

## ***System Thinking in a Global Context to Foster Transcendent Leadership***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines contemporary topics of leadership globally and its importance to be applied within multiple levels of governance. This paper is grounded in theory employing a theoretical framework to conduct qualitative deductive and inductive analysis (Maxwell, 2013), Patton (2015) posits that ‘Grounded theory emphasizes steps and procedures for connecting induction and deduction through the constant comparative method.’ Through the examination of theories like Systems Thinking framing model in relation to Transcendent Leadership and governance, the need arises for Systems Thinking theory, by which innovative solutions can be achieved for thriving international organizations. With the complexity and interdependency nowadays in pedagogy, concepts, and interaction, the shift in global leadership enacts a new demand for holistic inquiry fostering nonlinearity, interdependency, and an integral framework of thinking, thereby improving synergy in leadership and productivity of all systems, what Gardner (2006) calls ‘transcendent Leadership.’

Keywords: System Thinking, Global Context, Transcendent Leadership

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## Introduction

The world is transcending and transforming into connected yet complex forms of interactions globally. All international institutions are extremely interdependent and connected, we no longer can depend on the skills of mechanical reductionists to analyze situations and find "technical solutions," and more adoptive emerging problems arise in our globalized social, international systems (Holmes & Noel, 2015). Changes in policymaking, educational advancement, and economic gains in one nation will inevitably affect another. Hence, a new 'systems mindset' proves feasible to understand the deep roots of complex behavior and be able to predict them.

All the parts and intricate loops of interaction feed into each other causing the emergence of a complex globalized future. These models of interactions are unable to depict the full magnitude of understanding the dynamics of the intricate components of the system. Thus, a new form of inquiry and leadership is needed for self, others, and the institutions.

Global leadership is a prominent field of study to foster successful international exchange and improve human experience within and amongst nations. It requires the skills and consideration of working in different cultures; combining business practices to fit multinational needs; cultivating trust among team members that may not be of the same nationality or only work with each other remotely or both; overcoming communication barriers; creating clarity in team objectives where values may differ, dealing with different laws and regulations; overcoming stereotypes; and managing through the complex, changing, and often ambiguous global environment (O'Keefe, 2018, p. 5).

As organizations around the world become more interdependent and connected, leaders are increasingly focused on performance on a global scale. The discussion therefore focuses on global leaders who are operating in a more complex and diverse environment. Accordingly, it requires new skills to work more effectively. (Terrel & Rosenbusch, 2013).

According to Al-Ebraya (2017), transcendent leadership is "the leader's adoption of an administrative philosophy to fulfill the desired goals of the institution, based on serving the subordinates, adopting satisfaction and encouraging to participation, initiative, and creativity within the frame of teamwork" (p. 27). The researcher claims that transcendent leadership is a style of leadership based on the leader who manifests ethical and noble styles in dealing with the followers and prioritizes their requirements to promote their performance and to accomplish the goals of the institution.

This paper aims to deliver a meta-framework to assess and synthesize the different philosophies, theories, models, and definitions concerning global leadership (as an overarching term) to decrease conceptual confusion and uncover the underlying mechanisms.

This paper investigates the following questions: What is global leadership? How does Systems Thinking in a global context foster Transcendent Leadership?

## System Thinking in a Global Context

"Systems Thinking is literally a system of thinking about systems" (Arnold & Wade 2015; Westover, 2022). The first element of the system is the leader. We all come from various backgrounds, demographics, and life experiences that helped us shape our value system, lenses, and the way we look at things. Then we encounter other leaders in larger systems that

are interconnected. As Harter (2021) pointed out, “It is not just that leaders participate in systems as something out there as an encompassing reality, but leaders are themselves systems” (p. 41). Leaders are both influenced by and influencing the system all the time. Each leader's experiences, biases, and behaviors contribute to the landscape of the system and in turn, are constantly influenced by the system. As Lippitt (2021) suggested, one important characteristic of systems analysis is that an individual, whether it is a leader or a follower, needs to “recognize (their) potential distortions or bias” (p. 55).

