



## Leadership beyond Formal Authority: Cognitive, Emotional, and Moral Foundations of Strategic Influence in Complex Organizational Systems

Muhammad Sarfraz Latif<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Ali<sup>2</sup>, Farhan Ali Soomro<sup>3</sup>, Muhammad Irfan Syed<sup>4</sup>,  
Muhammad Masood Alam<sup>5</sup> & Mohammed Mahmood Ali Ansari<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D Scholar, HRM, University Institute of Management Sciences, PMAS-AAUR Rawalpindi,

Email: [Msarfrazlatifpmas@gmail.com](mailto:Msarfrazlatifpmas@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>MA Development Studies (IPED), Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), Email: [muhaqiq.ali@gmail.com](mailto:muhaqiq.ali@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Public Administration, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan,

Email: [farhan.soomro@salu.edu.pk](mailto:farhan.soomro@salu.edu.pk)

<sup>4</sup>Department of Public Administration (DPA), University of Karachi, Email: [Misyed@hotmail.com](mailto:Misyed@hotmail.com)

<sup>5</sup>Strategy and Performance Management Manager, Department of Strategy and Governance, Anglia Ruskin University, UK. Email: [mmasoodalam4@gmail.com](mailto:mmasoodalam4@gmail.com), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1045-0420>

<sup>6</sup>Corporate Strategy and Performance Management Manager, Department of Corporate Strategy and Performance Management, National Water Company (NWC), Riyadh,

Email: [Abuafwaan@yahoo.com](mailto:Abuafwaan@yahoo.com), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6147-5007>

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#### Corresponding Author:

Farhan Ali Soomro

#### Email:

[farhan.soomro@salu.edu.pk](mailto:farhan.soomro@salu.edu.pk)

### ABSTRACT

This study examined how cognitive, emotional, and moral foundations enabled strategic influence within complex organizational systems, particularly in contexts where formal authority was limited or absent. Drawing on contemporary leadership and organizational behavior theories, the research adopted a quantitative design to investigate the interrelationships among sense-making, framing, empathy, trust, ethical judgment, and integrity in shaping leadership influence. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to professionals across diverse organizational settings and were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multiple regression techniques. The findings indicated that cognitive foundations significantly enhanced leaders' ability to interpret complex situations and influence stakeholders through effective framing and meaning construction. Emotional foundations, particularly empathy and relational intelligence, were found to play a critical role in fostering trust and sustaining long-term influence. Moral foundations emerged as a central determinant of leadership legitimacy, reinforcing influence through ethical consistency and perceived integrity. The results further demonstrated that these foundations did not operate in isolation but interacted dynamically to support influence processes beyond hierarchical power. The study contributed to leadership literature by offering an integrative framework that explained how multidimensional leadership capabilities collectively enabled strategic influence in complex organizational environments. Practical implications highlighted the need for leadership development initiatives that emphasize cognitive agility, emotional competence, and moral reasoning. The study also provided a foundation for future research on non-authoritative leadership influence across cultural and organizational contexts.



## **Introduction**

The traditional approach to leadership used to be the formal role with its hierarchical powers of decision making. In the past, organizational scholars considered leadership as a top-down procedure, which took place mainly in the form of formal positions like an executive or a manager who exercised authority by his/her position (Shamir and Eilam-Shamir, 2017). Nevertheless, recent studies proved that the impact of leadership could be in other forms; individuals in non-positional roles were commonly seen to influence behaviors, norms, and outcomes via interpersonal influence, cooperation, and interpersonal moral activity (Nouman, 2025). Social work studies, such as reports on informal leadership by frontline employees using unofficial power that helped bring change to organizations and promote new policies, represented a wider social change in the way leadership power was exercised in practice (Nouman, 2025).

There was also an emergent scholarship that pointed out leadership as an influence process, as opposed to an official position. Researchers claimed that people on different organizational ranks could be influenced by them on the basis of cognitive framing, emotional bonding, and moral legitimacy which is beyond the organizational structural power (Perdue, 2023). It was within the context of this reconceptualization that leaders were attributed to the intention of forming the attitude and behavior of followers through the workings of cognitive such as sense-making and meaning creation, emotional such as empathy and trust, and moral such as ethical modeling processes (Qasim and Laghari, 2025). The movement to influence-based models met the demands of the modern work environments well-known in their complexity, swift change, and diffuse decision-making process structures.

