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Leadership as Bounded Agency: An Integrative Framework of Organizational Constraints

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ABSTRACT

Main Objectives: Leadership research remains dominated by leader-centric perspectives that treat organizational context as a backdrop rather than as constitutive of leadership action. This article develops an integrative framework conceptualizing leadership as bounded agency enacted within an organizationally constituted space of action. **Background Problems:** Behavioral decision research and organization theory each explain one source of boundedness while holding the others constant, and the two literatures rarely engage one another. No account specifies how cognitive and organizational constraints combine. **Novelty:** We integrate leaders' cognitive and interpretive constraints with knowledge, institutional, and governance constraints, and derive interaction propositions specifying how their joint configuration, rather than either set alone, constitutes the leader's space of action. **Research Methods:** A theory-synthesis conceptual review drawing on 40 substantive sources across four constraint domains, selected for their contribution to framework development and analyzed through structured mechanism mapping. **Finding/Results:** The framework specifies five domain mechanisms and two interaction mechanisms. Where constraints bind simultaneously their effects are non-additive: competing evaluative criteria contract the choice set faster than either constraint alone predicts, and joint knowledge and legitimacy pressure produces symbolic coordination, meaning visible integration activity that leaves knowledge boundaries unresolved. **Conclusion:** Leadership is best understood as bounded agency constituted through interacting organizational constraints rather than through individual capacity. The framework shifts analysis from normative effectiveness toward the mechanisms and configurations that shape what leadership can be.

1. Introduction

Most leadership research assumes that leaders are autonomous and rational actors, explaining effectiveness through personal attributes, competencies, or styles. We suggest that this assumption overstates leader autonomy. In dynamic environments marked by competing stakeholder demands and distributed expertise, leaders act within organizational settings that limit attention, shape choices, and constrain which actions can be defended. A long tradition in organizational scholarship holds that organizational behavior is better understood through bounded rationality, routines, and systemic constraint than through models of unconstrained optimization (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958). Treating leadership as a predominantly individual phenomenon risks describing it as a matter of personal volition, divorced from the organizational realities that make leadership possible at all.

Leaders are situational actors whose impact cannot be assessed apart from the configurational, cultural, and institutional ecosystems that enable or restrict action. Previous research has begun to examine leadership in context, addressing the influence of leaders on employee creativity in Indonesian organizations (Nilasari et al., 2022) and charismatic leadership within the structural constraints of schools (Widiantari et al., 2022), but has not yet systematically articulated how organizational boundaries shape leadership practice. This is not a peripheral concern. Johns (2024) documents a systematic context deficit across leadership scholarship, showing that contextually oriented theories guide only a small share of published work and attributing the imbalance to the romance of leadership. Recent studies illustrate both the promise and the limits of contextual accounts: Janning (2025) reads leadership practice through culturally specific dispositions, while Nurfaizal and Barros (2026) show that acceptance of algorithmic leadership in

Indonesia varies with institutional logic and industry type. Such work establishes that context matters without specifying the mechanisms through which it binds.

Behavioral perspectives hold that leadership action is bounded by the cognitive limits of the individual making decisions. What leaders notice, prioritize, and justify depends on bounded rationality, framing, and systematic patterns of misjudgment (March & Simon, 1958; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981), and decision processes under threat narrow rather than expand the choice set (Shimizu, 2007; Staw et al., 1981). Leadership action is not a matter of competence or discretion alone but of how leaders interpret circumstances, thereby constructing cognitive limits on what appears realistic or defensible (Denrell et al., 2019; Felin et al., 2015). Leadership is constrained before organizational structure intervenes.

Organizational settings define the outer limits of that discretion. The knowledge-based view holds that organizational effectiveness depends less on what the leader knows than on how far dispersed knowledge is integrated (Grant, 1996), making coordination across units and roles more central than directive leadership (Nickerson & Zenger, 2004). Recent work shows that such coordination depends on organizational design, notably the stability of the hierarchy through which collective action is structured (Gray et al., 2023). Leadership agency rests less on unilateral decision-making than on arranging the conditions under which collective action can be coordinated.

Institutional contexts narrow those bounds further. Formal structures are adopted not only for efficiency but because they signal conformity with socially constructed expectations of rationality and appropriateness (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), and coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures push organizations toward homogeneity even where an alternative pathway would perform better (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Leadership consequently becomes as much the management of legitimacy across diverging constituencies as the exercise of discretion, enabled and constrained at once by the pursuit of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Suddaby et al., 2016).

Governance mechanisms constrain agency further, particularly at the apex of the hierarchy. Agency theory locates leadership discretion within information asymmetries, monitoring difficulties, and incentive structures that align managerial action with principals' interests (Eisenhardt, 1989). Board-executive research shows that these constraints operate through evaluative mechanisms rather than formal structure alone (Veltrop et al., 2015; Westphal & Zajac, 2013), and uncertainty makes them more binding still, reinforcing the premise that leadership is the capacity to act defensibly rather than autonomously (Boivie et al., 2016).

Each of these literatures explains one source of boundedness. Behavioral research explains how leaders think and decide under cognitive limits; organization theory explains how institutional, governance, and knowledge structures organize action. Leadership scholarship has largely treated them separately rather than asking how they jointly constitute leadership action, with the result that leadership is explained either as a cognitive outcome or as a structural one, and in neither case as the product of their interaction.

This article attempts to close this gap by exploring how leadership action results from leaders' internal shortcomings and the constraints of organizations. Specifically, we ask:

How do leaders' cognitive and interpretive constraints interact with organizational knowledge, institutional, and governance constraints to constitute the space of action within which leadership is enacted?

