

DISRUPTION AND THE SOURCE OF LEADERSHIP – WHO LEADS THE LEADER; AUTHORITY, MEANING, AND MOTIVATION IN DISRUPTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Leadership literature traditionally treats leaders as primary sources of direction, motivation, and ethical judgment. In the field of leadership and management, the challenge of any study is the absence of a single conclusive solution to a management problem. While much scholarship examines how leaders guide organisations through disruption, the author in this paper seeks a departure in approach and attempts to investigate a central idea that “While a leader leads people and organisations among the ongoing disruption, and he is aware of all the challenges and implications and the ethical dilemmas, but who leads him, where does he derive his motivation from while motivating the others? Leadership discourse assumes that leaders are autonomous sources of direction, meaning, and ethical judgment. Under conditions of disruption, this assumption collapses. In disrupted environments, leaders are expected to provide certainty and moral clarity precisely when their own sources of guidance are fragmented, contested, or eroding. So, what systems, structures, narratives, and constraints shape the leader’s judgment, motivation, and ethical boundaries?” Drawing on management and leadership scholarship on authority, sense-making, identity, and institutional legitimacy, the paper argues that leadership in disrupted environments is governed less by formal position and more by a constellation of non-hierarchical influences. These include internalised professional identity, self-actualisation, institutional value systems, peer legitimacy, moral frameworks, and socially constructed narratives of purpose and responsibility.

Using the mixed methods approach with both quantitative and qualitative data analysis and applying the grounded theory approach, based on both contemporary thought and ancient Indian wisdom, this paper analyses how authority and meaning are constructed and sustained at the level of the leader. It redefines leadership as a process rooted in consciousness, relationships, and institutions, rather than an autonomous exercise of control. The author identifies, codifies, and articulates specific sources of leadership capable of withstanding prolonged disruption to achieve and sustain competitive advantage.

1. Introduction

Leadership in contemporary organisations is often exercised amid disruption, uncertainty, and ethical challenges. Factors such as rapid technological changes, unstable politics, volatile markets, and weakened institutions have changed how leaders work, making traditional ideas about predictability, steady authority, and judging success by outcomes less reliable. Much research has focused on how leaders manage teams and organisations under these tough conditions; however, there is less exploration of the crucial question of what guides leaders themselves when their usual sources of authority, meaning, and motivation start to weaken. This study addresses this issue by looking at leadership not just as an external role but as an internal process shaped by personal judgment, purpose, and ethical direction.

1.1. Intent

This study aims to uncover the core factors that influence how leaders make decisions in unpredictable situations. Instead of focusing only on leadership styles or their effects on followers, it will examine where leaders find their authority, sense of purpose, and motivation when formal rules and standard practices offer little direction. By focusing on what drives leaders themselves, rather than just how they direct others, this study intends to add a new perspective to leadership and management research.

1.2. Central Idea of the Research Study

While a leader leads people and organisations among the ongoing disruption, and he is aware of all the challenges and implications and the ethical dilemmas, but who leads him, where does he derive his motivation from while motivating the others? Leadership discourse assumes that leaders are autonomous sources of direction, meaning, and ethical judgment. Under conditions of disruption, this assumption collapses. In disrupted environments, leaders are expected to provide certainty and moral clarity precisely when their own sources of guidance are fragmented, contested, or eroding. So, what systems, structures, narratives, and constraints shape the leader's judgment, motivation, and ethical boundaries?

1.3. Research Problem

Despite extensive literature on leadership effectiveness, a significant gap persists in

understanding how leaders sustain judgment, motivation, and ethical coherence in disruptive environments. Existing leadership models implicitly assume that leaders remain stable sources of direction, even as the environment destabilises. This assumption becomes problematic when disruption is persistent rather than episodic, and when leaders experience fragmentation of authority, meaning, and ethical certainty. The research problem addressed in this study is the inadequacy of conventional leadership sources in explaining how leaders continue to lead effectively under such conditions.

1.4. Research Questions

This research basically intends to answer the following two questions:-

- (a) What sources of authority, meaning, and motivation guide leaders when formal hierarchies and established norms are insufficient under conditions of disruption?
- (b) When leadership can no longer rely on hierarchy, precedent, or outcomes, what mechanisms govern the leader's own decisions and ethical boundaries?

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study advances leadership and management theory by examining internal and institutional influences beyond traditional leader-focused models. For practice, it underscores the value of internal coherence, ethics, and purpose in developing effective leaders, especially in uncertain and complex sectors where judgment and legitimacy matter more than authority.

2. Literature Review

Traditional leadership discourse often presents leaders as autonomous agents, expected to provide direction and moral clarity (Urick A, 2021). However, disruptive environments fundamentally challenge this assumption. In such turbulent times, leaders face fragmented guidance and eroding certainties; yet, they are still expected to offer stability and direction to their organisations and stakeholders (Urick A, 2021). This inherent paradox highlights a critical gap in conventional leadership models, as leaders are tasked with navigating complex challenges and ethical dilemmas, yet the sources of their own guidance and motivation often remain unexamined. This literature review explores the profound question of 'who leads the leader' by examining where leaders derive their authority,

meaning, and motivation in disruptive environments. It delves into the systems, structures, narratives, and constraints that shape a leader's judgment and ethical boundaries when traditional sources of certainty are compromised. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a recent and profound example of disruptive challenges, showcasing the intense pressures on leaders and the need to re-examine existing leadership frameworks. The period of widespread disruption underscores the necessity for leadership models that account for ongoing assessment, high levels of communication, and iterative experimentation, reflection, and learning, particularly within adaptive systems (Choflet A, 2021).

