DISSERTATION

HOW ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYEES CONSTRUCT THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP IN A LARGE ORGANIZATION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO LEADERSHIP DISTANCE, FOLLOWER EXPERIENCE, AND CEO INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

HOW ENTRY-LEVEL EMPLOYEES CONSTRUCT THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP IN A LARGE ORGANIZATION: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO LEADERSHIP DISTANCE, FOLLOWER EXPERIENCE, AND CEO INFLUENCE

Responsible Leadership (RL) has emerged as an essential response to globalization, corporate scandals, the erosion of trust in leaders, and the need for organizations to be both ethically and effectively successful in a rapidly changing world. Although the RL movement is gaining momentum, conceptual gaps remain in its definition, and there is very little empirical research on how followers perceive and construct their views of RL. The purpose of this study is to address a gap in empirical research by employing Narrative Inquiry (NI) to explore how employees in large organizations understand and experience RL through the lens of their relationships with their CEO. To provide a focused, bounded analysis of RL within a single organization, this study explores how entry-level employees construct their perceptions of RL as it relates to their CEO. As this study was confined to a single company, the results enable a controlled examination of the impact of leadership across extreme hierarchical distances, while eliminating potential variation attributable to multiple CEOs, organizational culture, and/or varying stakeholder roles. From a constructivist perspective, the study examines RL as a relational/co-constructed phenomenon shaped by organizational systems and constituent expectations. Therefore, the primary focus of this study is to develop an understanding of the relational dynamics of RL and to demonstrate the value of followers' perspectives. By offering a means to capture followers' lived experiences, this study provides insights into how RL is

defined, enacted, and evaluated in organizational settings. Ultimately, the findings of this study add to leadership theory by deepening our understanding of how RL is constructed, thereby closing the gap in followers' perspectives. Furthermore, this study has practical applications for developing leadership in large organizations and can inform organizational operating strategies that promote trust, engagement, and responsible decision-making.

PERSONAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My family

First and foremost, to my wife, who encouraged me to continue this journey despite my offer to drop out to prioritize our relationship. To my kids, who are my greatest joy — I hope this journey inspires you to do hard things that you're passionate about.

The Woodring mantle is one of education. And it is a wonderful family tradition to value education as a practice of lifelong learning and to reject the status quo. To my Grandma and Grandpa Woodring, who believed in the inherent goodness of people and inspired me with their minds, hearts, actions, and generosity. To my Dad, who modeled intellectual rigor and encouraged and aided in this journey. To my Mom, who never stops moving and continues to be my biggest fan. I love you all with all my heart.

To my committee

Thank you for saying yes and supporting my journey. Your belief, advocacy, and advice on refining along the way made this possible. To Tom Chermack, thanks for being so responsive, supportive, and encouraging. And lastly, to my honorary member, Sue Lynham, your work in leadership studies was the seed that took root and enabled this study to grow. I hope my work has honored you and brought more attention to the importance of your academic contributions.

The participants of the study

These acknowledgments would be incomplete without recognizing the participants who responded to me. Recruiting participants proved to be one of the greatest challenges of this journey, and I appreciated the kindness and curiosity that led to a "yes"; each one was a wind in my sail. Their participation made this possible.

TECHNOLOGY ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout this study, the world underwent profound transformations. Beyond the geopolitical landscape, some of which began during this study (e.g., the Palestine conflict), Artificial Intelligence (AI) has remained a central topic for world leaders and frequently emerged in this study. At the time of writing this study, AI continues to drive market disruption and dominate headlines and discussions amid emerging issues of responsibility. I am increasingly concerned that societies, economies, and individuals are not yet prepared to cope with the uncertainty, revolutionary changes, and fundamental challenges that AI may bring.

In the main research phase (Fall 2025) and the writing phase (2024-2026), advances in "frontier" models (such as ChatGPT, Claude, & Gemini) have brought disruptive capabilities at a dizzying pace, almost weekly. While this research remains relevant given these revolutionary changes, in retrospect, I may have preferred to focus more on questions and research designs that could explicitly address these emerging global challenges. Regardless, leaders must transcend self-interest and take responsibility to guide society through this turbulent period in an effective, ethical, and enduring manner. Responsible leaders recognize that the greatest meaning in life consists in finding and shouldering the greatest burdens one can bear (Peterson, 2018). The future needs such responsible leaders.

Since I began writing my doctoral dissertation in 2024, the capabilities of authorship and research tools have advanced rapidly. Tools like Grammarly, initially designed to aid authors in proper grammar, have increasingly moved toward authorship itself, and at times, it has become difficult to recognize my own voice amid the polyphony of AI-augmented recommendations. Atlas.ti also evolved over the course of my research, integrating AI into its analysis process. How these tools will be interpreted in academia and how they will affect expectations of originality remain unclear. Meanwhile, large language models can now write in multiple styles and possess comprehensive, extended context windows and training corpora that far surpass

human capabilities, raising new questions about authorship, current academic practice, and the relevancy of terminal degrees. Given the uncertainty surrounding future academic standards and authorship policy, my advisor, committee, and I believe it is academically prudent and important to disclose the tools used in this dissertation and to describe how they contributed to the study's process and output. These tools and their applications are briefly described below:

Ulysses was used to write my initial rough draft of this dissertation. Ulysses is a writing application that uses Markdown syntax, similar to a simplified version of HTML/CSS. This allowed me to focus on content creation without dealing with formatting details like APA indentation and distractions from additional functionality or AI-augmentation.

Microsoft Word was used once I finished my initial rough draft in Ulysses for final editing and formatting. In addition to the built-in spell checker, Microsoft Word now integrates Copilot, an embedded Large Language Model (LLM) that provides editing suggestions.

Atlas.ti, one of the leading qualitative analysis tools, was used to code participant interviews, manage interview transcripts, and maintain analysis notes and memos. Although Atlas.ti now offers AI-driven features in its analysis workflow, which I tried, I did not use its AI results for two reasons: (1) the results were too exhaustive, so everything appeared as a pattern, and (2) I felt its use would introduce a third-party bias (their GPT stack) which would have complicated the narrative research. Automatically generated topics or codes can be biased by computational methods and other tools, leading to a more complex interpretation of findings.

Grammarly was used in the editing stage of writing. I also worked in Microsoft Word with Grammarly Desktop installed, which overlays on Microsoft Word to offer additional suggestions and functionality. This allowed me to perform real-time grammar checking and editing improvements. I also frequently used Grammarly.com as an online editor for reviewing milestone drafts. The online portal of Grammarly offers additional features, including style correction, language suggestions, plagiarism detection, and general proofreading support.

ChatGPT was used primarily as a research and proofreading tool. As a research assistant, especially towards the end of 2025, I used it to summarize articles, identify relevant topics, and rapidly synthesize new academic literature. As a proofreading tool, it helped me review APA formatting and maintain consistency of citations throughout the text and references.

To ensure the academic integrity and personal authorship of my work, I also used Grammarly's AI analysis tool to detect AI-generated text. The tool claims the following:

> *The AI detection feature is developed to empower our users with tools for responsible AI usage. It is your authenticity safeguard — it identifies text written and/or modified by major AI models, like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini, helping you ensure originality and meet academic, editorial, or institutional criteria. Whether you're verifying your own work or reviewing others', this feature adds clarity and certainty to the presubmission and review process. (Grammarly, n.d.)*

Grammarly's analysis showed that approximately 1% of the content in the entire document corpus is similar to AI-generated text. Upon closer examination of sections flagged as AI-generated, some content labeled as AI-generated was definitely written exclusively by me, while other sections were clearly suggestions from Grammarly and/or Microsoft Copilot that now brought recognizable patterns into the text. I made this minority percentage of AI-patterned text explicit to my advisor and committee during the dissertation review process.