The second main element of a system is that it is made up of others. As Kellerman (2016) discussed, the systemic approach transcends “the leader-centrism that has plagued the leadership industry for 50 years” (p. 36). She went on to discuss her argument for eliminating leader-centrism, and for employing instead a more holistic approach to leadership, one that, by definition, is more inclusive. Lippitt (2021) recommended an important characteristic of systems analysis is to “solicit, respect, and involve all stakeholders” in the process (p. 55). Lippitt (2021) went on to say, “Leaders must tap cross-professional expertise and engage others to generate a comprehensive understanding of current challenges and triggers novel solution” (p. 56).

Finally, and possibly the most salient element in systems thinking, as it relates to the process of leadership, is the important role context plays in the system. Harter (2021) made the argument that systems and the context of the system shape both the leader and follower even before they engage in the process of leading or following. Lippitt (2021) argued that this perspective of context is critical for systems analysis suggesting individuals need to, “learn from the past, understand the present, and plan for the future” (p. 55). Each of these contexts plays an important role in impacting all the elements of the system. Donaldson (2021), influenced by Kellerman (2016) noted “Leadership must have a context. The context for leadership is the system” (p. 44). For leaders and followers to operate effectively within a particular system they need to recognize the influence context has on them and the overall system, so systems thinking can lead us on a critical and rational path of theories.

Systems thinking is a holistic approach to analysis that focuses on the way that a system's constituent parts interrelate and how systems work over time and within the context of larger systems. The systems thinking approach contrasts with traditional analysis, which studies systems by breaking them down into their separate elements. According to systems thinking, system behavior results from the effects of reinforcing and balancing processes. A reinforcing process leads to the increase of some system components. If reinforcement is unchecked by a balancing process, it eventually leads to collapse. A balancing process tends to maintain equilibrium in a particular system (Lutkevich, 2023).

System Thinking is a realization that there are consequences to our actions that we are oblivious to. By understanding and changing structures that are not serving us well (including our mental models and perceptions), we can expand the choices available to us and create more satisfying, long-term solutions to chronic problems. In general, a systems thinking perspective requires curiosity, clarity, compassion, choice, and courage. This approach includes the willingness to see a situation more fully, to recognize that we are interrelated, to acknowledge that there are often multiple interventions to a problem, and to champion interventions that may not be popular (Goodman, 2021).

We need a system to think about this complex system, systems thinking is a way to think about systems (Westover, 2022). While systems thinking can be considered a talent, there is a

lot of supporting theory and a range of tools that can be used in application. Systems thinking educators identify six key elements for creating systems thinking: (1) interconnectedness, (2) synthesis, (3) emergence, (4) feedback loops, (5) causality and (6) systems mapping (Jonathan, 2020).

## **Grounded Theory**

During its 40-year history, grounded theory has served as a major method for conducting emergent qualitative research. What is an emergent method? I start with a working definition of an emergent method as inductive, indeterminate, and open-ended. An emergent method begins with the empirical world and builds an inductive understanding of it as events unfold and knowledge occurs. Social scientists who use emergent methods can study research problems that arise in the empirical world and can pursue unanticipated directions of inquiry in this world. Emergent methods are particularly well suited for studying uncharted, contingent, or dynamic phenomena. These methods also allow for new properties of the studied phenomenon to appear that, in turn, shape new conditions and consequences to be studied. By adopting emergent methods, researchers can account for processes discovered in the empirical world and direct their methodological strategies accordingly (Charmaz, 2006, p.155; Karin, 2016).

In 1967, Glaser (2008) developed the term "grounded theory," which stems from the analysis of the previously collected data as opposed to the approach that develops a theory from numerous observations or concepts, then data are collected to test this theory. It is claimed that grounded theory constructs theories close to reality. It focuses on the construction of theory more than focusing on a particular theoretical content. It also asserts steps and procedures by combining deduction with induction, comparing research areas, sampling, and testing concepts derived from the field study. At the same time, grounded theory takes the researcher to the real world and makes them close to it. Consequently, the results are grounded in the empirical world.