2.1. Nature of Disruption and its Impact on Leadership

Disruption is characterised by rapid and unpredictable changes that fundamentally challenge existing organizational structures, processes, and norms (Choflet A, 2021). These periods of uncertainty necessitate prompt responses for survival across various sectors. Disruptions can manifest in diverse forms, including major crises such as pandemics or economic collapses (Faulks, 2021), transformative technological shifts such as the rise of generative AI (P Budhwar, 2023), broader societal transformations, or conflict situations such as 'Operation Sindoor' (Press Information Bureau, May 14, 2025) in the Indian context during May 2026. These disruptive environments demand leadership styles that are highly adaptive, capable of continuous assessment, and marked by high levels of communication. Leaders in such contexts are often confronted with heightened uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. This often results in significant personal and professional strain, necessitating a re-examination of frameworks.

2.2. Leadership as an Autonomous Construct

Early trait and behavioural theories treat the leader as a self-contained source of direction (PG, 2021). Even contingency models retain the assumption that once the situation is "read", the leader chooses the matching style (FE, 1967). This autonomy lens is echoed in popular frameworks such as transformational and charismatic leadership (Bass BM, 2006) and underpins most Harvard Business Review (HBR) prescriptions for "crisis leadership" (C, 2020).

2.3. Disruption as a Test of the Autonomous Leader

Disruption studies show that environmental volatility, uncertainty and ethical ambiguity erode the cognitive and moral scaffolding on which leaders customarily rely (Christensen, 2015). When events outpace sense-making, the leader's internal resource is often the first casualty (KE, 1993). Paradoxically, stakeholders still demand certainty from the very actor whose own anchors are slipping (G, 2020).

2.4. Sources of Leader Motivation in Disruptive Environments

Beyond external expectations, leaders' internal motivation is crucial for sustained action in disruptive contexts. Self-care and well-being are increasingly recognised as vital for leaders to avoid burnout and maintain effectiveness during turbulent times (Urick A, 2021). Empowering leadership, which fosters innovative work and organizational learning, can contribute to sustainable performance even amid disruptions (Faulks, 2021). The ability to learn and adapt, along with resilience, are key personal traits that sustain leaders. Organizational resilience, an emergent property of complex adaptive systems, involves both planned preparation for future crises and adaptive responses to chronic stresses and acute shocks. Qualitative analysis of leadership narratives reveals several recurring themes related to motivation in disruptive environments. Key themes identified include external guidance/mentorship, self-care/well-being, support networks/team focus, sense of purpose/values, personal resilience/adaptability. This suggests that leaders draw motivation not only from internal reservoirs of resilience and purpose but also significantly from their support networks and a deliberate focus on self-care. Effective leadership in disruptive environments often involves iterative cycles of experimentation, reflection, and learning, highlighting the importance of adaptive styles and inclusive decision-making at the local level (Choflet A, 2021). A growing stream relocates the source of leadership from the individual to relational, institutional, and narrative systems (M, 2006). Institutional logics provide "moral grammars" that pre-shape leader choices (Thornton, 2012), while peer legitimacy acts as an invisible board of directors (De Rue, 2010). Yet the literature rarely asks how these sources stay coherent under prolonged disruption.

2.5. Leadership Outcomes and Competitive Advantage

Dynamic-capability theory posits that sustained advantage flows from leaders who continually reconfigure organisational resources (DJ, 2016). Ethical climates moderate this link, suggesting that morally anchored leaders generate higher employee creativity and customer loyalty (Brown, 2018). However, the causal chain from "leader's inner source" → "ethical climate" → "dynamic capability" remains under-specified.

2.6. Re-evaluating Authority and Guidance - Who Leads the Leader

The traditional model of a singular, autonomous leader providing all direction becomes untenable under conditions of disruption (Urick A, 2021). In turbulent environments, leaders navigate a complex web of influences, drawing guidance from various, sometimes conflicting, sources. This includes critical input from expert advice, diverse stakeholder perspectives, and their own internal values (Geerts JM, 2021). The institutional environment, encompassing established ethical frameworks and the prevailing organizational culture, significantly shapes a leader's judgment and subsequent actions, particularly when facing unprecedented challenges. For instance, the institutionalisation of responsible innovation highlights how organizational dynamics, including legitimation and entrepreneurship, influence responses to disruption. Public trust and adherence to recommended interventions are strongly reinforced when leaders are perceived as credible and effectively communicate positive social norms to their constituents (Ruggeri, 2024). This underscores the critical role of external validation and societal expectations in guiding leadership behaviour, especially during crises. Therefore, understanding the multifaceted influences on leaders is essential for developing robust leadership frameworks that acknowledge the inherent interdependencies and support systems that guide leaders through disruptive periods.

2.7. Ancient Indian Wisdom - Inner Anchors over Outer Control

1.1. The Bhagavad-Gita and Arthashastra locate authority in dharma, a socially embedded yet self-validated moral code (LN, 1992). The Upanishads link self-actualisation to detached action, offering an internal locus that remains stable when external rewards collapse (S, 1953). Recent empirical work shows that CEOs who draw on these scripts report

lower decisional paralysis during technological shocks (Sinha, 2021).

2.8. Key Takeaways

(a) Shift in Authority. Leadership is moving from formal hierarchical power toward influence derived from personal connection, inspiration, and moral integrity (India, 2020).

(b) Ethical Core. Sustainable organizational success in disruptive futures is increasingly tied to "moral management," where the leader's internal ethical boundaries dictate corporate resilience (Education, 2022).

(c) Disruption Resilience. Adaptive leadership requires a shift from providing "answers" to managing the "meaning" of the disruption for the collective (PG, 2021).

(d) Internal Motivation. Ancient Indian wisdom emphasizes the concept of "Rajarshi" (the sage-king), suggesting that the leader's primary source of motivation is internal duty (Dharma) rather than external reward (F, 2021).