In the coming years, as new technologies accelerate the research and writing process, the way dissertations are written and evaluated must certainly evolve. Institutions like Colorado State University may develop new policies, programs, and tools that may render this acknowledgement either ahead of its time or offbeat. Time will tell. I chose to complete this study now, partly to situate it within the current scholarly context and, more importantly, to alleviate the cognitive load of the study so I can be as present as possible to lead my family and work through this era of great uncertainty and change with a clear purpose to be as responsible a leader as I can be. *Selah.*

DEDICATION

In January of 2008, I was sitting in a field in Zambrano, Honduras, at the start of a mission trip, a month after graduating from college. Uncertain of my purpose in life, I was stooped in a valley of loneliness and aimless depths. It was in that place, prompted by the will to offer myself to a higher cause and believing that my life and skills were not accidental and that life is a part of a grand narrative from a Creator God, I felt the presence and voice of my Lord tell me: '*You are not a craftsman but a leader of many — if you can get out of your own way.'*

I have been following that vocation ever since. My struggle was one of uncertainty, identity, and faith. I excelled in my crafts (graphic design, photography, web design), but I felt called to do more. I did not consider myself a leader, so I had to re-identify myself. With it, I realized that not my will, but God's be done. My PhD is part of my commitment to the race to which I have been assigned. In it, I hold fast to these writings from the ancient text of the Holy Bible as truth:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us" Hebrews 12:1

"Dedicate your works to the Lord, and your plans will be established" Proverbs 16:3

"To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen." Philippians 4:20

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The price of greatness is responsibility.

Winston Churchill (1943)

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Organizations worldwide are experiencing increased societal pressure to demonstrate their actions in response to numerous evolving challenges. Businesses are increasingly expected to engage positively and provide leadership in corporate responsibility and humanitarian initiatives through their organizational actions (Pless & Maak, 2008).

The traditional capitalist model for organizations has been challenged in recent years. Now, organizations are expected not only to maximize shareholder growth but also to create a positive impact on society (Freeman et al., 2010). The 2025 Edelman Trust Barometer reveals a paradox in society's views of institutional leadership. There is significant distrust toward government, journalists, and business leaders. For example, 70% believe government leaders intentionally mislead the public, 67% believe this about journalists, and 59% about business leaders. However, the public still trusts businesses the most. Businesses have a 62% trust rating, NGOs 58%, Government 52%, and Media 52% (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2025).

Due to increased pressure on corporations to engage with social issues and growing consumer scrutiny, responsible corporate behavior has become a crucial component of strategic management. This develops into a moral obligation through which firms earn trust and goodwill, thereby improving living environments and, most importantly, providing a social opportunity for firms to grow and expand (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2025). People want firms to behave as

responsible leaders. They also want business leaders to consider the effects their organizations have on all stakeholders and to be accountable for those effects.

Leaders must also consider the long-term sustainability implications of decisions, including environmental impacts and the business's viability. Today, there is increasing pressure on business leaders to be sustainably responsible for solutions to employee security, fair labor practices, and a sustainable economy for future generations. Voegtlin (2016) emphasized the intense competition between short-term gains and long-term success at an organization. Leaders must meet short-term demands from shareholders and internal stakeholders while maintaining a long-term perspective on sustainability (Flammer & Bansal, 2017). The paradigm has shifted to RL. Society constantly judges organizations not only on their financial performance but also on their commitments to current and future employees, communities at large, and future generations. (Maak & Pless, 2006a; Voegtlin et al., 2012). A recent example is the Business Roundtable's new corporate purpose statement. The statement urges leaders to consider not only shareholder value, but also the welfare of customers, employees, and the environment (Harrison et al., 2020).

The Problem

Advancement of RL theory is hampered by many obstacles, primarily related to definitions, measurements, and applications. A major problem is the absence of a general or widely accepted definition of RL, which has led to fragmentation in RL research and variable measurement and application methodologies (Pless & Maak, 2011). As a result, integrating RL into leadership practice is hindered by a lack of clarity about what RL entails, while leaders are simultaneously under pressure to respond to global issues, unethical conduct, and stakeholder expectations (Voegtlin et al., 2012). In addition, empirical research on RL has been limited,

particularly from the follower's perspective, with virtually all studies examining leader behavior rather than how employees perceive and define leadership (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018). Miska and Mendenhall (2015) highlighted a gap in the literature regarding followers' experiences of RL, underscoring the need for research examining how followers experience RL. Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) called for increased focus on the role of followers in leadership processes, noting that existing research has been primarily leader-focused.

Emerging Challenges, Gaps, and Problems

Since the 2008 global downturn, trust in the corporate sector has eroded. High-profile scandals — such as Enron's collapse and Volkswagen's emissions scandal — contributed to this decline. So did a series of ethical breaches and new crises, including COVID-19 and AI-driven decision-making (Edelman, 2025). This situation raises key questions: What defines leadership accountability? What mechanisms can restore trust? (Maak & Pless, 2006b; Muff et al., 2020) RL is stakeholder theory-based. It expands leaders' responsibilities beyond financial results to include ethical stewardship and engagement with all stakeholders, particularly in times of challenge (Pless et al., 2012; Voegtlin et al., 2012).

Three trends and one gap emerge in the literature relevant to this study. The three trends are: (1) RL in the context of techno-global disruption, (2) the increasing share of large firms in the U.S. workforce, and (3) CEO accountability. The gap is a major emerging one relative to the rapid advancement of leader-centric research on RL, namely, follower perspectives in RL research.

Challenge 1: RL with Technological and Global Disruption. New technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), are disrupting how businesses operate, with both positive and negative implications for business operations and society at large. According to certain

academics and corporate executives, social change is the driving force in the business environment (Singh, 2023; Scherer, 2015). A new paradigm should be fully implemented to maximize AI's potential in supporting leadership roles by pairing technical skills that enable AI to operate in workplaces with emotional intelligence and responsible decision-making. Advanced AIs raise increasingly pressing questions about workplace accountability long before their continued evolution makes them even more capable than humans; while remaining easily available and customizable (London, 2024), the workforce is undergoing a parallel evolution. An infusion, as Quaquebeke describes it, of techno-emotional-intelligent-responsible acumen. Therefore, it can be concluded that talent management and the ethical use of AI are both essential for organizations seeking to adapt to AI-driven changes and establish sustainability in a dynamic economic landscape (Sposato, 2024). Accordingly, senior leaders have an obligation to researchers, such as Kuennen (2023), to ensure the responsible and ethical use of AI.

Technology has a social impact, and organizations must quickly follow trends to keep up with society. AI, connectivity, and data analytics add more dimensions to the issues leaders must address within their organizations to ensure the survival of such entities (Kandasamy, 2024). The way human-machine interactions take place in contemporary organizations explicitly reveals a clear cooperative coexistence, grounded in a framework for the development of responsibility towards society, as stated by Omol (2024). This reality underscores RL as one of the most significant issues facing organizations in the contemporary business world (Pless et al., 2021b). The challenges confronting organizations have grown increasingly complex, and it is leaders the world desperately seeks to step forward and provide direction (Harrison, 2024). Work has gone remote; workplaces are being inundated by disruptive technologies, including AI, and a slew of new ethical issues seem to be percolating through globalization and global crises. These changes

call for a revision of the processes through which leaders interact with teams and make decisions. Of all U.S. workers, 58% are working remotely, either part-time or full-time (McKinsey & Company, 2023). At workplaces, remote or hybrid, trust should be built to make such modes flourish within any organization. Communication modes that meet evolving workplace needs should also be articulated, and inclusive digital environments for all employees should be developed to sustain productivity. Artificial Intelligence is among the latest emerging technologies, which may drastically change how work is performed by providing new tools for decision-making, workflow management, and support for myriad other processes. In doing so, numerous ethical issues that leaders need to be aware of and address, specifically privacy and fairness, as well as the potential for automation/technology to replace jobs (Ivanov, 2023; McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2016).

