

# Contextual Intelligence as a Meta-Competency in Strategic Leadership Implementation: Moving Beyond Universalist Leadership Models

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## Abstract

Rapid globalisation, technological disruption, and increasing institutional complexity have transformed organisational environments into highly dynamic and context-sensitive systems. Under such conditions, leadership effectiveness can no longer be assumed to derive from universally applicable models but must be understood in relation to shifting contextual variables. This creates a growing need to reconceptualise leadership beyond static behavioural frameworks toward more adaptive, context-aware capabilities.

This article examines the limitations of dominant leadership theories, particularly transformational, servant, and authentic leadership, which, despite their influence, often assume universality across diverse cultural and institutional settings. The study argues that leadership effectiveness depends not only on possessing competencies but also on the ability to interpret and respond to the contextual conditions that shape organisational realities.

Adopting a systematic conceptual review methodology, the study synthesises literature from leadership theory, institutional theory, and strategic management to explore how context influences leadership practice and organisational outcomes. The analysis identifies a persistent gap in existing frameworks: the limited integration of environmental interpretation into leadership models. To address this gap, the article introduces **contextual intelligence** as a meta-competency, defined as the leader's capacity to interpret contextual signals, understand institutional dynamics, and align strategy and execution accordingly. The findings suggest that contextual intelligence enables more effective strategic adaptation in complex, multi-institutional environments.

The article contributes to leadership scholarship by offering a conceptual framework that reframes leadership effectiveness through a contextual lens, integrating environmental interpretation, strategic alignment, and execution. This provides a foundation for future empirical research and practical leadership development in increasingly complex organisational settings.

**Keywords:** Contextual intelligence; Strategic leadership; Contextual awareness; Leadership theory; Institutional context; Strategic implementation

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## 1. Introduction

Leadership has long been recognised as a vital factor influencing organisational performance and effectiveness (Yukl, 2013; Northouse, 2022). Over recent decades, researchers have built a substantial body of evidence exploring the behaviours, traits, and skills that allow leaders to influence followers and meet organisational goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Day et al., 2014). More recently, leadership studies have increasingly focused on understanding how leaders function within complex, dynamic, and context-dependent settings, highlighting adaptability, sensemaking, and systemic awareness as essential skills (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018; Crevani, Lindgren & Packendorff, 2020). Recent research further supports this change by depicting leadership as an adaptive, contextually embedded process shaped by complexity and evolving organisational conditions (Dinh et al., 2024).

Despite the theoretical richness of leadership research, an underlying assumption often remains implicit in much of the literature: that effective leadership behaviours are universally applicable. Many leadership models suggest that behaviours such as inspiring followers, communicating vision, empowering employees, or demonstrating authenticity are broadly relevant across organisational and cultural contexts. As a result, leadership development programmes frequently emphasise the acquisition of generalised leadership competencies intended to work across diverse environments.

Nevertheless, more focus has been placed on the limitations of this universalist assumption. Leadership research has traditionally been dominated by studies carried out in Western institutional contexts, especially in North America and Western Europe. These settings are characterised by relatively stable regulatory frameworks,

formal organisational structures, and cultural norms that emphasise individualism, autonomy, and participatory decision-making (House et al., 2004). Leadership theories developed within such environments may not easily transfer to other institutional contexts.

Organisations operating in emerging economies, transitional societies, or highly regulated institutional settings often face conditions that differ greatly from those assumed by mainstream leadership theories. Leaders may need to manage regulatory uncertainty, informal governance practices, political influences, or cultural norms that prioritise hierarchy and collective identity over individual independence. In such contexts, applying universal leadership models may prove inadequate for successful organisational management.

The increasing recognition of situational variation has led scholars to emphasise the importance of environmental and contextual factors in leadership effectiveness. Early contingency theories of leadership already recognised that leadership behaviours must adapt to specific circumstances (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). More recent research has broadened this view by exploring the influence of cultural context, organisational structures, and environmental complexity in shaping leadership outcomes.

Within this developing discourse, the concept of **contextual intelligence** has attracted attention as a skill that allows leaders to interpret environmental signals and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Contextual intelligence refers to the ability to understand environmental factors that influence organisational functioning and to modify leadership strategies to suit those conditions. Instead of depending on fixed leadership styles, leaders with high contextual intelligence can interpret complex environments and align their actions with situational realities (Kutz, 2008).

In an era marked by rapid technological change, globalisation, and increasing institutional complexity, the importance of contextual interpretation in leadership has become even more significant. Organisations operate within overlapping regulatory frameworks, diverse cultural environments, and swiftly changing economic conditions. Leaders must therefore shift from static leadership models towards more adaptable approaches that emphasise situational understanding and strategic flexibility.

This article contends that contextual intelligence functions as a meta-competency in the execution of strategic leadership. A meta-competency is a higher-level ability that supports the effective use of other competencies across different contexts. In leadership, contextual intelligence allows leaders to identify which leadership behaviours, strategies, and implementation approaches are most suitable for a specific environment.

By framing contextual intelligence as a core competency, this study redefines leadership effectiveness as a dynamic process of interpreting environments and adapting strategy. Instead of solely emphasising behavioural leadership traits, the analysis highlights the cognitive and interpretive skills that allow leaders to navigate complex institutional settings.

The article, therefore, seeks to address the following research question:

**How can contextual intelligence be conceptualised as a meta-competency that enables effective strategic leadership implementation across diverse institutional environments?**

To address this question, the study employs a systematic conceptual review methodology to synthesise existing literature on leadership theory, institutional analysis, and strategic management. The aim is not to test hypotheses empirically but to develop a conceptual framework that combines contextual interpretation with leadership implementation.

