

Conceptualizing Strategic Leadership: Theories, Themes, and Varying Perspectives

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Abstract: Objectives: This paper conceptualizes strategic leadership (SL) by exploring foundational theories, central themes, and varying perspectives, emphasizing its role in aligning vision, setting strategic direction, and developing dynamic capabilities required for sustainable competitiveness. Prior Work: Building on the intersection of strategy and leadership theories, the paper integrates diverse frameworks addressing gaps in executive leadership literature, with theories like upper echelons, managerial cognition, and the resource-based view being central to the SL discourse. Approach: Employing a semi-systematic and integrative literature review, this paper critically examines SL through relevant theories, themes, and leadership perspectives, including top-down, collaborative, and distributed models. Results: SL is best operationalized through constructs emphasizing leaders' cognitive abilities to develop mature strategic management processes, including determining direction, adapting to dynamic environments and managing core competencies. Implications: This study refines the understanding of SL as leadership "of" organizations rather than "in" organizations, offering insights for academics and strategic leaders on integrating strategic thinking across all levels to enhance strategic outcomes linked to key performance indicators (KPIs). Value: The paper presents a multidisciplinary SL framework, bridging theoretical insights and practical gaps, positioning SL as a catalyst for translating organizational strategy into sustainable competitive advantage (SCA).

Keywords: Strategy; Strategic Management; Top Management Teams; Chief Executive Officers; Board of Directors

JEL Classification: M10; M12; M14; M19; L20; D83

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1. Introduction

The growing complexity of modern organizational challenges has made SL more crucial than ever (Ater et al., 2023). Despite its recognized importance, SL remains a fragmented concept, with scholars debating its precise definition, scope, and role in fostering organizational adaptability and long-term success (Bonardi et al., 2018; Samimi et al., 2022). In the face of disruptive competition and an increasingly volatile global environment, the demand for leaders who can integrate strategic vision with effective leadership is becoming more urgent to attain sustained competitiveness. This paper contributes to these ongoing debates by conceptualizing SL, examining its core themes, and exploring perspectives on its application in dynamic business environments and building an organisation's strategic agility.

Understanding SL requires a deep grasp of both strategy and leadership. Strategy has garnered significant academic attention, leading to numerous definitions and interpretations of its elements (Menz et al., 2021). However, a standardized definition remains elusive (Bukhari, 2019). Strategic planning plays a pivotal role in sustaining organizational performance, enabling firms to capitalize on opportunities and mitigate risks (Waldman et al., 2004; Neugebauer et al., 2016). Strategy encompasses defining a firm's mission and long-term objectives, analyzing both internal and external environments, and selecting actions to achieve the organization's goals (Hitt et al., 2020). It is often conceptualized as the cognitive process that underpins decision-making to enable the formulation and execution of plans (Guillot, 2003; Samimi et al., 2022). Furthermore, strategy involves positioning the organization within its competitive environment and leveraging its resources and capabilities (Ramos-Rodríguez et al., 2019). Strategy operates across multiple levels such as corporate, business, and functional (Wheelen et al., 2017). Despite the numerous strategic analysis tools, Porter's theory of the firm continues to provide a valuable framework in competitive strategy (Menz et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2023).

Leadership, like strategy, is multifaceted and spans across various disciplinary approaches (Obuba, 2022). In organizational contexts, leadership revolves around influencing followers, instilling a shared sense of purpose, and driving the achievement of collective goals (Northouse, 2021). Traditionally, leadership has been explored through the lenses of traits, behaviours, and roles, though recent attention has shifted towards leadership development and effectiveness (Yukl & Gardner, 2020). Leadership is particularly critical in the strategic management process, especially in guiding strategy implementation, monitoring and control (Hsieh & Yik, 2005; Allio, 2013; Day & Liu, 2018). Leaders play multifaceted roles in the strategy execution process, such as strategists, analysts, and motivators (Marx, 2014; Mjaku, 2020). While a leader's vision can inspire and enhance performance (Carmeli et al., 2013; Spasojevic et al., 2019), the extent of leadership's impact on

organizational success varies across different perspectives (Köseoğlu et al., 2009; Fitza, 2017; Safari & Mazdeh, 2018; Hitt et al., 2020).

SL, at its core, represents the integration of strategy and leadership (Singh et al., 2023). It requires leaders to anticipate, envision, and empower their organizations to achieve sustainable success (Ireland & Hitt, 2005; Asif & Basit, 2020; Hitt et al., 2020). The essence of SL lies in shaping the organization's long-term direction, aligning organisational resources with strategic goals, and securing sustainable performance (Wilderom et al., 2012; Vera et al., 2022). SL transcends traditional leadership dynamics, focusing on navigating complex, dynamic environments to achieve long-term organizational objectives (Hitt et al., 2017; Schaedler et al., 2022). Effective SL blends strategic planning with strategic thinking, fostering the adaptability necessary for thriving in competitive environments (Freedman, 2003; Hunitie, 2018). Unlike operational leadership, SL requires a distinct strategic mindset at higher organizational levels (Norzailan et al., 2016; Jaleha & Machuki, 2018). Although strategy and leadership have been extensively studied in isolation, their integration within SL context remains underexplored, especially in today's rapidly evolving business landscape where strategic adaptability, balancing flexibility and strategic control is critical for sustained success (Asif & Basit, 2020; Schaedler et al., 2022).

