

Trait, Skill & Behavioral Theories: A Historical Review of Leadership Research

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the evolution of leadership theory through a conceptual and analytical review of seminal and contemporary literature was examined. Drawing on 36 scholarly sources, it traces the progression of leadership thought from the deterministic assumptions of the Great Man Theory to more dynamic and context-sensitive approaches, including Trait, Skills, and Style theories. The analysis highlights a significant epistemological shift from leader-centric and essentialist perspectives toward relational, developmental, and socially embedded understandings of leadership. Critically, while each theory contributes important insights—traits explaining who leaders are, skills leaders can develop, and behaviors leaders exhibit—none provides a comprehensive explanation of leadership effectiveness on its own. Consequently, the study develops an Integrated Leadership Model (ILM), which conceptualizes leadership as a multidimensional process arising from the interaction among traits (being), skills (becoming), behaviors (doing), and context (situating). The findings demonstrate that leadership effectiveness is not determined by any single dimension but by the alignment and interaction among these elements. Therefore, the study advances a holistic and integrative framework that reconceptualises leadership as a dynamic, adaptive, and contextually embedded process. This framework provides a more comprehensive foundation for understanding and developing leadership in complex organisational environments, bridging the gap between traditional theories and contemporary leadership challenges.

Keywords: Great Man Leadership theory, Trait Leadership Theory, Style Leadership theory, Managerial Grid.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership functions as a dynamic, relational process involving continuous interaction among leaders, followers, and contextual conditions to pursue shared goals. Rather than operating linearly, leadership emerges through ongoing social exchange shaped by situational demands and collective purpose (Crevani et al., 2010). Uhl-Bien & Arena (2018) further reinforce the notion that leadership is a socially constructed and context-dependent phenomenon, in which influence develops through relationships rather than individual authority.

According to DeRue & Ashford (2018), despite the absence of a universally accepted definition, scholars consistently identify influence, shared purpose, and relational processes as core elements of leadership. Recent research frames leadership as a networked, adaptive, and multi-level system in which effectiveness depends on interaction patterns rather than individual traits alone (Lemoine et al., 2019).

Early leadership perspectives emphasized control, centralization, and dominance, reflecting strongly leader-centric assumptions. Contemporary research challenges these views by demonstrating that leadership emerges within collective and distributed processes, shifting attention from individual leaders to leadership practices (Carson et al., 2020; Denis et al., 2021). Such developments signal a transition from individual authority to relational influence.

Fragmentation continues to characterize leadership research, as competing classifications such as trait versus behavior and prescriptive versus descriptive approaches create conceptual ambiguity. Recent scholarship addresses these tensions by advancing integrative and multi-level frameworks that combine individual, relational, and contextual dimensions (Day et al., 2021).

Cultural variability further complicates leadership theory. Leadership practices differ across societies, challenging the universality of Western-derived models. Contemporary cross-cultural research confirms that leadership remains culturally embedded and socially negotiated, requiring context-sensitive interpretation (Rockstuhl et al., 2020).

A persistent gap remains between theory and practice. Although research supports shared and distributed leadership, many real-world contexts continue to favor heroic and individualistic leadership forms (Tourish, 2019). Such divergence highlights the slow adoption of emerging leadership paradigms.

Emerging leadership constructs increasingly reintroduce the ontological dimension of “being”, emphasizing that leadership effectiveness is grounded not only in what leaders do (behavior) or what they can do (skills), but also in who leaders are (Katsande, 2021). Scholars now recognize that identity, character, values, and self-awareness shape how leaders interpret situations, relate to others, and exercise influence (Lord et al., 2020). According to Katsande, the “being” dimension anchors leadership in internal coherence and moral orientation, providing the foundation for the expression of competencies and behaviors.

Recent scholars, therefore, converge on a holistic view of leadership that integrates being (identity and character), becoming (the development of competencies), and doing (behavioral enactment), all within contextual boundaries. Leadership effectiveness emerges from the alignment of these dimensions rather than their isolation.