## **2. Methodology: Systematic Conceptual Review**

This study employs a **systematic conceptual review methodology** to synthesise existing scholarship and develop a theoretically grounded framework for contextual intelligence in leadership. Unlike empirical studies that gather primary data, conceptual reviews analyse and integrate existing literature to enhance theoretical understanding and generate new conceptual insights (Snyder, 2019). Conceptual review approaches are especially valuable in areas where theoretical constructs are emerging or where research is fragmented across disciplinary boundaries.

Leadership studies form such a field. While extensive empirical research exists on leadership behaviours and styles, relatively limited work has systematically integrated contextual interpretation, institutional dynamics, and strategic implementation within a unified conceptual framework. The purpose of this study is therefore not to test

hypotheses empirically but to **synthesise relevant theoretical perspectives** in order to develop a conceptual model of contextual intelligence as a meta-competency in leadership.

In management research, systematic reviews help scholars organise large bodies of literature and spot patterns, theoretical gaps, and emerging ideas (Tranfield, Denyer & Smart, 2003). Unlike traditional narrative reviews, systematic reviews follow a structured process of identifying, screening, and synthesising the literature, aimed at increasing transparency and rigour. Although systematic reviews are often linked to quantitative meta-analysis, they are just as suitable for conceptual and theoretical research when the goal is theory development rather than statistical aggregation (Boell & Cecez-Keemanovic, 2015).

Following recommendations in management research methodology, the review process used in this study consisted of three main stages: literature identification, screening and selection, and conceptual synthesis (Snyder, 2019).

## 2.1 Literature Identification

The first stage involved identifying relevant scholarly literature across multiple academic disciplines. Because the concept of contextual intelligence intersects with several research streams, including leadership theory, institutional theory, strategic management, and organisational behaviour, a broad search strategy was necessary to capture the breadth of relevant contributions. Literature searches were carried out using several leading academic databases that offer extensive coverage of peer-reviewed research in management and organisational studies. These databases included:

- **Scopus**
- **Web of Science**
- **Google Scholar**

These databases are widely recognised for their comprehensive indexing of peer-reviewed journals and academic books, and are commonly utilised in systematic management reviews (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). Searching across multiple databases reduces the risk of publication bias and enhances the thoroughness of literature identification. Search terms were developed to capture literature addressing contextual influences on leadership as well as conceptual discussions of contextual intelligence. The search strategy included combinations of the following keywords:

- contextual leadership
- contextual intelligence
- leadership and context
- institutional leadership
- strategic leadership implementation
- leadership and culture
- leadership and institutional theory

Additional sources were identified through **backward and forward citation tracking**, a process in which reference lists of key publications are examined to identify earlier foundational studies, while citation tracking identifies more recent works that cite these publications (Webster & Watson, 2002). This approach is widely recommended in systematic literature reviews to ensure that influential contributions are not overlooked.

The literature search mainly targeted **peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly books**, which are regarded as the most credible sources of theoretical and empirical research. Special attention was paid to leadership studies published in influential journals such as *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Management*, *Strategic Management Journal*, and *Academy of Management Review*, owing to their significance within the discipline.

## 2.2 Screening and Selection Criteria

After identifying potential sources, a screening process was carried out to ensure that the chosen literature was directly pertinent to the research aims. Systematic reviews usually employ clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to focus the analysis on literature that meaningfully contributes to the research question (Tranfield et al., 2003). Three primary criteria guided the selection of sources.

### Scholarly relevance

Publications were required to address at least one of the following themes:

- leadership theory or leadership behaviour
- contextual or situational influences on leadership
- institutional or cultural environments influencing organisational leadership
- strategic leadership and implementation processes

Studies that did not engage directly with leadership or organisational strategy were excluded from the analysis.

### Conceptual contribution

Because the objective of the study is theoretical development, preference was given to publications that offer conceptual insights regarding leadership, context, or institutional dynamics. Conceptual and theoretical works were therefore prioritised over purely descriptive empirical studies.

### Scholarly credibility

Sources were chosen based on their academic credibility. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and widely cited works that have influenced leadership and organisational theory. These sources are commonly used in conceptual leadership research to establish theoretical foundations (Podsakoff et al., 2005). Through this screening process, a body of literature spanning leadership theory, institutional theory, and strategic management was assembled for analysis.

## 2.3 Conceptual Synthesis

The final stage of the review involved synthesising insights from the selected literature to identify recurring theoretical themes and develop a conceptual framework. Conceptual synthesis involves comparing theoretical arguments across studies and identifying relationships among concepts that may not be explicitly connected in individual publications (Boell & Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2015). In this study, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in how scholars conceptualise the relationship between leadership behaviour and contextual conditions. The analysis revealed three major themes that recur across the literature.

The first theme concerns the **implicit universalism of many leadership models**, which assume that effective leadership behaviours can be applied broadly across organisational contexts.

The second theme relates to the **influence of institutional and cultural environments** on organisational leadership. Research in institutional theory and cross-cultural leadership consistently demonstrates that organisational practices are shaped by regulatory systems, social norms, and cultural value structures.

The third theme focuses on the importance of **strategic implementation and organisational alignment**, highlighting that leadership effectiveness relies not only on influence but also on the ability to translate strategic intent into operational results. By integrating insights from these themes, the review process helped develop a conceptual framework that connects contextual interpretation to leadership execution.