Globalization and crises such as COVID-19 have made it even harder for leaders to practice effective leadership, requiring them to balance short-term survival with long-term sustainability. Leaders must develop the ability to act ethically in highly complex, dynamic environments while also being aware of the various cultural and regulatory requirements governing ethical conduct (OECD, 2023). Only through sensitivity training on integrity can leaders be made aware of the importance of leading with integrity in today's globalized world (Rudolph et al., 2021).

Additionally, leaders should be adaptable to change and culturally and technologically intelligent in the current, rapidly changing environment (Kandasamy, 2024). Ultimately, RL practices grounded in ethical principles are necessary to address the complexity of a changing world while protecting stakeholders' interests.

Challenge 2: Shift Toward Large Organizations in The U.S. Workforce. The human experience is composed of socially constructed phenomena, such as leadership. Leadership exists because people talk about it within their social environments (Ospina & Schall, 2001). Additionally, patterns of human existence help us understand the world by experiencing it through others' lives. Postmodernism challenges traditional ideas of objective truth and promotes the view that there are many different views of the same thing (Multani, 2020), thereby highlighting the socially constructed nature of the world we live in (Ospina & Schall, 2001).

However, as research moves past the deconstruction of postmodernist ideas and into reconstructive ideas about moderation on the tension between relativism and truth, it will accept that, even though many realities exist at the same time, they can still be studied to help develop our understanding of the complex nature of the human experience (Ospina & Schall, 2001). In 2023, organizations with more than 250 employees accounted for approximately 55.63% of private-sector employment, particularly in industries like retail and finance (McKinsey & Company, 2023). This shift will have profound implications for leadership, as increased leadership distance, or a physical, social, and/or psychological gap between managers and their employees, will challenge current forms of leadership that are based on direct interaction with subordinates (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). As organizations continue to grow larger, the current trend of increasing organizational size is likely to persist; therefore, understanding how leadership distance affects modern leadership practices is crucial (van Houwelingen et al., 2017). As organizations expand, employees experience leadership less through personal engagement and more through organizational structures, policies, at-scale media, and messaging. Shamir (2012) captures this unique leadership dynamic in this statement:

> [Leadership] has been presented as applying equally to the leadership of CEOs and to the leadership of first-line supervisors. Yet the two situations are very different in many

respects, one of which is the fact that upper echelon leaders do not have direct contacts with the majority of their followers, and the latter do not have direct experience with the leader. This difference may have significant implications for the nature of the leadership process and for the relationships which develop between leaders and followers. For instance, the reasons for accepting and following a direct leader may be different from the reasons for accepting and following a distant leader. (p. 22)

Figure 1

U.S. employee distribution in the private sector 2000-2023, by firm size

Note. U.S. Small Business Administration. (2023).

Challenge 3: Heightened Expectations for Responsible CEO Action. The increased focus on Corporate Governance in today's business environment makes Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) accountable for all aspects of the organization they represent; this accountability is also due in part to the vast difference in the amount paid to CEOs compared to the typical entry-level employee in today's workforce (Przychodzen & Gomez-Bezares, 2021). The gap between CEO pay and entry-level worker pay has been rising at an alarming rate over the last few years (Przychodzen & Gomez-Bezares, 2021). Studies have shown that CEO salaries have outpaced average wage increases for workers. Typically, these salary increases are attributed to high-risk decision-making, impact on company strategy, and overall company performance (Bebchuk & Fried, 2006). In 2022, CEOs of large U.S.-based corporations averaged 344 times the median

income of a worker; in 1965, the ratio was approximately 21:1. This increase in CEO-worker income inequality has intensified scrutiny from stakeholders and the general public of CEOs' responsible and ethical leadership within their organizations (Piketty et al., 2018). The increase in income disparity creates an expectation among society that CEOs be responsible stewards of their organizations, balancing the interests of shareholders with those of employees, promoting equitable labor practices, and creating sustainable outcomes (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). In addition to being the most visible representatives of their organizations, CEOs establish the ethical tone for their organizations; therefore, RL provides a framework for demonstrating corporate responsibility and building trust within their organizations in light of the growing wealth gap and declining confidence in leaders (Voegtlin et al., 2012).

Gap: Followership Research and Larger Organizations. An essential yet often underexplored aspect of RL is the role followers play in shaping their perceptions of leadership. Research indicates that followers' value congruence significantly influences their perceptions of leadership styles and RL outcomes (Groves & LaRocca, 2012). The existence of RL cannot occur independently of the organization's followers, as leadership exists as a social relationship that has been socially constructed (Lynham, 2004). The actualization of the effectiveness and ethical dimensions of leadership occurs through followers' interactions with and experiences of the leader. Therefore, understanding how followers form their perceptions of RL is essential to recognizing its importance within an organizational setting (Uhl-Bien, 2006). The followers' interpretation of RL will directly influence their behavior, decision-making, and engagement with organizational objectives. Followers who perceive their leaders as practicing responsibly are more likely to align their actions with ethical and sustainable organizational outcomes (Voegtlin, 2016).

Although there has been increasing recognition of follower perceptions in leadership research, leadership studies remain unquestionably focused on the leader. Karl Weick (2007) noted that there existed an imbalance in leadership studies regarding the frequency of mentions of "leader" versus "follower," as he identified that "leader" was mentioned 57 times for each time that "follower" was mentioned. This ratio only marginally decreased to 22:1 four years later (Bligh, 2011). This trend indicates a greater cultural bias toward examining leader behaviors and relating them to leadership outcomes, rather than to the RL process between leaders and followers, which influences how followers define leadership within their own organizations (Meindl et al., 1985; Jackson & Parry, 2011). The research gap concerning how followers interpret the effects of leadership is most evident in large organizations. This is due to the physical and psychological separation that hierarchical leadership structures create in large organizations (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Followers in large organizations rarely have direct interaction with senior leaders. Therefore, followers interpret leadership influence through an organization's culture, policies, and communication systems (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Emerging challenges illustrate the need for RL in the current landscape of leadership development. Furthermore, the increasing disconnect between employees and executive staff necessitates an investigation into the construction of leadership influence at extreme hierarchical distances. The social environments in which followers form attributions about leadership are typically shaped by followers' perceptions of what leadership is, rather than their experiences with leaders (Georgakakis et al., 2023).

Many traditional leadership theories do not provide adequate insight into how direct leadership operates at the enterprise level, as they focus primarily on the dyadic relationship between supervisors and employees and fail to capture the relational and systemic aspects of

leadership (Yukl, 2013; Shamir, 1995; Yammarino & Dubinsky, 1994). The research problem identified in this study captures the difficulties and gaps RL is experiencing today and provides a new, unique, and important perspective on how Entry Level Employees are developing their perceptions of RL's most senior leader.

Research Problem.

Therefore, the problem driving this research is as follows:

Despite increasing organizational scale, global and technological disruption, and employee disengagement and distrust, leadership research continues to prioritize leader behaviors over followers' interpretations and experiences of Responsible Leadership.

