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The Limits of Contemporary Leadership Theory: Boundary Conditions of Authority, Accountability, and Coordination under Institutional Constraint

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Abstract

This paper examines the limits of contemporary leadership theory by identifying the boundary conditions under which its core assumptions (legitimacy, formal accountability, contract enforceability, transparency, and institutional stability) break down. While these assumptions shape current leadership frameworks, they are often unexamined in extreme contexts. Using organised crime as a case study, we demonstrate how these assumptions break down and explore alternative mechanisms that enable leadership to persist in challenging environments: authority without legitimacy, accountability outside formal structures, coordination without contracts, opacity instead of transparency, and adaptation amid instability. We introduce a boundary-condition framework that outlines how leadership mechanisms are reconfigured when conventional institutional assumptions fail, and we develop six propositions, including one that explains accountability challenges in AI-enabled organisations. We introduce a boundary-condition framework that outlines how leadership mechanisms are reconfigured when conventional institutional assumptions fail, and we develop six propositions, including one that explains accountability challenges in AI-enabled organisations. This study contributes to leadership theory by identifying its boundary conditions, proposing a framework for leadership under institutional constraints, and extending it to explain accountability challenges in AI-enabled organisations.

Keywords: Leadership theory, boundary conditions, strategic opacity, accountability, AI governance, organisational leadership

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Leadership theory is built on a set of largely implicit institutional assumptions: that authority is legitimate, accountability is enforceable, coordination relies on formal contracts, and transparency enhances organisational effectiveness. These assumptions underpin a wide range of leadership frameworks, including transformational and ethical leadership, as well as governance-oriented models (Hoch et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019). Despite their centrality, there has been limited systematic examination of the conditions under which these assumptions fail, and whether leadership can continue to function effectively in the absence of legitimacy, formal enforcement, and institutional support.

This paper argues that such conditions are not merely theoretical but empirically observable. Organised crime groups operate outside formal legal and governance systems, yet they sustain complex forms of coordination, enforce accountability, and maintain hierarchical control despite persistent threats and the absence of legitimacy (Varese, 2010). Rather than treating these organisations as anomalies, this study positions them as extreme-case contexts for leadership theory, through which the limits of prevailing models can be more clearly identified.

Recent research is redefining organised crime by focusing on its governance roles, adaptability, and internal structure (Campana & Varese, 2018). Varese (2010) differentiates between criminal production, trade, and governance, showing how these groups regulate exchanges and enforce agreements in the absence of formal legal systems. Additionally, studies on criminal networks illustrate their ability to develop decentralised yet coordinated structures that withstand enforcement pressures (Calderoni et al., 2017). These insights indicate that organised crime offers a valuable perspective on leadership in constrained environments.

Such studies mainly describe these phenomena without addressing their implications for leadership theory. This leaves a significant gap: *what occurs to leadership when foundational support like legitimacy, accountability, enforceability, and transparency are lost?* To answer this, we need to systematically examine leadership under such boundary conditions rather than merely extracting "lessons."

This paper advances leadership theory by identifying and formalising these boundary conditions. It develops a framework structured around five dimensions: authority without legitimacy, accountability without formal governance, coordination without contracts, strategic opacity in place of transparency, and stability under persistent threat. By analysing leadership in organised crime contexts, the paper makes visible the hidden assumptions embedded in mainstream theories and demonstrates where their explanatory scope is limited.

The study introduces four core constructs that underpin leadership under boundary conditions. First, constructed authority refers to the emergence and maintenance of leadership influence in the absence of formal or normative legitimacy, sustained through mechanisms such as coercive capacity, reputational enforcement, and relational dependency. Second, non-contractual coordination denotes the alignment of action in the absence of enforceable agreements, relying instead on repeated interaction, embedded trust, and credible commitment grounded in shared risk exposure. Third, Strategic opacity refers to the deliberate and selective restriction of operationally sensitive information to preserve coordination, reduce organisational vulnerability, and maintain authority under conditions of uncertainty. It does not refer to opacity resulting from poor governance, incompetence, or unintended information failure. The fourth, permanent adaptiveness, refers to leadership capability characterised by continuous environmental monitoring, iterative decision-making, and ongoing reconfiguration of authority and coordination mechanisms in response to persistent instability.

These constructs provide the analytical foundation for examining how leadership is reconfigured when institutional support is weak, contested, or absent.