## 2.4 Methodological Limitations

As with all conceptual research, the present study has certain methodological limitations. Conceptual reviews depend on existing scholarship rather than primary empirical data, so the conclusions reached are theoretical rather than empirically verified. Nevertheless, conceptual research plays a vital role in advancing scientific understanding by clarifying constructs, consolidating fragmented research streams, and generating theoretical propositions to direct future empirical studies (MacInnis, 2011).

Another limitation concerns the potential for selection bias in literature review processes. Although the study employed systematic search procedures and explicit selection criteria, it is possible that relevant studies may not have been included due to database indexing limitations or differences in terminology across disciplines. Despite these limitations, systematic conceptual reviews are widely recognised as an effective methodology for developing theoretical frameworks in management research, particularly in areas where interdisciplinary integration is required (Snyder, 2019).

## 2.5 PRISMA-Informed Literature Review Process

To improve methodological transparency, the literature review process adhered to principles derived from the **Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)** framework. PRISMA offers a structured method for documenting how literature is identified, screened, and included in systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021). Although PRISMA originated in medical and health sciences research, its principles have increasingly been adopted in management and organisational studies to enhance transparency and reproducibility in literature reviews.

The PRISMA framework emphasises four sequential stages: **identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion**. Although the present study is conceptual rather than empirical, these stages offer a useful structure for documenting the literature review process.

### Identification

The initial search phase involved identifying potentially relevant publications using the databases Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. These databases were chosen for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals across management, organisational studies, and leadership research.

Search queries were formulated using combinations of keywords related to leadership and contextual interpretation. These included “contextual leadership,” “contextual intelligence,” “leadership and context,” “institutional leadership,” “strategic leadership implementation,” and “leadership and culture.” The search was carried out without restricting the publication year to capture both foundational theoretical works and contemporary scholarship.

This initial search generated a broad pool of publications representing multiple disciplinary perspectives.

### Screening

In the second stage, titles and abstracts were reviewed to evaluate each publication's relevance to the research objectives. Studies that mainly addressed technical management topics unrelated to leadership or organisational context were excluded.

The screening stage ensured that the literature retained for further review addressed themes directly related to the research question, including leadership theory, contextual influences on leadership, institutional dynamics, and strategic leadership implementation.

### Eligibility Assessment

Publications that passed the initial screening were then subjected to a more detailed eligibility assessment. During this stage, full-text articles and book chapters were examined to determine their conceptual relevance and theoretical contribution. Eligibility criteria included:

- explicit discussion of leadership behaviour or leadership theory
- conceptual or theoretical treatment of context, institutions, or culture in organisational leadership
- relevance to strategy implementation or organisational change

Highly cited theoretical works were also included in order to capture foundational contributions that have shaped leadership scholarship.

### **Inclusion and Synthesis**

The final stage involved synthesising the selected literature to identify conceptual patterns and theoretical relationships. Through thematic analysis, three major conceptual themes emerged across the literature.

1. The implicit universalism of dominant leadership models
2. The influence of institutional and cultural environments on leadership behaviour
3. The importance of contextual interpretation in strategic implementation

These themes underpinned the conceptual framework developed in this article, which positions contextual intelligence as a meta-competency that enables leaders to align leadership behaviour with contextual conditions. By documenting the literature review process using PRISMA-informed principles, the study seeks to improve transparency and methodological rigour of the conceptual review.

### **3. Limitations of Universalist Leadership Models**

Although leadership research has produced many influential frameworks, many of these models implicitly assume that leadership effectiveness can be explained by a set of universally applicable behaviours or traits. While such frameworks have contributed significantly to leadership scholarship, their applicability across diverse contexts remains debated.

#### **Dominance of Western Leadership Paradigms**

One of the most common critiques of leadership theory relates to the predominance of Western viewpoints in the field. Much of the leadership research has been carried out within North American organisational settings. These studies often mirror cultural values linked to individualism, low power distance, and participative decision-making.

Transformational leadership theory offers a clear example. The model emphasises inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, individualised consideration, and idealised influence as essential components of effective leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). While these behaviours may be successful in many organisational contexts, their interpretation and effectiveness can differ across cultural environments.

Cross-cultural leadership research shows that cultural expectations about leadership vary considerably between societies. The GLOBE study, which investigated leadership in 62 societies, identified significant differences in the leadership qualities valued across cultures (House et al., 2004). For instance, leadership behaviours linked to participative decision-making might be appreciated in low power-distance cultures but could clash with expectations in hierarchical societies.

#### **Institutional Constraints**

Leadership models often assume organisational environments characterised by relatively stable institutional frameworks. However, in many regions, organisations operate in environments marked by regulatory uncertainty, evolving governance structures, or informal institutional arrangements.

Institutional theory emphasises that organisations are embedded within wider social and regulatory systems that shape behaviour and decision-making (Scott, 2014). Leaders must therefore navigate institutional constraints that may influence strategic choices and organisational processes.

In situations where regulatory frameworks are changing or where informal institutions have a major influence, leadership strategies crafted in highly institutionalised settings might not be easily applicable.

#### **Strategic Implementation Challenges**

Another limitation of universalist leadership models is their emphasis on leadership behaviour rather than strategic implementation. Many leadership frameworks highlight influence, motivation, and interpersonal dynamics but pay comparatively little attention to the intricacies of executing organisational strategy.