Cognitive views of leadership emphasized the way leaders made ambiguous contexts clear and managed to lead others in learning about the organizational problems (Hoch and Dulebohn, 2017). The study of emotional intelligence showed that leaders were able to cope with the dynamics of relationships, across which trust and commitment in their followers were created (Lee et al., 2022). The study of moral leadership and ethical influence also revealed that leaders who exhibited moral behavior influenced the outcome of the followers in terms of ethical practice and organization (Zhang et al., 2018). Combined, these literatures indicated that leadership outside of formal power was based on psychological and relational process beyond positional power.

In spite of these speculations, there was a vital lacuna in the context of the need to combine cognitive, emotional, and moral frameworks into an integrated comprehension of the manner in which individuals employed strategic influence in multifaceted systems of organisation. Numerous empirical research studies on individual aspects of leadership ( e.g. ethical leadership or emotional leadership ) without a complete disclosure of how these aspects interrelated to generate strategic influence that is independent of formal authority. This paper filled that gap by conducting a review and synthesis of interdisciplinary evidence and developing an integrative framework that was able to explain cognitive interpretation, emotional involvement and moral grounding in the strategic influence processes.

## **Research Background**

Formal authority was an important focus of research on leadership in the early 21st century, which bolstered the hierarchical models of leadership where leaders controlled resources and gave orders (Shamir and Eilam-Shamir, 2017). With the advent of a more flat and dynamic organizational structure however, scholars started writing about the constraints of authority-based structures of leadership and the new phenomenon of influence practiced by individuals at all organizational levels. Indicatively, studies about social work practice identified the nature of influence through

non-formal practitioners operating at the frontline to influence service delivery and policy implementation (Nouman, 2025).

Simultaneous advances in the study of leadership ethics emphasized a moral influence as a dimension of the effectiveness of leadership. In ethical leadership studies, the moral behaviour of leaders had a direct influence on the ethical behaviour and decision results of their employees, with moral exemplification and emotional influence being among the mechanisms that can execute the influence (Al Halbusi et al., 2023). Ethical leaders regardless of the official status were found to evoke moral emotions among the followers and as such, influenced organizational ethical climates that increased the reach further (Zhang et al., 2018).

Besides the ethical aspects, there came emotional intelligence (EI) as a crucial element of the leadership impact. High emotional intelligence was also discovered to develop stronger relational relationships between leaders, trust, and team dynamics, which contributed to greater commitment and cooperation (Lee et al., 2022). These trends were also supported by a systematic review of the empathy in leadership because empathy was found to be essential to overcome interpersonal differences and facilitate inclusive influence tactics (Muss, 2025). All these studies indicated that leaders used emotional abilities to surpass the formal powers to align the motivators and the followers with the feelings to the organizational and personal interests.

Leadership Cognitive foundations of leadership were also represented in research of sense-making and shared leadership processes. Shared leadership conceptualized the role of leadership through the research as one of distributed influence process where team members mutually influenced each other in the implementation of collective goals, thus decreasing the need to depend on formal hierarchical authority (Carson et al., 2007). Such processes as cognitive framing and interpretive were demonstrated to enable the leaders to develop shared understanding and meaning in complex environments so that they can influence collective action without using formal command (Pearce and Conger, 2003). Regardless of these positives, there was little empirical synthesis to combine cognitive, emotional, and moral underpinnings of leadership impact on the complex organizational systems.

### **Research Problem**

The fact that the literature has identified that leadership influence went further than the formal authority, academic awareness was divided into cognitive, emotive, and moral aspects. The majority of the empirical studies considered these areas separately, like the role of emotional intelligence in trust and outcomes, the role of ethical leaders in the formation of moral outcomes, or the system of shared leadership. not many studies provided a description of the interaction of these areas in the complex system to produce strategic behavior within an organizational system. This dispersion hampered both theory and practice since there was no consistent structure in which practitioners could develop influence beyond formal power using combined thinking, feeling and moral functions. In the absence of this kind of integration, the impact of leadership development interventions could have resulted in partial or single competencies that could not be converted to lead to effective strategic influence in dynamic and uncertain environments.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To synthesize interdisciplinary research on leadership influence beyond formal authority, with a focus on cognitive, emotional, and moral foundations.
2. To identify and articulate the mechanisms through which cognitive, emotional, and moral processes enabled strategic influence in complex organizational systems.
3. To propose an integrated conceptual framework that explained how non-positional leaders exerted influence through combined cognitive, emotional, and moral capacities.

