

Concept Paper

Not peer-reviewed version

Conscious Leadership as Collective Cognition: A Conceptual Framework from Large-Scale Institutional Transformation

[Abdulmohsen Alrohaimi](#) *

Posted Date: 27 February 2026

doi: 10.20944/preprints202602.1910.v1

Keywords: conscious leadership; collective cognition; organizational sensemaking; institutional transformation; leadership theory



Preprints.org is a free multidisciplinary platform providing preprint service that is dedicated to making early versions of research outputs permanently available and citable. Preprints posted at Preprints.org appear in Web of Science, Crossref, Google Scholar, Scilit, Europe PMC.

Copyright: This open access article is published under a [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](#), which permit the free download, distribution, and reuse, provided that the author and preprint are cited in any reuse.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.

Concept Paper

Conscious Leadership as Collective Cognition: A Conceptual Framework from Large-Scale Institutional Transformation

Abdulmohsen Alrohaimi

Shaqra University, Saudi Arabia; alrohaimi@su.edu.sa

Abstract

Leadership research has largely emphasized individual leaders and organizational-level outcomes, offering influential theories such as transformational and authentic leadership. However, these approaches provide limited explanatory power in contexts of sustained, large-scale institutional transformation, where authority is diffuse, temporal horizons are extended, and coordination challenges exceed the influence capacity of individual actors. This article develops a conceptual framework that reconceptualizes leadership as a form of collective cognition, defined as shared interpretive structures that guide decision-making, sustain coordination, and maintain continuity under prolonged uncertainty. Drawing on leadership theory, organizational sensemaking, and institutional analysis, the framework specifies three core constructs: implicit decision frameworks, collective historical cognition, and identity continuity mechanisms, and explains their dynamic interrelationships. Rather than advancing a context-specific or prescriptive model, the article offers a generalizable theoretical perspective with clearly articulated boundary conditions. By shifting attention from individual leaders to shared cognitive infrastructures, the framework extends leadership theory and provides a foundation for future empirical research on leadership during large-scale transformation.

Keywords: conscious leadership; collective cognition; organizational sensemaking; institutional transformation; leadership theory

1. Introduction

Leadership scholarship has produced a substantial body of theory explaining how leaders influence followers and organizational outcomes. Dominant approaches—including transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and leader–member exchange—have emphasized individual agency, relational dynamics, and behavioral competencies (Banks et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018; van Knippenberg, 2020). These theories have proven effective in explaining motivation, trust, and performance within relatively stable organizational contexts.

However, growing attention has been directed toward leadership challenges arising in contexts of sustained, large-scale transformation, such as digitalization, institutional reform, and systemic societal change (Hannah et al., 2021; Petriglieri et al., 2023). In such contexts, leadership influence is rarely confined to a single individual or role, authority is often distributed across institutional layers, and coordination must be sustained over extended temporal horizons. Individual-centric leadership models struggle to account for how coherence, legitimacy, and continuity are maintained under these conditions.

Parallel developments in organizational research have highlighted the importance of shared cognition, sensemaking, and meaning construction in shaping coordinated action (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Cornelissen et al., 2022). These studies demonstrate that organizations rely on collectively maintained interpretive frameworks to navigate ambiguity and uncertainty. Yet, despite

conceptual overlap, leadership theory has only partially integrated insights from organizational cognition and sensemaking, resulting in fragmented explanations of leadership processes.

Institutional theory further underscores the role of historically embedded rules, norms, and belief systems in stabilizing behavior over time (Scott, 2014; Greenwood et al., 2017). From this perspective, leadership cannot be understood solely as episodic influence but must be examined as a process that aligns collective action with enduring institutional trajectories. Existing leadership theories offer limited tools for analyzing these temporal and institutional dimensions.

Addressing these gaps, this article develops a conceptual framework that reconceptualizes leadership as collective cognition. Leadership is theorized as emerging from shared interpretive structures that guide decision-making, maintain identity continuity, and enable coordination across time and institutional levels. By integrating leadership theory with organizational sensemaking and institutional analysis, the framework advances a system-level understanding of leadership during large-scale transformation.