Strategic leadership research emphasises that leaders play a crucial role in aligning organisational resources, structures, and processes with strategic objectives (Hitt, Ireland & Hoskisson, 2017). Effective leadership, therefore, involves not only influencing followers but also navigating organisational systems and environmental constraints. When leadership models are applied without accounting for contextual factors, strategic initiatives may fail due to a misalignment between leadership approaches and environmental conditions.

#### **4. Theoretical Foundations: From “Context Matters” to Contextual Intelligence**

The critique of universalist leadership models does not suggest that established theories are “wrong”; instead, it emphasises that their explanatory power relies on contextual assumptions that are often left implicit. The key question, therefore, is not whether leadership models can transfer across different settings, but under what conditions they stay valid, and what higher-order ability enables leaders to apply leadership knowledge effectively across varied environments. This section introduces contextual intelligence as that higher-order ability: a meta-competency that helps leaders read context, interpret signals, choose suitable leadership responses, and implement strategy in ways that align with institutional and cultural realities.

##### **4.1 Context as an explanatory layer in leadership research**

Leadership scholarship has long recognised context, but often as a background variable rather than a central explanatory mechanism. Contingency traditions explicitly positioned “fit” between leadership style and situational conditions as decisive (Fiedler, 1967). Situational leadership similarly argued that leader behaviour should vary with follower readiness and task structure (Hersey and Blanchard, 1982). These approaches introduced the crucial insight that there is no single best leadership style; however, they tended to treat context as a relatively bounded, immediate situation, rather than as a multi-layered institutional and cultural system that shapes meaning, legitimacy, and feasibility.

Organisational studies provide a deeper understanding of context. Institutional theory contends that organisations are embedded within regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive structures that influence what is seen as legitimate and feasible (Scott, 2014). Leaders do not operate in a neutral environment; rather, they function within institutional fields where rules, norms, professional standards, and taken-for-granted assumptions both constrain and enable action. Simultaneously, cross-cultural leadership research demonstrates that leadership behaviours are interpreted through cultural value systems, which affect whether followers view them as credible and appropriate (House et al., 2004). Therefore, context is not just the “setting” in which leadership takes place; it is a system of meaning that mediates how leadership is perceived, whether strategy gains acceptance, and which pathways for implementation are practical.

Strategic management scholarship similarly emphasises that execution depends on alignment with environmental conditions and organisational capabilities (Hitt, Ireland and Hoskisson, 2017). Strategy is not merely a plan; it is an enacted process that involves coordination, interpretation, and adaptation over time. Across these perspectives, a consistent implication is that leadership effectiveness is inseparable from understanding the context. Leaders must continually assess how institutional constraints, cultural expectations, stakeholder influence, and organisational readiness shape the conditions for successful implementation.

##### **4.2 Sensemaking, interpretation, and the cognitive core of contextual intelligence**

The cognitive basis of contextual intelligence closely aligns with the sensemaking tradition. Sensemaking explains how actors create meaning in ambiguous environments, interpret actions, and organise responses around plausible narratives (Weick, 1995). Leaders are not just decision-makers; they are managers of meaning who influence how others interpret events. In complex settings, this interpretive role becomes crucial: if leaders misinterpret the context, strategies might be logically consistent but practically unfeasible, opposed, or out of sync with institutional realities.

Contextual intelligence, therefore, requires interpretive judgment: the ability to recognise relevant contextual cues, discriminate signal from noise, and generate workable interpretations that guide action. This aligns with research on managerial cognition and bounded rationality, which argues that decision-makers operate with limited attention and imperfect information (Simon, 1997). Leaders with higher contextual intelligence manage attention more effectively: they scan broadly while also identifying the small set of contextual variables that matter most for strategic implementation.

### 4.3 Institutional logics and “implementation legitimacy”

Institutional logics theory broadens institutional analysis by emphasising how different “logics” (such as market, state, profession, community, religion) offer unique values, assumptions, and legitimacy criteria (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012). In pluralistic settings, organisations often face conflicting logics, creating ambiguity about what constitutes “good” leadership or “appropriate” strategy. A leadership approach that aligns with one logic may contradict another, complicating implementation.

This is central to contextual intelligence: strategic leadership is not only about technical feasibility but also about **legitimacy**. Leaders must gain legitimacy from stakeholders who assess strategy through various institutional perspectives. Leadership models that rely on a single dominant logic—often a market-managerial one—may face difficulties in contexts where state, community, or professional logics take precedence. Therefore, contextual intelligence includes the ability to recognise which logics are prominent, how they influence stakeholder expectations, and how strategic narratives can be crafted to build legitimacy across competing audiences.

### 4.4 Cultural value systems and “interpretive equivalence”

The GLOBE research programme reveals that cultural dimensions influence what societies view as desirable leadership qualities (House et al., 2004). This indicates that leadership behaviour may not have the same interpretive meaning across different cultures: the same behaviour might be seen as empowering in one culture and as weak or indecisive in another. Participative decision-making can signal respect and inclusion in low power-distance cultures, but be seen as a lack of authority in high power-distance settings. Similarly, direct feedback practices that are normalised in some Western contexts may be perceived as disrespectful in environments that emphasise face-saving and harmony.

Therefore, contextual intelligence encompasses cultural interpretive competence: not just understanding cultural differences but also predicting how leadership actions will be received and tailoring communication and decision-making processes accordingly. This overlaps with, but is not identical to, cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence emphasises the ability to operate effectively in culturally diverse environments (Earley and Ang, 2003). Contextual intelligence is more comprehensive: it includes cultural competence, along with institutional literacy, stakeholder sensing, and adapting execution within constraints.

