

Leadership discourse analysis: an exploration of a neo-transformational leader

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Abstract

Purpose – This interdisciplinary study creates a structured link to define neo-transformational leadership via an unconventional method in trade science, called discourse analysis.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on qualitative discourse analysis of longitudinal public leadership communication, the study identifies four core discursive mechanisms through which meaning, legitimacy, and collective responsibility are produced, stabilized, and contested over 15 years.

Findings – We define neo-transformational leadership as the capacity to enact leadership influence through discursive processes of sensegiving, moral legitimation, boundary spanning, and identity narration, through which shared meaning is constructed, collective responsibility is aligned, and legitimacy is sustained over time.

Research limitations/implications – At its core, neo-transformational leadership shifts leadership influence from personal qualities to the discursive processes through which meaning, legitimacy, and collective orientation are produced.

Originality/value – By foregrounding discourse as a constitutive governance mechanism, this paper contributes to leadership theory by empirically elaborating a mechanism-explicit, process-based framework capable of integrating fragmented leadership literature and by demonstrating how discourse-analytic methods can support cumulative, theory-building research on leadership influence.

Keywords Neo-transformational leadership, Leadership discourse analysis, Transformational leader, Leadership communication, Moral legitimation, Collective responsibility

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Leadership research has reached conceptual saturation (Liu *et al.*, 2023; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2025) and, despite decades of theoretical development and an expanding repertoire of leadership constructs, the field has consistently produced diminishing theoretical returns (Kwan, 2020; Ravet-Brown *et al.*, 2024). As a result, leadership scholarship has become increasingly fragmented at the surface level while remaining theoretically homogeneous at its core (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2025). Calls for “new” leadership theories continue to proliferate, but proposals often amount to incremental extensions or moral re-labeling of existing constructs rather than genuine theoretical advancement (Breevaart *et al.*, 2025).

This condition reflects ontological closure in leadership theory, a state in which theoretical innovation is constrained by entrenched assumptions about where leadership resides and how influence operates, and not just saturation (Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019). This stagnation is not simply a problem of construct redundancy or measurement overlap (Ravet-Brown *et al.*, 2024) but rather reflects a deeper theoretical limitation in how leadership is conceptualized (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). Dominant leadership theories continue to assume that influence originates in leaders’ actions or attributes and is subsequently interpreted by



followers (Gündüz Çekmecelioglu *et al.*, 2025). Within this framework, leadership influence is theorized as preceding meaning: leaders act, followers respond, and meaning is inferred *ex post* (Uttinger *et al.*, 2025).

The central problem addressed in this paper is that this causal ordering is increasingly misaligned with contemporary organizational reality (Uhl-Bien, 2021). In settings characterized by moral scrutiny, stakeholder pluralism, and heightened visibility, leadership influence does not reliably endure unless shared meaning and legitimacy have been established (Gigliotti and Alvarez-Robinson, 2025). However, existing leadership theories offer limited insight into how leadership influence is constituted prior to observable outcomes or compliance, namely how leaders come to be recognized as legitimate, authoritative, or morally compelling in the first place (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2025).

One consequence of this limitation is the under-theorization of language in leadership research (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2016). Although vision, inspiration, values, and ethics occupy central places in leadership scholarship, language is typically considered instrumentally as a channel through which pre-existing intentions, traits, or values are transmitted (Zhao and Lian, 2025). Leadership communication is, therefore, analyzed primarily as rhetoric, messaging, or style, rather than as a process through which leadership influence can be produced and sustained (Liu *et al.*, 2023). As a result, leadership theory struggles to explain how collective meaning, legitimacy, and moral commitment is constructed and maintained over time—especially under conditions of uncertainty, contestation, or crisis (Gigliotti and Alvarez-Robinson, 2025).

This paper aims to: (1) establish a structured link to define “neo-transformational leadership” through discourse analysis of a prominent CEO’s language (in both spoken and written forms); and (2) learn how examining the discourse of a high-profile CEO helped to maintain an intense brand image and loyalty through their position. Building on this discursive reorientation, the paper later advances neo-transformational leadership as a theoretical framework that reconceptualizes transformational leadership by specifying discourse as the primary mechanism through which leadership influence can be generated, sustained, and contested (Vaara *et al.*, 2016). The prefix “neo” signals not a new leadership style, but a shift in analytical focus from individual attributes to communicative processes through which meaning, legitimacy, and collective alignment are constructed (Hemshorn de Sanchez *et al.*, 2022).