The paper makes three contributions; it shifts leadership research away from idealised institutional environments toward constraint-driven contexts. It repositions organised crime as an analytically relevant setting for testing leadership theory, rather than treating it solely as a criminological domain. Lastly, it develops a boundary-aware leadership framework that provides a basis for rethinking authority, accountability, and coordination in environments characterised by weak or contested institutional conditions.

In doing so, the study reframes organised crime not as an object of emulation, but as an extreme-case analytical lens through which more robust and context-sensitive models of leadership can be developed, models capable of explaining not only how leadership functions under ideal conditions, but how it persists when those conditions no longer apply.

2. Leadership Theory: Assumptions and Boundary Failure

Leadership theory has evolved into a diverse field that encompasses relational, ethical, behavioural, and complexity-informed perspectives. Frameworks such as transformational, servant, authentic, distributed, and adaptive leadership have notably advanced the understanding of influence, motivation, and organisational effectiveness (Hoch et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Notwithstanding these developments, most contemporary theories share a common characteristic: they implicitly presume institutional conditions that facilitate leadership functioning. These presuppositions are seldom regarded as contingent factors, thereby limiting the explanatory power of leadership theory in contexts where legitimacy, governance, contractual enforcement, transparency, or institutional stability is compromised or absent. The paper delineates these presuppositions as the boundary conditions underpinning contemporary leadership theory.

2.1 Assumption of Legitimacy

Contemporary leadership theories generally posit that authority is derived from institutional legitimacy, whether through formal appointment, moral credibility, or social acknowledgement (Hoch et al., 2018; Crevani et al., 2010). Legitimacy is accordingly regarded as a prerequisite for leadership rather than a variable necessitating explanation. The result is that existing theories offer limited insight into the mechanisms by which authority is established and maintained in the absence of legal, moral, or institutional legitimacy.

2.2 Assumption of Formal Accountability

Leadership and corporate governance research typically assume that accountability is maintained through formal governance structures, including boards, regulation, auditing, and hierarchical oversight (Aguilera et al., 2018). This institutional perspective largely equates accountability with formal governance arrangements. Leadership theory offers a limited explanation of how responsibility is enforced through informal, relational, or direct mechanisms when such structures are weak or absent.

2.3 Assumption of Contractual Coordination

Organisational and economic theories commonly assume that coordination depends on enforceable contracts, incentives, and monitoring mechanisms that reduce uncertainty and opportunism (Williamson, 1985; Eisenhardt, 1989). Even trust-based leadership models typically operate within this contractual infrastructure. Consequently, leadership theory offers a limited explanation of coordination when agreements cannot be formally enforced, and alternative mechanisms must sustain collective action.

2.4 Assumption of Transparency

Contemporary leadership research generally treats transparency and open information sharing as essential for trust, collaboration, and organisational effectiveness (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). This assumes that transparency is both feasible and universally beneficial. Leadership theory gives limited attention to situations in which strategic control of information is necessary for coordination, authority, or organisational survival.

2.5 Assumption of Institutional Stability

Most leadership theories suggest that organisations operate within broadly stable institutional environments, treating crises as temporary disruptions rather than permanent conditions (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). This assumption limits understanding of leadership in environments marked by persistent uncertainty, continuous threat, and ongoing institutional instability, where adaptation is a permanent rather than an episodic requirement.

2.6 Conclusion: The Boundary Failure of Leadership Theory

These assumptions collectively define the conventional domain of contemporary leadership theory. They explain leadership effectively where legitimacy, accountability, contractual enforcement, transparency, and institutional stability are present, but provide less explanatory power when these institutional conditions deteriorate or disappear. As organisations increasingly operate amid regulatory fragmentation, geopolitical uncertainty, technological disruption, and institutional contestation, these boundary conditions become increasingly important. Figure 1 conceptualises this transition by illustrating how leadership mechanisms are reconfigured when the institutional assumptions underpinning conventional leadership theory break down.

The figure illustrates how conventional leadership assumptions are reconfigured into alternative mechanisms when institutional boundary conditions fail.