### 4.5 Strategic leadership as an implementation discipline

Strategic leadership research highlights the leader’s role in aligning strategic intent with organisational action (Hitt, Ireland and Hoskisson, 2017). Yet, strategies often fail during implementation—not because leaders lack vision, but because the organisation lacks readiness, the operating model cannot support execution, or the institutional environment constrains change. Change leadership scholarship repeatedly emphasises that transformation depends on sequencing, coalition building, communication, and institutionalising change (Kotter, 1996). However, change frameworks often under-specify how context influences the practicality of these steps.

Contextual intelligence redefines strategic leadership as a disciplined process of analysing context, adapting strategies, and designing execution. Instead of applying generic change steps, leaders use contextual intelligence to identify: who has veto power; what institutional rules and norms limit options; which cultural expectations influence acceptance; which resources are limited; and what pace and pathway of change are feasible.

### 4.6 Western-centric assumptions and the risk of “model transplantation”

A further theoretical issue is **model transplantation**: the transfer of leadership frameworks from their original institutional settings to contexts with different assumptions about authority, agency, and accountability. When this happens, models can become prescriptive ideologies rather than analytical tools. Leadership development programmes often promote empowerment, distributed decision-making, and low-hierarchy collaboration as universally desirable. However, in environments where accountability is strongly role-based, where compliance is personalised, or where organisational identity is rooted in senior authority, empowerment rhetoric can lead to ambiguity rather than improved performance. The issue is not that empowerment is unwanted; it is that empowerment must be designed with clarity about decision rights, legitimacy expectations, and capability maturity.

From an institutional viewpoint, leadership behaviour often needs to satisfy multiple types of legitimacy: regulative legitimacy (compliance), normative legitimacy (moral approval), and cognitive legitimacy (taken-for-granted acceptance) (Scott, 2014). Western-centric models usually assume that normative legitimacy is achieved

through individual authenticity, fairness, and empowerment. In other contexts, cognitive legitimacy might rely on visible authority, decisive action, or culturally appropriate distance. Contextual intelligence helps leaders avoid ideological adoption by asking: what does legitimacy look like here, for these stakeholders, and within these institutions?

#### **4.7 Contextual intelligence as a bridge between leadership and implementation research**

A persistent gap in leadership scholarship is that many models explain influence but under-theorise implementation. Conversely, implementation research often focuses on processes and structures while treating leadership as a generic enabling factor. Contextual intelligence bridges this gap by treating implementation as an interpretive-execution challenge. Leaders must interpret not only the external context but also the internal organisational context—capability constraints, informal networks, and readiness. This aligns with the perspective that leadership is embedded within organisational systems rather than solely residing in individual traits (Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey, 2007).

Conceptually, contextual intelligence connects three areas: (1) environmental interpretation (institutions, culture, stakeholders), (2) strategic design (choices, priorities, sequencing), and (3) execution architecture (governance, routines, metrics). This connection becomes crucial in environments characterised by uncertainty, where plans rapidly become outdated and execution relies on ongoing adjustments. In such contexts, contextual intelligence functions as an adaptive control mechanism: it revises assumptions, realigns actions, and maintains cohesion amid shifting conditions without compromising strategic intent.

### **5. Defining Contextual Intelligence as a Meta-Competency**

#### **5.1 Concept definition and boundaries**

Building on the foundations above, contextual intelligence can be defined as:

**Contextual intelligence is the leader’s capacity to perceive, interpret, and respond to the cultural, institutional, and organisational conditions that shape strategic feasibility, legitimacy, and implementation success.**

This definition considers contextual intelligence a meta-competency because it allows leaders to appropriately deploy other skills (communication, influence, emotional intelligence, strategic analysis). A leader might have high emotional intelligence but still fail in execution if they misdiagnose institutional constraints. Conversely, a leader could possess strong strategic insight yet fail if they cannot translate strategy into contextually appropriate narratives and operational pathways.

The construct is limited by neighbouring concepts in three ways. First, contextual intelligence is broader than situational awareness because it includes multi-layered institutional and cultural interpretation. Second, it exceeds cultural intelligence because it involves institutions, stakeholder influence, and organisational implementation constraints. Third, it is different from general cognitive ability because it is domain-specific, requiring interpretive skill grounded in contextual knowledge and experience.

#### **5.2 The four dimensions of contextual intelligence**

Synthesising leadership, institutional, and strategy research, contextual intelligence can be conceptualised as four interrelated dimensions:

##### **Dimension 1: Contextual sensing (environmental scanning and cue recognition).**

Leaders perceive contextual cues across institutional, cultural, political, and economic domains. This includes disciplined scanning, stakeholder listening, and the detection of weak signals that indicate shifts in constraints or opportunities. It aligns with the attention-based view that organisational action depends on what decision-makers notice and prioritise (Ocasio, 1997).

##### **Dimension 2: Interpretive judgement (sensemaking and causal mapping).**

Leaders form plausible interpretations of contextual cues, recognise causal relationships, and develop working diagnoses. This dimension directly relies on sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and bounded rationality (Simon, 1997). Merely noticing the context is not enough; leaders must interpret cues into a clear understanding of what matters and why.

##### **Dimension 3: Adaptive strategic alignment (fit between strategy, institutions, and culture).**

Leaders adjust strategic choices and framing to match contextual conditions. This includes choosing

implementation pathways that align with regulatory constraints, cultural norms, and stakeholder expectations. It also involves reframing strategic narratives to gain legitimacy across different institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury, 2012).