The following sections discusses the problem statement and then a comprehensive review of the literature, analyzing the evolving theories and approaches that inform the current understanding of SL.

2. Problem Statement

SL theories are often critiqued for their broad, complex and sometimes ambiguous definitions, which contribute to theoretical silos and diverse perspectives (Malewska & Sajdak, 2014; Fernandes et al., 2020; Schaedler et al., 2022). Despite the recognized importance of SL and scholarly efforts to explore its essence, the literature remains fragmented, exhibiting significant limitations and gaps (Samimi et al., 2022; Vera et al., 2022). One notable issue is the lack of clarity regarding how SL is identified and demonstrated within organizational systems, which has inevitably led to divergent conceptualizations and conundrums regarding its impact on strategic outcomes (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000; Cannella et al., 2009; Carter & Greer, 2013; Singh et al., 2023). Some of the critical questions persist about whether SL should be seen as person-centric, position-based, or as an institutional function, and how SL is enacted and held accountable within organizational frameworks (Hambrick & Quigley, 2013; Vogel et al., 2020; Vera et al., 2022).

The absence of comprehensive temporal analysis in SL research limits understanding of how SL perspectives and themes have evolved over time (Tao et al., 2021; Samimi

et al., 2022; White & Borgholthaus, 2022). This temporal deficiency perpetuates theoretical silos due to the complex and context-dependent nature of SL and its interaction with diverse organizational constructs (Vogel et al., 2020; Fernandes et al., 2022). Furthermore, some SL reviews lack methodological rigor, presenting findings in a static or non-dynamic manner without triangulation (Singh et al., 2023; Vera et al., 2022). This results in either a superficial overview of SL themes or a limited evolutionary perspective, thereby constraining the depth and breadth of insights (White & Borgholthaus, 2022; Fernandes et al., 2022). Despite increased scholarly attention to leadership, a universal consensus on SL remains elusive, often impacted by the differing viewpoints and ongoing gaps in the literature (Fernandes et al., 2020).

SL, as a broad concept, has been explored from various angles, yet lacks a unified paradigmatic focus (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Muthimi & Kilika, 2018). Some of the existing descriptions of SL are often criticized for being either overly expansive or reductive, focusing narrowly on the creation of meaning, vision, and organizational objectives, or merely on defining who strategic leaders are, implying that anything they do constitutes SL (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Antonakis et al., 2016; Samimi et al., 2022). Some scholarly perspectives also fall into a tautological trap by equating SL with its outcomes, while others offer overly superficial or narrow views, failing to capture the full essence of SL and its impact on organisations (Vera et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). For instance, the narrower perspectives often equate SL solely with the management of human and social capital, which is insufficient to condense the broader strategic dimensions of leadership (Hitt & Duane, 2002; Belias et al., 2017; Jaleha & Machuki, 2018; Tipurić, 2022). This restricted scope limits the representativeness and impact of SL research (Zhao & Li, 2019; Varma et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2023).

Based on the preceding context, there is a pressing need for a more comprehensive assessment of SL to address these gaps and limitations in the literature (Lim et al., 2022; Tipurić, 2022). This study bridges theses gaps through a critical conceptual analysis of SL noting its multidimensional nature, its temporal evolution, and its practical implications within the dynamic organizational environments.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Perspectives on Strategic Leadership

SL is characterized by a multitude of definitions, theoretical frameworks, and often unclear organisational research boundaries (Schaedler et al., 2022). Rumsey (2013) asserts that a comprehensive understanding of SL requires a focus on the actions undertaken by effective leaders to build strategy-oriented organizations. In this view, strategy serves as a framework for aligning SL activities, offering a cohesive,

forward-looking approach to decision-making (Davies & Davies, 2010; Hitt et al., 2017). SL provides insights into an organization's identity and its current context, guiding leaders in navigating future directions within the competitive landscape (Tipurić, 2022; Farida & Setiawan, 2022). In some instances, the current literature predominantly focuses on the external strategic objectives, often neglecting the internal organizational dynamics, which leaves a significant gap in the SL research (Elenkov et al., 2005; Birasnav & Bienstock, 2019; Fatyandri et al., 2023).

Starr-Glass (2017) raises the question of whether SL should be conceptualized as leadership "of", "in", or "through" organizations because SL may overlook the relational aspects of leadership hence blur the lines between strategic management and leadership processes. Bedeian and Hunt (2006) differentiate between leadership "in" organizations, which is more aligned with the psychological dimensions of leadership, and leadership "of" organizations, which is embedded in strategic management practices (Marx, 2014; Adoli & Kilika, 2020). SL is particularly relevant to organizations with mature strategic management processes (Hitt et al., 2020). It involves deliberate, broad-spectrum actions that exert strategic influence, which distinguishes SL from traditional leadership, which emphasize day-to-day management and individual behaviour (Simsek et al., 2018; Samimi et al., 2022; Ater et al., 2023).