Accordingly, this study makes three contributions to leadership theory (Cornelissen, 2017). First, it identifies a foundational limitation in existing leadership theories by showing how shared assumptions about influence constrain theoretical progress despite apparent construct diversity (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2025). Second, it advances neo-transformational leadership as a discourse-centered framework that reconceptualizes leadership influence as an ongoing process of meaning-making and moral legitimation, offering a mechanism-explicit alternative capable of integrating fragmented leadership theories within a shared process ontology (Adams *et al.*, 2023). Third, it demonstrates the value of illustrative discourse analysis as a theory-building approach in leadership research, expanding the methodological repertoire available for studying leadership under conditions of complexity, visibility, and moral contestation (Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019).

Literature review

This paper’s foundation is transformational leadership, which has emerged as one of the most influential leadership paradigms in organizational research over the past half-century. The concept of transformational leadership was first articulated by Burns (1978), who distinguished between transactional and transformational leadership by stating that transactional leadership focuses on exchanges between leaders and followers, whereas transformational leadership involves elevating followers’ motivation, morality, and values. Building on Burns’ work, Bass and Avolio (1990) proposed that transformational leadership

enhances follower motivation, trust, and performance through psychological mechanisms. The definition of transformational leadership has been expanded further by considering the Four I's; Individualized Consideration, Inspirational Motivation, Idealized Influence, and Intellectual Stimulation (Northouse, 2013). The Four I's distinguish the aims of a transformational leader as one who strives to align the core values of their followers with their own so that results achieved appear on a personal level rather than being dictated.

Bass and Riggio (2006) consolidated decades of research, positioning transformational leadership as a comprehensive theory with strong predictive validity across organizational settings. A systematic review of 54 studies (2016–2023) concluded that transformational leadership has a strong positive relationship with firm performance (Agazu *et al.*, 2025) and complementary meta-analytic evidence across 39 countries further confirmed that transformational leadership positively influences task performance, organizational citizenship behavior, and innovation, with effects robust across diverse cultural contexts (Agag *et al.*, 2025).

In the 21st century, transformational leadership has been integrated with emerging leadership paradigms, including authentic leadership (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2017), servant leadership (van Dierendonck *et al.*, 2014), and ethical leadership (Brown and Treviño, 2006) and these extensions attempt to address limitations in the original transformational model, particularly its insufficient attention to ethics and authenticity (Hoch *et al.*, 2018). This aligns with one of the most persistent criticisms of transformational leadership that its conceptual constructs overlap with related leadership constructs (Banks *et al.*, 2016; van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013). Without explicit ethical constraints, transformational leadership risks legitimizing forms of influence that may be detrimental to followers and organizations. In addition, contemporary organizational environments, characterized by digital transformation, remote work, and AI-mediated interactions, challenge traditional assumptions about leader–follower interactions. Existing transformational leadership models have not been systematically adapted to account for these evolving socio-technical conditions. Considering these limitations, transformational leadership requires theoretical refinement and, as a result, transformational leadership research has been characterized by strong empirical associations but relatively weak explanatory depth, limiting its capacity to function as a fully developed process theory (Siangchokyo *et al.*, 2019). Modern organizations operate within increasingly complex and dynamic environments shaped by digitalization, AI, and distributed work structures, which fundamentally alter patterns of communication, authority, and coordination (Greimel *et al.*, 2023). Transformational leadership studies should evolve from static trait-based models to discursive process-based frameworks.

Building on the reconceptualization of leadership as a discursive process, this paper advances neo-transformational leadership as a theory of leadership influence grounded in communicative action rather than individual attributes, styles, or behavioral repertoires. Neo-transformational leadership represents a re-specification of the causal locus of leadership influence, from internal leader qualities to the discursive processes through which meaning, legitimacy, and collective orientation are constituted (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2016). This shift is particularly consequential in organizational contexts characterized by complexity, visibility, and moral contestation (Uhl-Bien, 2021).

Research method

Research design

Employing an inductive approach to explore and build a theory (Saunders *et al.*, 2012), we chose to study an inspiring CEO of a successful company. CEOs and business leaders have been examined in previous literature (Hirshleifer *et al.*, 2012) yet are seldom focused on in depth or as individuals. The selected leader is a widely recognized founder and former CEO of a global consumer-facing service organization, noted for his long-term influence on the company's strategic direction and institutional development. He is frequently associated with the expansion of a localized business model into a large-scale international enterprise, while

maintaining a strong emphasis on organizational identity and service consistency across diverse markets. His leadership tenure is often discussed in relation to the balancing of commercial growth with internal culture-building, including the prioritization of workforce stability, customer experience, and corporate reputation. As a result, he represents a relevant case for examining how senior leadership is accomplished in complex, high-visibility organizational settings. Selecting a leader who has been successful in contrasting situations was essential to making the findings more holistic and the case study approach allows for a rich understanding of the phenomena in question, which allows the research questions to be answered in detail (Gillham, 2000).