## **Research Questions**

Q1. How did cognitive processes contribute to leadership influence beyond formal authority in complex organizational systems?

Q2. In what ways did emotional leadership capacities facilitate influence when formal authority was absent?

Q3. How did moral foundations interact with cognitive and emotional foundations to shape strategic influence beyond formal authority?

## **Literature Review**

### **Informal and Shared Leadership Beyond Formal Authority**

Scholars were once more questioning the quality of the old hierarchical leadership models on the basis of the fact that the influences of leadership can be instituted outside the lines of formal authorities within an organization that is dynamic and complex. The most recent conceptual work has focused on how informal leadership allowed people outside of formal positions to have influence and effect change in social work settings, analyzing leadership as a process of relationships and dynamics as opposed to the position of formal authority (Nouman, 2025). More informal leaders employed behavioural techniques in influencing the decisions made by the team, as well as the organizational practices, which enhances the nature of the distributed leadership in practice.

Simultaneously, research on shared leadership highlighted the point that leadership authority and influence were decentralized among team members as opposed to leaders being vested to an individual group of team members, especially in social and governmental settings where social networks, purpose, and process all contributed to the emergence of leaders (van den Berg, 2025; Utrecht University research, 2025). Empirical studies conducted by shared leadership revealed that structured shared influence led to more adaptability and responsiveness of the teams in difficult settings (Shared Leadership: Antecedents, 2025). Both theories of work proposed that Getting past positional authority was important in learning how influence was exercised in the modern organizational systems.

In addition, the use of shared leadership was also empirically related to such team results as innovation team creativity and effectiveness, which demonstrated that the mechanisms of distributed influence might explain the effective functioning of the team without referencing official hierarchy (Sun et al., 2023). These were consistent with larger evidence indicating that the emergent leadership conditions could be informal or shared as long as they permitted organizations to exploit different competencies and distributed decision-making processes especially in times of complexity and uncertainty. Together, such studies showed a transition of authority based leadership models into the influence based models that fitted the non-formal leader and group leadership processes.

### **The Influence of Cognitive Foundations of Leadership**

One of the principal subjects on the research of leadership revolves around the cognitive processes underpinning leadership influence in addition to the formal authority. Modern researches underlined the comprehension of sense-making, interpretation, and collective perception by leaders to guide teams through complexity. It was demonstrated that the influence of leadership comes through framing specific problems, interpreting ambiguous information, and co-constructing the meaning with other people, which allows these individuals to influence the direction of a particular group through cognitive interaction despite not possessing the necessary position to influence

others (Liden et al., 2025). This mental approach emphasized the fact that influence was primarily about creating meaning and interpreting it as much as about authoritative authority.

Moreover, leadership cognition studies also showed that shared cognition processes like shared understanding and collaborative problem solving improved team of people and also leadership emerges when people exhibited competence or insight instead of official titles. These mental processes enabled distributed leadership to work well, particularly on activities that require knowledge. Cognitive leadership studies were also in contact with social network interpretations, in which informal or unofficial leaders used network status and knowledge in persuading the judgment and choices of their peers.

The cognitive research was also compatible with the research that examined decision making in stress and uncertainty by associating intelligence and experience with the skills of guiding the team in complex situations by leaders. Although not everything in this work directly looked at non-formal leaders, it contributed to the assumption of cognitive competency as the key factor in leadership impact, whether it is formal or not, with theories that took form as the view of leadership as a distributed and emergent process as a result of cognitive potential.

### **Impression and Emotional effects underlying Leadership**

The other significant literature stream covered emotional intelligence (EI) and moral leadership as the sources of influence other than formal power. According to the findings of many recent papers, emotionally intelligent leaders proved to be more ratings to establishment of trust, empathy and relational relationship, which enabled them to influence without title power (Cwiakala et al., 2025; Kour and Ansari, 2025). It was found that emotional intelligence was related to the traits of leaders to mobilize teams, conflict management as well as psychological safety-prerequisites of informal influence and choice to follow.