Rather than refining existing leadership theories, the article repositions leadership as

a cross-level mechanism in which behavioral constraints interlock with organizational demands for legitimacy, control, and knowledge integration, shifting explanation from individual leaders to the conditions under which leadership action becomes possible and defensible. The article first sets out the behavioral bases of bounded agency, then the organizational limitations arising from knowledge, institutional, and governance structures, and positions the framework against research on managerial discretion. The final sections integrate these elements and propose directions for theory and empirical work.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Leadership research and the need for cross-level explanations*

Leadership scholarship has generated extensive knowledge centered on the individual leader: traits, behaviors, and relational dynamics. Much of it rests on the micro-centered assumption that leaders are self-contained decision-makers whose discretionary choices are sufficient to account for organizational outcomes. That assumption sits uneasily with organizations operating under uncertainty, competing priorities, and layered structural limitation. Classic organizational theory long ago displaced unconstrained choice, holding instead that organizational behavior is a function of insufficient information, restricted attention, and bounded rationality (March & Simon, 1958). Leadership action must be conceived not only in terms of individual agency but in terms of the constraint systems that delimit which actions are possible, justifiable, and defensible.

This points to a persistent theoretical gap. The field explains leader practices well but theorizes poorly how those practices are situated at the intersection of behavioral limits and organizational frameworks. Micro-foundations research argues that organizational outcomes cannot be explained by the individual alone, but require

articulating the connection between individual action and higher-level structure (Felin et al., 2012, 2015). A cross-level approach is therefore necessary to move beyond leader-centric accounts toward the mechanisms of leadership practice.

The persistence of leader-centric explanation has recently been diagnosed from two directions. Fischer and Sitkin (2023) review ten leadership styles and identify a common defect: descriptions of leader behavior are conflated with evaluations of its intentions or effects, which leaves the resulting evidence base causally indeterminate. Johns (2017, 2024) approaches the same problem from the side of context, arguing that situational stimuli constitute both constraints on and opportunities for behavior, and that omitting them produces biased and non-generalizable accounts. Style-based research continues to accumulate; a recent meta-analysis links servant leadership to organizational citizenship behavior across a large body of primary studies (Suyasa et al., 2026), but such work explains variance between leaders rather than variance in the conditions under which leadership is exercised. Taken together, these critiques point to the same remedy: an explanatory unit located not in the leader but in the configuration of constraints within which the leader acts.

2.2 Behavioral constraints: Leaders as bounded agents

Behavioral science helps consider leadership as bounded agency. For instance, the phenomenon of bounded rationality shows that leaders' cognition, information processing, and attention are limited, leading them to use decision rules that may not provide optimal outcomes in a situation (March & Simon, 1958). The leadership action, therefore, is a result of the reasoning and evaluative actions that leaders engage in to understand the situation at hand and define the action pathways.

Behavioral decision research shows that how leaders frame a situation shapes judgment and choice, often departing from the rational choice model (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Leaders do not respond passively; they construct the situation to which they then respond. A leader may misattribute outcomes or misjudge organizational capability on the basis of past performance, which in turn shapes subsequent search, risk-taking, and decisions (Denrell et al., 2019); under perceived threat, decision making becomes rigid, narrowing the available repertoire and producing defensive action patterns (Shimizu, 2007). Leadership agency is thus behaviorally bounded, particularly under uncertainty.

It is important to note that behavioral constraints are not merely sources of error. Gavetti's strategic behavioral theory pinpoints the cognitive representations and interpretive processes that influence the identification, expression, and pursuit of opportunities (Gavetti, 2012; Gavetti et al., 2005). In this perspective, the agency of leaders is interpreted through a cognitive framework, rather than as the full possession of summative agency. This provides stronger legitimacy to theorizing leadership as a construct of bounded agency, where the discretion is the result of cognitive framing and interpretive limitation as opposed to the absence of choice (Foss & Lindenberg, 2013).

Behavioral theory therefore explains why leadership action is selective and interpretively constructed rather than optimizing. What it cannot explain on its own is why the same cognitive limitation yields expansive action in one organization and defensive action in another, because it holds the organizational setting in which cognition operates constant.

2.3 Organizational constraints I: Knowledge structures and coordination limits

Where behavioral theory addresses the internal boundaries of action, organizational

theory holds that leadership is also limited by the structure of organizing itself. Contemporary organizations create value by combining specialized and distributed knowledge, which makes knowledge integration a fundamental organizational problem. The knowledge-based view treats the firm as an institution for combining specialized knowledge, implying that leadership cannot be equated with centralization where the decisive knowledge is dispersed (Grant, 1996).

The scope of leadership action is therefore set by the information and coordination constraints surrounding a decision. Recent work shows that the value of knowledge diversity depends on the stability of organizational structure: where structure is unstable, dispersed knowledge and skill cannot be brought to bear, which sets a limit on what leadership can achieve (Gray et al., 2023). Leadership in knowledge-intensive settings is thus less a function of command than of creating the conditions under which knowledge can be integrated.

The need to address competing forms of knowledge is just one of the many challenges. An ambidexterity perspective focuses on how organizations address the paradox of balancing both exploitation and exploration, thereby defining the structural frameworks within which leaders' choices are made and rationalized (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). From this perspective, the range of leadership actions is shaped organizationally, and not only by individual rationality, by the need to orchestrate opposing flows of knowledge over time.

The knowledge-based perspective therefore explains why leadership shifts from directing to integrating as expertise becomes distributed. It cannot, however, specify when integration will be attempted but not achieved, because it holds constant the legitimacy and accountability pressures that determine which integration efforts are visible, defensible, and therefore worth undertaking.

2.4 Organizational constraints II: Institutional pressures and legitimacy demands

The surrounding institutional milieu constrains leaders further by articulating expectations of legitimacy and limiting which actions can be deemed appropriate. Institutional theory holds that organizations adopt structures not only for efficiency but for conformity to socially constructed myths of rationality (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Leaders' choices are consequently evaluated not only on performance but on their departure from institutional expectation, which encourages ceremonial compliance and symbolic alignment.