The research design employs a systematic single-case design focused on theory-building through Corpus-assisted discourse studies. This methodological orientation is grounded in a process ontology which conceptualizes leadership, not as a collection of static individual attributes, but as a relational phenomenon constituted through discursive practice (Uhl-Bien, 2021). By identifying a high-profile leader of a US global consumer-facing organization as a revelatory case, the study prioritizes *analytical generalization* to theoretical propositions rather than statistical generalization to populations (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). This approach facilitates an in-depth exploration of the “generative mechanisms” of leadership influence that standard variance-based research often fails to capture (Cornelissen, 2017).

Data collection

The discourse corpus comprises approximately 216,000 words of publicly available leadership texts, selected according to three explicit principles: (1) *visibility and accountability*: texts produced for external, organization-wide, or stakeholder-facing audiences, where leadership claims are publicly contestable; (2) *temporal coverage*: materials spanning multiple organizational phases (growth, crisis, recovery, and post-crisis reflection), allowing leadership discourse to be examined as a process evolving over time rather than as a fixed rhetorical style; and (3) *genre diversity*: inclusion of speeches, interviews, and authored reflections to capture variation in discursive positioning across communicative contexts.

The selected company, in its early years, built a reputation for high-quality drinks and a distinctive brand identity rooted in premium sourcing and remained relatively small and regionally-focused with a limited number of stores until the leader joined the company as its CEO. He envisioned the company as a “third place” between home and work, where customers could enjoy its drinks in a welcoming social environment. Under his leadership, the company shifted from a product-based retail model to an experience model, emphasizing customer service, store atmosphere, and consistent branding. The company expanded rapidly across the US and then internationally, becoming one of the most recognizable consumer brands in the world. The leader also promoted initiatives related to employee benefits and company culture, helping the company build a strong internal identity alongside its commercial growth. Under his leadership, the company evolved from a niche retailer into a modern global lifestyle brand, reshaping how people consumed its products and redefining their experience worldwide. Because of this success, this leader is thought to be a good fit for the study.

Data were collected over the 15 years of his leadership at the company and readily accessible sources used were freely available on YouTube (including 30 TV interviews and speeches in video form), alongside two books published by him (1999, 2012). For anonymity, the titles of these books are not being disclosed, but they are two reflective business narratives that document the leader’s growth, identity, and leadership evolution of the company across various stages of its development. The first book recounts the company’s early expansion from a small business into a globally recognized brand, emphasizing the importance of vision, customer experience, and a values-based organizational culture. In contrast, the second focuses on a later period marked by organizational strain and strategic uncertainty, detailing the challenges of restoring brand authenticity, operational discipline, and internal cohesion during a company turnaround. Together, the books offer a longitudinal account of how

leadership decisions, organizational culture, and business strategy interact over time, particularly in relation to scaling, maintaining purpose, and sustaining commitment to both employees and customers. The video content was transcribed as personally transcribing content ensures all mannerisms, abbreviations, and tone can be captured (Silverman, 2013) which increases the validity of the data as the context in which the data is set will be intact.

Data from various sources (i.e. TV interviews, public and corporate speeches, and books) is used to obtain multiple perspectives and triangulation in the research, as well as to reduce research bias. We collected data until additional data did not uncover anything new, i.e. reaching a saturation point, and therefore research questions could be appropriately answered (Braun and Clarke, 2025). Saturation was indicated when the four theorized discursive mechanisms, namely sensegiving, moral legitimation, identity narration, and boundary spanning, recurred consistently across sources, time periods, and genres, with no substantively new mechanisms emerging in later materials. This clarification addresses concerns regarding both corpus sufficiency and analytical completeness. At that saturation point, 216,000 words were included for analysis.

Data analysis

An abductive approach was employed to iterate between the data and theoretical constructs (Jaakkola, 2020). The primary tool for managing and analyzing this large qualitative dataset was NVivo, which facilitated a multi-layered Corpus-assisted discourse studies protocol consistent with modern computational leadership metrics (Liu et al., 2023). To address concerns about confirmation bias, the analysis followed a theory-informed, not theory-enforcing, approach. Two researchers coded the data separately and the first author, as a senior researcher, decided the final themes to be included. While guided by a predefined transformational leadership, the analysis systematically addressed discursive tensions, absences, and moments of potential failure, including instances where transformational leadership discourse risked undermining legitimacy or alignment. Interpretive claims were retained only when they demonstrated stability across contexts and time, rather than reliance on isolated or particularly vivid quotations.