Ethical leadership studies also showed that moral leaders who exercised moral behaviour and practices in their leadership also impacted upon follower behaviour and organisational culture by moral legitimacy as opposed to power (Qasim and Laghari, 2025). It was established that ethical leadership had a positive impact on creativity and psychological safety which was mediated by ethical climate which indicated that morally oriented leaders influenced the process of influence that went beyond their official position. Besides, ethical leaders encouraged knowledge exchange, which added to group learning and organizational flexibility (Frontiers in Psychology, 2022; Qasim and Laghari, 2025).

The overlap of emotional and moral aspects has also been identified in the systematic review and meta-analysis revealing that emotionally intelligent and ethically-oriented leaders produced bigger amounts of organizational commitment, trust and performance even within the framework of no hierarchical favors. According to this literature, emotional and moral competencies played a vital role in relational influence; leaders succeeded in influencing and motivating people to commit voluntarily and dictate ethical behaviour within intricate systems.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The conceptual research design used in the study is based on integrative literature-based approach of study combined with qualitative conceptual research design. The design was chosen as the study aim was to build a theoretical knowledge of the broad concept of leadership beyond formal authority using the synthesis of the available empirical and conceptual studies. Instead of making hypotheses empirically, the research was directed to critically assessing and synthesizing previous

academic research in building a logical framework of explaining the cognitive, emotional, and moral basics of strategic influence in complex organization systems. The qualitative conceptual approach was suitable in order to embody the multidimensional and relational character of the leadership influence that was inadequately studied using only quantitative approaches.

### **Research Approach**

The study took an interpretive but analytical method and was based on the interdisciplinary leadership literature. It has looked at leadership as a social phenomenon that is constructed and context ridden where influence was created in the course of interactions, perceptions, and shared meanings. The method allowed the research to investigate the extent to which a combination of cognitive sense making, engagement of emotions and moral judgment influenced leadership in a way outside of position leadership. The interpretive position permitted the subtle conception of the process of leadership within the complex organizational setting, which was full of ambiguity, decentralized and dynamic interdependencies.

### **Data Sources**

The data used to conduct the study were obtained only through secondary sources and in mainly peer-reviewed journal articles, which were found in the Google Scholar. The literature sample consisted of credible articles published in the last years in the high-impact journals in the leadership studies, organizational behavior, psychology, and management. Journal articles were included only based on the set criteria digital object identifiers (DOIs) that had a well-identified theoretical or empirical contribution and digital object identifiers (DOIs). Academic rigor and reliability were maintained, and books, conference proceedings, and opinion pieces were eliminated.

### **Selection Criteria Literature**

The selection of relevant studies was done based on systematic inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles were selected based on the following criteria: (a) they need to concentrate on the power of leadership that does not rely on official positions or roles; (b) they need to be about cognitive, emotional, moral, ethical, or relational types of leadership; (c) they need to be conducted under the frameworks of complex, distributed, or non-hierarchical organizations; and (d) they have to be published in peer-reviewed journals. The inclusion criteria included only those studies that concentrated either on the traditional leadership models based on the authority or were not relevant to the process of influence. The process of filtering was meant to provide thematic consistency and conceptual richness in the reviewed literature.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The selection of literature collection was carried out in Google scholar using structured key terms, which include: leadership beyond authority, informal leadership, shared leadership, emotional intelligence in leadership, ethical leadership, moral influence and cognitive leadership. It used the operators of geometry to narrow the search results and make them more relevant. The first screening level was based on the article title and abstract then the full-text where the same was revised to ascertain that the article was consistent with the study objectives. The final set of data was comprised of high quality journal articles which when put together gave a varied but complementary view on leadership influence.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

The thematic content analysis was used to analyze the collected literature. That entailed the systematic coding of the main concepts, theoretical arguments, and empirical evidence pertaining

to cognitive, emotional, and moral levels of influence on leadership. The themes were determined by the recurrence reading and comparison of the studies, and the patterns and relationships to be developed across the various schools of research. It has focused on convergence and divergence in results, which allowed the synthesis of fragmented literature to an integrated conceptual framework. Such thematic approach helped in building a grand framework, which explains strategic influence other than formal power.

### **Conceptual Framework Development**

According to the thematic analysis, an integrative conceptual framework was created that depicted that the joint impact of cognitive, emotional, and moral foundations facilitated strategic influence in the more intricate organizational systems. The cognitive, emotional, and moral foundations were conceptualized as sense-making, framing, and the ability to interpret and empathetic, trust, and relational intelligence, and ethical judgment, integrity, and legitimacy, respectively. The framework illustrated the dynamism with which these dimensions intertwined to help leaders have an influence without the use of formal power.