Organizational isomorphism at the field level, whereby organizations become similar due to coercive, normative, and mimetic pressures, restructures the range of legitimate choices available to decision-makers (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This pressure is especially relevant in fields with multiple evaluative constituencies. Where those constituencies impose incompatible prescriptions, organizations face institutional complexity, and the resulting demands cannot be satisfied simultaneously (Greenwood et al., 2011). From the perspective of institutional logics, organizations encounter, and must deal with, competing logics, and this significantly influences how leaders think and act through cross-level cultural frameworks that determine what is significant and what is legitimate (Thornton et al., 2012). As a result, leadership is often a process of seeking legitimacy, in which the selection of actions is more focused on symbolic alignment rather than solely on impact control (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Suddaby et al., 2016).

Contemporary institutional scholarship has become more cautious about how logics are invoked. Lounsbury et al. (2021) warn against treating logics as ready-made analytical labels and call instead for attention to how they cohere, endure, and govern

action. Previous empirical works illustrate the point in leadership terms: acceptance of algorithmic leadership in Indonesian organizations varies systematically with the prevailing institutional logic and industry setting rather than with the technology itself (Nurfaizal & Barros, 2026), and academic leaders navigating the tension between academic freedom and institutional reputation find their available responses bounded by which choices their audiences will credit (Zvavahera & Svongoro, 2026).

Institutional theory therefore explains why leadership action converges on socially acceptable and often symbolic forms. It cannot explain why convergence varies among leaders facing identical field-level pressures, because it holds constant the cognitive and interpretive processes through which those pressures are noticed, weighted, and translated into action.

2.5 Organizational constraints III: Governance mechanisms and bounded discretion

Governance frameworks define further boundaries for leadership scope beyond knowledge and institutional pressures. Agency theory outlines leadership action as inherently bound by information asymmetries, monitoring difficulties, and misaligned rewards between principals and agents (Eisenhardt, 1989). Consequently, governance limits leadership through formalized rules, but also through accountability frameworks that determine which decisions are possible, defensible, and sustainable in the long term.

The most recent literature in the domain points to the cognitive and relational dimension of governance constraints. Differing monitoring frameworks based on cognitive dissonance between the board and executives, as well as the leadership position of the board chair, have a significant impact on the scope and character of oversight (Veltrop et al., 2015). These scenarios suggest that leadership is restricted in action because

governance frameworks dictate the contour of discretionary limits, oversight, and the rationale behind strategic moves.

Governance constraints also operate through power rather than through formal control alone. Berti and Simpson (2021) show that where actors receive contradictory demands within an intense managerial relationship, the capacity to respond legitimately is itself distributed by power relations, so that the same tension is tractable for some actors and paralyzing for others. This matters for a constraint-based account of leadership: constraint is not experienced uniformly across a hierarchy, and the capacity to act within it is unevenly available.

Governance research therefore explains why leadership action becomes defensible, auditable, and risk-contained. It cannot on its own explain how leaders absorb simultaneous and contradictory evaluative demands, because it models constraint as a control problem between principal and agent rather than as a configuration of competing evaluative logics.

2.6 Bounded agency and managerial discretion: Positioning the framework

The proposition that leaders operate within limits is not new to management research. Managerial discretion, defined as the latitude of action available to executives, was introduced precisely to reconcile the view that leaders determine organizational outcomes with the view that they are constrained by their environments (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987). The subsequent literature has established that discretion varies systematically across industries, organizations, and individuals, and that this variance conditions the relationship between executive characteristics and organizational outcomes (Wangrow et al., 2015). Any account of leadership as bounded agency must therefore state its relationship to this

construct rather than proceed as though the ground were unoccupied.

Three differences define the position taken here. First, discretion research has predominantly treated latitude as an antecedent variable, most often operationalized through features of the industry task environment, and has used it to predict outcome variance; Wangrow et al. (2015) observe that comparatively little work has examined the manager's own characteristics or the internal organization as sources of latitude. The present framework treats latitude not as a measured input but as a constituted outcome: the space of action is produced by the interaction of cognitive, knowledge, institutional, and governance constraints, and it is that production process, rather than the resulting quantity, that requires explanation.

Second, discretion research is largely a literature about executives. The constraint logics assembled here operate at every level at which leadership is exercised, and the framework is specified accordingly.

Third, discretion is typically modeled as a scalar, with more or less latitude, whereas the account developed below treats constraint configurations as qualitatively distinct. Two leaders may face equivalent amounts of constraint and nonetheless occupy different action spaces, because a space bounded principally by coordination

requirements affords different action than one bounded principally by monitoring. The framework's contribution is therefore not the observation that leaders are constrained, which discretion research established, but the specification of how constraints of different kinds combine to shape what leadership can be.

2.7 Gap and synthesis: Toward leadership as bounded agency under organizational constraints

Taken together, these literatures establish that leadership action is bounded. Behavioral science locates the bounds in reasoning, bias, and threat-induced rigidity (Denrell et al., 2019; March & Simon, 1958; Shimizu, 2007; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981); organization theory locates them in institutional, governance, and knowledge structures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Eisenhardt, 1989; Grant, 1996; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Leadership research has rarely synthesized them, treating each as a separate issue.

The case for integration does not rest on the observation that these literatures have not yet been combined. It rests on a shared limitation: as Table 1 sets out, each perspective explains one source of boundedness by holding the others constant, and each is therefore unable to account for the variance the others contain.

