent under a single concept of leadership. Their responsibilities, sources of authority, and modes of influence diverge in fundamental ways. These differences will be examined and distinguished in detail later in the book.

Mission and Vision

Both micro- and macro-organizations should have a well-designed structure that aligns with the organization's short-term and long-term goals. The structure should support the implementation strategy to enhance operational efficiency. A well-designed structure and implementation strategy help in managing complexity, clarifying authority, and improving accountability. They influence stakeholders' behavior, resource allocation, and the organization's ability to adapt to change and innovation. Within this context, mission and vision play a central role in guiding direction and aligning these organizational elements.

Mission and vision should not be merely seen as catchy words or slogans; rather, they should have substance and be conceived as a broad blueprint (Yousaf, 2016). Although these terms are often used in micro-organizations, they are equally valid concepts for macro-organizations. A well-defined mission and vision should be grounded in reality, reflecting a careful analysis of available resources, both internal and external threats, and opportunities in the environment. A number of studies have shown that a clear mission and vision positively impact an organization's growth (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010; Lipton, 1996). Furthermore, a clear and authentically articulated

mission and vision serve as reference points for decision-making at all levels, provided there is a strong intention to implement them.

The function of a mission is to delineate the purpose of an organization's existence, distinguishing it from others (Raynor, 1998). It clarifies who the organization serves and how it contributes to its stakeholders (Levin, 2000; Kelling, 2013). Communicating the mission clearly and effectively is crucial, as it conveys the organization's intent to meet the needs of both the organization and its stakeholders (Kelling, 2013; Raynor, 1998). The mission broadly outlines the primary duties and expected behaviors of both organizational members and leadership (Yousaf, 2016). Ultimately, it shapes the organization's value system. When a mission fails to provide meaningful guidance, it is often due to conceptual ambiguity or a lack of genuine commitment (Kantabutra and Avery, 2010). In essence, the mission influences the organization's current purpose and primary activities.

Similarly, a well-defined vision stimulates development and growth. Vision articulates long-term aspirations and future direction. Wolin (1960) defines vision as a creative and imaginative process that involves picturing an organization as an idealized version of itself that serves as a guide for transformation and challenges the status quo to inspire change. In other words, a vision should be more attractive and promising than the present. The function of the vision is to guide strategy in achieving objectives by resolving problems. To achieve this, organizational processes and systems must align with each other (Kantabutra and Avery, 2010; Lipton, 1996).

Yousaf (2016) notes that outlining a vision is not an end, but a means to reach the goals and objectives of organizations. He also highlights that a shared sense of purpose is a consequence of the vision. For a vision to be effective, it must not only be clear and ambitious but also communicated consistently and embraced collectively across the orga-

nization. However, vague and ambiguous visions carry no impact and are difficult to implement (Yousaf, 2016; Khalifa, 2011; Levin, 2000).

Organizational vision is typically associated with top leadership. Leaders are expected to construct a conceptual roadmap that not only galvanizes and inspires followers but also secures their commitment by fostering both intellectual alignment and emotional engagement (Yousaf, 2015; Mirvis et al., 2010; Levin, 2000). Rogers and Reynolds (2003) stress that leaders play a crucial role in developing a vision that is both meaningful and actionable for their organizations and members. This involves not only communicating the vision but also ensuring that leaders and members internalize it and consistently reflect it in their daily practices.

An effective vision represents and aligns with the interests of all stakeholders and followers rather than pursuing a self-serving leader's interests. Kantabutra and Avery (2010) argue that a meaningful vision must encompass the broader interests of the organization and be desirable to all stakeholders. A powerful vision is stable and indicates a long-term perspective and the future environment in which it operates (Kantabutra & Avery, 2010). The mission and vision of organizations emerge from the need to align individual and collective aspirations, enabling the organization to respond to internal challenges and to survive and thrive in both local and international contexts (Yousaf, 2016).

However, leadership should not treat the terms mission and vision as mere buzzwords. Without consistent actions, aligned behaviors, and organizational practices that embody them, they remain nothing more than statements or slogans. Mission and vision gain meaning only when leaders use them to guide decisions, shape organizational culture, allocate resources, and model the values they claim to uphold. Unfortunately, many people, including researchers, often classify leaders as visionary, charismatic, or transformational based solely on

their mission and vision statements rather than on a careful evaluation of their actual behaviors and actions. This creates a misleading picture of leadership where rhetoric is mistaken for reality.

Organizational Change:

Organizational change and organizational development (OD) are often used interchangeably because both relate to transitioning an organization from one state to another. Although there is a slight distinction between the two concepts, a detailed discussion is beyond this study's focus. Organizational change is a broad term referring to any shift from a current state to a desired future state, often driven by external pressures or internal needs. Organizational development, by contrast, is a planned, systematic, and long-term approach aimed at improving organizational effectiveness through structured interventions.