The effectiveness of leaders, their ethical decision-making, and corporate accountability within complex systems have largely been explained by leaders' characteristics or behaviors, for example, the trait theory of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Pless & Maak, 2011; Voegtlin et al., 2012), and by the decisions they make, for example, decision-making theory. Many theories and models, both positivist and empirical, that analyze a leader's effectiveness through ethical decisions and corporate accountability in complex systems still focus mainly on the leader. Miska and Mendenhall (2015) argue that this approach fails to account for how followers help create the meaning associated with a particular leader. As organizations continue to grow, researchers need to further investigate perceptions and experiences among lower-level personnel regarding leadership at the top, which has limited or no direct contact with them. While this provides an opportunity to check and deepen understanding of how junior staff conceptualize RL, it also offers insights into the formation of perceptions among middle-level employees. It develops a relational, contextualized perspective on leaders' influence over others in large organizations by partially bridging theoretical gaps within leadership studies.

Significance of the Problem

Financial and cultural risks have prevented the discovery of what entry-level employees think about RL and how leadership distance affects their organizational commitment. Turnover costs alone provide a strong rationale for this study. U.S. firms report an estimated $1 trillion in turnover costs per year (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). An employee's departure can cost between fifty percent and two hundred percent of the annual salary in replacement costs — recruitment, training, and lost productivity (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). Beyond these costs, disengaged employees contribute to significant global unproductivity. Only 23 percent report being actively engaged at work, resulting in up to $7.8 trillion per year, according to Gallup (2023). Phenomena such as "quiet quitting," defined as employees becoming disengaged and reducing discretionary effort, have also been reported in large organizations where leadership distance further separates employees from their executive leaders (Kim & Sohn, 2024). If employees perceive the CEO and top management as remote, ineffective, or engaged in unethical behavior, their commitment and motivation decline, along with trust within the organization (Georgakakis et al., 2023). Most organizations do not seek to understand how frontline employees perceive RL. If organizations fail to engage entry-level employees in shaping perceptions of RL, they experience higher employee turnover, lower employee engagement, and a diminished leadership pipeline. This study addresses this concern by investigating how RL is perceived at the greatest leadership distance, potentially informing the development of trust, engagement, and RL practices in large-scale organizations.

Leadership has largely been examined in a search for the holy grail of neat, repeatable individual behaviors; this study, through storytelling (Meindl et al., 1985), presents the messiness and unequivocal enmeshment of leadership and followership as an infinitely complex system that

can only be partially experienced through storytelling. Therefore, ethical leadership for executives is not a simple concept. That is one of the key reasons for adopting a qualitative, exploratory approach to this study. Such an approach is well-suited to understanding dynamic and intricate phenomena, such as leadership (Conger, 1998). As Klenke (2016) stated:

> "The world in which leaders and managers operate is becoming more complex and difficult than in the past, continually shaping and renewing itself through forces such as globalization, rapidly changing technologies, shifting workforce dynamics, and evolving conceptualizations of leadership; qualitative research has much to offer." (p. XV)

The goal of this study is to develop a data-based rationale for an RL that reflects employee perspectives — thereby bridging a gap in the literature on follower perceptions — by recommending a qualitative NI to examine how employees in larger organizations understand the concept of RL. To build knowledge of RL from followers' viewpoints, this research can identify the relational processes and co-created values that enable leaders to engage in ongoing, effective, and ethical leadership practices (Miska & Mendenhall, 2015; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). As such, the methodology employed in this study increases our theoretical understanding of RL by incorporating a critical aspect of followership that has been overlooked in prior studies, and also provides organizational leaders with practical knowledge on how to develop trust among employees and strengthen relationships between leaders and followers, thereby fostering joint responsibility for their organization's actions in today's highly dynamic and increasingly complex world (Maak & Pless, 2006b; Voegtlin et al., 2012). This study presents a nuanced model to advance RL in current global and societal environments. It makes a modest contribution to the field of leadership studies by foregrounding follower perspectives, emphasizing the importance of scale, and identifying distance from the leader as a key variable in assessing leadership effectiveness (O'Shannassy, 2021; MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018).

Purpose Statement

This study examines how entry-level employees construct their perceptions of RL in relation to their CEO, particularly how leadership influence is interpreted from a distance and how followers assess leaders' actions as (a) effective, (b) ethical, and (c) enduring.

Methodological Philosophy and Approach

The study utilized the constructivist paradigm to frame the understanding of reality as co-created by the collective experiences and interpretations of individuals and groups (Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lincoln et al., 2011) in addition to emphasizing the subjective nature of reality in that knowledge develops from the interaction of individuals with their environment and from social and cultural influences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998).

The constructivist paradigm from an ontological viewpoint views reality as experiential, relative, and contextually determined (i.e., based upon individuals' experiences and perceptions) (Guba, 1990; Lincoln et al., 2011), thus, the experience of RL is seen as a co-creation of those individuals who interact within the parameters of organizational systems, along with the experiences, social interactions, and cultural environments present (Voegtlin, 2016; Maak & Pless, 2006a). This ontology corresponds with the focus of this research on how followers create their perceptions of RL within large organizations.

From an epistemological perspective, the constructivist paradigm views knowledge as constructed through interaction between the researcher and the participant, rather than as the objective discovery of truth (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Schwandt, 1994). Therefore, narrative analysis is the most suitable methodology for this research, as it honors participants' lived

experiences and offers an opportunity to explore how they construct meaning regarding RL (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative analysis offers the opportunity to examine contextualized understandings of leadership while providing greater depth than quantitative methodologies (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018; Riessman, 2008). Based on the theoretical foundation of this study, it is assumed that narratives provided by followers will offer insight into how they perceive, interpret, and enact RL. Therefore, it shall shed light on the relational and contextual dimensions of responsibility, as well as the ethical and emotional dimensions, in relationships between leaders and their followers (Meindl et al., 2004; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The study, therefore, expanded and developed leadership theories and practical applications of leadership within rapidly changing large organizations through a constructivist lens.

Researcher's Perspective

Bruce Avolio introduces the concept of your 'life stream,' which he defined as "the cumulative events from birth to the present that shape your approach to influencing others and yourself" (Avolio, 2005, p. 11). Whether or not we are consciously aware of it, we all have formed a nuanced leadership philosophy, known as our 'implicit leadership theory' (Schyns & Meindl, 2005). Alongside this, one holds strong convictions about what they consider the right and wrong ways to lead others or to be led.

The human experience is composed of socially constructed phenomena, such as leadership. Leadership has been shown to exist because people discuss it within their social environments (Ospina & Schall, 2001). Additionally, the pattern of human existence enables us to understand the world around us by experiencing it through others' lives. Postmodernism

challenges traditional notions of objective truth and promotes the view that there are multiple perspectives on the same object (Multani, 2020), thereby highlighting the socially constructed nature of the world we inhabit (Ospina & Schall, 2001). However, as research moves past the deconstruction of postmodernist ideas and into the reconstructive ideas of moderation on the tension between relativism and truth, research will accept that even though many realities are existing at the same time, they can still be researched to help develop our understanding of the complex nature of our collective, uniquely human experience (Ospina & Schall, 2001).

Definitions of Terms

The literature provides definitions of critical terms used in this study about RL and related concepts. The definitions presented here are intended to provide a foundational context and research framework.

Responsible Leadership (RL): A form of leadership in which leaders are committed to being accountable to stakeholders inside and outside their organizations. It involves responding to ethical, economic, and social problems and requires balancing the interests of various stakeholders to achieve sustainable outcomes (Pless et al., 2011; Maak & Pless, 2006b). A full description of RL is provided in Chapter 2.

Follower-centric leadership: A leadership perspective shifts the focus from leader behavior to followers' perceptions and responses to leadership. It also examines the collaborative nature of leadership and the relationships it forms, acknowledging that followers actively participate in the leadership process (Meindl, 1995; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Thus, followership and leadership cannot be separated in the study of inherent leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014).