(e) Competitive Advantage. Organizations that cultivate "change-ready" leadership through internalized professional identities maintain a superior edge in volatile markets (Amanchukwu, 2015).

2.9. Research Gaps

(a) Empirical studies seldom capture how leaders replenish their own motivation when institutional, peer and narrative sources fragment simultaneously.

(b) While existing literature extensively covers how leaders influence followers, there is a significant gap in understanding the psychological and spiritual "leader of the leader." Most studies assume the leader's motivation is a given or derived from organizational goals.

(c) There is a lack of empirical research on the specific "non-hierarchical influences" (like self-actualization or ancient philosophical frameworks) that sustain a leader's judgment during a total collapse of institutional norms.

(d) The codification of "consciousness-based leadership" as a practical tool for achieving competitive advantage in disruptive environments is missing.

(e) Ancient Indian constructs such as dharma and svadharma are cited philosophically but rarely operationalised or tested in large-sample disruption research.

(f) Mixed method work that combines grounded theory with quantitative validation is sparse, creating a methodological blind spot for capturing emergent sources of authority.

2.10. Hypotheses

The study tests the following hypotheses:-

Null Hypothesis (H0): Conventional sources of leadership are sufficient for sustaining effective leadership in disruptive environments.

Research Hypothesis (H1): Conventional sources of leadership are insufficient for sustaining effective leadership in disruptive environments.

3. Methodology

3.1. Theory in Use

This paper developed its subject matter with the application of “Grounded Theory” approach.

Using Mixed Methods Approach with both Quantitative and Qualitative Data Analysis and applying the Grounded Theory Approach, based on both contemporary thought as well as Ancient Indian Wisdom, this paper analyses how authority and meaning are constructed and sustained at the level of the leader. It redefines leadership as a process rooted in consciousness, relationships and institutions, rather than an autonomous exercise of control. The author identifies, codifies, and articulates specific sources of leadership capable of withstanding prolonged disruption for achieving and sustaining competitive advantage.

Quantitative data is collected through a structured survey questionnaire administered to individuals occupying formal leadership roles across sectors. The questionnaire employs a five-point Likert scale to measure perceptions related to disruptive environments, conventional and non-conventional sources of leadership, leader-level outcomes, and organisational effectiveness. Quantitative analysis includes descriptive statistics to establish response patterns, reliability analysis to assess internal consistency of constructs, and correlational analysis to examine relationships between leadership sources and perceived effectiveness under disruption.

Qualitative data is collected through open-ended survey questions designed to elicit leaders' reflections on their lived experiences of leadership under disruption. Further, additional Qualitative analysis is conducted in subsequent stages using textual analysis, thematic analysis, and sentiment analysis to identify recurring themes, meanings, and emotional orientations. The grounded theory approach guides the coding process, enabling the emergence of conceptual categories related to authority, meaning, motivation, and consciousness. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings allows for triangulation and provide a richer understanding of the sources that govern leadership in disruptive environments.

4. Quantitative data analysis

4.1. Survey Design and Concept - Construct Framework

The quantitative component of this study was designed to empirically examine the adequacy of conventional leadership sources in disruptive environments and to explore the role of non-conventional, internal, and institutional sources in sustaining leadership effectiveness. The survey instrument was structured around a single overarching concept of “leadership”, with five associated constructs as under:-

(a) Disruptive Environment: Capturing uncertainty, ambiguity, ethical complexity, and outcome unpredictability.

(b) Conventional Sources of Leadership: Including formal authority, hierarchy, rules, and command-and-control mechanisms.

(c) Non-Conventional/ Internal Sources of Leadership: Encompassing professional identity, moral frameworks, purpose, institutional values, and consciousness.

(d) Leader-Level Outcomes: Reflecting judgment clarity, motivational resilience, ethical confidence, and internal coherence.

(e) Organisational Outcomes: Capturing perceived organisational coherence, adaptability, and sustained effectiveness.

Responses to structured items were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). In addition, three open-ended questions were included to capture

leaders' reflective accounts of guidance, motivation, and self-leadership under disruption. The intended logical mapping of the survey items to the Research hypothesis is indicated in the Table 1 below:-

Table 1. Constructs and the Hypothesis

Construct	Questions	Role in Hypothesis
Disruptive Environment	Q1-Q4	Confirms disruption context
Conventional Sources	Q5-Q8	Tests adequacy of traditional leadership
Non-Conventional Sources	Q9-Q13	Identifies alternative sources
Leader-Level Outcomes	Q14-Q17	Measures "effective leadership"
Organisational Outcomes	Q18-Q20	Secondary validation

The Survey Questionnaire and the recorded responses are appended separately as Appendix to this paper.

4.2. Sample Adequacy and Data Screening

A total of 67 valid responses were obtained from individuals holding formal leadership responsibilities across sectors that included Public Sector/ Government, Private Sector/ Corporate, Defence/ Security, Education/ Academia, and Non-Profit/ Civil Society. Given the exploratory, theory-building orientation of the study and the use of correlational rather than causal analysis, this sample size is adequate for reliability assessment, descriptive analysis, and pattern identification.

Data screening indicated the following:-

- (a) No systematic missing responses on mandatory items.
- (b) Acceptable response dispersion across all Likert items.
- (c) No evidence of straight-lining or patterned responding.

The dataset was therefore deemed suitable for further analysis.

4.3. Reliability and Internal Consistency

Internal consistency of the constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. All multi-item constructs demonstrated acceptable to good reliability, indicating that the items coherently measured their intended underlying dimensions.