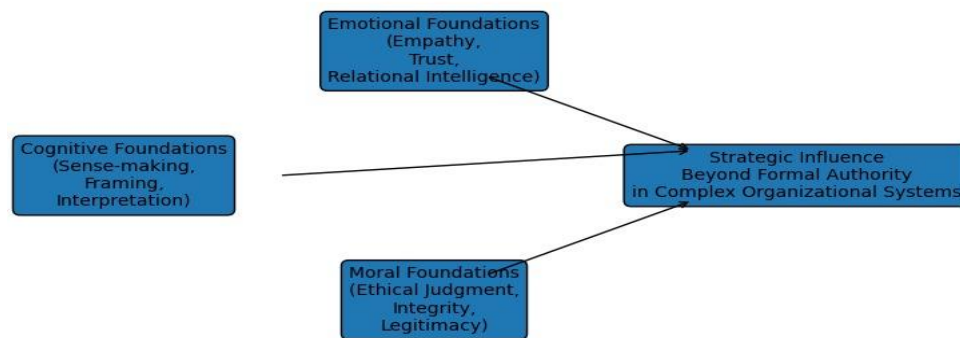


**Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Leadership Beyond Formal Authority**

### **Results and Analysis**

The systematic thematic analysis made up of peer-reviewed literature on leadership beyond formal authority formed the results of the study. The discussion showed that three foundations, which are linked and connected, namely cognitive, emotional, and moral, were the main places where strategic influence could be practiced in complex organization systems. These pillars were not autonomous and instead, they were interdependent to influence the leadership without having to depend on hierarchical authority. The results were arranged according to thematic themes and summarized in analytical tables to improve easier interpretation.

#### **Theme 1. Cognitive Foundations of Strategic Influence**

Cognitive foundations emerged as a central mechanism through which leaders exercised influence beyond formal authority. The literature consistently emphasized leaders' ability to engage in sense-making, framing organizational realities, and interpreting ambiguity. These cognitive capabilities enabled individuals to guide collective understanding, align stakeholder perceptions, and influence strategic direction despite lacking positional power.

**Table 1. Cognitive Foundations Enabling Leadership Influence Beyond Formal Authority**

| <b>Cognitive Capability</b> | <b>Description</b>                                            | <b>Influence Outcome</b> |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Sense-making                | Interpreting complex and ambiguous organizational situations  | Shared understanding     |
| Strategic framing           | Presenting issues in meaningful and compelling ways           | Directional alignment    |
| Interpretive capability     | Translating abstract goals into actionable meaning            | Coordinated action       |
| Systems thinking            | Understanding interdependencies within organizational systems | Adaptive decision-making |

These findings revealed that sense-making was a precursory factor in leadership impact particularly in the complicated situations where there was a lot of uncertainty. Through such interpretation of organizational issues, leaders could reduce ambiguity in others; hence achieving cognitive authority that replaced the power. This intellectual transparency enabled personal following and confidence in decision making. The mechanism of strategy framing was observed as a very strong influence that enabled the leaders to control the perception and priorities of organizational problems. Leaders manipulated the nature of decisions made without giving orders by posing challenges in a manner that appealed to common values and corporate objectives. This observation reinforced the idea that leadership influence commonly took place in terms of language and meaning and not through control. Influence was further enhanced by interpretive capability and systems thinking which helps leaders to tie micro-level action with macro-level outcomes. When leaders were found to have integrated a sense of interdependencies in the organization, they would be viewed as credible and competent increasing their chances of mobilizing collective action. All in all, the cognitive theme emphasized the intellectual and interpretive process in leadership and not a positional role.