Leadership distance: The physical, social, or psychological distance between a leader and their followers. It affects how followers perceive their leader's actions and decisions,

particularly in organizations with multiple layers or large numbers of employees (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Responsibility: The obligation to perform ethically, to make decisions that are in the best interest of stakeholders, and to be accountable for the results of one's actions, especially in a bounded system where responsibility is formed and can be assigned (for example: a parent is responsible for their children). Responsibility includes individuals' and organizations' commitment to adhere to societal, legal, and moral standards (Lynham & Chermack, 2006).

Responsible: A person who is responsible is accountable and performs ethically. Responsible people make sure their decisions and actions benefit their stakeholders and reflect the broader values of society (Maak & Pless, 2006a).

Irresponsible: Not being accountable is a lack of responsibility or awareness of the proper ethics of actions/decisions that do not consider the well-being of all stakeholders or violate the accepted social/ethical standards (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018).

Ethics: Ethics are the values that guide leaders' decision-making, helping them determine right from wrong and ensuring their decisions have moral integrity and satisfy the expectations of all stakeholders and society as a whole (Brown & Trevino, 2006; White-Newman, 1993; Lynham & Chermack, 2006).

Effectiveness: In RL research, effectiveness refers to leaders' ability to meet organizational performance and goal requirements (Maak & Pless, 2006a). Effectiveness is most commonly used to measure financial performance in the context of RL research; it may also include assessments by leader constituents (White-Newman, 1993; Lynham, 2000).

Enduring: Enduring leadership takes a long-term view, emphasizing sustainability, and is often contrasted with a short-term view that undermines long-term resilience. Enduring leaders

ensure that their decisions address current needs and future challenges and align with the principles of stewardship and corporate responsibility (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018; Lynham & Chermack, 2006).

Entry-level employee. An entry-level employee is new to the workforce and at the beginning of their career. Typically, an entry-level employee has fewer than three years of experience in a non-management role and has very limited decision-making authority (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023; Gentry et al., 2021). Upward mobility paths foster professional growth by offering training opportunities that can be pursued with a supervisor's guidance and clear, defined paths (NACE, 2024). Employees in entry-level roles are the farthest removed from Executive Leadership. They are most likely to receive leadership input through Organizational Culture, Policies, and/or indirect forms of communication from upper management, rather than directly from Executive Leadership (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Large organization: A large organization is a company employing over 1,000 employees that uses a complex organizational structure, including multiple layers of management, significant hierarchical structures, a wide range of functions, an international presence, and substantial financial resources. Formal leadership models, a global presence, and mass-scale operations characterize organizations of this type. They differ significantly from small and medium-sized enterprises, where leadership may be less formalized and relationships between executives and employees are much closer. In terms of employee access to Executive Decision-Makers, such as CEOs, the sheer size of large organizations creates significant "Leadership Distance," and consequently, entry-level employees and other lower-level employees may have very little opportunity to interact directly with Executive Decision-Makers (Voegtlin et al., 2012; Antonakis & Atwater, 2002).

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

In addition to providing insight into how first-time workers understand RL in relation to their Chief Executive Officer, this study acknowledges important assumptions and limitations. First, it assumes that the perception of RL among first-time workers is almost entirely mediated by indirect contact with the CEO, such as corporate messaging, overall organizational culture, and his mode of communication as a leader, rather than by direct engagement (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). These findings are consistent with the Leadership Distance literature (Georgakakis et al., 2023), which suggests that employees perceive their leaders through mediated experience rather than direct contact with the leader, particularly for employees at lower levels in the hierarchy. The second limitation allows the researcher to compare controlled results; however, it does not permit broad conclusions about organizations in other business environments with various leadership structures and/or cultures (Patton, 2015). The third major limitation of this study is that it specifically excluded mid- and top-level managers, who presumably would have had the opportunity to provide a different interpretation of RL than entry-level employees and possibly act as mediators in interpreting their leaders' behaviors (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Huy, 2002). Finally, although RL encompasses many forms of stakeholder involvement, this study was restricted to the engagement of internal stakeholders (employees) and excluded external stakeholders, including investors, customers, and regulatory agencies, that can also provide important inputs into a firm's leadership accountability (Voegtlin et al., 2012; Maak & Pless, 2006b).

The above limitations call for future research to adopt a wider perspective on RL by investigating it across different management levels and various stakeholder categories. Such an

approach will enhance researchers' understanding of the responsibilities associated with leadership positions in large organizations.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Responsible Leadership (RL) emerged in academic literature in the early 1990s, with its first articulation by White-Newman in 1993. In the mid-2000s, RL gained prominence due to high-profile leadership misconduct at Enron, WorldCom, Parmalat, VW, and Ford (Maak & Pless, 2006b; Seeger & Ulmer, 2003; Voegtlin et al., 2012). Its significance has continued to grow because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Maak et al., 2021; Tsui, 2020), calls for corporate social responsibility, political scandals, and international crises (Sharma & Ray, 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Responding to this emerging need for corporate responsibility, Maak and Pless (2006a) stated, "Responsible leadership is one of the most pressing issues in the business world" (p. 1).

The first distinctions regarding the construct of RL were developed in the field of human resource development (Piñeros Espinosa, 2022) by White-Newman (1993) and Lynham (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004). Lynham developed a model of Responsible Leadership for Performance (RL/P). Although much RL literature developed and garnered attention in management (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018), recent reviews (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020; Foldøy et al., 2021; Haque et al., 2021; Shi & Ye, 2016) have drawn more inclusive boundaries.

Although there are many calls for a unified theory or definition of RL, scholars generally agree that RL is multidimensional and context-dependent (Quigley et al., 2005). However, the literature does not provide a single, conclusive definition. Instead, it reflects diverse perspectives across academic disciplines (Pless & Maak, 2011). Pless and Maak (2011) note that the construct is fluid, suggesting that the answer to 'What is responsible leadership?' depends on context.

Similarly, Waldman and Galvin (2008) point out that the concept is defined differently across scholars.

Given RL's importance and the ongoing debate over its definition, an integrative review using Torraco's (2005) guidelines is needed to clarify understanding since RL/P's creation (Lynham, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004). This review aims to clarify what is known and what remains unknown about RL and to guide future research, theory, and practice. It addresses the following questions:

1. What is the current state of knowledge on RL?
    a. What do we appear to know about the construct of RL?
    b. What do we appear not to know about the construct of RL?
2. What are the implications for (a) research, (b) theory, and (c) practice of RL?

This literature review method was structured according to Torraco's (2005) process of constructing an integrative literature review. The study is guided by a constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2013). Findings from the review of literature are presented in two parts. First, the literature review focuses on what is known about the construct of RL and how it is described. Second, this review looks at gaps and unknowns in the RL literature that provide direction for future research, theory, and practice (Torraco, 2005, p. 362). An integrative literature review is a distinctive form of research that generates new knowledge about a topic by reviewing, critiquing, and synthesizing representative literature in an integrated way, thereby developing new frameworks and perspectives (Torraco, 2005, p. 356).

This literature review aims to provide an up-to-date synthesis of RL by searching, retrieving, categorizing, defining, differentiating, and theming relevant works. It cites

foundational studies, identifies gaps and areas for future research, analyzes and critiques sources, and creates new understanding through synthesis (Torraco, 2005, p. 356).

Methodology and Methods

As the theory of how the inquiry should proceed, the methodology can be considered the hook on which the chosen methods utilized in this review are hung (Glesne, 2016; Schwandt, 2014). The methods are the tools employed in this study to collect and analyze data consistent with the methodology (Schwandt, 2014).

Ontologically, this review is undergirded with the supposition that reality is interpreted and socially constructed relative to individual experience (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Accordingly, the reality of what is known and unknown about RL is a construction through the collection and analysis of literature in a manner that is subjective to the researcher, acting as an "interpretive participant" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 103). The objective of the integrative review, as Torraco (2005) wrote, is "synthesis integrates existing ideas with new ideas to create a new formulation of the topic or issue" (p. 356).