Table 1. Comparative positioning of the four constraint perspectives

Perspective	Locus of constraint	Primary level	What it explains	What it cannot explain alone
Behavioral decision theory	Cognition, attention, framing, inference	Individual	Why leadership action is selective and interpretively constructed	Why identical cognitive limits yield expansive action in one setting and defensive action in another
Knowledge-based view	Distribution of expertise; coordination requirements	Organizational	Why leadership shifts from directing to integrating	When integration is attempted but not achieved

Institutional theory	Legitimacy expectations; isomorphism; competing logics	Field	Why action converges on acceptable and often symbolic forms	Why convergence varies among leaders facing identical field pressures
Agency and governance	Monitoring, accountability, incentive alignment	Organizational apex	Why action becomes defensible, auditable, and risk-contained	How leaders absorb simultaneous and contradictory evaluative demands
Managerial discretion	Latitude granted by environment, organization, and individual	Executive	That latitude varies and that the variance predicts outcomes	How latitude is itself constituted from the interaction of the logics above

Source: Author

This is why an integrative framework is necessary rather than merely convenient. The residual variance each perspective leaves unexplained is precisely the variance the others contain, which means the explanatory gap cannot be closed by refining any one of them. It can only be closed by specifying how the constraints combine. Micro-foundations research makes the same methodological point: theoretical progress requires articulating the mechanisms that connect individual action to organizational structure and outcomes, not merely asserting that both matter (Felin et al., 2012, 2015). Accordingly, the framework developed below defines leadership as bounded agency enacted within a space of action constituted by interacting constraints and derives mechanism-based propositions, including propositions about the interactions themselves, that can be carried into empirical work.

3. Method, Data, and Analysis

3.1. Research design justification: Integrative conceptual synthesis

This study employs an integrative conceptual review design to bridge the theoretical divide between micro-level leadership studies and macro-level organizational theories. This design focuses

on synthesis rather than aggregation and aims to combine various theoretical mechanisms into a single, coherent framework and to reconceptualize leadership as bounded agency situated within organizational constraint systems. An integrative review is warranted when relevant insights are scattered across disparate literatures that infrequently, if ever, engage with one another directly, as is the case with behavioral leadership and organization theory.

In the terms of Jaakkola's (2020) typology of conceptual article designs, this study follows a theory synthesis template: it draws on multiple established literatures to develop an integrated view of a phenomenon that none of them explains alone, as distinct from theory adaptation, typology construction, or model building. The review is bounded in the manner Elsbach and van Knippenberg (2020) recommend for integrative reviews, by a defined explanatory problem rather than by a topic label, and it pursues the kind of contribution Hurland (2020) identifies for conceptual review papers, namely refining existing theory rather than accumulating findings. We note that Alvesson and Sandberg (2020) contest this approach, arguing that reviews should problematize rather than integrate. Synthesis is chosen here because the problem is not that

existing assumptions are unexamined but that established explanations are partitioned across literatures that do not engage one another.

The study does not claim to build a new standalone theory. It combines established literatures to articulate the constraint systems, operating across levels, through which leadership agency is constituted. Cross-level synthesis is essential here because behavioral and structural components operate in concert to define what leadership can be and do within a given organizational context. The study therefore emphasizes mechanism-based synthesis as a platform for theoretically grounded and empirically testable propositions (Post et al., 2020; Torraco, 2005).

3.2. Literature underpinning the framework

This article is an integrative conceptual review rather than a systematic literature review. Its evidentiary base is accordingly the body of scholarship on which the conceptual argument is built, not an exhaustive retrieval of a defined publication set. The literature drawn upon consists overwhelmingly of international peer-reviewed journal articles. A small number of scholarly books and book chapters are retained because they remain the canonical statements of the constraint logics the

framework integrates and are not superseded by later restatements: March and Simon (1958) on bounded rationality and attention, Cyert and March (1963) on organizational decision-making, Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) on institutional logics, and Hambrick and Finkelstein (1987) on managerial discretion.

The literature is organized around four analytically distinct but interrelated constraint logics that shape leadership action: behavioral constraints, knowledge structures, institutional pressures, and governance frameworks. Two further groups inform the argument without belonging to any single logic: work positioning the framework relative to managerial discretion, and contemporary contextualized leadership research that motivates the problem the framework addresses. Organizing the literature by constraint logic rather than by disciplinary boundary is what makes the cross-level synthesis possible; organizing it by field would reproduce the very partition the article seeks to overcome. Twenty-eight of the works drawn upon were published in 2015 or later, so the framework is built on current scholarship as well as on its foundational sources.

3.3. Selection of literature and its contribution to the framework

Table 2. Criteria governing the selection of literature

Criterion	Basis for inclusion	Rationale
Theoretical relevance	The source specifies a mechanism by which cognition or organizational structure constrains or enables leadership action, and that mechanism belongs to one of the four constraint logics	The framework is organized by constraint logic; sources that describe leadership without specifying a constraint mechanism cannot contribute to it
Level of analysis	The source addresses the individual, managerial group, organizational, or field level in a way compatible with a cross-level account	The framework is explicitly cross-level; purely dyadic leader-follower work with no organizational-level constraint falls outside it

Contribution to framework development	Removing the source would leave a mechanism in the framework unsupported, or a theoretical position undefended	An integrative review advances theory rather than accumulating findings, so inclusion is justified by explanatory function rather than by volume
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Source: Author

On these criteria, forty substantive sources underpin the framework: thirty-six peer-reviewed journal articles and four canonical books or book chapters. Table 3 reports them in full, grouped by the constraint logic to which each contributes and stating what each group contributes to the framework.

Presenting the literature in this form, rather than as an aggregate count, makes the intellectual architecture of the framework visible and allows the reader to trace each mechanism to the scholarship from which it derives.

