

Eight Employees, One CEO They Never Met, Eight Different Leaders

Tim Woodring, PhD · Colorado State University · 2026 How followers construct responsible leadership across distance

Responsible leadership isn't a trait a leader holds. It's a meaning a follower builds — indirectly, from a distance, and never finished.

THE STUDY

Almost all leadership research studies the leader. This study flips the lens to the people furthest from power: **eight entry-level Microsoft employees** who had never met CEO Satya Nadella — yet held strong, detailed convictions about whether he led responsibly. Their accounts were **polyphonic**: multiple, often contradicting versions of the same person, all valid, all constructed.

Method Narrative Inquiry · constructivist · interviews + survey (Atlas.ti)

Case One multinational · CEO at extreme hierarchical distance

Finding Divergence came from how each person *weighted* responsibility — not the facts

THE MODEL — THE FOLLOWER INTERPRETIVE PROCESS

Extends Lynham's Responsible Leadership for Performance (RL/P) framework by adding the missing layer: how a follower turns a leader's signals into a verdict.

- 1 Leader signals** — strategy, structural acts (layoffs), symbolic comms, and silence enter the system.
- 2 Mediation & identity filtering** — signals arrive via managers, peers, media; decoded through culture, faith, upbringing, career stage.
- 3 Responsibility domain weighting** — sorted across market, organizational, and moral domains, each weighted differently.
- 4 Recursive trust calibration** — a provisional verdict that every new disruption re-rates.

↳ The loop never closes — output feeds back into how the next signal is read. Trust is continually renegotiated.

SIX THEMES — HOW A VERDICT GETS BUILT

- 1 Leadership Signals.** Strategic decisions, communication, and actions are the raw stimuli.
- 2 Mediation Through Distance.** Perception forms via managers, peers, media — never direct contact.
- 3 Identity Filtering.** Culture, faith, and career stage decide what a signal means.
- 4 Domain Weighting.** Market vs. organizational vs. moral — weighted differently by each.
- 5 Narrative Disruption.** Layoffs, an AI pivot, silence in a crisis — inflection points that re-wire trust.
- 6 Conditional & Recursive Trust.** Provisional, recalibrated, shaping how the next signal lands.

THREE DOMAINS — WHERE TRUST SPLITS

Market

Strategy, innovation, financial stewardship.
Broadly positive across all eight.

Organizational

Culture, empowerment, internal solidarity.
Mixed — stated values vs. lived experience.

Moral

Ethical clarity, transparency, principled risk.
Greatest divergence. Where trust broke.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR LEADERS

1

Design signals with interpretive awareness

Every decision is decoded, not received.

2

Treat the manager as the interpreter

To a distant employee, the skip-level is the CEO.

3

Prepare for moral inflection points

Silence in a crisis is itself a signal.

4

Account for domain-weighted responsibility

Market strength won't offset a moral gap for all.

5

Treat trust as recursive, not static

It's renegotiated after every disruption.