Data Collection and Selection Criteria

Relevant literature was collected from electronic databases and search engines. The review began with White-Newman (1993). To ensure a proper understanding, literature was not limited to publications (Torraco, 2005) but also included trade journals (Broadbent, 2015; De Bettignies, 2014; Tsui, 2021), university statements of purpose, and private corporation mission statements (Lord Corporation, 2015; Wells, 2009). Books (Badracco, 2013; Kempster & Carroll, 2016) were also reviewed. Four criteria were used: (1) written in English; (2) title or abstract contains "responsible leader" or responsible leadership; (3) focus on RL as distinctive, definitive, and independent; and (4) published between Jan. 1, 1993, and Oct. 1, 2022.

Searches were conducted across major academic databases and narrowed through several deductive steps. Articles were excluded using a "Title only" filter. Duplicate reports were removed. Abstract screening then narrowed the total number of articles. Finally, papers were reviewed for relevance, and those that did not mention RL as a stand-alone construct were excluded to maintain a focused emphasis on RL (Torraco, 2005, p. 362).

In addition to searching for peer-reviewed articles, a general internet search for "responsible leadership" yielded blogs and trade articles on RL. Six papers from the 2010 RL conference in South Africa were also added. In total, 128 pieces were included.

Analysis and Synthesis of Selected Literature

An analysis table was created with the entries ordered by publication date, as Torraco (2005) recommended. The selected literature was then analyzed individually using open coding and constant comparison to uncover new meaning within and across the selected set (Merriam, 2002). Each piece was coded using these questions: (1) Which methods were used in the literature? (2) How have the author(s) described RL within their work? (3) Why did the authors choose to describe "responsible leadership"? (4) How does the literature better inform an understanding of what is known about RL? (5) What consideration was given to follower perspectives?

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion. The search for literature was guided by four criteria: (1) written in English, (2) title or abstract contains "responsible leader" or responsible leadership, (3) focus on RL as distinctive, definitive, and independent, and (4) published between Jan. 1, 1993, and March 16, 2023. In addition to these criteria, key terms were expanded without restrictions. This included

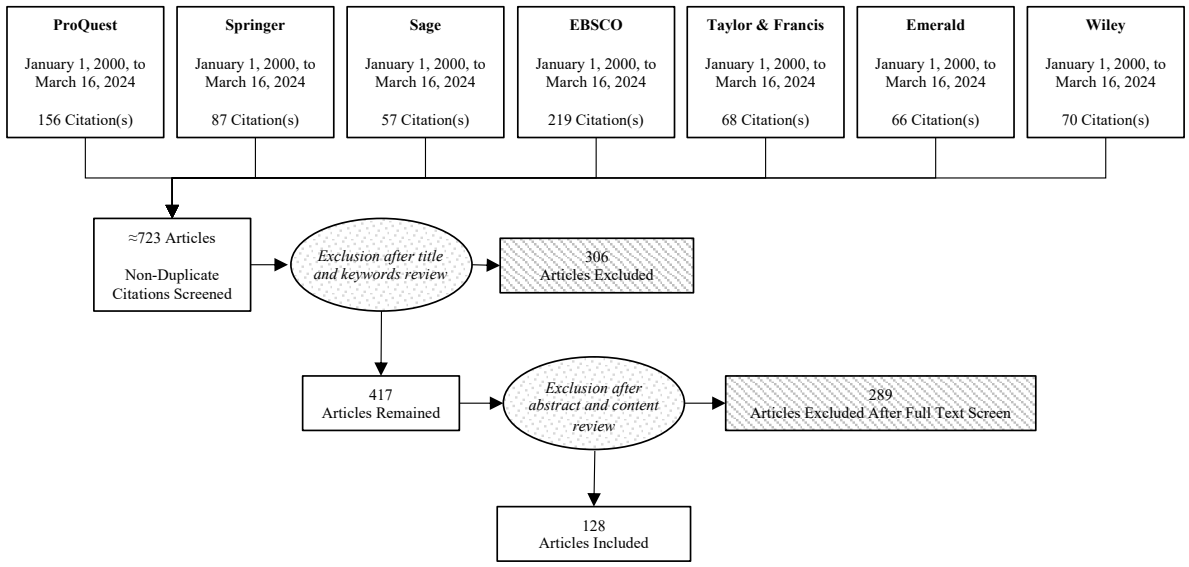
the incorporation of specific private-sector businesses and organizations, with no limitations on terminology used to describe RL, whether it was referred to as socially RL or globally RL.

Exclusion Criteria. The review excluded publications beyond peer-reviewed journal articles, including conference papers, thesis dissertations, reviews, conceptual studies, and qualitative studies. Studies were also excluded if the survey instruments used for measurement were not published or accessible. Furthermore, research on RL in non-profit contexts, including leadership in public-sector organizations and political leadership, was excluded. Studies involving student populations without reported work experience, particularly those assessing learning outcomes from leadership courses, were also omitted.

Process. The initial search yielded 1,313 results (Figure 2). After removing duplicates, 723 articles remained. These underwent screening based on title and keyword search, removing 306 articles. Additional screening, including text reviews, resulted in 128 publications.

Figure 2

Process of Search for the RL Literature



Findings

The integrative review process creates new knowledge by examining the whole body of existing literature (Torraco, 2005). Through the examination of each piece individually, and then the consideration across the entire set, what is known and not known emerges through thematic construction. In what is constructed, the absence and gaps become more explicit, revealing new opportunities and implications for future research.

What is Known About RL?

What is known about RL, its intent, and *how* scholars have researched it is examined. To this end, the literature was coded into two categories: (a) why people have decided to write on RL and their motivations behind its development, and (b) how people have written about RL to describe what RL is and how it manifests.

Why Have People Written about RL?

There are many ways in which people have written about RL and categorized its study. Based on this open coding, the following themes emerged as the primary reasons for writing about RL. Authors have researched RL to:

1. Explore leadership through affective characteristics, traits, and behaviors
2. Explore other leadership theories in the context of RL
3. Explore leadership through a systems lens
4. Explore leadership through a constituency orientation
5. Explore leadership framed within short- and long-term perspectives
6. Explore leadership through an ethical lens
7. Explore leadership related to corporate social responsibility (CSR)
8. Explore the CEO as a central figure in RL

1. Explore Leadership through Affective Characteristics, Traits, and Behaviors.

This exploration includes leaders who are deemed responsible (or irresponsible), often positioning RL alongside other leadership theories (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018). Any cursory study of the leadership literature reveals a prevailing tendency to coin new adjectives to precede the word leadership, e.g., transformational, ethical, authentic, virtuous, spiritual, and so on (Kempster & Carroll, 2016). Many scholars have identified this perpetual reconceptualization and theoretical claim-staking as academic jargon (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). It is a common academic endeavor of incremental conceptual variation, filling in the edges of a paradigm (Lynham, 2002).

James Meindl (1995) described this search for leadership traits as a prevalent approach to leadership studies in which a romanticized view of leadership as a privileged position of esteem, prestige, charisma, and heroism has become an academic obsession. With so many extant leadership theories and adjectives, it is no surprise that RL has been associated with many existing leadership approaches, especially related to the affective components of other leadership approaches (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018).

Since its introduction into literature, RL has been associated with leadership theories such as authentic (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), charismatic, communal (Bryson & Crosby, 1992; DePree, 1997), distributed (Bolden, 2011), dynamic, ethical (Treviño et al., 2000, 2003), participative, servant (Greenleaf, 1977; Hunter et al., 2013; Spears, 2010; van Dierendonck, 2011), shared (Pearce & Conger, 2002), spiritual (Fry, 2003), transformational (Bass, 1985; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Waldman et al., 2006), transactional, virtuous (Cameron, 2012), and more (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018; Northouse, 2021).