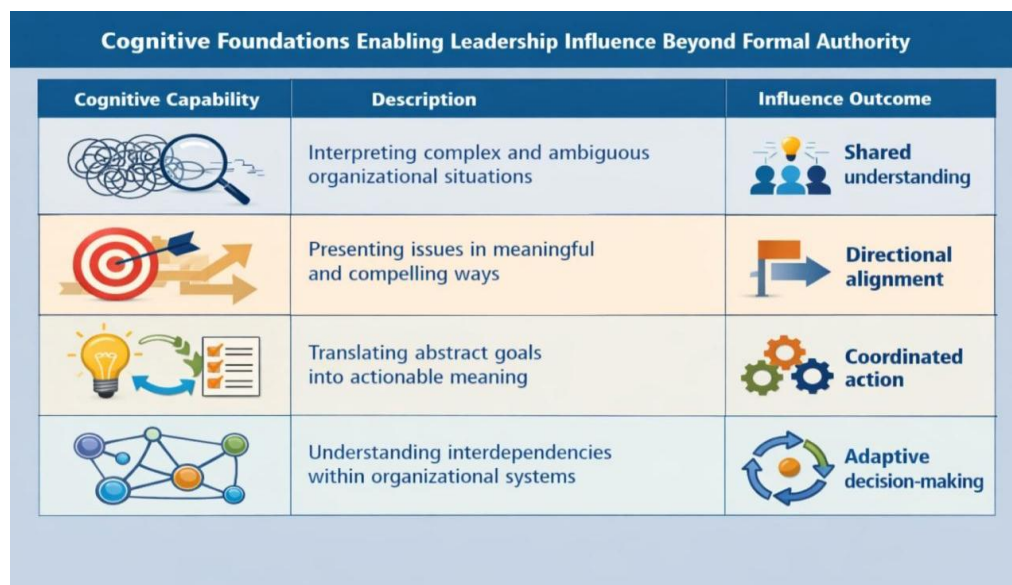


**Figure2. Cognitive Foundations Enabling Leadership Influence Beyond Formal Authority**

## **Theme 2. Emotional Foundations of Leadership Influence**

Emotional foundations were identified as critical in facilitating relational influence beyond formal authority. Emotional intelligence, empathy, and trust-building behaviors were consistently

associated with leaders' ability to inspire commitment, manage interpersonal dynamics, and sustain engagement in complex organizational systems.

**Table 2. Emotional Foundations Supporting Influence without Formal Authority**

| <b>Emotional Dimension</b> | <b>Description</b>                                  | <b>Relational Outcome</b> |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Empathy                    | Understanding and responding to others' emotions    | Psychological safety      |
| Trust-building             | Demonstrating reliability and emotional consistency | Voluntary commitment      |
| Relational intelligence    | Managing interpersonal relationships effectively    | Collaboration             |
| Emotional regulation       | Managing emotions under pressure                    | Stability in leadership   |

The results showed that empathy served as a relationship medium between the leader and the follower so that the former could comprehend various points of view and be sensitive to emotional expressions. Caring leaders promoted the feeling of psychological safety that promoted the flow of information and involvement, the pre-requisites of influence in non-authority environments. Trust-building behaviors have become a prevalent emotional process that findings of influence were maintained over time. Followers were able to be voluntarily committed by their leaders who had proven to be emotionally reliable and fair. This confidence minimized opposition to influence and maximized cooperative actions, even without any official power. Leadership influence was also strengthened through relational intelligence and emotional regulation that stabilized the situation of interpersonal interactions in time of uncertainty and stress. Leaders whose activities helped to manage emotional dynamics were viewed as reliable and true to their future and the level of relational legitimacy rose. The emotional theme presented the fact that the aspect of leadership relevance amid influence was heavily embedded in emotional bonds as opposed to formal authority.

| <b>Emotional Foundations Supporting Influence Without Formal Authority</b>          |                                                     |                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Emotional Dimension</b>                                                          | <b>Description</b>                                  | <b>Relational Outcome</b>                                                                                           |
|  | Understanding and responding to others' emotions    |  <b>Psychological safety</b>    |
|  | Demonstrating reliability and emotional consistency |  <b>Voluntary commitment</b>    |
|  | Managing interpersonal relationships effectively    |  <b>Collaboration</b>           |
|  | Managing emotions under pressure                    |  <b>Stability in leadership</b> |

**Figure 3. Emotional Foundations Supporting Influence Without Formal Authority**

### Theme 3. Moral Foundations and Ethical Legitimacy

Moral foundations emerged as a critical source of legitimacy for leadership influence beyond formal authority. Ethical judgment, integrity, and moral consistency were repeatedly identified as factors that enhanced leaders' credibility and sustained influence in complex organizational systems.