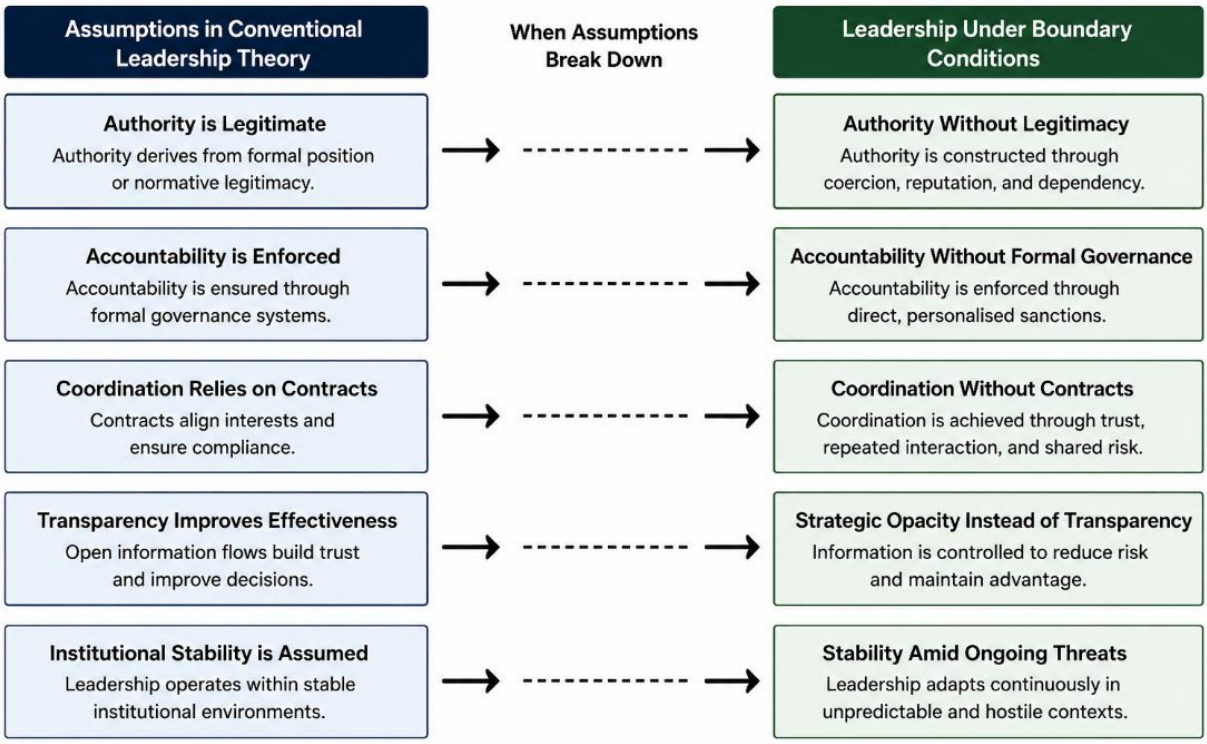


Figure 1. Boundary Breakdown Model of Leadership

3. Propositions: Leadership Under Boundary Conditions

We build on the boundary breakdown model illustrated in Figure 1 to articulate a series of propositions about how leadership operates when the institutional assumptions underpinning prevailing theories no longer apply. Rather than viewing leadership as a uniform construct across contexts, the framework proposed herein conceptualises it as conditionally reconfigured. The fundamental mechanisms: authority, accountability, coordination, information control, and adaptation assume distinct forms in response to specific constraints.

The first dimension focuses on the link between authority and legitimacy. Mainstream leadership theory holds that authority derives from institutional legitimacy, whether through formal position, moral credibility, or follower recognition (Hoch et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019). When legitimacy is absent or contested, leadership must rely on alternative sources of influence, including coercive capacity, reputational enforcement, and relational dependency.

> **Proposition 1.** When legitimacy is absent or contested, leadership authority is sustained through constructed mechanisms—such as coercive capacity, reputational enforcement, and relational dependency—rather than institutional validation.

Conventional governance frameworks presuppose that accountability is upheld via formal institutions such as regulation, auditing, and hierarchical oversight (Aguilera et al., 2018). In scenarios where these mechanisms are lacking or ineffective, responsibility must consequently be enforced through direct and personalised mechanisms.

> **Proposition 2.** In the absence of formal governance structures, accountability is sustained through direct, personalised enforcement mechanisms in which responsibility is tightly coupled to outcomes rather than mediated by institutional processes.

Organisational theory generally presupposes that enforceable contracts form the basis for coordination (Williamson, 1985; Eisenhardt, 1989). In circumstances where contractual enforcement is not feasible, coordination relies on repeated interactions, embedded trust, and credible commitments.

> **Proposition 3.** When contracts are incomplete or unenforceable, coordination is sustained through relational and iterative mechanisms—such as repeated interaction, embedded trust, and credible commitment—rather than formal contractual arrangements.