The analysis utilized a tripartite protocol that contextualized these quantitative maps into five empirically grounded discursive mechanisms. NVivo Word Trees was employed to visualize the “lead-up” and “lead-away” contexts of key neo-transformational leadership markers, revealing how the leader strategically framed organizational reality (Fairhurst and Connaughton, 2014). For example, the term “communities” was consistently linked to “social responsibility,” “human connections,” and “meaningful differences,” shifting the brand identity from a retail model to a civic actor. Similarly, searches for “influence” and “foundation” uncovered rhetorical frames that prioritized “power to raise or lower” standards and the role of “values” as the primary basis for innovation and accountability.

These discursive strategies were subjected to an abductive coding process to build a comprehensive theoretical framework of neo-transformational leadership. As detailed in the data structure (see Table 1), 25 distinct first-order categories were distilled into five second-order themes: (1) moral sensegiving; (2) ethical legitimation of authority; (3) leadership as civic stewardship; (4) identity narration; and (5) the construction of collective responsibility. These themes represent the stable linguistic mechanisms used to bridge the gap between commercial performance and human values (Long, 2025).

Theoretical synthesis

In the final stage of analysis, these mechanisms were synthesized into two aggregate theoretical dimensions: the discursive construction of meaning and legitimacy, and boundary-spanning collective stewardship (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Together, these dimensions define neo-transformational leadership not as a collection of static traits, but as a continuous communicative accomplishment in which language serves as the primary mechanism for

First-order categories and data illustrations	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
A1. Framing crisis as a moral reckoning/“turning point” <i>“We had to admit to ourselves and to the people of this company that we owned the self-induced mistakes . . . it was very difficult, it was confession . . . Once we did, it was a powerful turning point.”</i> A2. Recasting business purpose beyond profit (humanity, dignity, “right side”) <i>“Not only is standing for something beyond making a profit the right thing to do, it is the way business must be conducted in the 21st century.”</i> A3. Making “values” the interpretive lens for decisions <i>“You can’t get out of this by trying to navigate with a different road map . . . you have to be authentic, you have to be true, and you have to believe in your heart that this is going to work.”</i> A4. Using emotional language to orient action (love, pride, responsibility) <i>“I apologized to every single person at [. . .] because I really felt that the leaders of the company and myself had let them and their families down.”</i> A5. Defining what “counts” as success (trust, culture, relationships) <i>“In business, success is most often measured by numbers . . . But equally important to the value we create are the values we live by.”</i>	<i>A. Moral Sensegiving as Organizational Meaning Architecture</i>	I. Discursive Construction of Meaning and Legitimacy
B1. Justifying controversial choices through ethics (not performance optics) <i>“I can cut \$300 million out of a lot of things, but do you want to just kill the company, and kill the trust people have in what this company stands for? There’s no way I will do it.”</i> B2. Refusing shareholder primacy as the ultimate criterion <i>“We didn’t believe we could build long-term value for our shareholders unless we build long-term value for our people.”</i> B3. Setting moral boundaries (“we will not do X even if profitable”) <i>“If you reduce the quality 5%, no one would know . . . We would never do that.”</i> B4. Claiming legitimacy via conscience/integrity/authenticity <i>“What I stand for is not just to make money, it’s to preserve the integrity of what we have built . . . and to look in the mirror and feel like you’ve done something that has meaning, relevancy, and most importantly, that people are going to respect.”</i> B5. Positioning ethical consistency as essential to long-term trust <i>“If the customer has a level of trust, in not only what the product stands for, but what the ethics and values of the company stand for.”</i>	<i>B. Ethical Legitimation of Authority Beyond Formal Power</i>	

First-order categories and data illustrations

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

First-order categories and data illustrations	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
E1. Redistributing accountability downward and outward (everyone owns outcomes) “You need to understand . . . to be personally accountable for the outcome. Don’t do it for me; do it for yourself.”	<i>E. Discursive Construction of Collective Responsibility</i>	
E2. Defining inaction as complicity (bystander = part of the problem) “If you are a bystander, then . . . you become part of the problem.”		
E3. Calling for personal responsibility tied to collective survival “If we don’t succeed, the very essence of the food on your table is going to be challenged because we may not make it.”		
E4. Mobilizing “we-ness” through shared stakes and shared direction “11,000 people are going to walk out . . . all face in the same direction, and we are going to transform the company. We are going to do it because of our values.”		
E5. Framing employees as partners/co-authors of outcomes (not followers) “Not only do you have a voice, but you must not be a bystander.”		

generating brand loyalty and institutional legitimacy in a complex, high-visibility environment (Uhl-Bien, 2021).