A similar concept exists at the level of the state, where the term state-building describes efforts to strengthen and develop public institutions to enhance governance and societal functioning. Despite differences in scale and context, all these terms share a common purpose: the development, improvement, and growth of the organization in question. In this work, the term organizational change will be used whenever required.

Organizational change becomes necessary in response to shifting environments, evolving goals, and emerging challenges. Achieving lasting and sustainable change, however, requires the genuine support of stakeholders. Resistance to change is almost always present and may arise from multiple factors, including cultural identity, attachment to existing norms, fear of losing power, fear of the unknown, questions of legitimacy, or self-serving interests (Yousaf, 2017 & 2016; Micelotta & Washington , 2013; Marx & Engels, 2010; Burns & James, 1994; Olsen, 1994; Eckstein, 1988; Hirschman, 1970). As Wolin (1960)

suggests, resistance may also stem from ideological conflicts or from the perception that authority figures are imposing changes that do not align with the values or needs of individuals or groups.

Importantly, resistance is not always negative; it can reflect legitimate concerns about whether a proposed change is effective, fair, or aligned with the broader interests of the organization or society. Rather than being dismissed outright, resistance should be viewed as an opportunity for constructive dialogue before designing policy and implementation strategies. Such dialogue is essential for evaluating diverse perspectives and fostering mutual understanding. This shared understanding ultimately contributes to the success of change initiatives and helps reduce resistance.

There is, however, an ongoing debate about whether stakeholder support is truly necessary for change to occur. Beer et al. (1990) and Ybema and Horvers (2017) argue that organizational change can be implemented even in the face of resistance, meaning that participant consensus is not always required. Yet, as Schein (2010) and Eckstein (1988) emphasize, changes introduced without addressing underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions often remain superficial. Overlooking stakeholder willingness may allow apparent change, but such change is often shallow and unsustainable. The success of transformational change that challenges the status quo and reshapes norms, values, and culture depends on influencing individuals and their cognitive frameworks.

Research provides ample evidence that change initiatives frequently fail without the support of key stakeholders. For example, state-building efforts often collapse when they lack the backing of local communities (Etzioni, 2010; Bliesemann de Guevara, 2008; Ottaway, 2002). Similarly, Maccoby (2000) argues that corporate leaders rarely succeed in implementing transformative change without a collaborative team. He cites cases such as Pehr Gyllenhammar at Volvo and Bill Gates at

Microsoft, both of whom relied on strong team support to translate their vision into practical and sustainable outcomes.

As noted above, resistance is always present, but its magnitude is crucial. No reform or law can succeed if a substantial portion of stakeholders are determined to ignore it. Anti-bribery laws illustrate this point: although such laws exist in all countries, bribery remains more common in developing states because a larger proportion of officials choose to violate them. In such cases, the reform exists on paper, but widespread resistance prevents it from becoming effective in practice.

These patterns can also be observed in micro-level organizations. For example, a hospital in Denmark changed its working hours from 12:30–20:30 to 13:30–21:30 without consulting employees. The change was implemented unilaterally, and most staff strongly disliked the new schedule. Within a few months, the supervisor held a vote on working hours, and the majority chose to revert to the original schedule. This case illustrates that even when change is formally introduced, it cannot be sustained if those affected are unwilling to accept or internalize it.

In summary, organizational change, whether at the micro or macro level, requires active leadership that engages stakeholders, addresses resistance constructively, and aligns organizational processes with intended outcomes. Leaders who neglect these factors risk superficial or unsustainable change, regardless of formal structures or policies.

Difference between Leadership and leaders

The terms leader and leadership are often used interchangeably, but they represent two distinct concepts. The distinction matters because each term refers to a different level of analysis and carries different implications for how organizations and states function. In many studies, especially those focused on micro-organizations, the words leader

and leadership are treated as synonymous. While this may be acceptable in certain contexts, it is not universally accurate. In this book, both terms are clearly distinguished.

Leadership refers to a process as well as the collective body of individuals who influence decisions, rather than the actions of a single person. In a country or a large institution, leadership is not limited to the president or CEO; it is shaped by the combined influence of advisors, lawmakers, and bureaucrats. These actors operate within a broader system of influence rather than acting as sole drivers of change. Leadership, in this sense, refers not only to the individuals who collectively hold decision-making authority but also to the abstract and systemic processes through which direction, norms, and priorities are established. It represents the collective guidance of an organization, emerging from structures, interactions, and shared practices rather than the actions of a single person.