Particular attention was paid to the non-conventional leadership construct, which included the item relating to "consciousness" as a source of leadership. The inclusion of this item did not reduce construct reliability, suggesting that respondents interpreted consciousness as a meaningful and coherent leadership resource rather than as an abstract or irrelevant concept.

4.4. Descriptive Analysis - Perceived Adequacy of Leadership Sources

Disruptive Environment: Respondents overwhelmingly affirmed operating in environments characterised by uncertainty, ethical ambiguity, and limited predictability of outcomes. This confirms that the sample context aligns with the study's core assumption of persistent disruption, rather than episodic crisis.

Conventional Sources of Leadership: Items measuring reliance on formal authority, hierarchy, rules, and command-and-control structures yielded moderate to low mean scores, with substantial dispersion. This indicates that while such sources are not entirely irrelevant, they are not perceived as sufficient for effective leadership under sustained disruption.

Non-Conventional/ Internal Sources of Leadership: In contrast, items measuring professional identity, ethical frameworks, purpose, institutional values, and consciousness showed consistently higher mean scores with lower variance. Leaders reported strong reliance on these sources when formal guidance was inadequate.

Leader-Level Outcomes: High levels of agreement were observed on items related to clarity of judgment, motivational endurance, and ethical confidence, particularly among respondents who reported stronger reliance on non-conventional sources. This suggests that leadership effectiveness under disruption is experienced primarily as internal coherence, rather than external control.

Organisational Outcomes: Items measuring organisational outcomes, specifically organisational

coherence, adaptability, trust, and sustained effectiveness under disruption, showed consistently positive response patterns, though with slightly greater variance than leader-level outcomes. Respondents generally agreed that leadership grounded in values, purpose, and internal coherence contributed to organisational stability and adaptive capacity during disruptive periods. Notably, organisational outcomes were not strongly associated with formal authority or hierarchical control in respondents' perceptions. Instead, organisational effectiveness was described implicitly as an emergent property of leadership that sustains trust, legitimacy, and collective orientation over time. This suggests that in disruptive environments, organisational outcomes are less a function of directive control and more a reflection of leadership processes that preserve coherence and meaning amid uncertainty. The descriptive pattern indicates that while leader-level outcomes such as judgment clarity and motivational resilience are internally experienced, their effects extend outwards into organisational functioning. This reinforces the conceptual positioning of organisational outcomes in this study as secondary but consequential, shaped indirectly through the quality of leadership judgment and ethical orientation rather than through direct authority or procedural enforcement.

4.5. Correlational Analysis and Hypothesis Assessment

Given the exploratory and theory-building orientation of the study, hypothesis assessment was conducted through descriptive and correlational analysis rather than confirmatory inferential testing.

To assess the Research Hypothesis, correlations were examined between leadership source constructs and leader-level outcomes.

(a) Conventional leadership sources showed weak and inconsistent correlations with leader-level outcomes.

(b) Non-conventional leadership sources demonstrated moderate and consistently positive correlations with judgment clarity, motivational resilience, and ethical confidence.

Statistical analysis indicates weak and inconsistent relationships between conventional leadership sources and leadership effectiveness outcomes, providing empirical support for the non-establishment of the Null Hypothesis. This pattern

supports the Research Hypothesis (H1) that "conventional sources of leadership are insufficient for sustaining effective leadership in disruptive environments." While formal authority and procedures retain contextual relevance, they do not appear to be the primary drivers of leadership effectiveness under conditions of prolonged uncertainty.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, these findings are interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive, pointing toward the need for reconceptualising leadership sources in disruption.

4.6. Analysis of Open-Ended Questions

Question 1 - Sources That Guide Leaders During Disruption: Responses to the question on guiding sources revealed five dominant thematic categories:-

(a) **Values and Ethics** – references to integrity, moral responsibility, and ethical clarity.

(b) **Sense of Purpose and Duty** – including service orientation, organisational mission, and societal responsibility.

(c) **Self-Reflection and Inner Discipline** – introspection, self-control, and emotional regulation.

(d) **People and Relationships** – teams, colleagues, mentors, and peer legitimacy.

(e) **Institutional and Cultural Anchors** – organisational values and professional norms.

Notably, references to formal authority, rank, or positional power were rare and peripheral, reinforcing quantitative findings.

Question 2 - Leadership Situations without Formal Authority: The second open-ended question invited respondents to describe specific situations where formal authority was insufficient for effective leadership. The objective was not to document isolated anecdotes, but to identify recurring situational patterns that illuminate how leadership is exercised when hierarchy and positional power lose efficacy. Analysis of the responses reveals that the situations described by respondents cluster into five broad categories, each reflecting a distinct type of leadership challenge under disruption, as described in Table 2 below:-