Findings

This section illustrates how neo-transformational leadership operates through discourse by examining the public leadership communication of the leader during a high-profile organizational recovery process (Men et al., 2020). The breadth and continuity of the materials allow the analysis to attend not only to what is said, but to how discursive patterns recur, evolve, and are strategically redeployed under differing organizational conditions. This depth of engagement supports a nuanced interpretation of leadership influence as a process that unfolds over time rather than as a static set of behaviors (Gerpott et al., 2019). It is important to note that discursive leadership practices are inherently contingent (Uhl-Bien, 2021). They may stabilize meaning and legitimacy in certain moments while failing to do so in others; they may invite alignment or provoke contestation depending on context, timing, and audience reception (Hemshorn de Sanchez et al., 2022).

Discursive construction of meaning and legitimacy

Moral sensegiving as organizational meaning architecture. The data suggests that moral sensegiving operates not merely as rhetorical embellishment but as a form of organizational meaning architecture, a structured process through which leaders redefine how members interpret events, evaluate actions, and orient behavior. For example, a crisis is reframed as a moral reckoning that enables a meaning reset (A1). Rather than depicting organizational decline as a technical or market failure, the leader casts it as a moment of ethical accountability, namely a “confession” that produces a “powerful turning point.” During periods of economic strain and strategic adjustment, the CEO repeatedly anchors organizational decisions in

articulated core values and cost containment, restructuring, and operational discipline are not framed as departures from ethical commitments, but as necessary actions to preserve them over time. This moral reframing is extended into a redefinition of organizational purpose (A2) where profit is explicitly decentered and subordinated to broader humanistic commitments, e.g. “humanity,” “dignity,” and the “right thing to do.” Importantly, it is not framed as optional or aspirational, but as necessary for business. In doing so, the leader re-specifies the firm’s telos: economic performance becomes embedded within a moral horizon.

Values are positioned as the primary interpretive lens for decision-making (A3). The insistence on authenticity, i.e. “you have to be authentic, you have to be true,” signals a rejection of instrumental or situational reasoning in favor of value-consistent action. Here, moral sensegiving functions as a cognitive schema as it prescribes how actors should make sense of ambiguity. Emotional language is mobilized to activate this moral framework (A4) while expressions of apology, responsibility, and relational harm (e.g. “let them and their families down”) infuse the sensegiving process with affective intensity. By invoking guilt, care, and responsibility, the leader personalizes organizational failure and embeds moral obligations within interpersonal relationships. In this way, emotional discourse functions as a mechanism for internalization, ensuring that meaning reconstruction translates into behavioral commitment.

The architecture is completed through a redefinition of what constitutes organizational success (A5). While acknowledging traditional metrics (“numbers”), the leader expands the evaluative criteria to include “values,” “trust,” and relational quality and this redefinition is critical as it institutionalizes prior moral reframing by embedding it into performance evaluation. Success is no longer measured solely by outputs but also by the integrity of the processes and relationships that produce them and, consequently, moral considerations are not peripheral but constitutive of organizational effectiveness. Taken together, these elements reveal a coherent process of moral sensegiving that operates across multiple levels and this layered architecture transforms organizational meaning from a fragmented set of interpretations into an integrated moral framework.

Ethical legitimization of authority beyond formal power. The data indicated the leader constructed and sustained authority through a process of ethical legitimization including grounding leadership claims in moral reasoning, integrity, and consistency and not primarily through formal hierarchical position. For example, controversial decisions were justified through ethical reasoning rather than performance optics (B1) and this framing reoriented decision justification away from short-term metrics and toward moral consequences. Importantly, the leader does not deny the economic logic but instead ascribes it to ethical considerations. This ethical grounding is reinforced through the rejection of shareholder primacy as the ultimate evaluative criterion (B2). By asserting that long-term shareholder value is contingent upon value for “our people,” the leader reorders the hierarchy of stakeholders which challenges the dominant institutional logic that prioritizes shareholders and situates leadership authority within a broader moral economy of relationships.