Table 3. Substantive literature underpinning the framework and its contribution

Domain	Literature included	Contribution to the framework
Behavioral constraints (11 sources)	Cyert & March (1963); Denrell, Fang & Liu (2019); Felin, Foss, Heimeriks & Madsen (2012); Felin, Foss & Ployhart (2015); Foss & Lindenberg (2013); Gavetti (2012); Gavetti, Levinthal & Rivkin (2005); March & Simon (1958); Shimizu (2007); Staw, Sandelands & Dutton (1981); Tversky & Kahneman (1981)	Bounded rationality and limited attention as the source of selectivity in leadership action; framing effects and biased inference as interpretive constraints through which choice sets are constructed rather than given; threat rigidity as the narrowing of repertoire under perceived threat; microfoundational grounding of the link between individual action and organizational outcomes
Knowledge structures (4 sources)	Grant (1996); Gray, Bunderson, Van der Vegt, Rink & Gedik (2023); Nickerson & Zenger (2004); Tushman & O'Reilly (1996)	Knowledge integration as the organizational problem leadership must solve; distributed expertise and the limits it places on centralized control; coordination requirements and the dependence of knowledge diversity on hierarchy stability; ambidexterity as competing knowledge flows that leaders must orchestrate over time
Institutional pressures (9 sources)	Bitektine & Haack (2015); DiMaggio & Powell (1983); Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta & Lounsbury (2011); Lounsbury, Steele, Wang & Toubiana (2021); Meyer & Rowan (1977); Nurfaizal & Barros (2026); Suchman (1995); Suddaby, Bitektine & Haack	Legitimacy demands and legitimacy judgment as evaluative constraints on action; institutional logics and their contemporary reassessment; institutional complexity where constituencies impose incompatible prescriptions; coercive, normative, and mimetic isomorphism as the narrowing of legitimate alternatives;

	(2016); Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury (2012)	ceremonial adoption and symbolic alignment as characteristic constrained responses
Governance (5 sources)	Berti & Simpson (2021); Boivie, Bednar, Aguilera & Andrus (2016); Eisenhardt (1989); Veltrop, Hermes, Postma & De Haan (2015); Westphal & Zajac (2013)	Monitoring and information asymmetry as the classical source of bounded discretion; accountability and the demand for defensible, auditable action; board-level evaluative dynamics through which oversight operates in practice; the uneven distribution, by power position, of the capacity to respond to contradictory demands
Managerial discretion (2 sources)	Hambrick & Finkelstein (1987); Wangrow, Schepker & Barker (2015)	Theoretical positioning of the framework relative to the established construct of managerial discretion, and differentiation between latitude treated as a measured antecedent of outcomes and the space of action treated as constituted through interacting constraints
Contextualized leadership (9 sources)	Fischer & Sitkin (2023); Janning (2025); Johns (2017); Johns (2024); Nilasari, Muhidin & Prasetyo (2022); Suyasa, A'yun & Tumanggor (2026); Widianari, Bin Samadi & Karim (2022); Yusoff (2025); Zvavahera & Svongoro (2026)	Contemporary evidence of the context deficit in leadership research and of the limits of style-based explanation; demonstrates the movement toward contextualized leadership scholarship that this framework extends by specifying the mechanisms through which context binds
Total	40 substantive sources	Six groups of literature constituting the framework's intellectual architecture

Note: A further nine references, Alvesson and Sandberg (2020), Cronin and George (2023), Elsbach and van Knippenberg (2020), Hulland (2020), Jaakkola (2020), Post et al. (2020), Snyder (2019), and Torraco (2005, 2016), inform the design and reporting of the integrative conceptual review itself. They are not part of the theoretical synthesis and are therefore excluded from this table.

Source: Author

3.4. Literature selection strategy: A concept-centered approach

The review proceeded in the four phases established in the integrative review literature: problem formulation, identification of relevant literature, critical assessment, and synthesis (Cronin & George, 2023; Snyder, 2019). Because selection was governed by explanatory function rather than by volume (Torraco, 2005, 2016), the review moved away from descriptive thematic categorization and toward

identifying the mechanisms and conditions that bound leadership action, making it an analytical rather than a descriptive review (Post et al., 2020).

3.5. Analytical approach: Mechanism mapping and theory synthesis

In this analysis, theory synthesis is applied through structured mechanism mapping. Each analytical domain has been interrogated using three guiding questions. These questions are: (1) what assumptions about agency under constraint are latent in

the literature, (2) what causal mechanisms operate in the interaction between organizational constraints and leadership action, and (3) in what ways do intensified constraints shape leadership processes and outcomes? These questions served to disentangle, contrast, and fuse mechanisms across the behavioral and organizational divide. Working through these questions allows us to articulate how the constraint logics interact, and yields both an integrative conceptual framework and a set of mechanism-based propositions that systematize previously disparate contributions into a coherent answer to why leadership action is selective, limited, and sometimes symbolic (Post et al., 2020; Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005, 2016). The next section develops that framework and its propositions.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Results: An integrative framework of leadership as bounded agency

The synthesis yields an explanatory framework that reconceptualizes leadership as agency enacted within a “space of action”. Rather than treating organizational context as a backdrop, the framework treats constraints as constitutive of what leadership can be and do. Leadership is accordingly the outcome of interaction between micro behavioral constraints and macro-organizational constraints, an interaction amplified under ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity.

Figure 1 presents the framework, and the four dynamics set out below correspond to its elements in turn. The first dynamic, shown in the upper band of the figure, is the set of context amplifiers: environmental uncertainty and threat, institutional complexity, and ambidexterity tensions. Under these conditions the effect of constraints is amplified, because ambiguity increases and the evaluative trade-off between exploration and exploitation becomes more acute.

Second, the internal constraints shown on the left of Figure 1 structure leadership through cognitive and interpretive mechanisms. Leadership action is selective because bounded rationality and limited attention prevent leaders from processing all information or evaluating all options (March & Simon, 1958). Framing effects and biased inference shape problem definition, risk interpretation, and sensemaking, constructing choice sets rather than selecting from objectively given alternatives (Denrell et al., 2019; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). These constraints shape leadership action in advance of any interaction with external pressure.