An integrative perspective underpins the present study, which conceptualizes leadership as a multidimensional system shaped by the interaction of traits, skills, behaviors, the ontological “being” of the leader, and contextual factors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Great Man Theory (1840s)

Around the Mid-19th Century, the great man theory evolved. The great man theory was popularized by Thomas Carlyle; however, in 1860, the English philosopher Herbert Spencer disputed the theory, affirming that heroes are simply products of their times and that their actions result from social conditions. The Great Man Theory advanced that leadership traits were innate, with a person born with essential leadership ability and acumen. The construct surmises that leaders are born rather than made, and therefore a person’s traits and ability to lead are intrinsically assigned and destined at birth (De Neve et al., 2013)

While De Neve et al. (2012) claim to have scientifically identified DNA that predicts leadership, Peters (2023) dismissed the assertion that the Great Man theory rests on faith and offers no evidence, asserting that leaders' traits are intrinsic. Researchers have not determined, with scientific certainty, which human characteristics or combinations were responsible for identifying great leaders. While the Great Man theory sees great leaders as those who are destined by birth to become a leader, Kouses and Ponser (2006) argue that great leaders rise when confronted with the appropriate situation.

During the Great Man era, King (1990) cites Borgotta, Rouch, and Bales 1954; Galton, 1869, who posits that researchers suggested: “that if a person copied the personality and behaviours of great men (and some women) they would become a strong leader” (King, 1990, p.45). The Great Man Theory was advanced to the point that, according to Jennings (1960), some theorists even attempted to explain leadership in terms of inheritance (King, 1990, p. 45). However, according to King, the key and decisive research was carried out by Bowden (1926), who equated leadership with personality (King, 1990, p.45).

Trait Theory

Trait Theory emerged in the early 20th century as one of the earliest systematic efforts to explain leadership in terms of inherent individual attributes. Early scholars such as Stodgill argued in 1948 that leadership is rooted in stable traits such as intelligence, confidence, and dominance, reinforcing the belief that certain individuals are

naturally predisposed to lead. The concept reveals a continuation of Great Man assumptions, reframed through empirical inquiry.

However, the theory failed to establish a universal and definitive set of traits, limiting its predictive validity. In contrast, contemporary research reframes traits as probabilistic enablers rather than deterministic causes, suggesting that traits increase the likelihood of leadership emergence without guaranteeing effectiveness (Lord et al., 2020; Zaccaro et al., 2018). Critically, this shift reflects a shift from static identity-based explanations to dynamic, context-sensitive interpretations of leadership.

Research on Trait Theory

Mid-20th-century research introduced a critical turning point, particularly through Stogdill's (1948) work, which demonstrated that leadership depends on the interaction between traits and situational factors. The concept reveals a transition from viewing leadership as a fixed attribute to understanding it as a relational and contingent process.

However, subsequent studies continued to emphasize personality traits as differentiators between leaders and non-leaders, reinforcing leader-centric assumptions. In contrast, contemporary scholarship adopts a multi-level perspective that integrates individual traits, team processes, and environmental conditions (Day et al., 2021; DeRue & Ashford, 2018).

As leadership studies grew, the trait model evolved to integrate "soft" skills competencies such as social awareness and emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Scholars integrated relational skills and acknowledged that effective leadership involves connecting and influencing others. Critically, such integration blurs the boundary between traits and competencies, raising conceptual ambiguity regarding whether leadership is rooted in inherent qualities or developed capabilities (Lemoine et al., 2019).

Strengths of Trait Approach

The Trait Approach contributes significantly to leadership studies by identifying core attributes associated with leadership emergence, providing a foundation for leader selection and assessment. Historically, the approach aligned with prevailing perceptions of leadership as grounded in personal qualities, reinforcing its intuitive appeal.

However, according to Zaccaro et al. (2018) and Lord et al. (2020), contemporary research situates these strengths within broader frameworks, recognizing that traits function as enabling conditions rather than sufficient determinants of leadership effectiveness. In contrast to earlier assumptions, leadership emerges through the interaction of traits with relational and contextual dynamics (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Critically, the concept reveals that trait research has informed modern leadership theory by identifying attributes such as integrity, confidence, and sociability, while also exposing the limits of relying solely on individual characteristics (Day et al., 2021).

Weaknesses of the Trait Theory

According to Zaccaro, Day, & Hedrick (2020), Trait Theory exhibits significant limitations, particularly its inability to produce a definitive and universally applicable list of traits. The concept reveals inherent ambiguity, as the expanding range of traits undermines theoretical precision and explanatory power (Grossman, 2019; Frankenhuys & Panchanathan, 2023).

However, the most critical limitation lies in its leader-centric orientation, which neglects relational, situational, and processual dimensions of leadership. In contrast, contemporary research demonstrates that leadership effectiveness depends on interaction, adaptability, and contextual alignment rather than static attributes (DeRue & Ashford, 2018; Day et al., 2021).