#### **Dimension 4: Contextual execution design (implementation architecture under constraints).**

Leaders translate strategy into execution mechanisms, governance, incentives, operating rhythms, and capability building—appropriately aligned with organisational capacity and contextual constraints. This dimension links leadership with strategy execution. It draws on insights from change leadership (Kotter, 1996) while emphasising context-specific sequencing and design.

These dimensions are mutually reinforcing. Strong sensing without interpretive judgment creates noise. Strong interpretation without adaptive alignment results in well-crafted diagnoses that are politically ineffective. Strong alignment without execution design leads to credible plans that never scale. Therefore, contextual intelligence functions as a system capability rather than a single trait.

### **6. A Conceptual Model: Contextual Intelligence and Strategic Leadership Implementation**

#### **6.1 Core proposition**

The central theoretical proposition of this article is that contextual intelligence improves the implementation of strategic leadership by enhancing the fit among strategy, institutional conditions, cultural expectations, and organisational execution capacity.

Conceptually:

**Contextual Intelligence → Strategic Adaptation and Legitimacy → Implementation Effectiveness → Organisational Outcomes**

This model integrates technical and social mechanisms. Strategic adaptation refers to adjusting the content and pathway of the strategy to fit constraints. Legitimacy refers to securing stakeholder acceptance across institutional logics. Implementation effectiveness refers to the degree to which a strategy is translated into coordinated action, sustained over time, and produces intended operational change.

#### **6.2 Mechanisms and pathways**

##### **Mechanism 1: Reducing information asymmetry and misfit.**

By analysing and interpreting context, leaders minimise misalignment between strategy assumptions and environmental realities. Misfit is a known cause of implementation failure: strategies designed for stable environments collapse under volatility; strategies tailored for formal institutions fail where informal norms prevail. Contextual intelligence diminishes misfit by making assumptions explicit and continuously updating them through sensing and interpretation.

##### **Mechanism 2: Building legitimacy for execution.**

Even technically strong strategies can fail if they lack legitimacy. Institutional theory views legitimacy as a resource that affects survival and performance (Scott, 2014). Contextual intelligence allows leaders to frame strategies in ways that resonate with stakeholders' logics and meet their criteria for suitability. This broadens the implementation coalition and reduces resistance.

##### **Mechanism 3: Designing context-appropriate execution architectures.**

Execution depends on governance, resource allocation, routines, and measurement. Contextual intelligence assists leaders in designing execution systems that suit organisational maturity and specific constraints. In settings with limited resources, leaders might need to implement phased capability development and form network partnerships. In highly regulated environments, leaders may require compliance-by-design processes, stakeholder alignment, and governance that is ready for audits.

##### **Mechanism 4: Enhancing adaptive capacity over time.**

Complex environments change over time. Contextual intelligence supports ongoing adaptation by updating interpretations and adjusting execution pathways. This aligns with the dynamic capabilities perspective, which suggests capacities to sense, seize, and reconfigure in response to change (Teece, 2007). At leadership level, contextual intelligence can be conceptualised as a micro-foundation enabling adaptive strategic action.

### 6.3 Relationship to global leadership and complexity perspectives

Global leadership scholarship is increasingly emphasising complexity, ambiguity, and cross-cultural challenges. Leaders in global settings must reconcile multiple stakeholder expectations and manage institutional diversity. Contextual intelligence provides a unifying perspective because it considers leadership as an interpretive and executive ability rather than a static behavioural style. It also aligns with complexity leadership theories that see leadership as facilitating adaptive dynamics within complex systems (Uhl-Bien, Marion and McKelvey, 2007). Contextual intelligence is compatible with complexity thinking because it highlights sensing, interpretation, and adaptation amidst uncertainty.

### 6.4 The Contextual Intelligence Leadership Framework (CILF)

Drawing the argument together, the **Contextual Intelligence Leadership Framework (CILF)** is proposed as a conceptual tool for the implementation of strategic leadership. The CILF consists of three layers:

#### Layer A: Context layers (what leaders must read)

- **Institutional layer:** rules, regulations, governance, professional norms (Scott, 2014)
- **Cultural layer:** values, power distance, communication norms, legitimacy expectations (House et al., 2004)
- **Stakeholder layer:** power, interests, coalitions, informal influence structures
- **Organisational layer:** capability maturity, resources, operating model, readiness for change

#### Layer B: Contextual intelligence dimensions (how leaders process context)

- Contextual sensing
- Interpretive judgement
- Adaptive strategic alignment
- Contextual execution design

#### Layer C: Implementation outputs (what contextual intelligence enables)

- Strategy adaptation (content and pathway)
- Legitimacy building (narratives and coalitions)
- Execution architecture (governance, incentives, routines)
- Adaptive iteration (learning and reconfiguration)

The CILF does not replace existing leadership models; it functions as a meta-competency scaffold that explains when and how leadership behaviours should be selected and enacted.