SL can be conceptualized around specific strategic capabilities such as anticipating future trends, envisioning strategic possibilities, maintaining strategic adaptability, engaging in strategic thinking, and empowering employees to create dynamic capabilities (Ireland & Hitt, 2005; O'Shannassy, 2021; Singh et al., 2023). However, some scholars argue that SL represents a strategic dimension of broader leadership paradigms, rather than a distinct category of leadership (Pasaribu et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2022; Fernandes et al., 2022). In this context, SL guides an organization's mission and objectives, aligning aspirations with shared goals (Elenkov et al., 2005). It equips organizations with capabilities to seize opportunities and mitigate threats, emphasizing on cognitive abilities and managerial wisdom to adapt in dynamic environments (Boal, 2004; Vera & Crossan, 2004; Sinnaiah et al., 2023).

Rowe and Nejad (2009) emphasize SL's role in communicating shared values and a clear vision to employees. This approach highlights how SL fosters strategic foresight and proactive adaptation, aligning employee actions with communicated vision and strategy (Elenkov et al., 2005; Simsek et al., 2015; Fuertes et al., 2020). Effective SL should inspire executives to make strategic decisions that support both short-term stability and long-term competitive sustainability (Rowe, 2001; O'Shannassy, 2021). For example, empowerment, shared vision development, creativity, and innovation are integral to SL's function (Hamidi, 2009; Abdow, 2015; Alkheyi et al., 2020). SL processes reinforce the organisation's core values and

strategic choices, ensuring continuity as organizations navigate challenges within the operating environment (Knies et al., 2016; Vogel et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2023).

Based on the strategic choice perspective, SL can be examined through the lens of executives as custodians of organizational strategy (Adoli & Kilika, 2020). In this context, SL is understood as the ability to think and act strategically in a dynamic environment (O'Shannassy, 2021). Therefore, a deficiency in SL may lead to organizational drift in strategic direction and loss of focus (Hirschi & Jones, 2009; Fernandes et al., 2022). This strategic perspective evaluates the attributes, actions, and methodologies of executives, along with their impact on the strategic management process (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996; Samimi et al., 2022). SL is also viewed as a set of procedural processes that integrate individuals, technology, work processes, and opportunities, enabling organizations to proactively adjust to competitive environments (Sosik et al., 2005; Adoli & Kilika, 2020; Ater et al., 2023).

SL is sometimes conceptualized as the "art" of value creation, where leaders guide and empower human capital to generate value (Memon et al., 2009; Simsek et al., 2018). This perspective emphasizes the fusion of science, art, and empathy in shaping visionary paths and organizational values (Simsek et al., 2015; Pasaribu et al., 2021; Carvalho et al., 2021). SL helps to instil a compelling vision, foster a sense of purpose, and provide strategic guidance (House & Aditya, 1997; Bhardwaj et al., 2021). However, there is still a need to explore how to execute these activities in the SL process and their importance in achieving strategic outcomes such as SCA (Samimi et al., 2022; Ater et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2023).

SL also involves anticipating, planning, adapting, and collaborating to develop human and social capital for sustained competitiveness (Ireland & Hitt, 2005; Mahdi & Almsafir, 2014). Davies & Davies (2010) suggest that SL mobilizes employees to effectively implement business plans. It integrates internal and external environments, manages complex information processing through building the organisation's absorptive and adaptive capacity within the operating environment (Boal and Hooijberg, 2000; Schaedler et al., 2022; Fatyandri et al., 2023). Ultimately, SL requires managerial wisdom to guide resource management and driving organizational transformation for sustained competitiveness (Crossan et al., 2008; Hirschi & Jones, 2009; O'Shannassy, 2021).

3.2. Strategic Leadership Theories and Themes

3.2.1. Introduction

SL theories focus on the strategic implications of leadership, differentiating this approach from traditional leadership theories that emphasize style and behaviour across all organizational levels (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Carter & Greer, 2013; Jaleha

& Machuki, 2018). While traditional leadership theories encompass leaders at various hierarchical levels, SL pertains specifically to leaders at the highest levels of the organization, particularly Top Management Teams (TMTs) and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) (Hambrick & Pettigrew, 2001; Vera & Crossan, 2004; Knies et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2023). SL theories primarily centre around governance and organizational direction, focusing on leaders' responsibilities in defining vision, establishing meaning, and determining purpose (DeChurch et al., 2010; Quigley & Graffin, 2017). The key theories include emergent leadership theories, dispositional attributes and strategic choice theory, stakeholder theory, and external perspectives (Fuertes et al., 2020; Samimi et al., 2022; Tipurić, 2022). Emergent theories highlight the dynamic and adaptive nature of leadership, suggesting that SL emerges in response to complex and changing organizational environments. External perspectives, on the other hand, consider how external factors, such as market conditions and industry dynamics, shape leadership decisions.