Table 2: Leadership Situations without Formal Authority

<u>Situation</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Insights</u>
Crisis and High-Stress Operational Situations	Many respondents described crisis-like conditions such as operational breakdowns, time-sensitive decision-making under uncertainty, or situations involving heightened emotional stress among teams. In these contexts, formal authority was perceived as inadequate because compliance alone could not generate trust, calm, or collective focus.	Leadership effectiveness in crises depends less on command and more on emotional regulation, credibility, and presence. Authority without relational legitimacy was described as insufficient.
Ethical Dilemmas and Value Conflicts	Several narratives involved situations where leaders faced ethical tensions - between organisational directives and personal or professional values, between short-term performance and long-term integrity, or between competing stakeholder interests.	In ethically ambiguous situations, formal authority was often seen as a constraint rather than a guide. Leaders relied on internal ethical frameworks to navigate decisions, reinforcing the role of self-governance and moral judgment.
Change Management and Resistance	A significant number of respondents cited scenarios involving organisational change, resistance to new policies, or uncertainty generated by restructuring or transformation initiatives. Formal authority was insufficient to secure genuine buy-in or sustained commitment.	Leadership under change required persuasion, dialogue, and meaning making, rather than enforcement. Authority was effective only when accompanied by legitimacy and shared purpose.
Cross-Functional and Peer-Based Contexts	Some situations involved lateral leadership - working with peers, cross-functional teams, or stakeholders over whom respondents had limited or no formal authority.	These contexts foreground leadership as a relational capability, dependent on trust, credibility, and influence rather than positional power. Leadership effectiveness was derived from professional respect and interpersonal competence.
People-Centred and Interpersonal Challenges	Several respondents described situations involving individual or team morale, interpersonal conflict, or motivation during periods of stress or uncertainty.	Such situations highlighted the limits of authority in addressing human concerns. Leaders reported relying on empathy, patience, and ethical consistency, reinforcing the importance of inner orientation and emotional intelligence.
<u>Overall Assessment</u> Across these categories, a consistent pattern emerges that formal authority was rarely described as the primary enabler of effective leadership. Instead, effectiveness arose from internalised values, relational legitimacy, ethical clarity, and emotional steadiness. These situational narratives empirically ground the study's central claim that leadership under disruption is governed by sources beyond hierarchy and control.		

Question 3 - Meaning of “Leading Oneself as a Leader”: This question elicited the most reflective responses. Dominant themes included:-

- (a) Self-discipline and emotional regulation.
- (b) Ethical self-accountability.
- (c) Clarity of intent.

(d) Detachment from immediate outcomes.

(e) Inner stability during uncertainty.

Several responses explicitly invoked ideas aligned with consciousness, self-awareness, and inner alignment, lending empirical support to the study's theoretical framing and its incorporation of ancient Indian leadership concepts.

4.7. Demographic Analysis and Contextual Insights

Demographic variables were identified selectively to ensure relevance to the research problem,

focusing on leadership exposure, responsibility, and disruption context intended to contextualise the findings which is in the Table 3 as under:-

Table 3: Demographic Analysis		
Demographic Variable	Response	Analytical Implication
Leadership Experience	Responses indicate that most participants possess substantial leadership experience, with a significant proportion reporting more than a decade in formal leadership roles. This suggests that the insights captured reflect experienced leadership judgment rather than novice perceptions.	Findings are grounded in lived leadership practice, enhancing the credibility of claims regarding leadership under disruption.
Leadership Level	Participants represented a range of leadership levels, from team-level leadership to senior and strategic roles. Higher-level leaders were more likely to report operating under ambiguity and limited outcome validation.	The data captures leadership across hierarchical layers, reinforcing the argument that disruption affects leadership authority at multiple levels, not only at the top.
Sectoral Distribution	Respondents were drawn from diverse sectors, including public, private, defence/ security, and institutional contexts. Despite sectoral variation, remarkable consistency was observed in perceptions regarding the inadequacy of formal authority under disruption.	The convergence of responses across sectors strengthens the general relevance of the study's findings without claiming statistical generalisability.
Exposure to Disruptive Environments	Most respondents reported frequent or continuous exposure to disruptive or crisis-like situations. This confirms that the sample is well aligned with the study's conceptual framing of disruption as a persistent condition rather than an episodic anomaly.	Leadership perceptions captured in the survey are rooted in sustained disruption, reinforcing the validity of inferences drawn from the data.
Overall Assessment Taken together, the demographic profile indicates that the findings emerge from a relevant, experienced, and disruption-exposed leadership cohort. The demographic data thus functions as a validity check rather than a differentiating variable, supporting the study's exploratory and theory-building orientation.		

5. Qualitative data analysis

5.1. Purpose

The qualitative component of this study is designed to explore the deeper, often unarticulated sources that govern leadership judgment, motivation, and ethical orientation in disruptive environments. While the quantitative survey examined perceived adequacy of conventional leadership sources, qualitative analysis is employed to investigate orientations that cannot be captured through structured scales alone. Consistent with the grounded theory approach adopted in this study, qualitative analysis is not used to confirm predefined categories, but to enable the emergence of conceptual patterns related to the central idea of this research.

To achieve this, the qualitative analysis draws on

three complementary methods - textual analysis, thematic analysis, and sentiment analysis - applied to an identified corpus of authoritative texts drawn from contemporary leadership scholarship and ancient Indian wisdom.

5.2. Data Sources

- The qualitative analysis is conducted on two broad categories of texts:-
- (a) **Contemporary Leadership and Management Literature:** This included foundational books, peer-reviewed articles, and selected Harvard Business Review essays addressing leadership under disruption, crisis, uncertainty, and ethical stress.
 - (b) **Ancient Indian Knowledge Texts:** This included the Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, and Arthashastra,

along with modern scholarly interpretations that examine leadership, governance, self-mastery, and ethical action within these traditions.

These texts were selected based on three criteria:-

- (a) Explicit engagement with leadership under uncertainty or moral ambiguity.
- (b) Articulation of internal or non-hierarchical sources of authority and motivation.
- (c) Relevance to sustained leadership effectiveness rather than episodic success.

5.3. Textual Analysis - Leadership Discourse

Textual analysis was undertaken to examine how leadership texts linguistically construct the source of leadership. Attention was paid to recurring terms, metaphors, and narrative structures used to describe leadership authority, responsibility, and motivation.

In contemporary leadership literature, leadership is frequently framed through action-oriented and outward-directed language, emphasising decisiveness, communication, influence, and control (KE, Sensemaking in Organisations, 1995). Even when addressing disruption (Heifetz, 2009), the leader is often portrayed as the stabilising agent

who must “provide clarity,” “hold the organisation,” or “project confidence.” Such language implicitly reinforces the assumption of the leader as an autonomous source of direction, even under extreme uncertainty.