Contemporary leadership research generally treats transparency as essential for trust, collaboration, and organisational effectiveness (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). However, transparency is not universally optimal. Under conditions of elevated risk, strategic competition, or organisational vulnerability, leaders may deliberately restrict the distribution of operationally sensitive information to protect decision processes, preserve coordination, or reduce exposure. This study refers to such deliberate and purposive information management as strategic opacity, distinguishing it from opacity arising from poor governance, information failure, or organisational dysfunction.

> **Proposition 4.** Under conditions of high risk and uncertainty, leadership effectiveness is sustained through strategic opacity; the deliberate and selective control of operationally sensitive information to preserve coordination, reduce vulnerability, and maintain authority rather than through complete organisational transparency.

Leadership theory generally assumes stable institutional environments in which disruption is episodic rather than continuous (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). Under conditions of persistent instability, organisations cannot rely on fixed structures or occasional strategic adjustment. Leadership instead operates through continuous monitoring, rapid decision cycles, decentralised authority where appropriate, and ongoing reconfiguration of coordination mechanisms in response to changing threats and opportunities

> **Proposition 5.** In environments characterised by persistent instability, leadership effectiveness depends on permanent adaptiveness; continuous monitoring, reassessment, and reconfiguration of authority, coordination, and decision processes in response to evolving internal and external conditions.

The boundary conditions identified in this study are increasingly evident in AI-enabled organisations, where algorithmic systems are entrusted with decisions relating to hiring, lending, fraud detection, healthcare, and resource allocation. Although these systems lack institutional legitimacy or legal agency, they increasingly exert operational influence over organisational outcomes. At the same time, responsibility for those outcomes is often dispersed among developers, vendors, deployers, managers, and governing bodies, creating ambiguity about who is accountable for consequential decisions (OECD, 2025; ITU, 2025; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2024). This suggests that, under conditions of delegated algorithmic authority and limited transparency, leadership accountability may become detached from operational authority unless responsibility is explicitly anchored within identifiable governance structures.

> **Proposition 6.** When organisations delegate consequential decisions to opaque AI systems, the divergence

between operational authority and formal accountability widens unless governance mechanisms explicitly reconnect decision-making authority to identifiable human responsibility.

These propositions reframe leadership as a context-dependent phenomenon, with underlying mechanisms that shift when institutional assumptions break down. Instead of replacing current leadership theories, they highlight the situations where those theories have limited explanatory power.

4. Illustrative Cases: Leadership Under Boundary Conditions in Practice

4.1 Case Selection Logic

The cases were selected using theory-illustration empirical examples rather than a comparative case-study design (Yin, 2018). Each case was chosen because it provides a well-documented example of one of the five proposed boundary mechanisms: constructed authority, personalised accountability, non-contractual coordination, strategic opacity, and continuous adaptation. The cases represent diverse forms of organised crime operating across different institutional, geographical, and organisational contexts, thereby reducing dependence on any single criminal organisation or jurisdiction.

The purpose is not to establish causal proof or empirical generalisation, but to examine whether the proposed theoretical mechanisms are observable across multiple extreme-case settings. Each case is intentionally linked to a single proposition to maximise conceptual clarity while allowing cross-case comparison of the proposed boundary mechanisms.

4.2 Authority Without Legitimacy: The Sicilian Mafia and Constructed Authority

The Sicilian Mafia, or Cosa Nostra of Italy, exemplifies leadership authority maintained without formal legitimacy. Mafia leaders have controlled areas with weak state presence, where formal law was ineffective or non-existent. Their authority relies on coercion, reputation, and relationships (Gambetta, 1993; Paoli, 2008).

Gambetta (1993) explains that Mafia leaders positioned themselves as providers of "private protection," creating a system in which authority stemmed from their ability to enforce order and resolve disputes, rather than from legal institutions. This case illustrates Proposition 1 by showing that coercive capacity and reputational enforcement can sustain leadership authority in the absence of institutional legitimacy.

4.3 Accountability Without Formal Governance: Internal Discipline in the Yakuza

Japanese organised crime groups like the Yakuza illustrate how accountability can function without formal governance. Despite the absence of legal oversight, Yakuza organisations impose strict internal discipline through clear hierarchies and conduct expectations (Hill, 2003; Adelstein, 2010).