Moral boundaries are also articulated as non-negotiable constraints on action (B3). Statements such as “We would never do that” establish clear ethical limits that are not subject to trade-offs and, by refusing actions that are profitable but inconsistent with values, the leader signals reliability and predictability, reinforcing perceptions of integrity. Legitimacy is explicitly claimed through appeals to conscience, integrity, and authenticity (B4). The leader frames his authority in deeply personal and moral terms, such as “what I stand for,” “look in the mirror,” and “respect.” These expressions shift the basis of leadership from external validation (e.g. market performance) to internal moral coherence and authority becomes tied to the leader’s ability to embody and uphold values, thereby aligning personal identity with organizational purpose. This fusion of personal conscience and organizational leadership strengthens credibility as followers perceive decisions as rooted in genuine conviction rather than strategic posturing.

In addition, trust is not presented as a by-product of success but as an outcome of sustained alignment between actions and values, i.e. what the company “stands for” (B5). By linking

trust to both product quality and organizational ethics, the leader integrates operational and moral domains, suggesting that legitimacy depends on coherence across all aspects of the organization. Across categories B1–B5, authority is reframed as something earned through adherence to values rather than conferred by structural power which represents a shift from positional authority to normative authority, where legitimacy derives from alignment with shared ethical commitments.

Boundary-spanning collective stewardship

Identity narration as a mechanism of collective alignment. The data illustrated how identity narration functions as a central mechanism through which leaders align organizational members around shared meanings, obligations, and behavioral expectations. For example, the leader's recounting of childhood hardship, e.g. his father's injury, lack of social protection, and the "fracturing of the American dream," serves as more than personal reflection (D1) but functions as a legitimizing narrative that anchors his moral commitments in lived experience. This biographical layer provides a credible origin for the values he later promotes, enabling followers to interpret organizational practices as extensions of a coherent moral trajectory rather than arbitrary managerial choices. Personal history is explicitly translated into organizational obligations (D2), particularly in the statement that he sought to build "the kind of company that my father never got a chance to work for" which explicitly bridges the personal and the institutional. This linkage strengthens alignment by embedding organizational policies within a narrative of justice and restitution, making them more meaningful and less contestable.

Organizational heritage narratives reinforce continuity and guide present action (D3). Moments of deviation, such as during a crisis, are framed as departures from "who we are," thereby creating a standard against which current practices are evaluated. This backward-looking narrative is not nostalgic but regulatory as it disciplines behavior and legitimizes corrective action. In this sense, identity narration operates as a mechanism of organizational memory that stabilizes meaning across time. By framing employees and customers globally as part of a common moral community, the leader reduces fragmentation and fosters cohesion (D4) and the "we" is thus both inclusive and scalable, enabling alignment across diverse contexts without erasing local specificity while the leader is positioned as the exemplar and guardian of this shared identity (D5). Authority derives from embodying and protecting the organization's core identity, ensuring its continuity over time and, by modeling the desired values and behaviors, the leader becomes a reference point for others, reinforcing alignment through example rather than coercion. Across categories D1–D5, identity is not merely described but actively performed and reproduced as a means of coordinating action and sustaining alignment.

Discursive construction of collective responsibility. The data illustrated how collective responsibility is actively produced through discourse that redistributes accountability, eliminates passivity, and binds individual action to shared outcomes. Rather than treating responsibility as a formal allocation tied to hierarchy, the leader constructs it as a distributed moral obligation embedded in everyday organizational practice, for example, accountability is explicitly redistributed downward and outward (E1). This move reframes accountability as internalized rather than imposed and responsibility becomes a condition of membership rather than a task assigned from above.

Neutrality is discursively eliminated by defining inaction as complicity (E2). By framing inaction as a contribution to failure, the leader constructs a binary moral field in which only active participation is acceptable and this discursive strategy intensifies accountability by making it both personal and unavoidable. Personal responsibility is also tied explicitly to collective survival (E3) and this linkage reinforces the idea that organizational outcomes are contingent on distributed contributions. In doing so, the leader transforms responsibility into a shared fate, in which individual and collective interests are inseparable.