In contrast, ancient Indian texts employ a markedly different linguistic orientation. Leadership and authority are repeatedly anchored in inner states - clarity of mind, ethical restraint, self-discipline, and detachment from outcomes. The Bhagavad Gita (Bhagavad Gita, n.d.), for instance, frames effective action as emerging from *sthita-prajna* (steady wisdom), where leadership flows from inner equilibrium rather than external control. Similarly, the Arthashastra (R, 2014) emphasises the ruler’s self-regulation as the foundation of governance effectiveness.

This textual contrast reveals a fundamental divergence that while modern texts emphasise “what the leader does”, ancient texts emphasise “what the leader is”. This divergence directly informs the study’s central proposition that leadership in disruption may depend less on external authority and more on internal governance.

5.4. Comparison of External Guidance Mechanisms for Leaders in Crisis

The comparison is given in Table 4 below:-

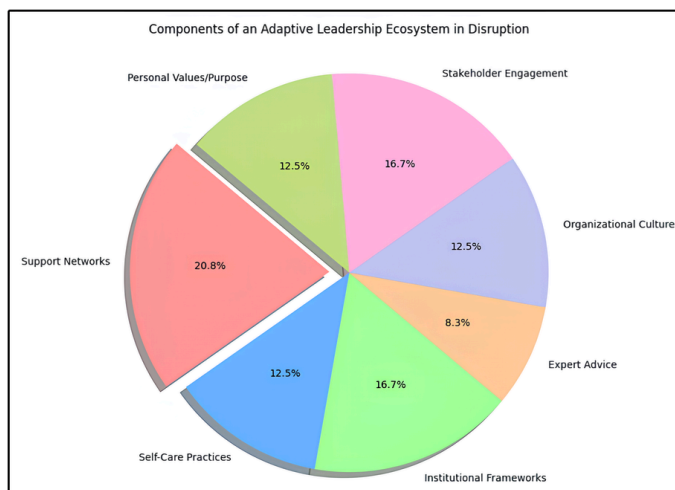
Table 4: External Guidance Mechanisms

Mechanism	Description	Perceived Effectiveness in Crisis
Peer Networks	Informal or formal groups of fellow leaders providing shared experiences, advice, and emotional support.	Highly effective for emotional support and practical advice, aiding in reducing isolation and burnout. Enables rapid sharing of adaptive strategies and lessons learned, especially in contexts like school leadership during a pandemic.
Mentorship	Guidance from more experienced leaders or specialized coaches, offering perspective, strategic thinking, and personal development.	Provides valuable long-term development and strategic insight. Can be particularly effective in offering a broader perspective beyond immediate crisis pressures, helping leaders to cocreate with their organizations for future needs.
Institutional Frameworks	Established policies, ethical guidelines, and legal structures within an organization or sector that dictate acceptable behavior and decision-making.	Essential for ensuring accountability, consistency, and ethical conduct. However, they can be rigid and slow to adapt to rapidly evolving disruptive scenarios unless designed with sufficient flexibility and mechanisms for continuous assessment.
Expert Advice	Consultation with specialists (e.g., scientists, economists, public health officials) to inform decision-making based on up-to-date knowledge.	Crucial for evidence-based decision-making in complex crises, particularly when behavioral science evidence can guide policy. Effectiveness hinges on the leader's ability to synthesize potentially conflicting expert opinions and communicate clear policies.

unforeseen outcomes. The network graph above in Figure 1 illustrates these complex interdependencies and potential conflicts among ethical stakeholders and guiding principles that leaders must consider in disruptive contexts (based on author's visualization through the thematic analysis).

5.5.2. Adaptive Ecosystems for Leadership

Figure 2- Adaptive Ecosystems



Effective leadership in disruptive environments transcends the traditional view of an autonomous individual, instead encompassing a supportive ecosystem of structures, narratives, and constraints. This multifaceted ecosystem provides a crucial framework through which leaders derive motivation, validate their authority, and establish essential ethical boundaries. The various elements of this ecosystem, encompassing both internal and external factors, are critical for sustained leadership in turbulent times. Future research should prioritize the development and evaluation of interventions designed to strengthen these leadership ecosystems, thereby fostering greater resilience and ethical decision-making capabilities in leaders facing an increasingly dynamic and unpredictable world. Understanding "who leads the leader" is not about diminishing individual agency but rather acknowledging and enhancing the complex interplay of internal resolve and external support systems that fundamentally shape leadership during periods of profound change. The pie chart above in Figure 2 illustrates possible components of an adaptive leadership ecosystem during disruption (based on author's visualization through the thematic analysis).

5.6. Sentiment Analysis - Leadership Narrative Tone

Sentiment analysis was applied at a qualitative interpretive level to examine the emotional tone

embedded within leadership narratives. Rather than using computational scoring at this stage, affective patterns were assessed through comparative reading.

Contemporary leadership discourse (G, 2020) under disruption frequently carries tones of anxiety, urgency, and burden, reflecting the pressure placed on leaders to perform certainty amid uncertainty. Emotional labour is acknowledged but often framed as an individual coping challenge.

In contrast, ancient Indian texts (S, 1953) exhibit a markedly equanimous and stabilising emotional tone, even when addressing conflict, war, or governance crises. Emotional regulation is presented not as suppression, but as a prerequisite for ethical and effective action. This suggests that emotional orientation itself may function as a leadership source, shaping judgment and resilience.

The contrast indicates that leaders drawing on internalised consciousness-based or ethical anchors may experience disruption differently, that is, not as a threat to authority, but as a test of inner coherence.