Accountability is enforced with immediate consequences, both symbolic and material. Practices such as yubitsume (a ritual of self-mutilation) serve as visible markers of responsibility and failure, promoting obedience and loyalty (Hill, 2003). These extreme measures show how accountability can be personal and internalised rather than reliant on institutional processes.

This case illustrates Proposition 2 by demonstrating how direct, personalised enforcement substitutes for formal governance in maintaining accountability.

4.4 Coordination Under Non-Contractibility: Colombian Drug Trafficking Networks

Colombian drug trafficking organisations illustrate effective coordination without enforceable contracts. They operate across jurisdictions and outside legal systems, relying on trust, repeated interactions, and risk-sharing to maintain complex supply chains (Kenney, 2007).

Kenney (2007) shows that traffickers create adaptive learning systems in which coordination occurs through decentralised decision-making and ongoing feedback rather than formal agreements. They rely on reputational consequences and the threat of retaliation to secure transactions, thereby establishing a self-enforcing equilibrium.

This case illustrates Proposition 3 by showing how repeated interaction, trust, and reputational enforcement substitute for formal contractual coordination.

4.5 Strategic Opacity: Compartmentalisation in Transnational Criminal Networks

Many organised crime groups have compartmentalised structures where information is shared only on a strict need-to-know basis. This is common in transnational networks involved in trafficking, cybercrime, and illicit finance (Calderoni, 2012; Campana & Varese, 2018).

Cell-based structures help organisations limit exposure by ensuring that individuals only have partial knowledge of operations. Leaders control information to reduce vulnerability to infiltration and disruption. Instead of promoting

transparency, these organisations prioritise strategic opacity for survival.

This case illustrates Proposition 4 by demonstrating that strategic control of information can enhance coordination and organisational resilience under high-risk conditions.

4.6 Leadership Under Persistent Instability: Mexican Cartels and Adaptive Structures

Mexican drug cartels operate under consistent enforcement pressure, competition, and internal fractures. As a result, they display significant strategic adaptability, frequently changing their leadership and operational structures (ICG. 2020; Grillo, 2017).

Instead of maintaining stable hierarchies, cartels adopt modular, decentralised models, enabling them to withstand shocks such as leadership losses or territorial setbacks. Here, permanent adaptiveness refers not simply to organisational flexibility but to leadership operating through continuous environmental scanning, rapid decision revision, decentralised operational adjustment, and ongoing structural reconfiguration rather than episodic responses to isolated crises.

This case illustrates Proposition 5 by showing that continuous adaptation, rather than episodic adjustment, underpins leadership effectiveness in persistently unstable environments.

4.7 Cross-Case Synthesis

The five cases demonstrate a consistent pattern. Despite differences in organisational structure, geography, and criminal activity, each illustrates a distinct mechanism through which leadership persists when conventional institutional assumptions are absent. Rather than functioning as isolated examples, the cases collectively provide analytical support for the proposition that authority, accountability, coordination, information control, and adaptation can each be reconfigured under conditions of institutional constraint.

Simultaneously, the cases should not be construed as empirical validation of the proposed framework. They serve as illustrative rather than comparative examples and were chosen to evaluate theoretical plausibility rather than causal relationships. Future empirical investigations should methodically examine the propositions across a wider array of organisational contexts, including reputable organisations facing institutional uncertainty, to appraise their explanatory scope and boundary conditions.

5. Implications: Leadership, Practice, and Governance Under Constraint

5.1 Theoretical Implications: Boundary Conditions of Leadership

The main theoretical implication is that leadership should be understood as boundary-dependent rather than universally stable. Existing leadership theories remain valuable, but their explanatory strength is greatest in contexts where authority is legitimate, accountability is formally enforced, coordination is contractually supported, transparency is feasible, and institutional stability is broadly present (Hoch et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2019; Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018). The boundary-condition perspective developed in this paper clarifies where these theories operate effectively and where their explanatory limits begin.

A further implication is the need to distinguish leadership effectiveness from leadership legitimacy. Leadership may remain operationally effective through coercive credibility, reputational enforcement, relational embeddedness, or information control, even where it lacks legal or moral legitimacy. This distinction prevents leadership theory from assuming that effective coordination is necessarily normatively desirable.

5.2 Practical Implications: Responsibility, Coordination, and Information Control

For organisations operating under uncertainty, the analysis highlights three practical implications. First, responsibility must be clearly anchored. When authority is dispersed across committees, platforms, or socio-technical systems, accountability can become diluted. Organisations therefore need identifiable responsibility owners for consequential decisions, particularly where formal governance mechanisms are fragmented or incomplete (Aguilera et al., 2018).