3.2.2. Dispositional Features and Strategic Choice Theories on SL

Dispositional features and strategic choice theories explore the influence of executives' individual characteristics, cognition, and decision-making processes on strategic outcomes (Quigley & Graffin, 2017; Gupta et al., 2019). These theories posit that an executive's personality, cognitive orientation, and behavioural tendencies can significantly impact the strategic direction and long-term performance of organizations. The prominent theories within this category include, the Upper Echelons Theory (UET), Managerial Cognition, and Behavioural Decision-Making (Samimi et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). Managerial cognition focuses on how cognitive limitations and biases shape strategic decision-making, while behavioural decision-making theories examine the psychological factors that influence strategic choices made by top executives. Together, these frameworks contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how SL operates in practice.

3.2.2.1. Upper echelons theory (UET)

Upper echelons theory (UET) posits that the personal characteristics of TMTs significantly influence their leadership styles, strategic decisions, and, ultimately, organizational outcomes such as sustained performance and competitiveness (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Neely et al., 2020; Bekos & Chari, 2023). UET emphasizes the role of the leader's observable demographic variables such as age, tenure, education, and experience in shaping strategic choices (Hambrick, 2007; Finkelstein et al., 2009; Samimi et al., 2022). Based on the UET, these characteristics which serve as proxies for deeper cognitive and behavioural traits are thought to reflect an executive's values, perceptions, and decision-making tendencies, thereby impacting organizational identity and strategic outcomes (Hambrick & Pettigrew, 2001; Carpenter et al., 2004; Hambrick, 2018).

Hambrick (2023) further argues that organizations often mirror the behaviours and characteristics of their top managers, as these traits shape strategy execution and influence organizational actions. While early research on UET emphasized the CEO's central role in shaping strategy, recent studies have adopted a more collective and distributed view, that includes the broader TMTs and Board of Directors (BoDs) and how they impact strategic decision-making and strategic outcomes (Quigley & Hambrick, 2017; Ma et al., 2020). This team-based perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of how leadership operates at the upper echelons, highlighting the importance of collaborative and distributed decision-making among top leaders (Georgakakis et al., 2017; Ma & Seidl, 2018; Luciano et al., 2020). In this context, the extent of TMT autonomy can moderate the impact of their individual decisions on organizational outcomes (Elenkov et al., 2005; Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Georgakakis et al., 2022).

However, UET has faced scholarly criticism for its reliance on demographic characteristics as proxies for leadership traits, potentially oversimplifying the complexities of SL (Priem et al., 1999; Carpenter et al., 2004; Neely et al., 2020). UET's assumptions may fall short in dynamic environments where multiple factors beyond TMT characteristics influence the organization's strategic outcomes (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Samimi et al., 2022). For example, although demographic indicators may be useful, they fail to capture the full spectrum of cognitive and behavioural factors that influence decision-making (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Samimi et al., 2022). This reliance on easily measurable variables may prioritize measurement reliability over construct validity, leading to scholarly concerns about the comprehensiveness of UET as a theory of SL (Duursema, 2013; Neely et al., 2020; Bekos & Chari, 2023).

3.2.2.2. Moving beyond UET

While UET provides valuable insights into the impact of TMT characteristics on strategic outcomes, its limitations highlight the need for a more comprehensive approach to understanding SL. Therefore, despite its theoretical insights, UET faces gaps and may potentially become theoretically insular (White & Borgholthaus, 2022; Fatyandri et al., 2023). In this context, integrating insights from managerial cognition and behavioural decision-making theories develops a more holistic framework. These theories can offer deeper insights into the cognitive and psychological processes that shape SL, complementing UET's focus on observable demographic variables. Such an integrated approach would allow scholars to move beyond the constraints of demographic-based analysis and offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of how top executives influence organizational strategy and performance (Hernandez et al., 2011; Quigley & Hambrick, 2015; Fitza, 2017; Bekos & Chari, 2023). This would reflect the growing consensus that SL is a

collective, dynamic process involving multiple organizational actors across different levels (Denis et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2023).

Bromiley & Rau (2016) advocate for a broader approach to UET, suggesting the inclusion of non-demographic variables such as personality traits, attention mechanisms, and cognitive processes. This would probably enhance the theory's capacity to account for the dynamic and multi-faceted nature of SL. When these elements are incorporated, UET could better capture the collective and distributed nature of SL, considering that strategic decisions are influenced not only by individual executives but also by the interactions between various organizational levels (Smith & Tushman, 2005; Ma et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2023).

3.2.2.3. Behavioural Theories on Executive Decision-Making

Behavioural theories delve into how strategic leaders' risk preferences, cognitive biases, heuristics, and social dynamics shape strategic decision-making processes within organizations (Malmendier & Tate, 2005; Krause et al., 2022). These theories underscore that executive behaviours are pivotal in influencing the strategy process and ultimately shape the organization's strategic outcomes (House & Aditya, 1997; Bhattacharyya & Jha, 2018; Tipurić, 2022). Strategic leaders differ in their decision-making tendencies because, some executives exhibit exploratory behaviours that prioritize innovation and risk-taking, while others adopt exploitative strategies focused on minimizing losses (O'Connell & O'Sullivan, 2014; Quigley & Hambrick, 2015). For instance, in high-pressure scenarios, some executives may resort to bounded rationality, where their personal biases and knowledge structures guide strategic decisions, especially under conditions of uncertainty and complexity (Walsh, 1995; Quigley & Graffin, 2017; Schaedler et al., 2022).