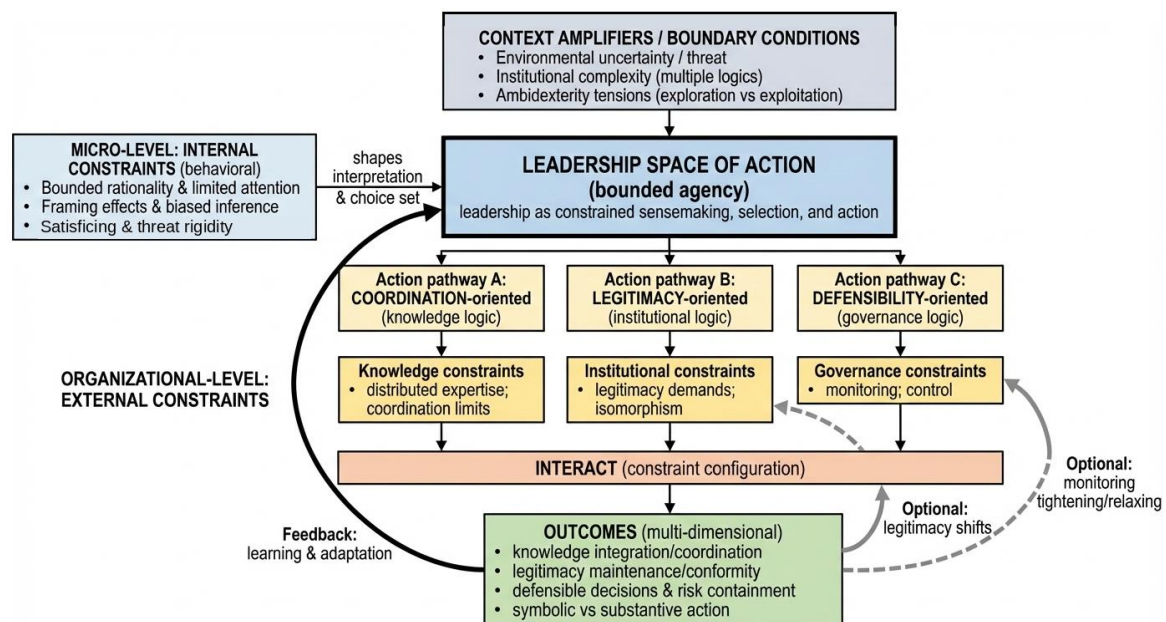
Third, the organizational-level constraints in the lower half of Figure 1 determine what is feasible, legitimate, and defensible. Knowledge constraints arising from distributed expertise and coordination limits push leadership toward integrative, boundary-spanning coordination rather than central command (Grant, 1996). Legitimacy demands and isomorphic pressures push it toward socially acceptable forms, including symbolic alignment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Governance constraints impose monitoring and control, narrowing discretion to auditable and defensible options (Eisenhardt, 1989; Veltrop et al., 2015).

These do not represent a summation of isolated effects; their interplay forms configurations that make some leadership pathways more likely and others less so. Figure 1 represents this convergence as the interaction node through which the three constraint streams pass before outcomes are produced.

Fourth, the feedback paths in Figure 1 make leadership dynamic. Outcomes influence future action through learning and adjustment, updating leaders’ interpretive frames and action patterns, and they also adjust governance monitoring and institutional legitimacy expectations, thereby reconfiguring the constraints that follow. The

framework thus captures leadership as constrained action and organizational response rather than as a one-off exercise of discretion.

Figure 1. Integrative framework of leadership as bounded agency under interacting organizational constraints



The framework posits leadership as *bounded processes of sensemaking, choosing, and acting that are constrained at the micro-behavioral and organizational levels (knowledge, institutional, governance)*. Context amplifying phenomena increase these constraints, while the outcomes of leadership feedback through learning and adaptation and may recalibrate legitimacy and monitoring pressures.

4.2. Propositions

This study offers seven mechanism-oriented propositions based on the integrative framework in Figure 1. The first five specify the mechanism internal to each constraint domain; the last two specify what occurs when domains bind simultaneously, and therefore carry the framework's central claim that the space of action is constituted by interaction rather than by summation. They are offered not as claims of certainty but as an analytically grounded basis for future empirical study of how constraint configurations shape leadership action.

P1: (Cognitive narrowing under uncertainty). When leaders face stronger

bounded rationality and attentional constraints, leadership action becomes more selective and simplified, particularly under high environmental uncertainty.

Bounded rationality implies that leaders cannot fully process complex information environments and must allocate limited attention to a subset of cues, relying on satisficing rather than optimizing (March & Simon, 1958). Under conditions of uncertainty, the cognitive costs of broad search increase, making selective attention and simplified action more likely. Leadership discretion therefore contracts not solely because of external restriction, but because internal cognitive constraints compress the effective choice set.

P2: (Interpretive construction via framing and biased inference). Stronger framing effects and biased inference increase the extent to which leadership actions reflect constructed interpretations of situations rather than objective assessments of available alternatives.

Framing influences whether leaders perceive situations as gains or losses, shifting risk preferences and altering evaluations of action alternatives (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Biased inference further distorts interpretation by turning noisy outcomes into misleading signals, particularly through misattribution processes that exaggerate perceived competence or opportunity (Denrell et al., 2019). Leadership action thus becomes partly a product of interpretive construction, as leaders actively define what constitutes a feasible action rather than merely selecting among given options.

P3: (Distributed knowledge shifts leadership toward coordination logic). As organizational knowledge becomes more specialized and distributed, leadership action shifts from control-oriented discretion toward coordination-oriented integration mechanisms.

The knowledge-based view holds that organizations exist to integrate specialized expertise that no single actor possesses (Grant, 1996). Under such conditions, centralized control becomes less effective, and leadership action is bounded by coordination demands. Leaders must therefore focus on enabling alignment, facilitating integration, and orchestrating collaboration across knowledge boundaries rather than exercising directive control.

P4: (Legitimacy pressure increases symbolic alignment). Under stronger institutional legitimacy demands and isomorphic pressures, leadership action becomes more compliance-oriented and more likely to take symbolic forms.