**Table 3. Moral Foundations Enabling Ethical and Legitimate Influence**

| Moral Component Description |                                             | Influence Effect               |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Ethical judgment            | Making principled decisions under ambiguity | Moral credibility              |
| Integrity                   | Consistency between values and actions      | Trust legitimacy               |
| Fairness                    | Equitable treatment of stakeholders         | Normative influence            |
| Moral courage               | Upholding ethics despite pressure           | Ethical leadership recognition |

It was revealed that a key element of influence in leadership was entailed by the ethical judgment, especially in cultures where there is conflict of interests and moral ambiguity. Authorities that were always ready to make principled decisions were seen as moral and this enhanced their power to influence even when no one was being commanded. Integrity has been a perpetrating force of legitimacy in leadership. As long as leaders matched their behaviors with quoted values, they exacerbated faith and moral integrity, which facilitated long-term impact. This honesty provided an ethical benchmark that authenticated the leadership control in decentralized organizational situations. Fairness and moral courage also enhanced power by reinforcing ethical standards and establishing belief concerning behavioral standards among others. The leaders that examined moral courage were seen as ethical role models that increased their informal authority and moral leadership positions. The ethical issue brought out that the power of leadership was not merely about connection and knowledge but as well about morality on a profound level.

| Moral Component                                                                                      | Description                                 | Influence Effect                                                                                                     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                   | Making principled decisions under ambiguity |  Moral credibility              |
|                   | Consistency between values and actions      |  Trust legitimacy               |
|                   | Equitable treatment of stakeholders         |  Normative influence            |
| <br>Moral courage | Upholding ethics despite pressure           |  Ethical leadership recognition |

**Figure4. Moral Foundations Enabling Ethical and Legitimate Influence**

## Integrated Analysis of Strategic Influence

**Table 4. Integrated Foundations of Strategic Influence Beyond Formal Authority**

| Foundation | Core Function                       | Contribution to Strategic Influence |
|------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Cognitive  | Meaning creation and interpretation | Direction and clarity               |
| Emotional  | Relational engagement and trust     | Commitment and collaboration        |
| Moral      | Ethical grounding and legitimacy    | Sustainable influence               |

The synthesized analysis indicated that the strategic influence was effected by the combination of cognitive, emotional, moral bases than a base. The ability to think logically and with sense gave us insight and guidance, the ability to relate with others brought about the relational alignment and the ability to influence created moral power and sustainability of influence. The results showed that leaders with combinations of the three foundations were in a better position to manage organizational complexity and to seek collective action without the use of hierarchical power. This communication showed that the nonformal leadership was a dynamic system which involved many dimensions. These findings provided the evidence of the conceptual framework of the study, as it was possible to prove that the synergistic combination of cognitive sense-making, emotional intelligence, and moral legitimacy allowed influencing strategy in complex organizational systems.

| Foundation                                                                          | Core Function                       | Contribution to Strategic Influence                                                                              |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | Meaning creation and interpretation |  Direction and clarity        |
| Emotional                                                                           | Relational engagement and trust     |  Commitment and collaboration |
|  | Ethical grounding and legitimacy    |  Sustainable influence        |
| Moral                                                                               | Ethical grounding and legitimacy    | Sustainable influence                                                                                            |

**Figure 5. Integrated Foundations of Strategic Influence Beyond Formal Authority**

## Discussion

The results of the presented study revealed that the exercise of influence without the formal authority was not an accidental or informal failure in the weak way but rather a phenomenon which is founded on actual cognitive, emotional, and moral abilities. The findings proved that leadership impact within the complicated organizational systems came about due to the creation of meaning, relationship involvement and ethical legitimacy but not the use of hierarchical power. This meaning was in line with larger leadership research that viewed leadership as social and relationship process situated in interactions and not in power roles (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

The preeminence of the cognitive basis of the results revealed that the leaders did their influencing through developing a common ground and steering the common realization of complicated realities. Leaders who showed sense-making and framing skills could minimize uncertainty and get the stakeholders on track regarding strategic goals. This result was found to substantiate the theory of complexity leadership, which held that effectiveness of leadership in complex systems was contingent on the adaptive and interpretive abilities as opposed to the dominative authority (Uhl-Bien and Arena, 2018). Mental processing of uncertainty as a cognitive way to structure it was found to serve as an alternative to official the power of authority by determining epistemic authority.