The applicability of prospect theory in leadership decision-making illustrates how cognitive biases, such as loss aversion can affect strategic choices, often leading to suboptimal strategic outcomes (Vera et al., 2022). Behavioural theories highlight that not all executives embody effective SL behaviours, and certain negative traits can impair strategic decision-making processes (Boal, 2004; Samimi et al., 2022). Conversely, executives who continuously learn, adapt, and build strong relationships within their organizations foster resilience and adaptability, positively influencing strategic execution (O'Shannassy, 2021; Quansah & Hartz, 2021; Ater et al., 2023). Therefore, the personal attributes of TMTs and CEOs, such as openness, can affect interactions with employees and the successful execution of strategies (Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2012; Herrmann & Nadkarni, 2014; Volpp et al., 2016).

However, behavioural theories also explore the detrimental effects of negative traits embodied by some strategic leaders. For example, executive narcissism, marked by self-centeredness and an inflated sense of self-importance, can undermine sound decision-making and organizational competitiveness, considering that narcissistic leaders often prioritize personal gains over organizational goals (Luciano et al.,

2020; Vera et al., 2022; Ismail et al., 2023). Moreover, overconfident executives may dismiss valuable feedback, reducing adaptability and long-term competitiveness (Chen, 2015; Heavey et al., 2022). Despite the contributions of behavioural theories, they are criticized for their limitations in accounting for contextual factors and for not identifying which leadership behaviours are most effective in specific organisational situations (Sanders & Davey, 2011; Quigley & Graffin, 2017). To address these gaps, contingency theories emphasize the role of situational variables that can moderate leadership effectiveness, highlighting the need for adaptable behaviours in diverse contexts (House & Aditya, 1997; Burkhard et al., 2023). These behavioural perspectives enrich the understanding of how human dynamics influence leaders' strategic decision-making (Malmendier & Tate, 2015; Wowak et al., 2017).

3.2.2.4. Managerial Cognition Theories

Managerial cognition theories focus on the mental processes and cognitive structures that underpin executives' strategic decision-making (Thomas & Porac, 2002; Simon, 2013; Galavan et al., 2018; Samimi et al., 2022). Executives' cognitive frameworks (mental models that shape perception and interpretation) impact their ability to navigate complex strategic issues in the organisation (Walsh, 1995; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008; Schaedler et al., 2022). The depth and breadth of these mental models significantly influence how executives address crises, manage strategic uncertainty, and streamline decision-making processes (Marcel et al., 2010; Krause et al., 2022). Thus, cognitive frameworks act as lenses through which executives interpret organizational challenges, identify opportunities, and formulate strategic responses (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2006; Burkhard et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2023).

Internal organizational dynamics and external conditions or pressures shape the cognitive processes underlying strategic choices, which, in turn, influence followers and overall organizational performance (Samimi et al., 2022). In this context, executives' cognition is shaped by both the leader's individual attributes and environmental factors. Therefore, understanding these mental models provides insights into how strategic leaders interpret and make sense of complex information which is critical for achieving sustained competitiveness (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Gupta et al., 2019). Within TMTs, shared cognitive frameworks foster strategic alignment and coherence in strategic decision-making, strengthening the collective impact of leadership on organizational outcomes (Souitaris & Maestro, 2010; Dóci et al., 2015). The importance of managerial cognition in shaping SL dynamics highlights that executives' interpretations of external environments and internal capabilities play a critical role in defining organizational direction (Thomas & Porac, 2002; Hambrick, 2007; Bekos & Chari, 2023).

Overall, managerial cognition theories offer a nuanced perspective on SL by delving into the less overt, yet highly influential factors, mental processes that guide

executive behaviour and how they exercise leadership. By emphasizing the collective and individual cognitive frameworks at play within TMTs, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of how strategic decisions are made and executed and ultimately influence overall competitiveness (Smith & Tushman, 2005; Denis et al., 2017). These cognitive processes dictate how leaders navigate complex organizational scenarios and how they lead.

3.2.3. SL as a Synergistic Combination of Leadership Styles

There is a diverse range of leadership styles that explain how executives influence an organization's strategic management process (Elenkov et al., 2005; O'Shannassy, 2021; Ater et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2023). Some contemporary leadership theories often focus on charismatic, transformational, and visionary leadership, highlighting the interpersonal dynamics between leaders and their followers (Waldman et al., 1990; Hitt et al., 2021; Wegge et al., 2022). Within this continuum, SL is conceptualized as a synergistic combination of managerial and visionary styles, a perspective that offers a comprehensive framework for influencing both operational stability and future-oriented growth (Rowe & Nejad, 2009; Vera et al., 2022).