### 6.5 Illustrative application: why the same “good” leadership fails across contexts

To clarify the practical meaning of the CILF while maintaining a conceptual perspective, consider a common strategic initiative: implementing performance management reform. In many Western corporate contexts, the reform narrative emphasises transparency, coaching, and ongoing feedback. The legitimacy logic is that fairness and development foster engagement. In other institutional settings, such as heavily unionised environments, public sector systems with rigid grade structures, or workplaces with high employment insecurity, performance management reforms may be seen primarily as control or a threat. Contextual intelligence would lead leaders to adjust both narrative and mechanisms: stakeholder co-design may be necessary to build legitimacy; measurement might need to focus on role clarity and procedural justice; and pacing could be phased to prevent triggering defensive behaviours. The same reasoning applies to digitisation initiatives linked to the Fifth Industrial Revolution discourse. Technology adoption is often presented as innovation and efficiency. However, in contexts where digitisation is associated with job loss, surveillance, or exclusion, legitimacy can be fragile. Contextual intelligence urges leaders to interpret the institutional significance of technology, design adoption strategies that

incorporate capability development, and align incentives and communications with cultural norms. The main point is that leadership behaviours become effective when they are perceived as legitimate and supported by implementation frameworks that are suitable for the context.

## 7. Research Propositions for Future Empirical Testing

Although this article is conceptual, it is useful to state propositions that future research can test empirically:

**P1:** Leaders with higher contextual intelligence will achieve higher levels of strategy implementation effectiveness, controlling for general leadership competencies.

**P2:** The relationship between contextual intelligence and implementation effectiveness will be mediated by perceived legitimacy of the strategy among key stakeholders.

**P3:** The positive effect of contextual intelligence on implementation effectiveness will be stronger in environments characterised by high institutional complexity and cultural heterogeneity.

**P4:** Contextual execution design will moderate the relationship between strategic adaptation and implementation effectiveness such that adaptation produces superior outcomes when accompanied by execution architectures aligned to organisational maturity.

These propositions provide a bridge between conceptual clarity and future empirical development, without requiring this study to collect primary data.

## Measurement, Leadership Development Implications, and Conceptual Synthesis

### 8. Measuring Contextual Intelligence in Leadership

Although contextual intelligence has become an important concept for understanding leadership effectiveness, measurement frameworks are still underdeveloped in leadership research. Many leadership ideas, like emotional intelligence, transformational leadership, and authentic leadership, have benefited from well-established measurement tools that support empirical studies. In comparison, contextual intelligence remains mainly a theoretical idea with limited ways to measure it.

Creating measurement approaches is crucial if contextual intelligence is to develop from a theoretical idea into a researchable leadership skill. Measurement frameworks must include both **cognitive and behavioural aspects**, as contextual intelligence involves not only the ability to interpret surroundings but also the skill to turn interpretation into action.

#### 8.1 Cognitive dimensions of contextual intelligence

The cognitive aspect of contextual intelligence pertains to how leaders perceive, interpret, and mentally model surrounding conditions. These abilities are closely connected to research in managerial cognition and strategic decision-making. Managers interpret complex environments using cognitive schemas that influence how they identify opportunities and threats (Walsh, 1995).

Three cognitive indicators are particularly relevant for contextual intelligence.

#### Environmental scanning capability

Leaders must demonstrate the ability to identify relevant environmental signals across multiple domains, including institutional, cultural, technological, and economic factors. Effective environmental scanning involves both structured information gathering and informal stakeholder engagement. Research on strategic foresight suggests that leaders who engage in disciplined scanning processes are better able to anticipate environmental change (Rohrbeck & Kum, 2018).

#### Institutional understanding

Institutional awareness refers to a leader's understanding of the regulatory systems, governance frameworks, and social norms that influence organisational behaviour. Institutional theory highlights that organisations operate within environments regulated by formal rules and informal expectations that shape strategic choices (Scott, 2014). Leaders with strong institutional awareness can foresee how policies, regulations, and normative expectations impact the implementation of strategy.

## **Interpretive reasoning**

Interpretive reasoning is the ability to synthesise various contextual signals and create coherent explanations for organisational challenges. This skill is closely linked to sensemaking processes, through which leaders develop shared interpretations of complex events (Weick, 1995). Leaders with strong interpretive reasoning can reduce ambiguity by constructing plausible narratives that guide organisational actions.

### **8.2 Behavioural dimensions of contextual intelligence**

While cognitive capabilities enable leaders to interpret context, it is ultimately through behaviour that contextual intelligence is expressed. Behavioural indicators, therefore, show how leaders turn contextual understanding into leadership actions.

#### **Adaptive leadership behaviour**

Adaptive behaviour describes a leader's capacity to alter leadership style and decision-making processes based on contextual conditions. Research on adaptive leadership emphasises that effective leaders switch between directive and participatory approaches according to situational demands (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009).

#### **Stakeholder alignment capability**

Contextual intelligence requires leaders to foster alignment among stakeholders whose interests and institutional positions may differ considerably. Stakeholder theory stresses that organisational success relies on managing relationships with actors who influence organisational outcomes (Freeman, 1984). Leaders with strong contextual intelligence can negotiate among competing interests and forge coalitions that support strategic initiatives.

#### **Strategic narrative construction**

Leaders must craft strategic initiatives that resonate with the values and expectations of organisational members and external stakeholders. Strategic narratives play a crucial role in shaping how individuals interpret organisational change (Sonenshein, 2010). Leaders equipped with contextual intelligence can develop narratives that connect strategic aims to real-world contexts.

### **8.3 Organisational indicators of contextual intelligence**

Beyond individual cognition and behaviour, organisational outcomes also demonstrate contextual intelligence by reflecting how effectively leadership interprets and implements strategies.

#### **Strategy–context alignment**

One clear indicator is how well organisational strategies match environmental conditions. Strategies that align closely with institutional demands and stakeholder expectations are more likely to be successfully enacted.

#### **Implementation effectiveness**

Implementation effectiveness can be evaluated using measures such as project completion rates, policy adoption success, and improvements in operational performance. Strategic initiatives that show consistent implementation success may indicate strong contextual intelligence among leadership.