Second, formal rules are not sufficient where enforcement is weak, incomplete, or slow. Effective coordination also depends on relational trust, repeated interaction, reputational commitment, and clear escalation pathways. These mechanisms do not replace formal governance but strengthen it when contractual or procedural safeguards are insufficient (Williamson, 1985; Eisenhardt, 1989).

Third, transparency should be treated as a governed practice rather than an automatic solution. While openness is important for trust, complete visibility may be unrealistic or risky in high-risk environments. Leaders, therefore, need to define what information should be shared, with whom, when, and for what purpose (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016).

5.3 AI Governance Implications: Delegated Authority and Accountability Decoupling

The framework is particularly relevant to AI governance because AI-enabled organisations increasingly exhibit the boundary conditions identified in this study: delegated authority, distributed accountability, limited transparency, and unstable decision environments. The issue is not simply that AI systems are opaque or technically complex. Rather, the framework explains how organisational authority can shift toward algorithmic systems, while accountability remains formally assigned to human actors who may lack meaningful oversight or the capacity for intervention. It is therefore important to distinguish strategic opacity, in which information restrictions are deliberately imposed for legitimate organisational purposes such as security, privacy, or operational resilience, from governance opacity, in which accountability is obscured because responsibility, decision logic, or oversight mechanisms are poorly defined.

This produces what may be described as accountability decoupling: the separation between who or what exercises operational influence and who is formally responsible for the outcome. For example, in AI-supported hiring, lending, fraud detection, or resource allocation, algorithmic systems may shape consequential decisions, while responsibility is distributed across model developers, vendors, compliance teams, managers, and senior executives. In such cases, leadership authority becomes technologically mediated, but accountability may remain institutionally ambiguous.

The boundary-condition framework predicts that AI governance failures are most likely where three conditions coincide: first, algorithmic systems influence consequential decisions; second, their decision logic is only partially transparent; and third, no clearly identifiable human or institutional actor has authority to review, override, or justify the decision. Under these conditions, formal governance may exist, but operational accountability remains weak.

This strengthens the case for an Ultimate Responsibility Owner (Frimpong, 2025) in AI-enabled decision systems. The role is not merely symbolic. It provides an accountability anchor where authority is delegated to opaque systems, and responsibility might otherwise be dispersed across socio-technical networks. Future empirical research could test whether organisations with clearly assigned responsibility owners, override rights, audit trails, and escalation mechanisms experience fewer accountability failures in AI-mediated decision-making than organisations that rely solely on general AI principles or compliance documentation.

6. Conclusion

Contemporary leadership theory is largely developed within institutional environments characterised by legitimacy, formal accountability, contractual enforceability, transparency, and relative stability. This paper has argued that these conditions represent boundary assumptions rather than universal features of leadership. When they weaken or disappear, leadership does not cease to exist; instead, its underlying mechanisms are reconfigured through constructed authority, personalised accountability, non-contractual coordination, strategic opacity, and continuous adaptation.

The principal theoretical contribution is the introduction of a boundary-condition perspective that clarifies the limits of prevailing leadership theories while extending their applicability to constrained environments. Rather than rejecting established leadership frameworks, the study identifies the institutional conditions under which they operate effectively and the mechanisms through which leadership persists when those conditions fail. In doing so, it also distinguishes leadership effectiveness from leadership legitimacy, demonstrating that the two should not be assumed to coincide.

The framework also has growing relevance for AI-enabled organisations. As authority becomes increasingly delegated to algorithmic systems, accountability is dispersed across socio-technical actors, and decision-making processes become more opaque, the boundary conditions identified in this paper are becoming increasingly visible in mainstream organisational settings. Leadership and governance, therefore, require explicit structures of responsibility that preserve accountability even when authority is technologically mediated.

Future research should empirically examine the proposed mechanisms across both conventional and extreme organisational contexts and assess how boundary conditions influence leadership effectiveness in different institutional environments. Comparative studies, particularly in AI-enabled organisations, public governance, and crisis settings, would further refine the framework and strengthen its explanatory and predictive value. By repositioning leadership as a context-dependent phenomenon rather than a universally stable construct, this study provides a foundation for developing leadership theories that remain robust amid institutional constraints and uncertainty.

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Dr. VF was responsible for the conceptualisation and drafting of the study. Dr OKB was responsible for the revision, amendment, and quality check. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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