The theory further perpetuates deterministic assumptions about the inherent nature of leadership, reinforcing exclusionary narratives. Furthermore, the concept reveals a tension between traditional beliefs—such as “leaders are born”—and modern evidence supporting leadership as a developmental and socially embedded process (Lemoine et al., 2019).

Trait Theory and Leadership Studies

Trait Theory has played a foundational role in leadership scholarship by establishing the importance of individual differences in the emergence of leadership. The concept reveals its enduring relevance, particularly when examined alongside evolving leadership paradigms.

However, Stogdill’s 1948 work introduced a critical shift by demonstrating that leadership depends on the interaction between traits and context, challenging earlier universal assumptions. In contrast, Lord et al. (2020) and Day et al. (2021) support the integration of leadership by positioning it as a multi-dimensional construct that combines traits, competencies, behaviors, and environmental factors (Lord et al., 2020; Day et al., 2021).

The concept critically reveals a historical evolution from trait dominance to contextual integration, reflecting broader developments in leadership theory. Modern perspectives no longer treat traits as sufficient explanations but as one component within a complex, relational leadership system (DeRue & Ashford, 2018)

The Skills Approach

The Skills Approach emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to the limitations of trait-based explanations of leadership, reframing it as a function of learned competencies rather than innate qualities. The concept reveals a critical paradigm shift from determinism to developmental capability, emphasizing that leadership effectiveness depends on acquired skills (Day et al., 2021). However, early formulations remained largely descriptive and lacked an integrative explanatory structure.

In contrast, contemporary scholarship conceptualizes leadership as a dynamic capability embedded in complex systems, in which skills develop through the interaction between individuals and their environments (Day et al., 2021). Critically, this shift positions leadership not as possession but as capacity enacted within context (Lord et al., 2020).

Katz’s Administrative Skills (1955)

Katz’s early framework identified technical, human, and conceptual skills as foundational to leadership effectiveness, with their relevance varying across organizational levels. Technical skills dominate at lower levels, while conceptual skills become critical at higher levels. The concept reveals a structured understanding of leadership capability linked to organizational hierarchy and role complexity.

However, Katz’s model assumes a relatively stable organizational environment and does not fully account for contextual variability. In contrast, recent research emphasizes that leadership skills must be adaptive and responsive to changing environments, rather than fixed across levels (Zaccaro et al., 2018). Critically, contemporary perspectives extend Katz’s model by integrating learning agility and adaptive capacity as core leadership competencies (DeRue & Ashford, 2018).

Skill-based Model (2000) Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, et al

The skill-based model developed in the late 20th century expanded the Skills Approach by linking leadership effectiveness to problem-solving ability, knowledge, and experience

The concept signals a shift toward a more cognitively grounded, performance-oriented framework in which leadership effectiveness hinges on the ability to process information and address complex challenges.

However, the model introduces a broad set of variables, including cognitive ability and motivation, which overlap with trait-based constructs. In contrast, contemporary research integrates these dimensions within multi-

level leadership frameworks, where cognition, identity, and behavior interact dynamically (Lord et al., 2020). Critically, the model highlights leadership as a function of capability development over time, rather than static ability.

Five Components of Skills Model

The Skills Model identifies five core components—competencies, individual attributes, leadership outcomes, career experience, and environmental influence—as determinants of leadership effectiveness. The concept reveals a comprehensive attempt to integrate individual capability with contextual factors, marking a significant advancement beyond earlier models.

Competencies such as problem-solving, knowledge, and social judgment underpin leadership performance by enabling leaders to interpret and respond to complex situations. However, the inclusion of attributes such as personality and motivation introduces conceptual ambiguity. In contrast, recent scholarship more clearly distinguishes between capabilities and dispositions, emphasizing their interaction rather than their conflation (Zaccaro et al., 2018).

Furthermore, career experience and environmental factors critically highlight leadership as a developmental and context-sensitive process in which effectiveness depends on accumulated learning and situational adaptation. Contemporary research supports this view by demonstrating that leadership emerges through continuous interaction between experience, environment, and capability (Day et al., 2021).

Critique of Skills Approach

The Skills Approach offers a compelling alternative to trait-based models by positioning leadership as accessible and developmental through learning and experience. The concept demonstrates its strength in democratizing leadership, making it attainable for individuals beyond those inherently “gifted”.