From the visionary leadership perspective, SL emphasizes the leader's ability to anticipate future trends, articulate a compelling vision, demonstrate resilience and adaptability in response to environmental changes (Rowe, 2001; Saher & Ayub, 2020). Visionary leaders are characterized by their willingness to take strategic risks, pursue innovative ventures, and inspire followers to align with the organization's broader vision. These leaders make decisions based on core values, often transcending organizational constraints, fostering a culture of innovation and empowerment (Robinson, 2013; Singh et al., 2023). This leadership style also involves creating a strong organizational identity and leveraging strategic control through socialization, cultivating shared norms and values among employees (Rowe, 2014). In this sense, visionary leadership aligns with the transformational leadership model, which emphasizes inspirational motivation and organizational change (Rowe, 2001; Nahak & Ellitan, 2022).

In contrast, managerial leadership is rooted in preserving organizational stability, focusing on maintaining existing structures and operational processes (Rowe, 2001; Karim et al., 2023). It is grounded in the organization's historical context and culture, similar to transactional leadership, which emphasizes managing day-to-day operations and ensuring adherence to established procedures, rather than driving innovation or creating new value (Nahak & Ellitan, 2022). However, an overemphasis on managerial leadership can risk depleting the organization's long-term potential, as it may limit the organization's ability to adapt to future challenges (Rowe & Nejad, 2009). To mitigate this risk, combining managerial leadership with a visionary approach becomes essential, ensuring a balance between maintaining operational stability and pursuing future growth (Rowe, 2001; Ateş et al., 2020).

Overall, SL is a multifaceted concept because it balances the competing demands of short-term financial stability and long-term sustainability (Rowe, 2001; Dimitrios et al., 2013; Rashid et al., 2016). Rowe (2001) argues that the true strength of SL lies in integrating both managerial and visionary mindsets. This balanced, synergistic approach enhances organizational outcomes by ensuring long-term sustainability while maintaining operational effectiveness (Kearney et al., 2019; Nahak & Ellitan, 2022). In this context, focusing exclusively on visionary leadership without adequate managerial oversight can lead to short-term failures, which in turn compromise long-term success (Rowe & Nejad, 2009; Mahdi & Nassar, 2021). Therefore, a synergistic combination of leadership styles is crucial for effective SL, promoting both organizational resilience and future competitiveness (Ateş et al., 2020).

3.2.4. Stakeholder Relationships Theories (Internal and External Perspectives)

The stakeholder relationships theory in SL plays a pivotal role in understanding how executives foster collaboration through distributed power-sharing across diverse groups and functional units (Samimi et al., 2022). For example, in global corporations, collaborative and inclusive relationships help leaders to navigate complex global environments, adapting strategies to local conditions for greater organizational success (Liu et al., 2018). This collaboration is essential in cultivating partnerships that harness the collective knowledge and creativity within the organization, creating a shared sense of accountability (Fatyandri et al., 2023).

3.2.4.1. Internal Relationships Perspective

Strategic leaders must prioritize long-term relationships with internal stakeholders such as employees, directors, and shareholders (Elenkov et al., 2005; Crossan et al., 2008; Nahak & Ellitan, 2022). Through these relationships, SL enables teamwork by bridging gaps between TMTs and employees (Willis et al., 2022). This perspective emphasizes that executives' social interactions significantly influence strategic outcomes (Bonardi et al., 2018). SL, in this context, goes beyond transactional relationships, focusing on positive reciprocity to build commitment, trust, and adaptability (Watts & Blazek, 2024).

The shared leadership approach aligns well with the internal relationships perspective, as it posits that organizational success is closely tied to distributing leadership responsibilities through interpersonal networks (Hambrick & Cannella, 2004; Liu et al., 2018). For example, promoting collaborative leadership fosters a supportive work environment that enhances employee motivation and performance (Norzailan et al., 2016). Through collaboration, trust, and the exchange of information, more informed strategic decisions emerge (Sonmez-Cakir and Adiguzel, 2020). In essence, SL requires competencies that extend beyond the executive's individual capabilities which necessitates a collaborative leadership model that spans both operational and strategic activities (Abu Mostafa et al., 2021; Tipuric, 2022).

In summary, internal relationships perspective suggest that no single executive can single-handedly manage the complexity of SL. In this context, distributing leadership responsibilities among individuals with complementary skills improves SL effectiveness and bolsters organizational competitiveness (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Georgakakis et al., 2022). The collaborative approach through internal relationships, positively impacts decision-making, organizational culture, employee engagement, and overall performance (Ma & Seidl, 2018). In this context, to maintain competitiveness, executives must proactively develop and sustain effective internal relationships (Buyl et al., 2014; Simsek et al., 2018).

3.2.4.2. External Relationships Perspectives

External stakeholder relationships play a critical role in SL, as they involve both analytical and affective processes (Ackermann & Eden, 2011; Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015). Strategic leaders have the potential to shape stakeholder impressions and judgments in the SL process (Lee et al., 2001; Bonnafous-Boucher & Rendtorff, 2016; Hitt et al., 2017). For example, strategic leaders serve as the public face of the organization, their strategic actions and communications shape external stakeholder perceptions (Gomulya et al., 2017). External relationships can act as mediating or moderating variables in the SL process (Samimi et al., 2022; Vera et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). These relationships create a dual perspective in which strategic leaders not only influence but are also influenced by their external environment (Quigley & Graffin, 2017; Fitza, 2017; O'Shannassy, 2021). Therefore, failing to adapt to external changes may lead to a loss of sustained competitiveness (Marx, 2014; Adoli & Kilika, 2020).