2. Leadership Theory and the Limits of Individual-Centric Models

Mainstream leadership theories have historically privileged the individual leader as the primary locus of influence. Transformational leadership emphasizes inspirational motivation and vision articulation (Banks et al., 2016), while authentic leadership focuses on self-awareness and moral perspective (Gardner et al., 2021). Adaptive leadership highlights the leader's role in mobilizing followers to address complex challenges (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Although these theories acknowledge contextual complexity, they remain anchored in assumptions of identifiable leaders exercising influence through interpersonal processes. Such assumptions become problematic in large-scale transformation contexts where leadership functions are distributed, and outcomes depend on sustained alignment rather than episodic intervention (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Recent reviews have called for greater attention to collective and systemic dimensions of leadership (van Knippenberg, 2020; Hannah et al., 2021). Distributed and shared leadership perspectives represent steps in this direction, emphasizing leadership as a process enacted by multiple actors (Bolden, 2011). However, these approaches often focus on role distribution rather than the cognitive mechanisms enabling coordination and continuity.

As a result, leadership theory lacks a coherent account of how leadership operates as a shared cognitive system that stabilizes meaning, guides decision-making, and sustains identity during prolonged transformation.

3. Organizational Cognition, Sensemaking, and Institutional Change

Organizational cognition research emphasizes how shared mental models and interpretive schemas shape collective behavior (Walsh, 1995; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011). Sensemaking theory further explains how actors construct meaning under conditions of ambiguity, emphasizing ongoing interpretation rather than static cognition (Weick et al., 2005; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Recent work highlights sensemaking as a collective and temporal process, embedded in institutional contexts and shaped by historical experience (Glynn & Watkiss, 2020; Cornelissen et al., 2022). These insights are particularly relevant for understanding leadership during sustained change, where actors must reconcile new demands with established norms and identities.

Institutional theory complements this perspective by explaining how shared beliefs and practices persist over time, providing stability and legitimacy (Greenwood et al., 2017; Suddaby et al., 2019). Leadership, from an institutional perspective, involves aligning action with these cognitive and normative structures rather than merely directing behavior.

Despite their relevance, these literatures remain weakly integrated into leadership theory, limiting understanding of leadership as a cognitive and institutional process.

4. Leadership as Collective Cognition

This article defines leadership as collective cognition: the shared interpretive frameworks, historically embedded decision logics, and identity narratives through which coordinated action is enabled under prolonged uncertainty. Leadership emerges not from individual authority but from the alignment of cognitive orientations distributed across actors and institutions.

Collective cognition enables locally autonomous decisions to remain globally coherent, reducing the need for centralized control (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011). Leadership influence persists over time through stabilized cognitive reference points rather than through continuous intervention by individual leaders.

Temporality is central to this conception. Leadership operates by integrating past experience, present interpretation, and future orientation into coherent cognitive structures (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Suddaby et al., 2020).

5. Core Constructs and Mechanisms

5.1. *Implicit Decision Frameworks*

Implicit decision frameworks are collectively shared cognitive templates that guide how decisions are interpreted and enacted. Operating largely below conscious articulation, these frameworks enable coordination by providing stable reference points for judgment and prioritization (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011; Cornelissen et al., 2022).

5.2. *Collective Historical Cognition*

Collective historical cognition refers to shared interpretations of past experiences that inform present decision-making and future expectations. Rather than functioning as static memory, historical cognition actively structures perceptions of legitimacy, risk, and continuity (Glynn & Watkiss, 2020; Suddaby et al., 2020).

5.3. *Identity Continuity Mechanisms*

Identity continuity mechanisms maintain collective identity amid change by linking evolving strategies to enduring narratives of purpose and role. These mechanisms reduce resistance and enable adaptation without fragmentation (Corley & Gioia, 2011; Ravasi et al., 2020).