Institutional theory emphasizes that organizations respond to legitimacy

expectations by adopting practices that signal appropriateness, sometimes decoupled from technical efficiency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As legitimacy pressures intensify, leadership discretion becomes bounded by the need to appear acceptable to salient audiences, increasing the likelihood of ceremonial adoption and symbolic alignment.

P5: (Monitoring pressure increases defensibility and risk containment). Stronger governance monitoring and control reduce leadership discretion by increasing the salience of defensibility, auditability, and risk containment in leadership decision-making.

Agency theory suggests that monitoring and accountability reshape leadership behavior by heightening scrutiny and emphasizing justification (Eisenhardt, 1989). Under intensive monitoring, leaders prioritize actions that can be defended and documented, often favoring risk containment over strategic ambition. Governance constraints thus channel leadership toward conservative and defensibility-oriented action, a pattern reinforced by board-level monitoring dynamics (Veltrop et al., 2015).

P6: (Interaction under competing evaluative criteria). The narrowing effect of bounded rationality on leadership action is amplified when institutional and governance constraints impose competing evaluative criteria, because leaders must satisfy multiple non-commensurable audiences from a fixed stock of attention.

P1, P4, and P5 describe constraints that operate on different resources: attention on the one hand, legitimacy and accountability on the other. Their interaction is not additive. When legitimacy demands and monitoring demands prescribe different actions, the leader cannot resolve the conflict by allocating more attention, since attention is already at its limit; the effect is that the choice

set contracts faster than either constraint alone would predict. Institutional complexity supplies the conditions under which this occurs, because incompatible prescriptions from multiple constituencies cannot be jointly satisfied (Greenwood et al., 2011). The capacity to respond is further distributed by power position rather than being uniform across the hierarchy (Berti & Simpson, 2021). This proposition is therefore the framework's principal departure from accounts that treat constraints as separable.

P7: (Symbolic coordination under joint knowledge and legitimacy constraint). When knowledge constraints and legitimacy demands are simultaneously high, leadership action shifts toward symbolic coordination: visible integration activity that signals appropriateness to evaluating audiences while leaving underlying knowledge boundaries unresolved.

P3 predicts a shift toward integrative coordination; P4 predicts a shift toward

symbolic alignment. Where both constraints bind, the two predictions converge on a specific and observable form of action. Integration across knowledge boundaries is slow, uncertain, and difficult to evidence, whereas the appearance of integration, through cross-functional forums, coordination roles, and integration initiatives, is rapid and legible to audiences. Under joint pressure, leaders have reason to invest in the observable form, producing structures that are ceremonially adopted and substantively decoupled (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Symbolic coordination is thus predicted to be most prevalent precisely where coordination is most needed, which is a counterintuitive implication that the framework generates and that neither constituent perspective yields alone.

Table 4 maps the propositions onto the constraint domains and the elements of Figure 1, so that each mechanism can be traced from its literature of origin through the framework to a testable statement.

Table 4. Mapping of constraint domains, mechanisms, and propositions to the framework

Constraint domain	Core mechanism	Leadership consequence	Proposition	Figure 1 element
Behavioral: cognition	Bounded rationality; limited attention	Selective, simplified action	P1	Internal constraints
Behavioral: interpretation	Framing; biased inference	Interpretively constructed choice sets	P2	Internal constraints
Knowledge structures	Distributed expertise; coordination limits	Shift to integrative coordination	P3	Organizational constraints
Institutional pressures	Legitimacy demands; isomorphism	Compliance and symbolic alignment	P4	Organizational constraints
Governance	Monitoring; accountability	Defensibility and risk containment	P5	Organizational constraints

Cognition × institutional × governance	Competing evaluative criteria under fixed attention	Amplified contraction of the choice set	P6	Context amplifiers
Knowledge × institutional	Unresolved integration under legitimacy pressure	Symbolic coordination	P7	Amplifiers, outcomes, and feedback

Source: Author

4.3. Discussion: Why leadership becomes constrained, selective, and sometimes symbolic

Most leadership theory emphasizes transformative, agentic action. The framework explains instead why leadership practice so often appears incremental, cautious, or simplified. Internally, cognition determines what receives attention and what appears achievable; externally, organizational constraints determine what can be coordinated, what falls within institutional expectation, and what will survive governance scrutiny (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Eisenhardt, 1989; Grant, 1996; March & Simon, 1958; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981).

Most importantly, the framework illustrates that leadership cannot be equated to traits or styles. Rather, leadership should be considered a bridging phenomenon. That is, leadership links organizational constraints and micro-behavioral processes at the individual level. The same leader may appear innovative in one setting and conservative in another. This should not be read as a reflection of leadership capacity, but rather of the configuration of organizational constraints.

A coordinating role is dominant when knowledge integration is the primary constraint; a legitimacy role is dominant when compliance pressures are high; a defensibility role is dominant when control, monitoring, and accountability pressures are high. These three roles are the action pathways labeled A, B, and C in Figure 1.

Bounded leadership is also iterative, in the sense carried by the feedback paths in Figure 1: outcomes recalibrate the constraint configuration itself, creating path dependencies that stabilize or tighten it across leadership cycles. The framework therefore pivots leadership scholarship away from prescriptive models and toward a realistic account of how leadership action comes to be.

Two boundary conditions should be stated explicitly, since a constraint-based account risks being read as structural determinism. First, the framework does not claim that leaders only absorb constraints. Leaders also act upon them: they lobby for changes in governance arrangements, redefine what their audiences will treat as legitimate, and restructure how knowledge is distributed. The framework specifies the conditions under which constraint dominates agency rather than asserting that it always does, namely, high environmental uncertainty, dense and competing evaluative audiences, and knowledge too distributed for any single actor to command. Where these conditions are absent, leader-centric explanations may retain more purchase than the framework allows.