The external relationships perspective aligns with dynamic capabilities theory, which emphasizes the need for organizations to adapt to the ever-changing environments (Helfat, 2015; Garg & Eisenhardt, 2017). Strategic leaders must develop dynamic capabilities like opportunity sensing, resource reconfiguration, and organizational learning to navigate the changing business landscapes (Teece, 2018). Furthermore, the resource dependency theory supports the external relationship perspective by highlighting organisation's reliance on external environments for acquiring necessary resources, such as capital and partnerships (Fernandes et al., 2022). In this context, effective external relationship management becomes crucial for securing these resources to support organisational strategy (Ater et al., 2023).

Futhermore, the open systems theory highlights the interaction between an organization's internal processes and its external environment, reinforcing the need for strategic adaptability (Jung & Vakharia, 2019). This underscores the reciprocal influence between organizations and their surrounding operating environment (Berglund & Sandström, 2013; Yang et al., 2022). The external relationships perspective also connects with the signalling theory, which suggests that CEOs' stock ownership, experience, and external directorships influence market

perceptions on the organisation's SL processes (Connelly et al., 2011; Bergh et al., 2014; Ernst et al., 2022). Additionally, institutional theory asserts that organizations are shaped by external institutional forces such as societal expectations and regulations (Scott, 2004; Moré et al., 2016; David et al., 2019). In this context, in exercising SL, strategic leaders must align their actions with these institutional demands (Bridoux & Stoelhorst, 2022).

Executives who effectively manage external social capital gain competitiveness by leveraging trust, shared knowledge, and collaborative behaviours (Prusak & Cohen, 2001; Cao et al., 2015; Nuryanto et al., 2020). SL develops meaningful long-term strategic connections with external stakeholders that span the entire value chain to understand their needs and desires, rather than relying solely on transactional interactions (McCallum & O'Connell, 2009; Jaleha & Machuki, 2018). The goodwill created from positive external relationships, especially with key stakeholders like investors and suppliers, help to attract critical resources and support strategic initiatives (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Willis et al., 2022).

4. Methods

This study employed a semi-systematic and integrative literature review, focusing on SL theories, themes, and varying perspectives (Snyder, 2019). This method was selected for its ability to comprehensively synthesize existing research and identify gaps within the SL field (Donthu et al., 2021; Vera et al., 2022). The review covered relevant journal articles and books from the fields of strategy, leadership, SL and strategic management, specifically examining the roles of CEOs, TMTs, and boards of directors (BoDs) in shaping organizational outcomes. A clear inclusion criterion was developed to ensure only studies that are directly relevant to SL theories and its practical applications were included aligning with prior methods (Tao et al., 2021; Samimi et al., 2022). The review followed a systematic process for data collection and analysis, utilizing an inductive categorization approach to code the literature. This enabled the identification of themes that emerged directly from the data, ensuring that the analysis was grounded in the literature rather than guided by preconceived notions.

The evaluation process critically assessed recurring SL themes, and an iterative review helped in the continuous refinement of themes. This method was instrumental in identifying theoretical robustness, contributions, discovery of empirical gaps and limitations, as well as relevance to contemporary SL challenges. This analysis provided a well-rounded view of the literature and allowed for the identification of commonalities, contradictions, and areas in need of further exploration. Additionally, the integration of findings across the reviewed literature enriched the analysis, offering a multi-dimensional perspective on SL. Overall, this structured

synthesis of literature also laid the groundwork for potential future research directions into the evolving dynamics of SL within organizational contexts.

5. Findings

The analysis revealed that SL can be examined from multiple levels - the individual level (Day, 2000; Busenbark et al., 2016; Fitza, 2017), within organizational strategic outcomes (Kurzhals et al., 2020; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021; Fernandes et al., 2022), at the team level (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Ma et al., 2020), and across upper echelons, including CEO-BoDs and CEO-TMT dynamics (Simsek et al., 2018; Georgakakis et al., 2022; White & Borgholthaus, 2022). Sometimes, scholars focus on the strategic leader's behaviour (Elenkov et al., 2005; Shao, 2022) and leadership styles (Jansen et al., 2009; Lin & McDonough, 2011). Furthermore, some SL studies integrate PESTEL factors (Hoffmann & Meusburger, 2018; Kurzhals et al., 2020; Cortes & Herrmann, 2021), evaluating how external macro-environmental elements influence SL's impact on organizational outcomes (Chin et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2023). These varied approaches underscore SL's complexity and its diverse manifestations within the strategic management process, which necessitates the consideration of multiple external variables to fully understand SL's impact.