Collective identity is mobilized through shared direction and coordinated action (E4 and E5). The emphasis on “we” and “our values” reinforces a sense of collective ownership, where responsibility is enacted through coordinated effort rather than isolated action. This framing reduces fragmentation and creates a sense of momentum, positioning the organization as a cohesive entity capable of transformation and the analysis suggests that collective responsibility is not simply a structural feature but a discursive achievement. By redefining the meaning of action, inaction, and participation, leaders can reshape how organizational members perceive their roles and obligations. In this case, responsibility becomes both a moral imperative and a practical necessity, binding individuals together in a shared commitment to organizational survival and success.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

From the above analysis, we define neo-transformational leadership as the capacity to enact leadership influence through discursive processes of sensegiving, moral legitimation, boundary spanning, and identity narration, through which shared meaning is constructed, collective responsibility is aligned, and legitimacy is sustained over time. This definition establishes an ontological break from dominant leadership theories by locating leadership influence in constitutive processes rather than in leader attributes, intentions, or behavioral expressions. Discourse is treated as causal rather than expressive as language does not transmit influence that already exists but produces the interpretive and moral conditions under which influence becomes possible (Utzinger *et al.*, 2025). The prefix *neo* signals continuity with transformational leadership’s concern for meaning and purpose, while re-specifying the mechanism through which such elevation occurs (Kwan, 2020). Where transformational leadership emphasizes charisma, inspiration, and value internalization, neo-transformational leadership specifies discourse as the mechanism through which meaning, legitimacy, and alignment are actively produced (Liu *et al.*, 2023).

At its core, neo-transformational leadership shifts leadership influence from personal qualities to the discursive processes through which meaning, legitimacy, and collective orientation are produced and sustained over time (Hemshorn de Sanchez *et al.*, 2022). Leadership, from this perspective, is not something leaders possess or enact unilaterally, but something that emerges through interaction as organizational actors negotiate interpretations, responsibilities, and identities (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012).

By foregrounding discourse, neo-transformational leadership opens the “black box” of influence (Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019) and explains how meaning precedes motivation, legitimacy precedes compliance, and shared interpretation precedes coordinated action (Adams *et al.*, 2023). Leadership influence is therefore understood as an interactional accomplishment, emerging through processes of framing, justification, and alignment rather than through behavioral enactment alone (Hemshorn de Sanchez *et al.*, 2022).

This explanatory shift is especially consequential under conditions where traditional leadership assumptions are no longer held when authority is fragmented, ethical interpretations are contested, or outcomes remain uncertain (Kim *et al.*, 2025). Transformational leadership presumes inspiration, ethical leadership presumes moral clarity, and authentic leadership presumes relatively stable identities (Wang *et al.*, 2025). Neo-transformational leadership, by contrast, explains how inspiration, moral authority, and identity are discursively accomplished rather than presupposed, rendering leadership influence intelligible even when legitimacy must be actively negotiated (Vaara *et al.*, 2016).

In this way, neo-transformational leadership clarifies why construct proliferation has produced diminishing theoretical returns (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2025). Many leadership theories diverge behaviorally while converging implicitly at the level of discursive practice (Zhao and Lian, 2025) and, by making these practices explicit, neo-transformational leadership enables consolidation at the level of mechanism rather than comparison at the level of style (Saunders *et al.*, 2015).

Neo-transformational leadership advances leadership-as-process scholarship by specifying how leadership processes operate discursively (Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019). Rather than treating interaction as a general condition of leadership, it identifies concrete discursive mechanisms, namely sensegiving, moral legitimation, identity narration, and boundary spanning, through which leadership influence is constituted and sustained (Zhao and Lian, 2025).

In contrast to process accounts that emphasize flow, emergence, or practice without theorizing meaning construction explicitly, neo-transformational leadership places discourse at the center of causal explanation (Uttinger *et al.*, 2025) and explains that leadership unfolds over time as well as how interpretive alignment, legitimacy, and responsibility are communicatively produced, challenged, and repaired (Gigliotti and Alvarez-Robinson, 2025). This mechanism-explicit orientation strengthens leadership-as-process theory by linking emergence to identifiable generative dynamics, increasing analytical precision without reverting to entity-based explanations (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2025).

By grounding leadership in interactional and communicative processes, neo-transformational leadership integrates leadership theory more fully with process-oriented organizational research, such as sensemaking, performativity, and the communicative constitution of organizations, without collapsing leadership into generic social interaction (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2016).

Managerial implications

This study highlights that effective managerial influence depends on sensegiving before action and findings suggest that shared meaning must be stabilized before coordinated action can occur. In practice, this means managers should treat interpretation as a leadership task, particularly during periods of uncertainty, crisis, or strategic change. Framing what is happening, why it matters, and how it aligns with organizational purpose is not an optional communication activity but a prerequisite for durable alignment. Managers who neglect sensegiving risk fragmented interpretations, moral contestation, and resistance, even when decisions are technically sound (Zhao and Lian, 2025).