The Grounded theory is an inductive—or perhaps more accurately—critical method aimed at generating theory from empirical data collected in the field. Often viewed as both a process and product of social research, grounded theory has been argued to be the most utilized contemporary qualitative research methodology (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Guetterman et al., 2017).

Studies that incorporate a grounded theory approach are a step towards conceptual thinking and theory building rather than empirical testing of the theory. Hence, a qualitative research approach is used in these types of studies. Particularly it is conceptual thinking and theory building that's why the researchers usually are going to conduct an inductive, constructivist 'Grounded Theory' approach. It is the systematic development of theory in social settings, and it depends upon inductive approaches which are appropriate for the study mainly aimed at theory development (Shahid, 2014, p.224). Furthermore, the research questions and literature review by themselves lead and support conceptual thinking and theory building rather than empirical testing of the theory, and this type of study follows an inductive theory-building approach. Gray (2009) argued that deductive reasoning moves towards hypothesis testing to verify, refuse, or modify a theory based on empirical data, whereas inductive reasoning seeks to discover a binding principle and to construct generalizations, relationships, and even theories by analyzing the data collected for this purpose. However, he also emphasized that the inductive process may still have some pre-existing theories or ideas

when approaching a problem. Nonetheless, it does not pursue to approve or negate the existing theories, but endeavors to create outlines, stabilities, and significances by collecting data (Gray, 2009).

Grounded theory is a method of explication and emergence. The method takes a systematic inductive, comparative, and interactive approach to inquiry and open-ended strategies (Charmaz, 2006). These strategies make grounded theory more than only inductive because they encourage researchers to make conjectures and check them and therefore to engage in deductive reasoning as inquiry proceeds. Grounded theory strategies make the method explicit, and their open-ended qualities foster the development of emergent conceptual analyses. Grounded theory strategies prompt early analytic thinking and keep researchers interacting with their data and emerging analyses (Charmaz, 2006).

The logic of grounded theory provides a major contribution to emergent methods because grounded theory involves creative problem-solving and imaginative interpretation. Grounded theory strategies prompt the researcher to reach beyond pure induction. The method builds a series of checks and refinements into qualitative inquiry through an iterative process of successive analytic and data collection phases of research, each informed by the other and rendered more theoretical. In short, the grounded theory method emphasizes the process of analysis and the development of theoretical categories, rather than focusing solely on the results of inquiry (Shahid, 2014, p.156).

### **Transcendent Leadership**

Leadership theories abound, but few have provided means to integrate the depth and breadth of the vast literature available. Building on the research of Crossan and Mazutis (2008) who propose Transcendent Leadership as an integrated framework, the search describes the key leadership challenges of leading across the levels of self, others, organization, and society. Much of the leadership discourse has focused mostly on the leadership of others and occasionally on the leadership of the organization, yet little has focused specifically on the integral component of leadership of self. There is evidence of the necessity of multiple levels of leadership, as well as some practical guidance.

Gardner (2006) coined the term 'transcendent leadership,' where the leader transcends the self and bases leadership practices on a 'shared vision' and a collective view (Crossan, Vera & Nanjad, 2008). The dynamics between the leader and follower may overlap without impeding progress or disrupting official tasks and litigation of each position within an organizational structure. In transcendent leadership, a new paradigm is needed to bring human efforts to higher levels of synergy' (Gardner, 2006, p. 72). Transcendent leadership is prominent within 'learning organizations' and 'systems theory' and is mostly concerned with developing the system in its entirety, including all of the intricate parts, feedback loops, people, units, ideas, policies, litigation, and leadership (Arnold & Wade, 2015; Senge, 1990). Hence, the concept of contemporary transcendent leadership, as it applies to systems thinking mindset internationally is explored in this paper to analyze processes that promote successful and meaningful interactions between various institutions with a wide range of philosophical worldviews, bylaws, beliefs, and explain the difference between micro and macro levels of governance between these institutions (Macdonald et al. 2018; Senge, 1996).