Ensuring this differentiation, in theory, many of the scholars working in this style of theory construction operate with the premise that these constructs would allow a leader, follower, scholar, or observer to differentiate between a "responsible leader" and a "servant leader." This affective characteristic approach to RL may provide a normative theoretical orientation, allowing someone to describe a leader who emphasizes responsibility through word and deed as a responsible leader (Argawal & Bhal, 2020). Similarly, for organizations seeking to encourage RL, these affective descriptions aim to provide a replicable, stable construct that can reproduce or model the positive outcomes associated with RL.

In such scholarship, it may be understandable to presume that RL as an affective descriptor "heralds a whole new school of leadership thinking" (Kempster & Carroll, 2016, p. 19). However, many scholars have treated and argued that RL is an altogether different concept (Burton-Jones, 2012; Kempster & Carroll, 2016; Lynham, 1998, 2000, 2004; Smit, 2013; Waldman, 2011). Furthermore, due to the subjective nature inherent in determinations of responsibleness, leadership theories that focus on the traits, skills, and behaviors of leaders can be considered incongruous with the construct of RL and further reinforce that RL should be regarded through a processual systems orientation that involves the constituency of others (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018).

2. Explore Other Leadership Theories in the Context of RL. Behavioral scientists have studied the characteristics that enable leaders to influence their followers for more than two hundred years. They have examined personality traits, leader behaviors, and situational factors that contribute to successful outcomes to better understand the dynamic relationships between followers and leaders (Yukl, 2013). Today, leaders, both politically and in business, face greater expectations than ever to meet the demands of an increasingly difficult and complex

environment, including addressing conflict, making responsible decisions under conditions of uncertainty and time pressure, and navigating the many challenges presented in the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) environment. To remain legitimate and effective, leaders in the VUCA environment will be required to focus on sustainability and ethical conduct to minimize criticism and negative scrutiny (Miska et al., 2014). The vast array of leadership theories offers diverse viewpoints on how a leader can fulfill their role ethically and effectively, especially in today's business landscape characterized by rapidly disruptive technology, geopolitical tensions, and globalization.

The analysis of RL's benefits is enhanced by examining its relationship to established leadership theories. Each theory offers distinct perspectives and tools applicable to the various aspects of RL (ethical, relational, systemic). As noted below, this study examines seven leadership theories (moral, spiritual, servant, virtuous, authentic, transformational, and ethical) and their contributions to understanding RL. Additionally, this study presents the behavioral and contextual approaches to RL and briefly notes additional theoretical leadership models.

Behavioral and Characteristic Approach. The behavioral and characteristic approach to leadership focuses on leaders' observable actions rather than on the reasons behind them. Leadership is defined as what leaders do, not why they do it (Yukl, 2013). The leader's behavior patterns associated with effective leadership are primarily task-oriented and relationship-oriented. The behavioral approach, per se, is not an ethical approach, but it provides insight into how a leader can act responsibly by balancing productivity with specific actions that support followers' well-being (Brown & Treviño, 2006). RL, viewed through this lens, highlights pragmatic actions leaders take to discharge their responsibilities. Characteristics associated with leaders illuminate how they operate (Vera et al., 2022). They explicate modes intrinsically

associated with certain leaders (Banks et al., 2021) or principles expected of them (Foldøy et al., 2021). Characteristics also help define a construct of leadership by providing insight into the qualities and features that make it distinct and recognizable. Accordingly, such traits are significant in comparing and contrasting different forms of leadership.

Contextual Approach. Contextual approaches to leadership view the leader's role as a function of the ever-changing, often chaotic environment in which they operate. As such, contextual approaches to the study of leadership emphasize the relationships and interactions between the leader and follower(s), and between the follower(s) and various environmental factors/situations that may impact those relationships. Furthermore, because contextual approaches suggest that adaptation is critical to effective leadership (Osborn et al., 2002) — the emphasis that RL places upon the inclusion of stakeholder interests and the organization-wide nature of the enterprise (Maak & Pless, 2006b; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018) are both consistent with this way of thinking about the implications of globalization and technological change.

Ethical Leadership. Ethical Leadership is centered on fairness, integrity, and role modeling. Brown & Treviño (2006) consider these qualities critical elements of effective leadership, and moral principles and values are also components of effective leadership. Leaders demonstrate strong accountability to ethical codes by fostering cultures in which followers are likewise held accountable for their actions. Ethical leaders inspire their followers through a commitment to accountability, in which every member of an organization must take responsibility for his/her conduct (Ciulla, 2004b). More specifically, with respect to RL, Maak & Pless (2006b) argue that it provides a basis for navigating more complex dilemmas, in this case, short-term organizational benefits versus long-term societal impacts.

Moral Leadership. Moral Leadership emphasizes the intrinsic obligation of leaders to act in ways aligned with moral values and social good (Ciulla, 2004a). While ethical leadership is defined as adherence to moral norms, it interrogates deeper moral imperatives for decision-making: "Why should one decide or act this way rather than another?" (Ciulla, 2004a). RL integrates moral leadership by challenging leaders to consider, among other things, the broader ethical dimensions of their actions and their obligations to various constituencies, including minorities (Doh & Stumpf, 2005).

Servant Leadership. Servant leadership prioritizes followers' needs, emphasizing humility, empathy, and stewardship (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leaders focus on the growth and well-being of their followers, which aligns with RL's emphasis on stakeholder inclusivity (Brown & Treviño, 2006). RL extends servant leadership principles by addressing broader responsibilities to external stakeholders, such as communities and the environment (Maak & Pless, 2006b).

Spiritual Leadership. Spiritual Leadership is primarily a transcendental and motivational school of thought that also emphasizes shared meaning (Fry, 2003). The components of spiritual leadership, altruism, and compassion, align closely with RL's stakeholder orientation framework (Fry & Slocum, 2008). Spiritual leadership holds that working for the greater good provides deep fulfillment; hence, it enables reflective leaders to confront more significant challenges for the benefit of not only an organization but also society at large (Marques et al., 2018).

Virtuous Leadership. Virtuous Leadership centers on a leader's virtues and character; it is defined by traits such as courage, humility, and justice (Cameron, 2011). RL also emphasizes the development of trust and a leader's ethical responsibility. Trust is treated as an outcome variable alongside accountability. Waldman and Balven (2014) state that 'Virtuous leadership

helps specify the character traits required of a responsible leader dealing with competing stakeholder demands for organizational legitimacy.'

Authentic Leadership. Authentic Leadership is centered around self-awareness, authenticity, and alignment of one's values with their behaviors (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Authentic leaders create trust by being consistent in their actions and committed to the moral principles that they espouse (Leroy et al., 2012). The concept of RL extends authentic leadership's emphasis on values-based behaviors and adds the relational and systemic aspects of responsible organizational behavior (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018).

Transformational Leadership. Transformational Leadership and RL share theoretical similarities, as both aim to motivate or inspire followers to reach common goals. Transformational Leaders promote followers' morale, aspirations, and values by creating a collective vision for the organization and through creative thinking (Bass, 1990). Similarly, Transformational Leadership aligns with the relational and ethical aspects of RL by promoting value-based decisions and long-term thinking that extend beyond the organization to stakeholders, including employees and communities, as well as to environmental considerations (Maak & Pless, 2006b). Transformational Leaders also advocate for initiatives that address all stakeholders' interests, including employees, communities, and environmental issues, reflecting a broader, stakeholder-based approach that is part of RL (Maak & Pless, 2006b). Therefore, when combining Transformational Leadership's focus on individual and organizational development with RL's focus on systemic responsibility, leaders can create an environment that develops and grows individuals and organizations, while providing solutions to the world's most pressing problems and establishing accountability among individuals and organizations.