5.7. Author's Notes – The Leadership Engine

5.7.1. The Essence of Leadership - Who Leads the Leader: Leadership is often defined by the responsibility to guide others, but its true nature extends far beyond simply directing followers. While leading others is a fundamental aspect, a leader's effectiveness is also shaped by qualities such as active listening, empathy, and unwavering ethical integrity. A genuine leader understands what needs to be done, when to act, and how to achieve it. The true miracle of leadership is not measured by how far a leader travels, but rather by the number of individuals who choose to walk alongside them. These followers place immense trust in their leader, feeling secure under their guidance. Yet, this raises a profound question: who guides the leader? Who provides the leader with direction and solace? Some leaders find strength in faith—be it in God, destiny, or truth—but can a leader truly entrust both their own faith and the welfare of their followers to these external forces alone? There must exist a deeper source—be it power, belief, truth, ethics, or perhaps even the Divine—that guides the leader, or perhaps it is the leader's own inner self that lights the way.

5.7.2. Limitations of Conventional Leadership: Traditional models of leadership often lack creativity, encourage slow decision-making, and are

primarily focused on hierarchical rank and power. Such approaches are vulnerable to misuse, as they frequently neglect emotional intelligence and prioritize personal advancement over collective well-being. In many cases, motivation and reward are closely linked, and certain leadership styles may even resort to manipulation. These shortcomings render conventional leadership models inadequate for achieving sustainable competitive advantage, especially in disruptive environments.

5.7.3. The Reciprocal Nature of Leadership: Leaders serve as guiding lights, ensuring that the unique qualities of their followers never fade. They remain steadfast by their followers' sides, providing consistency and reassurance. However, when challenges arise—when "dawn comes"—who remains by the leader's side? Who instills in them the confidence to persevere? Is it the leader's own resolve that provides rhythm and stability during turbulent times, or does a foundational truth empower them to face new challenges? There is an inherent beauty within every leader, a potential that even the leader may not fully recognize. The true art of leadership lies in attention to the subtle details of disruption—within these nuances, solutions can often be found.

5.7.4. The Metaphor of Leadership - The "Ship" in Leadership: The very word "leadership" contains the word "ship," evoking the image of a vessel navigating the ocean. Like a ship that maintains its balance despite powerful waves and currents, a leader must stand strong in the face of adversity. Behind every ship is a captain—an individual with the consciousness and wisdom to discern the right course of action. In moments of disruption, it is one's consciousness that becomes the greatest resource and support, guiding the leader through uncertainty.

5.7.5. The Role of Consciousness: It is the conscious and subconscious mind that transforms an individual into a leader. This internal awareness enables the coordination of senses and a deep understanding of one's environment. The triad of Manasa (thoughts), Vacha (speech), and Karma (action) work in harmony to guide and sustain effective leadership.

5.7.6. Self-Actualization and Mindfulness: The journey of leadership begins with self-awareness—truly feeling and understanding oneself. Becoming conscious of one's body and capabilities is the first step on the path of leadership. Small habits, thoughts, emotions, and feelings collectively shape

the mind and, ultimately, the personality. Only by grasping the true meaning of one's existence can a person mold themselves into a true leader.

5.7.7. The Wisdom of History: History is a reservoir of valuable knowledge that remains relevant today. India, for example, boasts a rich heritage of remarkable leaders: Guru Govind Singh Ji, who was undaunted by leading 1,25,000 against one; Lord Rama, who faced Ravana with an army of vanaras; and Maharana Pratap, who stood alone against the Mughal invaders. Such examples from history serve as enduring sources of inspiration for leaders across generations.

5.7.8. Sovereignty of the Self: The current generation must embrace and adapt the principle of self-sovereignty. In a world where societal perceptions weigh heavily, self-sovereignty means commanding one's entire being and maintaining awareness of one's potential. It involves unwavering loyalty to one's honor, principles, and identity—referred to as naam (name), namak (salt/ loyalty), and nishan (symbol).

5.7.9. The Power of Truth: Truth is often equated with divinity—"Truth is God." It compels leaders to confront harsh realities and accept facts that cannot be ignored. The ability to understand, address, and overcome adversity is where leadership becomes most vital, especially during times of disruption.

6. Resesarch Inferences

6.1. Key Findings

This study set out to examine a neglected but critical question in leadership and management studies: who or what leads the leader when disruption erodes traditional sources of authority, certainty, and validation? Drawing on mixed methods evidence, the following key findings emerge as listed in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Key Findings

Factors	Details
Inadequacy of Convention al Leadership	Conventional leadership sources are inadequate under sustained disruption; weak and inconsistent relationships between formal authority, hierarchy, rule-based control and leadership effectiveness.

Non-conventional/Internal Leadership Sources	Professional identity, ethical frameworks, institutional values, purpose, and consciousness are primary drivers of leadership effectiveness in disruptive environments.
Leadership as Internal Coherence	Effectiveness is experienced as internal coherence; higher reliance on internalised sources leads to greater clarity, steadiness, and ethical assurance.
Organisational Outcomes	Coherence, adaptability, and trust are indirect effects of leadership grounded in internal governance; effectiveness is shaped by leadership judgment and meaning making, not command or enforcement.
Lived Leadership Experiences	When formal authority fails, leaders rely on relational legitimacy, ethical self-regulation, emotional steadiness, and narrative sense-making; contexts include crises, ethical dilemmas, change resistance, peer-based leadership, and people-centered challenges.
Ancient Indian Knowledge Systems	Concepts such as dharma, self-discipline, detachment from outcomes, and consciousness-based action offer stable leadership frameworks when external structures collapse.
Research Hypothesis	Conventional sources of leadership are insufficient for sustaining effective leadership in disruptive environments.