However, the approach exhibits several limitations. The inclusion of multiple variables—such as cognitive ability, motivation, and personality—creates conceptual overlap with trait theory, reducing theoretical clarity. In contrast, research by Lord et al. (2020) emphasizes the need for parsimonious and integrative models that clearly distinguish between constructs (Lord et al., 2020).

A critical analysis by Peter (2023) raises concerns about the model’s empirical grounding in military contexts and its generalizability across diverse organizational settings. Furthermore, the approach remains largely descriptive rather than predictive, limiting its ability to explain how specific skills translate into leadership outcomes (DeRue & Ashford, 2018).

According to Zaccaro et al. (2018), the concept reveals that while the Skills Approach advances leadership theory by emphasizing development, its full explanatory potential lies in integration with behavioral, relational, and contextual frameworks. Day et al. (2021) further position leadership as a multidimensional system in which skills operate alongside traits, behaviors, and context to shape effectiveness.

Style Approach

The Style Approach emerged in the mid-20th century as leadership research shifted from internal attributes to observable behaviors, focusing on how leaders act within group settings. The Ohio State and the University of Michigan studies conceptualised through behavioral dimensions, the task and relational orientation, to explain how leaders influence performance and group cohesion. The concept reveals a critical shift from trait-based explanations to behavioral enactment as the central unit of analysis.

However, early models treated behavior as relatively stable across contexts. In contrast, Yukl (2013) and Northouse (2021), in their leadership research, reframed leadership behavior as adaptive and contingent, emphasizing that effectiveness depends on alignment between behavior and situational demands. Furthermore,

Day et al. (2021) critically analysed leadership behavior as context-sensitive practice, rather than fixed behavioral patterns (Day et al., 2021).

Research on Style Leadership Approach

The studies at Ohio State University and the University of Michigan sought to move beyond trait-based explanations. The Ohio State studies identified two independent dimensions: initiating structure and consideration, demonstrating that leaders can exhibit both task and relational behaviors simultaneously.

The concept reveals an early recognition of leadership as a multi-dimensional behavioral construct. However, findings across studies were inconsistent and failed to identify a universal behavioral formula for effectiveness. In contrast, later syntheses and reviews highlight that leadership effectiveness depends on interaction between behavior and situational variables, rather than behavior alone (Yukl, 2013; Judge et al., 2004—still highly cited and foundational).

Furthermore, research at the University of Michigan similarly distinguished between production-oriented and employee-oriented leadership, initially conceptualized as opposite ends of a continuum. However, the later reconceptualization, which aligned with Ohio findings, treating these behaviors as independent dimensions, critically reflects a broader shift toward understanding leadership as non-linear and contextually embedded (Northouse, 2021).

Leadership Behaviour

Research on leadership behavior emphasizes the distinction between task-focused and people-focused leadership, highlighting their influence on performance and group dynamics. Task-oriented behaviors structure activities and clarify roles, while relationship-oriented behaviors foster trust, cohesion, and engagement.

The concept reveals that leadership effectiveness depends on balancing these behavioral dimensions rather than privileging one over the other. However, empirical evidence does not consistently support a single optimal behavioral configuration. In contrast, contemporary research by Yukl (2013) and Day et al. (2021) demonstrates that effective leadership requires behavioral flexibility and situational alignment, rather than fixed styles.

Therefore, leadership behavior is increasingly understood as part of a broader leadership process, in which effectiveness emerges from the interaction among leaders, followers, and context (Northouse, 2021).

Managerial Grid (Leadership Grid)

The Managerial Grid extended behavioral research by integrating task and relationship dimensions into a two-axis framework, identifying five leadership styles based on concern for production and concern for people. The model proposed that team management (9,9) represents the most effective leadership style.

The concept reveals an early attempt to prescribe an ideal leadership style. However, such prescriptive assumptions overlook contextual variability. In contrast, leadership effectiveness depends on situational adaptability rather than adherence to a universal ideal (Yukl, 2013). While the grid offers diagnostic value, it simplifies leadership complexity by reducing behavior to two dimensions, limiting its explanatory capacity in dynamic and complex environments (Northouse, 2021).

Strengths of Style Approach

The Style Approach contributes significantly by emphasizing observable, measurable behaviors, making leadership accessible to evaluation and development (Zaccaro et al., 2018). The concept reveals its practical value, particularly in leadership training and assessment.

In contrast to trait and skills approaches, the model highlights leader–follower interaction, reinforcing the relational dimension of leadership. The perspective is supported by Day et al. (2021), demonstrating that leadership effectiveness depends on adaptive behavioral responses within changing contexts (Day et al., 2021).