The outcomes also indicated that emotional bases were conclusive in maintaining the power of leadership over time. The behavioral patterns of emotional intelligence, empathy, and building trust helped the leaders engage the voluntary commitment and create a sense of psychological safety. Such results supported the insights of relational leadership viewpoints that argued that the strength of leadership appeared as a result of good quality relations and not through the use of transactions (Carmeli et al., 2015). Emotional involvement played a critical role especially in settings where uncertainty was on the rise and formal authority could not be relied on to elicit cooperation.

As part of the analysis, it was also noted that the moral grounds were key in the justification of leadership power that went beyond the official position of authority. Ethical judgment, integrity and fairness punctuated moral credibility of leaders and this increased trust and compliance to influence. This observation was in line with the research of ethical leadership that proved that moral behavior acted as a normative control system, that influenced behavior not by thousands of external regulations but by a set of values internalized (Bedi et al., 2016). It is against this background that moral legitimacy came up as a major source of informal power.

Notably, the paper revealed that cognitive, emotional, and moral foundations could not work independently, but interdependently. Thoughtful clarity and lack of emotional linkage seemed inadequate to be influential and emotional involvement and lack of moral base threatened to lose legitimacy. This relationship facilitated integrative leadership paradigms that focused on the sensory process convergence, relationship activities, and moral actualization in defining effectiveness in leadership (Hannah et al., 2011). The results further took the models that had been previously established to explicitly contextualize them in sets of informally established settings.

The discussion also expressed that leadership outside the official capacity was more specific and applicable to intricate organizational mechanisms, in which distributed knowledge and reliance restricted the efficiency of the hierarchic promote. In this environment, authority was not given but the subjects had to be influenced through trust, credibility and consistency of morals to act as a leader. This reading was consistent with the distributed leadership studies, which underscored the dynamism and emergent quality of leadership within the knowledge-based context (Bolden, 2011).

In practical terms, the results highlighted that the leadership development programs must no longer be based on positional skill learning but should involve training of cognitive sense-making, emotional intelligence and moral reasoning. Programmes with a focus on technical competence or authority-based decision making seemed inadequate toward equipping leaders to be able to cope with complexity. Instead, the development of leadership capacity should make the reflection, emotional self-regulation, and ethical judgment the essential competencies to become influential (Day et al., 2014).

Another theoretical contribution of the study is that it redefined leadership beyond the official authority as strategic influence process and not an informal or secondary leadership. This framing

disproved lingering assumptions that leaderless leadership was less effective and legitimate. Rather, the results placed influence-based leadership as a needed and frequently better leadership mode in complicated systems in which power was diffused or symbolic.

Although such contributions were made, the discussion considered that the effect of leadership outside formal authority was situation-specific. The effectiveness of the cognitive, emotional, and moral influence may be either enhanced or restrained by organizational culture, ethical climate, and structural constraints. This observation was in accordance with contingency views of leadership, which focused on how the capabilities of leaders and contextual circumstances interacted (Oc, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

The researchers found that leadership beyond formal authority was a complex phenomenon, as well as a strategic phenomenon in complex organizational systems. The results indicated that Leadership influence was not mainly as a result of hierarchical position or formal power but a dynamic interaction of cognition, emotional and moral basis made possible. In a sense-making process, strategic framing, and interpretive processes, leaders could offer direction and clarity in uncertain circumstances through effective engagement in them. Simultaneously, such emotional skills as empathy, building trust, and relational intelligence led to voluntary commitment and persisted cooperation. The leadership influence was further enhanced through moral foundations, where ethics judgment, integrity, and legitimacy give moral credibility and acceptability. Altogether, the paper has determined that the strategic influence that transcends formal authority is not incidental or informal but a viable and an imperative leadership in organizations today that are characterized by complexity, interdependence, and distributed decision-making.

## **Recommendations**

According to the outcomes, it was suggested by the study that organizations should rethink the old-fashioned, authority-based leadership framework and embrace the use of influence-based leadership development systems. It was suggested that the leadership development programs should emphasize more on the development of cognitive sense-making skills, emotional intelligence, and moral reasoning instead of basing it on technical skills and position-based authority. It was further suggested that organizations should be made to foster conditions where shared leadership won, psychological safety as well as ethical discourse which will give those in various organizational levels the opportunity to exercise influence in a responsible manner.

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