Notably, SL effectiveness is context-dependent, varying significantly across industries, organizational size, culture, situational factors and sometimes depending on random effects (Fitza, 2017; Quigley & Graffin, 2017; Schaedler et al., 2022; Rönkkö et al., 2023). The study also identified an ongoing lack of consensus on SL, driven by divergent viewpoints and persistent gaps in the literature (Quigley & Graffin, 2017; Fernandes et al., 2020; Fatyandri et al., 2023). Some approaches overemphasize the roles of executives and CEOs, while underrepresenting the influence of followers and the broader permeation of strategic decision-making throughout the organization (Liu et al., 2018; Vera et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). Notablly, not all strategic leaders consistently exhibit effective SL (Fitza, 2017). Behavioural theories suggest that executives may fall prey to cognitive biases, bounded rationality, or reliance on heuristics, which can impair their decision-making and strategic effectiveness (Vera et al., 2022).

The critiques of SL's perspectives expose a diverse spectrum of views, ranging from narrow to excessively broad. This ongoing debate reveals the need for a more cohesive assessment to resolve issues such as fragmented insights, incomplete comprehension of SL development, and the absence of an integrated dialogue on SL's research trajectory (Fernandes et al., 2022; White & Borgholthaus, 2022). The perceived fragmentation in SL literature is attributed to its inherent complexity, suggesting that continued scholarly efforts to organize these disparate research silos could lead to significant advancements in SL research (Samimi et al., 2022).

Therefore, development of theories that focus explicitly on SL's multifaceted dimensions could provide a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of SL (Quigley et al., 2022). Such an approach could consolidate findings across the literature and address the longstanding need for integration in this critical area of organizational research (Denis et al., 2010; Fernandes et al., 2022).

6. Discussions and Conclusion

This literature review study enriches the understanding of SL by examining specific underlying principles, diverse perspectives, and leadership styles, alongside their intersection with organisational strategic outcomes (Aberg & Shen, 2020; Chen, 2020; Lim et al., 2022). The analysis underscores that without SL, even the most well-formulated strategies are prone to failure (Capon, 2016; Jaleha & Machuki, 2018; Mjaku, 2020). SL is critical to the successful execution of strategy and is foundational for achieving long-term organizational success (Boal & Schultz, 2007; Rumsey, 2013; Thompson et al., 2018; Menz et al., 2021). In the increasingly complex and competitive business landscape, effective SL is crucial for achieving SCA (Irtaimeh, 2018). Strategic leaders are required to demonstrate adaptability, foresight, and resilience, regardless of their hierarchical position within the organization (Waldman et al., 2001; Rowe, 2009; Fitza, 2017; Quigley & Graffin, 2017).

This study contends that SL should be conceptualized through holistic constructs, emphasizing the leader's cognitive ability to think strategically, envision long-term objectives, and implement plans that drive organizational outcomes. A more nuanced understanding of SL would benefit from recognizing that leadership is not confined to TMTs but is distributed throughout the organization (Liu et al., 2018; Zayed & Nasr, 2023). Existing literature often emphasizes leadership "of" organizations, rather than leadership "in" organizations, neglecting the broader implications of strategic decision-making processes that pervade various levels of leadership (Vera et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). Ultimately, this research advances the argument for a comprehensive understanding of SL, where leadership is examined as both a collective and individual phenomenon, integral to influencing organizational success. It highlights the importance of not only focusing on TMTs but also considering the distribution and flow of SL across different organizational levels. This holistic conceptualization provides a foundation for future research and practical leadership applications within contemporary organizations.

7. Further Research

The field of SL continues to face several fundamental challenges, particularly in exploring the interrelationships among strategic leaders and developing theories that capture the circular, relational dynamics within leadership contexts (Finkelstein et al., 2009; Vera et al., 2022). Samimi et al. (2022) suggests that to address existing gaps in SL research, scholars must explore three key dimensions, namely, the functions of SL (what strategic leaders do); the attributes of SL (why they do it), and the mechanisms and contextual factors that influence how SL is enacted. These questions continuously evolve and are increasingly relevant to contemporary organizations (Tao et al., 2021). One critical area for future exploration is the integration of fragmented insights in SL research. In this context, a coherent research trajectory could be advanced by addressing the lack of constructive dialogue across SL literature silos (Fernandes et al., 2022; White & Borgholthaus, 2022). For example, investigating sequential models that link leadership behaviours to strategic outcomes could offer more clarity in evaluating SL's impact on organisations (Liu et al., 2018). Future research should aim to address these theoretical gaps by incorporating integrated constructs that bridge different SL theories and by simultaneously testing multiple constructs to build a more robust and cohesive body of knowledge (Bromiley & Rau, 2016; Quigley et al., 2022; Fatyandri et al., 2023).

The lack of consistent indicators and the fragmented approach to identifying measurable organizational-level outcomes hinders theoretical and empirical progress (Hitt et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2023). Moving forward, research should focus on developing standardized measures of SL to resolve the ambiguity in defining reliable measures (Simsek et al., 2015; Alkhey et al., 2020). Additionally, research should examine how variables such as industry dynamics, and contextual moderators influence SL processes (Ater et al., 2023). By addressing these gaps, future SL research can offer more integrated frameworks that align with the complex realities of organizational leadership, providing clearer guidance for both academics and industry practitioners.

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