The approach provides a foundation for behavioral self-awareness and development, enabling leaders to adjust their actions to improve effectiveness (Northouse, 2021).

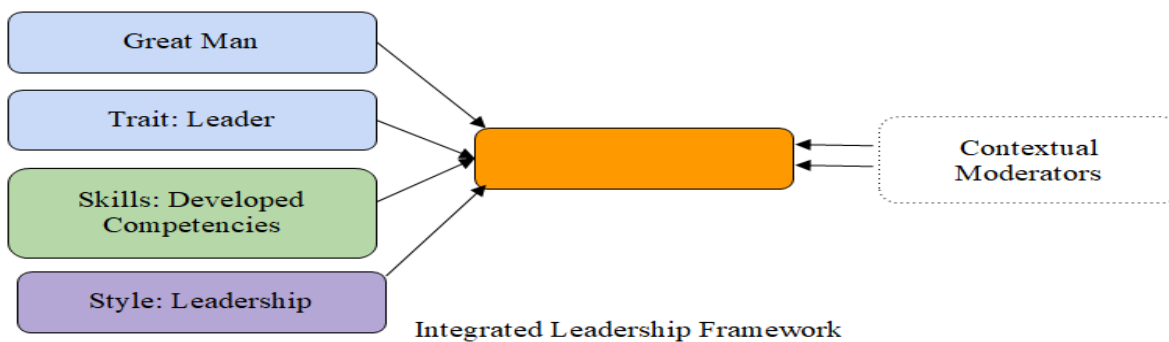
Criticism of the Style Approach

The Style Approach has been widely criticized for its inability to establish a clear causal relationship between leadership behavior and performance outcomes (Yukl, 2012/2020). The concept reveals that behavioral categorization alone does not adequately explain effectiveness.

However, the absence of a universally effective leadership style limits its predictive power. In contrast, contemporary scholarship emphasizes contingency and contextual alignment, arguing that leadership effectiveness depends on situational variables rather than fixed behavior (Yukl, 2013).

Therefore, the model oversimplifies leadership by focusing on two behavioral dimensions while neglecting deeper constructs such as cognition, identity, and context. The concept aligns with Day et al.'s (2021) advocacy that leadership must be understood as a multidimensional, integrative behavior within broader leadership dynamics.

Conceptual Framework



The Integrated Leadership Model conceptualises leadership as a dynamic, interactional, and contextually embedded process, emerging from the interplay of traits (being), skills (becoming), style (behaving), and context (situating) (Northouse, 2021; Yukl, 2019). According to Day et al. (2020), the integrated framework reintroduces the *leader's being* as a foundational yet insufficient condition for leadership effectiveness.

Furthermore, Mumford et al. (2018) and Northouse (2021) posited that traits represent the ontological core of leadership—the “being” of the leader, encompassing relatively stable attributes such as identity, values, intelligence, confidence, and integrity. However, these elements shape how leaders perceive themselves and others. In contrast, skills reflect the process of becoming, referring to developed competencies—technical, human, and conceptual—that enable leaders to translate inherent potential into capability. Furthermore, leadership style captures the behavioural enactment (behaving) of leadership through observable actions, particularly the balance between task-oriented and relational behaviours. Conversely, context represents the situational and relational environment, including organisational, cultural, and social conditions that shape how leadership is expressed and interpreted.

The framework shows that leadership effectiveness does not reside in the leader’s *being* alone. Rather, it emerges through the continuous, reciprocal interaction among being, becoming, behaving, and context. Specifically, the “being” of the leader (traits and identity) influences how skills are developed and enacted; these skills shape behavioural choices, and context moderates whether such behaviours are appropriate and effective. Consequently, leadership effectiveness is not a function of who the leader is, but how the leader’s being is translated, adapted, and aligned within specific contexts.

Fundamentally, unlike traditional trait-based models that privilege the leader's internal qualities, the integrative perspective avoids reducing leadership to static attributes. Instead, it situates the “being” of the leader within a

broader relational and adaptive system, in which identity, capability, and behavior are continuously shaped through interaction with context. Therefore, leadership is understood not as a fixed state, but as an ongoing process of alignment between self (being), development (becoming), action (behaving), and environment (context).