A leader, in contrast, is an individual who holds a position of authority and responsibility within a group or system. A leader contributes to strategic direction or decision-making but is not the entire system. Leaders are tangible, identifiable figures whose actions, decisions, and behaviors can be observed directly. Their influence is often more visible in smaller organizations, especially entrepreneurial settings, where personal vision and values strongly shape organizational culture. A leader is a concrete individual, selected or elected to perform a specific role.

Distinguishing between leadership and leaders is essential because leadership refers to a process or a collective pattern of behavior, whereas a leader is a single individual. Leadership can exist without a dominant person, but a leader cannot function without the broader leadership system that shapes decisions and distributes influence. Leadership often emerges from interactions, structures, norms, and collective dynamics, not merely from one person's actions. Confusing

the two risks oversimplifying how decisions are made, how influence operates, and why organizations succeed or fail.

This distinction is particularly important for analyzing outcomes, as it clarifies whether results stem from an individual actor or from the broader system. Negative or positive outcomes are rarely the product of one person; praise and blame should extend to those who support the leader and operate within the leadership structure. Treating leadership and leaders as identical leads to overcrediting or overblaming individuals, ignoring structural constraints, and misunderstanding the reasons for why change succeeds or fails. Clarifying this distinction strengthens assessments of responsibility and accountability.

Leadership Research, Attributions, and Role

Detailed evaluation of positive and negative theories will be presented in the following chapters; however, this section briefly provides an overview of major leadership research traditions, leader attributions, and the roles commonly associated with leaders. There are many definitions of leadership and leader styles, reflecting the diversity of approaches within the field (Stogdill, 1974).

Early leadership research focused on understanding why certain individuals occupy leadership positions and how their personal traits influence their behavior. The Great Man Theory, one of the earliest paradigms, posited that leaders are born with innate qualities such as intelligence, charisma, or distinctive personality traits. However, the search for a consistent set of traits across successful leaders proved unsuccessful. Stogdill (1948) argued that leadership is a multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be fully understood through traits alone.

This limitation prompted a shift from inherent traits to the behaviors leaders exhibit and the contextual factors that shape their actions.

Consequently, leadership has since been studied from various angles, including personality traits, hereditary influences, individual styles, and situational contingencies (Yousaf, 2015; Yukl, 1989; Davis & Luthans, 1979). Nonetheless, leadership theories, whether trait-based or behavioral, continue to assign both positive and negative attributions to leaders.

Over the decades, numerous leadership constructs and theories have emerged, most of which focus on leaders rather than leadership as a system or collective effort of a group of individuals. Positive constructs include Authentic Leadership, Charismatic Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Servant Leadership, and Spiritual Leadership.

Alongside these positive models, a substantial body of research has examined negative or harmful leadership styles. These include Machiavellian Leadership, Narcissistic Leadership, Toxic Leadership, and Psychopathic Leadership. While one set of theories highlights how leaders can positively influence followers and systems, the other exposes how leadership, when misused, can harm individuals and institutions, leading both followers and systems astray. These theories have produced a wide range of attributions about leaders, both positive and negative, which shape how leadership is interpreted in practice.

Leaders Positive Attributions

- Charismatic: A leader with a compelling presence that captivates and inspires followers. Charismatic leaders often possess strong communication skills, demonstrate confidence, and create an emotional connection with their followers, fostering loyalty and enthusiasm.
- Transformational: These leaders are deemed effective as they drive deep and meaningful changes within organizations,

communities, or systems. They challenge the status quo, inspire innovation, and empower others to grow and evolve, often leaving a lasting impact on the followers they influence.

- Intelligent: These leaders anticipate challenges and develop strategic solutions. Their ability to think critically enables them to make well-informed decisions.
- Visionary: These leaders have a long-term perspective and a clear vision for the future. They inspire others with ambitious goals and guide their teams toward achieving meaningful progress. Visionary leaders often embrace creativity and risk-taking.
- Empathetic: With a deep understanding of others' emotions, needs, and perspectives, empathetic leaders build strong relationships and foster an inclusive environment. They actively listen, show compassion, and ensure their decisions consider the well-being of those around them.
- Resilient: Leaders with resilience possess the ability to recover from setbacks and maintain motivation despite challenges. They handle adversity with composure, adaptability, and perseverance, ensuring their teams remain focused even during difficult times.
- Inspiring: These leaders uplift and energize others, motivating them to achieve beyond their perceived limitations. Through their words, actions, and vision, they encourage people to push forward, cultivate ambition, and believe in their capabilities.

Leaders Negative Attributions

- Authoritarian: An excessively controlling leader who relies on strict rules and commands without considering input from

others. This leadership style can stifle creativity, demoralize teams, and create fear-based management environments.