To establish a common understanding of global leadership will require intensive cooperation between science and practitioners. Meanwhile, the development of a meta-framework that

enables a better understanding of the actual scientific findings and the use of terms concerning global leadership could help to minimize the above-claimed conceptual confusion which is the aim of this study. It is intended to offer a tool that supports the coexistence of different global leadership frameworks, processes, models, and theories and visualize their interdependencies (Laszlo, 2012, p.1).

The notion of transcendental leadership has been developed recently by Cardona (2000), as a contribution-based exchange relationship. In this relationship, the leader promotes unity by providing fair extrinsic rewards, appealing to the intrinsic motivations of the followers, and developing their transcendent motivation. Later, Sanders, Hopkins & Geroy (2003) proposed, that the transcendental theory of leadership comprises three dimensions of spirituality (consciousness, moral character, and faith) that incorporate the managerial facets of transactional theory and the charismatic aspects of transformational theory to enhance Leadership effectiveness.

Taking this into consideration, the definition of Mendenhall, et al., (2012, p. 262) applies best: “Global leaders are individuals who effect significant positive change in organizations by building communities through the development of trust and the arrangement of organizational structures and processes in a context involving multiple cross-boundary stakeholders, multiple sources of external cross-boundary authority, and multiple cultures under conditions of temporal, geographical and cultural complexity.

For a better understanding of the term “positive,” it is helpful to review the findings of Morgan & Luthans (2012). They argue that positive global leadership results in more efficient and motivating communication using all kinds of (technical) resources to bridge physical distance avoiding an “out-of-sight, out-of-mind”-setting entering daily business. Challenges of cultural distance will be managed by positive global leadership in a more appropriate, “ambicultural” way by leveraging the good parts of each culture and avoiding the less useful or even blocking influences. Contrary cross-cultural barriers, e.g. corruption, institutional deficiencies, or language barriers cannot be solved by positive global leadership. Nevertheless, Morgan & Luthans (2012, p. 545) argue that “...leaders who possess positive traits such as courage and wisdom; have developed positive capabilities and psychological resources such as hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism; and are intentional about behaving ethically, authentically and in ways that systematically and integratively affirm the strengths, capabilities, and potential of their followers and their organizations over time and across contexts.”

### **Characteristics of Transcendental Leadership**

Scientific leadership emerged in the 20th century in sequence with the emergence of administrative theories by Henry Fayol after the industrial age and when the focus shifted to fostering psychology (positive psychology in the ‘60s), the investment in various human strengths and talents became prevalent rather than on just physical stamina (Seligman, 2000).

With the advent of the third millennium, numerous challenges, such as globalization of markets and technology, increase in global communication, intensification of competition and economic conflicts, transition to reliance on intellectual and social rather than physical capital only, increase in freedom of choice and the diversity of alternatives, emerged. Other value challenges, including finding and trading ethical values, linking ethics with capitalism, and the increasing number of experts and practitioners calling for the need to test leadership

concepts and models that contribute to understanding and overcoming these challenges and complexities, emerged, as well (Gadah, 2021; Crossan & Mazutis, 2008).

In a search for modern leadership models that contribute to resolving institutional crises and problems, transcendent leadership emerged as a relational leadership model that emphasizes stimulating the followers' motives; providing fair incentives and rewards; linking them to higher goals; devoting principles of cooperation, service, and sacrifice among the leaders and follows, prioritizing the well-being of the people and society, participating in decision-making and building common vision and goals. It is dynamic leadership that encourages the leader to commit to supporting and motivating the followers to contribute more through extrinsic motivation (money and praise), intrinsic motivation (learning and satisfaction), and transcendental motivation (appropriate actions and decisions for the benefit of all) (Acuna, 2017; Gadah, 2021). Transcendent leadership is a model for developing the leader based on spiritual and internal development, as most aspects of the leader's development disregard the internal system that leads to the emergence of their daily behaviors, helps them see aspects and solutions to the ambiguous personal and organizational problems, contributes to the institution's vision as mechanisms that create meaning and purpose for humanity rather than the mechanisms concerned with material profit only, and increases the followers' awareness of their work instead of acting coercively.