Furthermore, the expanded perspective provides greater explanatory depth by acknowledging that the *leader's being*—including values, self-concept, and moral orientation—conditions how leadership is exercised. Specifically, it explains why leaders with similar skills and behaviours may produce different outcomes, as their underlying “being” shapes judgment, intent, and relational engagement. Consequently, leadership effectiveness is both internally grounded and externally moderated.

Therefore, the Integrated Leadership Model offers a holistic and theoretically robust framework, where leadership is simultaneously a function of who the leader is (being), what the leader develops (skills), how the leader acts (behaviour), and where leadership occurs (context). This synthesis provides a more comprehensive foundation for understanding and developing leadership in complex, dynamic, and socially embedded environments.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, a conceptual and analytical review design, synthesising both seminal and contemporary leadership literature, was adopted to examine the evolution and convergence of leadership theories. An integrative narrative review with a theory-building orientation was specifically employed to develop a unified conceptual framework.

Research Design

To analyse the progression of leadership development, a thematic comparative approach was applied to contrast four major leadership paradigms: Great Man, Trait, Skills, and Style theories. The design critically enabled the examination of theoretical progression from deterministic to integrative perspectives, while supporting the development of the Integrated Leadership Model.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

A total of 80 journal articles, scholarly books, and academic publications were reviewed. Literature was sourced from major academic databases, including Google Scholar, ChatGPT Scholar, and Web of Science. Specifically, search terms such as “*leadership theory*,” “*trait leadership*,” “*skills approach*,” and “*behavioral leadership*” were used and combined using Boolean operators. Furthermore, citation tracking was applied to identify additional relevant sources.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

In this research, studies were included based on their theoretical relevance, scholarly rigor, and contribution to leadership theory, resulting in 36 articles. Specifically, sources had to address key paradigms (Great Man, Trait, Skills, Style), be seminal or highly cited, and fall within the period from 2015 to 2025. Only peer-reviewed and credible academic sources were considered. Other publications capturing historical evidence were included.

Conversely, studies that lacked relevance to the core theories, were non-peer-reviewed, were overly sector-specific without theoretical contribution, or were duplicative and lacked new insights were excluded from this study. Consequently, the selection ensured a balance between historical depth, contemporary relevance, and conceptual clarity.

Data Analysis

A thematic comparative analysis was conducted across key dimensions, including ontological assumptions, leadership development, context, and effectiveness, enabling identification of theoretical overlaps, divergences, and developmental shifts.

Synthesis and Model Development

Findings were synthesized using a theory integration approach, resulting in the Integrated Leadership Model (ILM). The model conceptualizes leadership as an emergent process arising from the interaction of traits, skills, behaviors, and contextual factors.

FINDINGS

Table 1: Thematic Comparative Analysis of Leadership Theories

A thematic comparative analysis of the Great Man Theory, Trait Theory, Skills Approach, and Style Approach reveals both continuity and divergence in how leadership scholars conceptualize leadership. This section synthesizes these theories across key analytical themes, highlighting their underlying assumptions, contributions, and limitations.

Discussion	Great Man	Trait	Skills	Style	Integrative Perspective
Ontology	Leadership is innate and predetermined	Leadership derives from inherent traits	Leadership is based on learned competencies	Leadership is expressed through behaviours	Leadership emerges from traits, skills, behaviour and context
Development	Leaders are born and not developed	Limited development traits, mostly fixed	Leaders develop through learning experience	Behaviour can be adapted and improved	Leadership is both inherent and developmental
Context	Ignores context; assumes universality	Minimal context consideration	Recognises context via experience	Implicitly considers context in behaviour	Context moderates leadership effectiveness
Unit of Analysis	Individual (heroic leader)	Individual leader-centric	Individual competencies	Leader-Follower Interaction	Leadership relational and systemic
Focus	Who leaders are	What traits leaders possess	What leaders can do	How leaders behave	Integrates being, becoming, and behaving
Effectiveness	Based on dominance and authority	Based on possession of traits	Based on competence and performance	Based on task-relational balance	Dynamic, contextual and multi-dimensional
Strengths	Foundational concept of leadership	Identifies key attributes	Emphasises development	Practical and observable	Holistic and Integrative
Limitations	Deterministic; lacks evidence	No universal trait set; ignores context	Ovelaps with traits; limited scope	Descriptive lacks predictive power	Requires Integration of all dimensions
Orientation	Heroic authoritarian	Leader-centric	Developmental	Behavioral	Relational and adaptive
Contribution	Introduced leadership studies	Systematized traits research	Shifted to Competencies	Focused on behaviour	Provides unified leadership framework

Ontological Assumptions of Leadership

The Great Man and early Trait theories adopt an essentialist ontology, positioning leadership as inherent and rooted in stable individual traits, independent of context (Singh et al., 2024; Udin, 2024). In contrast, the Skills and Style approaches reflect a developmental and interactional ontology, in which leadership is enacted through

learned skills and observable behaviors within social systems (Afzal & Tumpa, 2024; Setyawibawa & Tahir, 2025).