5.4. *Mechanism Alignment and Leadership Effectiveness*

Leadership effectiveness emerges from the alignment of these mechanisms. Misalignment undermines coordination even in the presence of formal authority, while alignment enables sustained collective action under complexity (Hannah et al., 2021).

6. Boundary Conditions and Differentiation

The framework is most applicable to contexts of sustained, large-scale transformation rather than short-term change initiatives. It presumes a minimum level of institutional continuity and shared history. The framework differs from distributed leadership by focusing on cognitive infrastructures rather than role allocation, and from cultural leadership by emphasizing decision logics rather than values alone.

As a conceptual contribution, the framework requires empirical validation. Future research should operationalize its constructs and examine applicability across organizational and institutional settings.

7. Contributions and Conclusion

This article advances leadership theory by reconceptualizing leadership as collective cognition. It integrates leadership research with organizational sensemaking and institutional analysis, offering a system-level explanation of leadership during prolonged transformation. By shifting focus from individual leaders to shared cognitive infrastructures, the framework opens new avenues for empirical research and theory development in business and management studies.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies: During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to assist with language editing and improving clarity of expression. The tool was used exclusively to enhance readability and linguistic coherence. All conceptual development, theoretical framing, interpretation, and final content decisions were made exclusively by the author. The author reviewed and edited all AI-assisted outputs and assumes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript.

Acknowledgments: The author gratefully acknowledges the institutional support provided by Shaqra University. Appreciation is also extended to colleagues whose academic discussions contributed to refining the conceptual clarity of this work. No external funding was received for this research.

References

1. Banks, G. C., McCauley, K. D., Gardner, W. L., & Guler, C. E. (2016). A meta-analytic review of authentic and transformational leadership. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 23(3), 236–252.
2. Bolden, R. (2011). Distributed leadership in organizations. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13(3), 251–269.
3. Cornelissen, J. P., Mantere, S., & Vaara, E. (2022). The contraction of meaning. *Academy of Management Review*, 47(2), 209–231.
4. Corley, K. G., & Gioia, D. A. (2011). Identity ambiguity and change. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(1), 63–82.
5. Gardner, W. L., et al. (2021). Authentic leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 32(5), 101–159.
6. Glynn, M. A., & Watkiss, L. (2020). Of organizational culture and institutional change. *Academy of Management Review*, 45(1), 154–174.
7. Greenwood, R., et al. (2017). *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism*. Sage.
8. Hannah, S. T., et al. (2021). Leadership in extreme contexts. *Journal of Management*, 47(1), 6–35.
9. Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership*. Harvard Business Press.
10. Hoch, J. E., et al. (2018). Shared leadership. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 103(3), 1–23.
11. Hodgkinson, G. P., & Healey, M. P. (2011). Psychological foundations of dynamic capabilities. *Strategic Management Journal*, 32(13), 1500–1516.
12. Kaplan, S., & Orlikowski, W. J. (2013). Temporal work in strategy making. *Organization Science*, 24(4), 965–995.
13. Maitlis, S., & Christianson, M. (2014). Sensemaking in organizations. *Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1), 57–125.
14. Petriglieri, G., et al. (2023). Leadership under uncertainty. *Organization Studies*, 44(3), 345–367.
15. Ravasi, D., et al. (2020). Organizational identity dynamics. *Academy of Management Annals*, 14(2), 1–39.
16. Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations* (4th ed.). Sage.
17. Suddaby, R., et al. (2019). Organizational history. *Academy of Management Annals*, 13(1), 1–43.
18. Suddaby, R., et al. (2020). Temporal dynamics in institutional theory. *Academy of Management Review*, 45(1), 1–22.
19. Uhl-Bien, M., & Arena, M. (2018). Leadership for organizational adaptability. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 29(1), 89–104.
20. van Knippenberg, D. (2020). Leadership and identity. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 7, 1–26.

21. Walsh, J. P. (1995). Managerial and organizational cognition. *Organization Science*, 6(3), 280–321.
22. Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science*, 16(4), 409–421.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.