Second, and relatedly, the capacity to act within constraints is not uniformly distributed. Berti and Simpson (2021) show that power relations determine whose responses to contradictory demands will be treated as legitimate, which means that the same configuration of constraints affords different action to differently positioned leaders. Bounded agency is therefore unevenly bounded, and the framework

predicts variation in leadership action not only across constraint configurations but across positions within them.

The framework therefore explains why leadership action is rarely a manifestation of unrestrained agency, and why it is so often selective, symbolic, and oriented toward defensibility. The final section sets out the contributions, implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

5. Conclusion and Suggestion

5.1 Conclusion

Leadership research has largely assumed that leaders operate independently of their contexts. Drawing on behavioral science and organization theory, this article has instead treated leadership as bounded agency enacted within a space of action defined by interrelated constraints.

The central argument is that leadership action is the product neither of free choice nor of structure alone. It results from sensemaking, choice, and action constrained simultaneously by individual cognitive limits and by organizational knowledge, institutional, and governance structures. Contextual amplifiers increase ambiguity, complexity, and conflict, narrowing viable pathways further, so that leadership is often oriented toward coordination, legitimacy, and defensibility rather than toward unconstrained strategic action. The framework accordingly treats leadership as a process rather than a set of traits: outcomes feed back into subsequent action and may recalibrate legitimacy expectations and governance oversight, which explains in part why leadership action varies across settings and periods even when the individual leader does not.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

The study makes three theoretical contributions.

First, we relocate the unit of explanation from the leader to the action space. Where style-

based accounts attribute variation in leadership to differences between leaders, the framework attributes it to differences in the constraint configurations leaders occupy. This generates testable predictions about when the same leader will act expansively and when defensively, and answers continuing calls for cross-level theorizing connecting micro and macro (Felin et al., 2012, 2015; Johns, 2024).

Second, we specify leadership as the pivot of the agency–structure relation. Rather than treating leadership as an outcome of structure or as an exogenous force acting upon it, the framework positions leadership within a constraint configuration and shows how leadership outcomes feedback to reshape that configuration over time.

Third, we distinguish the action space from managerial discretion. Discretion research established that latitude varies and that the variance predicts outcomes; it did not explain how latitude is produced. By treating the action space as constituted through the interaction of cognitive, knowledge, institutional, and governance constraints, and by treating configurations as qualitatively distinct rather than as more or less latitude, the framework supplies the account of production that the discretion literature leaves open (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987; Wangrow et al., 2015).

5.3 Methodological contribution

The study also makes a modest methodological contribution. The analytical procedure used here, interrogating each constraint domain with the same three questions concerning latent assumptions about agency, causal mechanisms, and the effects of intensified constraint, then mapping the resulting mechanisms onto a common framework, is transferable to other cross-level synthesis problems in which explanations are partitioned across literatures that do not engage one another. Reported alongside explicit selection criteria and a full account of the literature

underpinning the framework (Tables 2 and 3), it offers one way of making theory synthesis auditable, which conceptual reviews are frequently criticized for leaving implicit (Elsbach & van Knippenberg, 2020; Jaakkola, 2020).

5.4 Practical implications

While the framework is conceptual, it grounds future empirical work: formulating leadership as bounded agency permits study of how varying behavioral constraints and organizational controls shape leadership action and its outcomes, and the propositions offer starting points for multilevel and longitudinal designs capable of capturing learning and feedback over time.

For practitioners and policymakers, the framework indicates that leadership effectiveness cannot be assessed apart from the organizational constraint system. Investing in training or selection alone yields little if knowledge structures, institutional pressures, and governance arrangements are unchanged; development succeeds when it is calibrated to the conditions under which the capability will be exercised (Yusoff, 2025). The propositions sharpen this into specific guidance. If P5 holds, intensifying monitoring is not a neutral accountability measure but a predictable producer of defensive leadership, so governance redesign should be treated as a leadership intervention in its own right. If P7 holds, visible coordination under legitimacy pressure is a signal to audit whether integration is substantive, since the conditions that most require coordination also most reward its symbolic substitute.

5.5 Limitations and directions for future research

It is important to consider the study's limitations. First, the study uses an integrative conceptual review design instead of an empirical or research design. While the former is more suited for theoretical synthesis or framework building, it does not allow us to make cause-and-effect statements

about the strength or direction of certain proposed relationships. Establishing such relationships would require an empirical design; the present contribution is therefore a framework to be tested rather than a set of tested claims.

Second, the framework specifies cognitive and interpretive bounding but does not develop the affective and ethical dimensions of leader constraint. Emotion and moral judgment plausibly bound leadership action in ways the present account does not model, and extending the framework to specify how affective and ethical constraints interact with the organizational logics analyzed here is a direct and worthwhile continuation. Ethical constraint is already visible in contextual leadership research, where academic leaders' responses to competing obligations are bounded by what their audiences will credit (Zvavahera & Svongoro, 2026).

Third, the framework does not take into account differences by industry or context. Distinct constraint configurations are likely to occur in different sectors, so future research should consider what leadership as bounded agency looks like in public organizations, highly regulated industries, and entrepreneurial settings.

Fourth, the framework includes feedback loops, but only in a limited way. Longitudinal studies of leadership spaces of action, and of how those spaces are recalibrated following organizational success or failure, would extend the framework and address this limitation.

This study recasts leadership not as heroic discretion but as situational agency that organizational conditions both constrain and enable. By analytically foregrounding constraints, the framework positions the study of leadership in complex organizations toward understanding, as opposed to idealizing, how leadership works.

Declaration of AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process (if author[s] utilize AI)

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Gemini AI to generate the visual illustration of the conceptual framework (Figure 1) based on a prompt developed by the authors. The prompt was derived from the authors' original conceptual reasoning and the integrative framework developed in this study. After using Gemini AI, the authors reviewed, edited, and refined the figure to ensure accuracy and alignment with the theoretical arguments presented in the manuscript. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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