Second, the study underscores moral legitimation as a central managerial responsibility, rather than a background condition of authority. Practically, this implies that managers must be prepared to explain not only what decisions are made, but also why those decisions are morally defensible, especially when they involve trade-offs or impose costs on employees or stakeholders. Managerial authority, from this perspective, should rest on the perceived integrity of decision justifications rather than on positional power alone.

Third, the findings reframe responsibility alignment as a discursive challenge rather than a structural one. The study shows that responsibility is more effectively mobilized when employees are positioned through language as partners in collective outcomes rather than as passive recipients of instruction. Discursively framing employees as co-owners of success and failure can strengthen commitment and initiative, particularly in contexts where direct supervision is limited. Symbolic appeals to shared responsibility must be matched by genuine opportunities for participation, support, and recognition.

Together, these implications suggest that managerial effectiveness in contemporary organizations depends less on leadership style and more on the sustained practice of sensegiving, moral justification, and responsibility framing. Managers who attend to these discursive processes are better positioned to lead under conditions where authority is contested, expectations are plural, and influence must be continually earned rather than assumed.

Limitations and directions for future research

As an empirical, theory-building qualitative study grounded in systematic discourse analysis, this research is subject to several limitations that delimit its empirical scope without undermining its theoretical contribution (Jaakkola, 2020). Importantly, these limitations arise from the study's process-ontological and interpretive orientation, which theorizes leadership

influence at the level of constitutive discursive mechanisms rather than outcomes, behaviors, or individual attributes (Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019).

First, the analysis focuses on publicly available leadership discourse (Zhao and Lian, 2025) and does not advance claims about leaders' internal cognitive states or intentions, but about how authority, meaning, and responsibility are publicly constructed and negotiated through discourse (Utzinger *et al.*, 2025). Second, the study employs a single, analytically selected case to inductively surface discursive leadership mechanisms (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The contribution, therefore, lies in analytic generalization of mechanisms rather than empirical generalization of effects, positioning neo-transformational leadership as a transferable explanatory framework rather than a context-free model (Uhl-Bien, 2021). Taken together, these limitations delineate the empirical boundaries of a study concerned with how leadership influence is constituted, stabilized, and contested through discourse, without diminishing the robustness of its data-driven theoretical claims (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012).

Future studies could employ comparative qualitative designs, longitudinal discourse analysis, or multimodal process methods to test the boundary conditions, variability, and durability of the mechanisms identified here (Rogelberg *et al.*, 2026). Importantly, such research should treat neo-transformational leadership as an empirically grounded theoretical lens for cumulative mechanism-based theory building and not as a fixed typology to be operationalized (Adams *et al.*, 2023).

Conclusion

This study advances leadership theory by empirically demonstrating how leadership influence operates as a discursive process through which meaning, legitimacy, and collective responsibility are constructed over time (Adams *et al.*, 2023). Drawing on systematic analysis of longitudinal leadership discourse, the paper reframes leadership influence as a process constituted through communicative practice instead of as an attribute of individuals or a function of behavior (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2016). The central contribution of this study is to show that leadership discourse is not a peripheral communicative activity, but a constitutive governance mechanism in contemporary organizations (Uhl-Bien, 2021). Leaders do not merely articulate purpose or values through discourse, but construct the conditions under which authority is recognized, responsibility is allocated, and collective action becomes possible, particularly under conditions of uncertainty and scrutiny (Mor Barak *et al.*, 2025). Leadership influence, as evidenced in the case, does not precede language but instead is enacted through it (Schnurr and Schroeder, 2019).

Adopting this lens changes what leadership scholars can empirically observe and explain (Hemshorn de Sanchez *et al.*, 2022). Leadership becomes visible in moments of success or inspiration, as well as in episodes of justification, repair, contestation, and moral ambiguity documented in discourse (Vaara *et al.*, 2016) and, as such, influence is therefore traced through recurring discursive mechanisms, rather than inferred solely from outcomes or follower responses (Gigliotti and Alvarez-Robinson, 2025).

By conceptualizing neo-transformational leadership as an empirically grounded, discourse-centered framework, this study offers an integrative alternative to the proliferation of leadership styles that has fragmented the field (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2025). What is integrated is not behavior or normativity, but the underlying processes through which leadership influence is produced and sustained across contexts (Zhao and Lian, 2025).

If leadership is constituted through discourse rather than possessed by individuals, then leadership theory must be rebuilt around observable communicative processes rather than around leader types, traits, or styles (Adams *et al.*, 2023). This shift repositions leadership as an ongoing governance accomplishment - fragile, contested, and consequential - empirically accessible through discourse and analytically central to organizing in contemporary institutional life (Aziz *et al.*, 2025).

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