6.2. Discussion – Leadership Sources’ Coding Framework

The findings of this study invite a fundamental rethinking of leadership theory in the context of disruptive events. Traditional leadership discourse implicitly assumes that leaders function as autonomous sources of direction, meaning, and ethical decision-making. The evidence presented here suggests that this assumption does not hold when disruptions become prolonged rather than episodic.

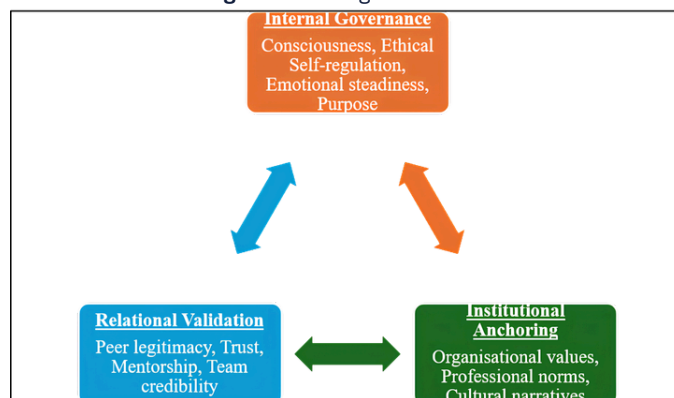
The quantitative results demonstrate that formal authority and hierarchical control lose their explanatory power precisely when leadership is most needed. This aligns with sense-making and

adaptive leadership literature but extends it by shifting attention from “how leaders lead others to how leaders themselves remain guided.” From this perspective, leadership effectiveness is less about decisional dominance and more about internal regulation.

The qualitative findings further illuminate this shift in the data. Situational narratives show that leadership without authority is not an exception but a recurring condition in disruptive environments. Leaders repeatedly describe navigating crises, ethical conflicts, and resistance through persuasion, presence, ethical clarity, and emotional regulation rather than through commands.

A useful way to interpret these findings is through a three-level coding framework as given in Figure 3 below:-

Figure 3. Coding Framework



Leadership under disruption emerges as a dynamic balance across these levels rather than as a function of positional power. Ancient Indian wisdom strengthens this interpretation by offering a philosophically grounded model in which leadership authority flows from inner discipline and moral duty rather than external reward or coercion.

The discussion thus reframes leadership as an “**ecological phenomenon**”: leaders are neither autonomous nor passive, but situated actors governed by interacting internal, relational, and institutional forces.

7. Recommendations - A Conceptual Framework for ‘Disruption and the Source of Leadership’

Based on the three-level coding framework suggested in the foregoing, this study proposes a Conceptual Framework of Leadership Sources in Disruptive Environments, aimed at both theory and

practice, as indicated and described below in Figure 4:-

Figure 4- Conceptual Framework (Image generated with AI assistance based on text narration)



Structural alignment alone cannot produce ecosystem-level integration. Actors must interact by processes that enable knowledge exchange, experimentation, coordination, standardization, learning, and modification. Knowledge exchange is particularly important because gastronomic innovation increasingly occurs at the intersection of different disciplines. Scientific knowledge can inform culinary experimentation, while culinary experience can

At the center of the framework lies the **Leader**, not as an autonomous controller, but as a node governed by interacting sources:-

(a) Primary (Internal Governance) Sources:

- Consciousness and self-awareness.
- Ethical frameworks and moral boundaries.
- Sense of purpose and professional identity.
- Emotional regulation and self-discipline.

(b) Secondary (Relational Validation) Sources:

- Peer legitimacy and trust.
- Mentorship and support networks.
- Team relationships and social credibility.

(c) Tertiary (Institutional Anchoring) Sources:

- Organisational culture and values.
- Institutional norms and professional codes.
- Societal expectations and legitimacy narratives.

These sources collectively shape:-

- Leadership judgment.
- Motivation under uncertainty.
- Ethical boundary setting.

Which in turn produce:-

- Leader-level outcomes (clarity, resilience, coherence).
- Organisational outcomes (adaptability, trust, sustained effectiveness).

8. Managerial and Leadership Implications:

(a) Leadership development programs must move beyond skill acquisition and authority training to cultivate internal coherence, ethical reflexivity, and consciousness.

(b) Organisations should deliberately design leadership ecosystems, strengthening peer networks, mentoring systems, and ethical cultures.

(c) Competitive advantage in disruptive environments should be understood not merely as strategic positioning, but as the capacity to sustain leadership judgment when outcomes and rules fail.

This framework operationalises the paper's core claim that leadership capable of withstanding prolonged disruption is rooted in internal governance supported by relational and institutional ecosystems.

9. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The sample size, while adequate for exploratory analysis, limits statistical generalisability. The study relies on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by retrospection or social desirability. Quantitative analysis was correlational rather than causal, consistent with the study's design but limiting claims of directional influence. Finally, while ancient Indian wisdom provides conceptual depth, its operationalisation remains interpretive rather than experimentally validated.

10. Suggestions for Future Research

(a) Conducting longitudinal studies to examine how leadership sources evolve across prolonged disruption.

- (b) Operationalising consciousness-based leadership constructs for experimental or large-scale validation.
- (c) Comparing leadership source configurations across cultures and institutional systems.
- (d) Investigating how leadership ecosystems can be intentionally designed and measured within organisations.
- (e) Exploring the causal pathways linking inner governance to ethical climates and competitive advantage.

11. Conclusion

This study contributes to leadership and management research by focusing on leaders not only as sources of authority but also as individuals who influence and guide themselves. By exploring the question “who leads the leader” both through data and theory, it introduces a new approach to leadership that is relevant for challenging, ethically demanding, and unpredictable times. The study connects current management ideas with traditional wisdom, providing a strong basis for rethinking how leaders are developed, how organisations build resilience, and how they maintain lasting competitive advantages.

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