#### **Organisational adaptability**

Organisations led by contextually intelligent leaders are more likely to demonstrate adaptability in response to environmental change. Adaptability may be observed through the organisation's ability to modify strategic priorities, restructure processes, or develop new capabilities when environmental conditions shift.

## **9. Implications for Leadership Development**

The recognition of contextual intelligence as a leadership meta-competency has significant implications for leadership development and executive education. Traditional leadership development programmes often emphasise behavioural skills such as communication, motivation, and emotional intelligence. While these skills remain valuable, they may not fully equip leaders for the complexities of modern organisational environments.

## **9.1 Limitations of traditional leadership development**

Many leadership programmes emphasise personal traits or behavioural frameworks applicable across organisational settings. These programmes often depend on competency models that specify general leadership behaviours such as communicating vision, motivating teams, and decision-making. Although such competencies are advantageous, they may not prepare leaders to navigate complex institutional environments.

Research on leadership development suggests that leadership effectiveness is influenced not only by behavioural competencies but also by cognitive capabilities related to strategic thinking and environmental interpretation (Day et al., 2014). Without training in contextual analysis, leaders may attempt to apply leadership models that are poorly suited to their organisational environment.

## **9.2 Developing contextual intelligence**

Developing contextual intelligence requires leadership education that emphasises environmental interpretation and strategic adaptation. Several developmental approaches may support the cultivation of contextual intelligence.

### **Institutional analysis training**

Leaders must understand how regulatory frameworks, governance systems, and cultural norms influence organisational behaviour. Institutional analysis training can assist leaders in recognising the broader systems within which organisations function.

### **Cross-cultural leadership exposure**

Exposure to diverse cultural contexts helps leaders develop sensitivity to differences in leadership expectations. Cross-cultural experiences help leaders recognise how leadership behaviours may be interpreted differently across societies.

### **Systems thinking**

Systems thinking encourages leaders to see organisations as complex adaptive systems where multiple interacting variables shape outcomes. Systems thinking frameworks help leaders to recognise relationships between organisational structures, stakeholder dynamics, and environmental conditions (Senge, 2006).

### **Experiential learning**

Contextual intelligence develops through experience as leaders confront real-world complexity. Experiential learning approaches, including action learning projects and cross-sector leadership assignments, allow leaders to practise contextual interpretation in dynamic environments.

## **10. Conceptual Integration: Contextual Intelligence and Strategic Leadership**

The previous analysis emphasises that contextual intelligence is essential for effective leadership implementation. Leadership effectiveness cannot be solely attributed to behavioural traits or interpersonal skills. Instead, successful leadership depends on the ability to interpret contextual conditions and adjust strategic actions to environmental realities.

The conceptual framework presented in this article positions contextual intelligence as a meta-competency that mediates the relationship between leadership behaviour and organisational outcomes. Leaders with robust contextual intelligence can interpret contextual signals, adapt strategic approaches, and design implementation pathways that align with institutional conditions.

In this framework, contextual intelligence influences organisational outcomes through three primary mechanisms.

### **Strategic adaptation**

Leaders interpret contextual signals and adapt organisational strategies to match environmental conditions. This adjustment ensures that strategies stay relevant and practical within particular institutional settings.

Legitimacy construction

Contextual intelligence helps leaders craft strategies that connect with stakeholders and fit with dominant institutional logics. By creating credible narratives, leaders boost the chances that strategic initiatives will gain organisational backing.

#### Implementation architecture

Contextually intelligent leaders design governance structures, resource allocation mechanisms, and operational processes that enable effective strategy execution.

These mechanisms collectively contribute to improved organisational performance and adaptability.

### 11. Future Research Directions

Although this article provides a conceptual framework for understanding contextual intelligence in leadership, further research is needed to advance the field.

#### Development of measurement instruments

Future research should develop validated scales to measure contextual intelligence. Measurement instruments could draw on existing constructs related to managerial cognition, strategic thinking, and cultural intelligence.

#### Empirical testing of the contextual intelligence framework

Empirical studies are needed to test the relationships proposed in the conceptual model. Quantitative research could examine the relationship between contextual intelligence and the success of strategic implementation across diverse organisational contexts.

#### Comparative leadership studies

Cross-national comparative studies could examine how contextual intelligence operates in different cultural and institutional environments. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of how leadership practices vary across societies.

#### Integration with digital transformation leadership

As organisations increasingly adopt digital technologies, leaders must navigate new forms of organisational complexity. Future research could explore how contextual intelligence influences leadership effectiveness in technology-driven organisational environments.

### 12. Conclusion

Leadership research has produced numerous theoretical frameworks that describe effective leadership behaviours. However, many of these frameworks assume that leadership practices can be universally applied across organisational contexts. This assumption overlooks the influence of cultural, institutional, and socio-economic environments that shape organisational behaviour.

This article argues that leadership effectiveness relies on a higher-order skill known as contextual intelligence. Contextual intelligence allows leaders to interpret environmental conditions, align strategies with organisational realities, and develop implementation pathways suited to the context. By integrating insights from leadership theory, institutional analysis, and strategic management research, the study defines contextual intelligence as a meta-competency in implementing strategic leadership. Leaders with contextual intelligence can manage complex environments and convert strategic aims into effective organisational actions.

Future research should further develop measurement frameworks and empirical studies to examine how contextual intelligence influences leadership effectiveness across diverse organisational settings.

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