However, this progression marks a shift from leadership as being (traits) to doing (skills and behaviours). Furthermore, Action et al. (2019) conceptualises leadership as dynamic rather than fixed. Therefore, ontology evolves from static individualism to process-oriented and socially embedded leadership (Uhl-Bien & Arena, 2018).

Nature of Leadership Development

Great Man theory rejects leadership development, asserting leadership is innate, while Trait theory allows limited flexibility but remains largely deterministic (Onia, 2025). However, the Skills approach introduces leadership as a set of acquirable competencies, emphasising learning through training and experience (Agazu & Debela, 2024).

Furthermore, the Style approach reinforces this developmental view by highlighting behavioural adaptability, where leaders modify their actions in response to situational demands (Dhamija et al., 2023; Doan & Wu, 2026). Consequently, leadership shifts from an exclusive attribute to a developable capacity. Therefore, later theories democratise leadership by making it accessible rather than predetermined.

Role of Context and Situation

Early leadership theories largely ignore context, assuming that effective traits are universally applicable. In contrast, contemporary research demonstrates that leadership effectiveness depends on the interaction between traits, skills, behaviours, and situational variables (Singh et al., 2024; Chaiyasat et al., 2025).

Specifically, the Skills and Style approaches acknowledge that leadership behaviours must adapt to organizational, cultural, and environmental conditions (Afzal & Tumpa, 2024; Borde et al., 2024). Furthermore, context functions as a moderating variable influencing how leadership is enacted. Consequently, leadership effectiveness becomes contingent rather than universal. Therefore, context is central to understanding how traits and skills translate into outcomes.

Focus of Analysis: Leader vs Process

The Great Man and Trait theories adopt a leader-centric perspective, focusing on individual characteristics and reinforcing hierarchical assumptions (Udin, 2024). Conversely, the Skills and Style approaches shift toward a process-oriented perspective, emphasising leadership as enacted through behaviour and interaction (Farhan et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the Style approach specifically examines task and relational behaviours, highlighting leader–follower engagement. Critically, this reflects a transition from individual dominance to relational processes. Therefore, leadership is increasingly understood as an interactive and socially constructed phenomenon.

Conceptualization of Effectiveness

The Great Man and Trait theories implicitly define effectiveness through the possession of superior traits. However, they fail to explain how these traits produce outcomes (Singh et al., 2024).

In contrast, the Skills approach links effectiveness to competence and performance, while the Style approach associates it with the balance between task-oriented and relational behaviours (Dhamija et al., 2023; Farhan et al., 2024). Furthermore, empirical literature suggests that behavioural flexibility enhances effectiveness across contexts. Consequently, effectiveness shifts from static trait possession to dynamic, behaviour-based evaluation. Therefore, leadership effectiveness is best understood as context-dependent and multidimensional.

Strengths and Limitations Across Theories

Each theory contributes valuable insights while presenting limitations. The Great Man theory provides historical grounding but lacks empirical validity. Similarly, Trait theory identifies important leadership traits but struggles with universality and contextual relevance (Udin, 2024).

However, the Skills approach enhances developmental applicability, although it overlaps conceptually with traits (Agazu & Debela, 2024). Conversely, the Style approach offers practical insights into leadership behaviour, yet lacks predictive precision (Borde et al., 2024). Consequently, no single theory provides a comprehensive explanation. Therefore, leadership must be understood as a multidimensional construct.

Toward an Integrative Leadership Perspective

The analysis reveals a clear trajectory toward integration. Leadership emerges from the interaction of traits, skills, behaviours, and context (Amallia & Wardi, 2025; Singh et al., 2024). Specifically, Trait and Great Man theories explain who leaders are, the Skills approach explains what leaders can develop, and the Style approach explains how leaders behave, while context determines effectiveness.