- Narcissistic: Narcissistic leaders prioritize personal recognition and success over the well-being of their teams. They often seek admiration, resist criticism, and undermine others to maintain superiority, leading to unhealthy organizational dynamics.
- Psychopathic: These leaders display a lack of empathy, manipulation, and disregard for ethical considerations. They can create toxic work environments by prioritizing power and control over collaboration and fairness, often resulting in harm to employees or stakeholders.
- Machiavellian: Highly strategic and cunning, Machiavellian leaders use deception, manipulation, and calculated tactics for personal gain. They may prioritize their own interests over those of their organizations and followers and build relationships solely for personal advantage rather than genuine connection.
- Arrogant: Overconfident leaders dismiss valuable input from others, believing they are always right. Their unwillingness to accept feedback or acknowledge mistakes can hinder growth, collaboration, and trust within an organization.
- Unethical: These leaders compromise integrity for personal benefit and engage in dishonest, corrupt, or exploitative behaviors. Their decisions can damage credibility, weaken morale, and lead to long-term negative consequences for their teams or organizations.
- Abusive: Abusive leaders consistently display hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact. Tepper (2000) notes that such behaviors can include public criticism,

loud or angry outbursts, rudeness, general inconsideration, and the use of coercive pressure on subordinates.

Role of Leaders

The research on leadership also indicates a variety of roles individual leaders perform within organizations. Some of these key roles include the following:

- Mission and Vision Provider: Leadership is often defined through the lens of vision. A core function of leaders is to articulate a compelling and forward-looking vision that provides direction and purpose. It is deemed that this vision serves as a guiding light for the organization, aligning efforts, inspiring commitment, and fostering a shared sense of meaning among team members. Without a clear mission and vision, organizations may lack coherence and strategic focus.
- Decision-Maker: Leaders are tasked with making critical decisions that are important for an organization's growth and development. These decisions often involve weighing risks, considering long-term implications, and navigating uncertainty.
- Mentor and Coach**:** This role involves nurturing talent and potential as mentors and coaches. Leaders play a vital role in developing individuals by offering guidance, constructive feedback, encouragement, and opportunities for learning. This role fosters both personal and professional growth, strengthening followers' capabilities.
- Communicator: It is leaders' task to communicate clearly and consistently to provide effective leadership. They must ensure that messages are clearly understood, expectations are conveyed, and feedback flows in both directions.

- Spokesperson**:** Leaders act as the official voice of an organization, communicating plans, policies, and performance to internal and external stakeholders. This role is important for the organization and also provides leaders with an opportunity to demonstrate their own capabilities.
- Problem-Solver: Leaders are expected to address and overcome challenges that arise within dynamic environments. This involves identifying the root causes of problems, analyzing possible solutions, making informed decisions, and implementing strategies to resolve complex issues.
- Motivator**:** It is part of the leaders' role to act as a motivator for employees and followers. They should have the ability to inspire and energize people, instill confidence, foster enthusiasm, and cultivate a sense of purpose within organizations.
- Strategist: Leaders are expected to be involved in strategic decisions in setting long-term goals and distributing resources such as time, personnel, capital, and tools efficiently and effectively. Leaders must anticipate future trends, identify opportunities and threats, and ensure the organization remains adaptable in the face of change.
- Ethical Guardian: Leaders serve as moral exemplars within their organizations. As ethical guardians, they uphold integrity, promote fairness, and ensure that decisions reflect ethical principles. They establish a culture of accountability, transparency, and respect, setting the tone for organizational behaviors and trust.
- Influencer**:** Influence is a subtle yet powerful tool of leadership. Influential leaders shape opinions, build alliances, and foster relationships that support the organization's vision.

- Channelling Energy: It is the task of leaders to channel the energy of individuals and provide a platform for a unified direction. The leader acts to align energies with organizational or societal objectives.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the basic concepts of organizations and outlined how they function at both micro- and macro-levels. It defined what an organization is and explained the distinction between micro-level and macro-level perspectives. The discussion then moved to the concepts of mission and vision, which are essential for guiding organizational direction. It was argued that mission and vision are not merely decorative statements but play a central role in shaping organizational purpose and should be developed in ways that reflect the interests of all stakeholders.

A brief overview of organizational change was provided, highlighting its inevitability for both micro and macro-organizations and the importance of addressing resistance effectively. The chapter then differentiated between leadership as a collective system of individuals and leaders as single actors. Based on various theories, a range of positive and negative attributes and roles were identified.

This conceptual foundation clarifies how organizations operate through collective influence, shared structures, and interconnected roles. It also establishes the analytical basis for the next chapters, which examine leadership theories in greater depth and evaluate them.