Transcendent leaders are accountable, they pay attention to followers to maintain quality personnel in the organization as long as possible, creating incentives and showing leadership potential using various techniques to achieve the vision of the organization, Leader competency is the ability to formulate strategies for personal and organizational development, the ability to lead oneself, lead others, and lead the organization to be the leader of change as an opportunity, knowing how to find the right change and how to create change effectively (Srichaiwong et al., 2020, p. 601).

Also, it entails a commitment to serving others, it also prioritizes the ethics of integrity, sublimity, and sacrifice that help accomplish the goals of the institution. Transcendent leadership supplements transformational leadership by providing the motivations behind the practice of harmony, altruistic love, and a sense of wholeness and well-being that are created by care, concern, appreciation for oneself and others, and concern for others rather than self-interest. Accordingly, it helps the followers feel powerful and empowers them to make decisions, accomplish work, and lead. Transcendent leadership also offers real human leadership that is service-oriented, seeks to develop the ones' motives, away from opportunistic behavior that seeks personal interest, and includes love and care for the followers (Gadah, 2021).

Transcendent leadership is a form of leadership that leads institutions and companies in light of the present global competitiveness to fulfill the requirements of the global market, where people restrict themselves to some determinants by defining what they can and cannot do. Therefore, the theory of transcendent leadership helped remove these limitations because the leaders, according to this theory, attempt to conceptualize new patterns of thinking with a deeper sense of what they feel. They also tend to create a type of commitment among workers based on self-confidence and provide motivation that promotes their performance (Covey, 2007).

In transcendent leadership, the leader attempts to develop high motivation among followers, focuses on the followers' potential, prioritizes their personal development, fulfills their needs

to have more freedom, wisdom, and autonomy, and gives continuously (Cardona, 2000; Acuña, 2017).

The transcendental leadership style is typically associated with a leader who motivates their followers not only extrinsically and intrinsically, but also transcendently (Fry, 2003; Liu, 2007). Great emphasis is placed on these preferred characteristics, including the leader's ability to achieve the impossible and make the intangible tangible (Community for Human Resource Management Rosas, 2016).

## **Conclusion**

Transcendent leadership offers a platform for an enriching and collaborative human experience in organizational dynamics. Transcendental leadership initiates the planet as a concept that needs attention. It is the leadership of making a difference in our lives for the welfare of all. Core principles these leaders stand for include compassion, integrity and bravery, modesty and insight, genuineness, and tranquility. Transcendental Leaders provide a strong moral backbone on which the entire organization flourishes not just as a profit center that focuses on today's strategies but also thrives on a global vision that encompasses the welfare of the sustainable future of humanity.

Global leaders need a unique set of competencies that are important to lead in diverse environments. The leader's willingness and ability, skills such as making linkages, experiences to deal with different people, and the ability to be successfully adaptable to new cultural settings with cultural knowledge and problem awareness. Experts and practitioners of leadership development emphasize the need for increased focus on a more holistic perspective of leadership through systems thinking.

Through the examination of theories like Systems Thinking framing model in relation to transcendent leadership and governance, the need arises for systems thinking theory, by which innovative solutions can be achieved for thriving international organizations. With the complexity and interdependency nowadays in pedagogy, concepts, and interaction, the shift in global leadership enacts a new demand for holistic inquiry fostering nonlinearity, interdependency, and an integral framework of thinking, thereby improving synergy in leadership and productivity of all systems.



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