Furthermore, this integrative perspective aligns with contemporary leadership research emphasising adaptability and relational dynamics. Consequently, leadership is conceptualised as a dynamic, socially embedded process rather than a fixed attribute. Therefore, an integrated leadership model provides a more comprehensive and realistic framework for analysing leadership in complex environments.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The literature review demonstrates a clear historical progression in leadership thought, moving from the deterministic assumptions of the Great Man Theory to the more dynamic and behaviourally oriented Style Approach. However, the evolution reflects an epistemological shift from essentialist and leader-centric perspectives toward relational, developmental, and context-sensitive frameworks.

Furthermore, the Great Man Theory establishes leadership as innate and exclusive to individuals possessing inherent traits. However, despite its foundational role, it lacks empirical support and overlooks the influence of social and environmental conditions. In contrast, critiques of the trait model introduce an early contextual perspective, emphasizing that leadership emergence is shaped by societal forces rather than purely biological determinism. Consequently, this marks an initial departure from static conceptions of leadership.

Trait Theory advances this discourse by systematically identifying key leadership traits, including intelligence, confidence, and integrity. Furthermore, empirical studies reinforced the relevance of these attributes. However, the absence of a universal set of traits exposed a major limitation. Specifically, Stogdill's work reframes leadership as contingent upon both traits and situational factors, thereby challenging the universality assumption. Therefore, leadership is repositioned as a function of interaction rather than as a fixed characteristic.

This shift is analytically significant as it transitions the ontological basis of leadership from static attributes to dynamic processes. Furthermore, the integration of social intelligence highlights the growing importance of relational competence. Consequently, Trait Theory, while limited in isolation, remains foundational in identifying core attributes that inform subsequent models.

The Skills Approach extends this progression by conceptualizing leadership as a set of learned skills rather than innate traits. Specifically, Katz's model of technical, human, and conceptual skills positions leadership as a skill to be developed. Furthermore, Mumford et al.'s framework integrates competencies, experience, and environmental influences, reinforcing a capability-based perspective. Consequently, leadership becomes more accessible and aligned with contemporary development practices.

However, the Skills Approach presents conceptual limitations. Its overlap with traits, particularly regarding personality and motivation, blurs theoretical boundaries. Additionally, its empirical basis limits generalisability.

Nevertheless, its emphasis on development and adaptability remains highly relevant. Therefore, it represents a critical bridge between trait-based and behavioural perspectives.

The Style Approach further advances leadership theory by focusing on observable behaviour. In contrast to earlier theories, it prioritises what leaders do rather than who they are or what skills they possess. Specifically, the identification of task-oriented and relationship-oriented behaviours provides a practical framework for analysing leadership. Furthermore, the Leadership Grid operationalises these dimensions, enhancing its applicability.

However, the Style Approach is primarily descriptive and lacks predictive precision. Consequently, it fails to identify a universally effective leadership style. Therefore, it reinforces the necessity of contextual sensitivity in leadership practice.

Overall, the literature reflects a progressive expansion of leadership understanding—from traits, to skills, to behaviours. Furthermore, this trajectory highlights increasing recognition of context and interaction. Consequently, leadership is best understood as a complex, adaptive, and socially embedded process rather than a fixed attribute.

CONCLUSION

The reviewed literature highlights the evolutionary trajectory of leadership theory, demonstrating a shift from deterministic and individualistic perspectives toward more relational and context-sensitive frameworks. The Great Man and Trait theories established an initial foundation by emphasising individual traits as central to leadership. However, their neglect of situational and relational dynamics limited their explanatory power. Consequently, the need for more comprehensive approaches became evident.

The Skills Approach represents a critical shift by redefining leadership as a set of skills that can be developed through learning and experience. Furthermore, this perspective democratizes leadership, aligning it with contemporary organisational demands for adaptability and continuous development. In contrast, the Style Approach advances this progression by focusing on observable behaviours, particularly the balance between task-oriented and relational actions. Specifically, it provides practical frameworks for leadership assessment and application.

However, no single theory offers a complete explanation of leadership. It is Critical to note that each framework captures only a partial dimension of a multifaceted phenomenon. Consequently, the convergence of these perspectives suggests that leadership effectiveness cannot be reduced to traits, skills, or behaviours alone. Rather, it emerges from their interaction, shaped by situational and cultural contexts.

Therefore, the study of leadership must adopt an integrative approach that synthesises individual attributes, developed competencies, and adaptive behaviours within specific contexts. Furthermore, such an approach reflects the complexity of leadership in modern organisations. Consequently, it provides a more robust foundation for developing leaders capable of navigating dynamic and multifaceted environments.

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