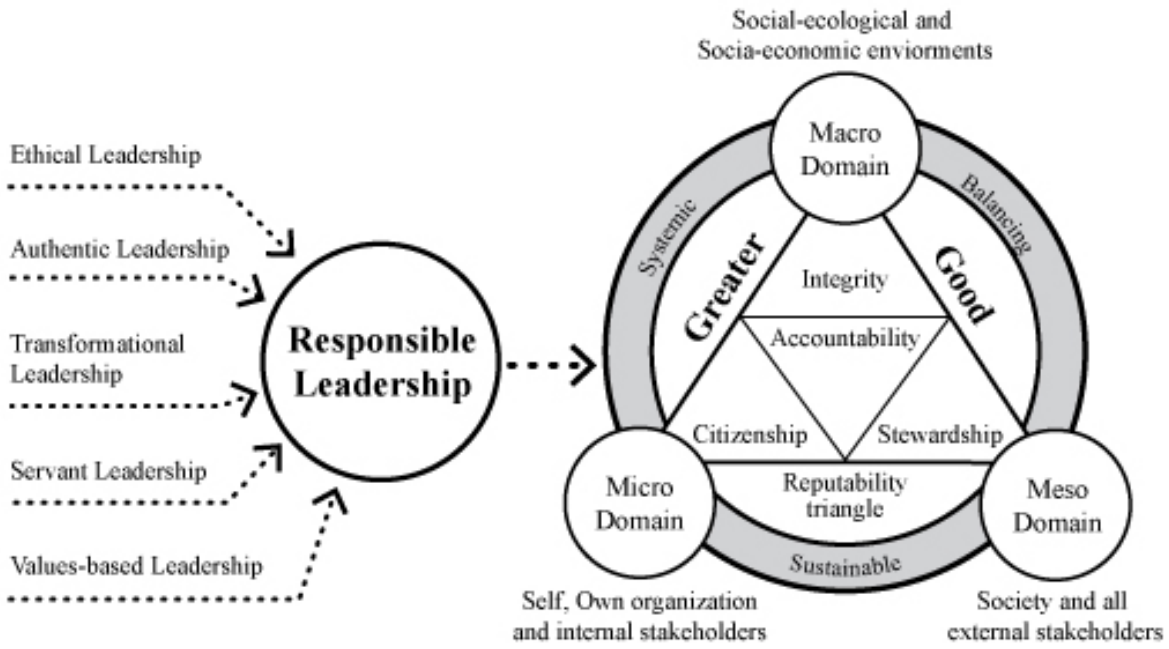
Other Leadership Theories. While this discussion focuses on leadership theories often associated with or adjacent to RL, there is an ever-growing list of theories that simply tack on an adjective, such as quantum leadership, shared leadership, values-based leadership, and connective leadership, that continues to expand. Some of these may also offer valuable insights into RL. Quantum leadership is about being flexible within a complex system (Porter-O'Grady & Malloch, 2015). Shared leadership is about making decisions with a group and distributing authority among many people. Connective leadership is an approach to collaborative problem-solving that depends on mutual interdependence (Lipman-Blumen, 1996). Though this study does not explore these or other leadership theories and models in depth, they can also be useful for expanding our knowledge of RL.

A review of the literature on leadership indicates substantial conceptual overlap among leadership theories, which positions RL uniquely among them. Unlike the typical "adjective game" found in most leadership research, RL makes a distinct theoretical contribution because it cannot exist outside broader leadership constructs. For instance, Antunes and Franco (2016) argue that conceptual similarities between RL and other forms of leadership, such as ethical or transformational leadership, imply that RL should not be viewed as an independent construct. Instead, scholars such as Esper and Boies (2013) have advocated incorporating RL into existing frameworks to develop a more comprehensive approach to complex leadership issues. Additional support for this integrative approach is found in the recent comprehensive literature review by Klerk and Jooste (2023), who propose a model that places RL within broader categories such as ethical, authentic, and others. Their bibliometric analysis shows the relationship between these constructs and RL's role as both a responsibility synthesis theory and an emergent mode of framing and addressing organizational responsibility through leadership (see Figure 3). The

authors' use of this approach reveals the lack of clarity in conceptualizing RL while demonstrating its potential as a bridging mechanism linking traditional and contemporary paradigms of leadership.

Figure 3

Emergent Meaning of RL and Its Place in the Leadership Domain



Note. Klerk and Jooste's (2023)

3. Explore Leadership Through a Systems Lens. Models are generally considered applicable and address multiple levels of responsibility: the individual, the team, the department, the organization, and society (Doh & Quigley, 2014; Lynham, 1998, 2000, 2004). Traditional leadership models often focus on an individual at the top of an organization who leads through a power-based hierarchy (Northouse, 2021). By contrast, a stream of RL literature positions leadership as an open system that includes various people acting in and upon it (Berger et al., 2011; Broadbent, 2015; Dent, 2012; Ketola, 2010; Lynham, 1998, 2000, 2004; MacTaggart &

Lynham, 2018; Pless & Maak, 2011; Sorlie, 2007). In contrast to traditional models, viewed through a systems lens, RL rejects the "great man" theoretical underpinnings and a romantic view of leadership in favor of a system of leadership accessible to external stakeholders and that "aggrandizes relationships" (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018, p. 12).

Considering a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including those not physically present or immediately affected by an organization, seems unique to RL and significantly expands the leadership system (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018). This view of leadership as a system has grown in popularity as a response to globalization and the complexity and complications organizations face (Martin, 2007). This complex environment in which leadership is positioned is riddled with often paradoxical challenges (e.g., lower costs to maintain profitability and a lower carbon footprint, which usually involve higher costs). These complex systems, alongside the VUCA business environment, are frequently associated with the challenge of RL today, in which leaders' judgments of levels of responsibility are determined by their capacity to balance seemingly conflicting stakeholder needs (Miska & Mendenhall, 2018).

Though a systems view of leadership may not be unique to RL, many articles reviewed positioned systems thinking as foundational to the construction of RL theory. Additionally, a systems view of leadership expands the responsibility beyond an individual to a collective leadership system, which could include a leadership group or other leadership classifications determined by the system and its constituents (Lynham & Chermack, 2006). Scholars working on RL development have asserted that the "traditional dyadic leader-follower relationship cannot capture RL" (Maak, 2007, p. 1). From a systems view, this branch of RL moves further away from traditional leadership models that overwhelmingly focus on the individual leader, in

response to a call for new leadership models that recognize the complexity of leadership through systems thinking (Benmira, 2021, p. 4).

Additionally, the systems view of RL provides a framework for contextually bounding leadership systems. This unique aspect of RL allows for the careful consideration of external environments that contextualize the organization and constituents (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018). By contextually delineating the circumstances of a leadership system, RL can be more fully understood in terms of what continues "responsible" action and desired outputs, distinctly through the eyes of its constituency and in light of industry, time, external factors, societal paradigms, and geographic limits (Lynham, 1998). Finally, a systems lens provides a workable framework for praxis, offering a contextual grounding for a phenomenon (Lynham, 2004).

4. Explore Leadership Through a Constituency Orientation. It is vital to address roles and responsibilities to constituents inside and outside their organization (i.e., stakeholder theory) (Maak & Pless, 2006b; Waldman & Balven, 2015; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Leadership studies focus on the influence process between an individual leader and employees (e.g., Bass, 1990; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 2012). There is still a need for a philosophical foundation of RL that provides an orientation for dealing with the conflicting norms of a heterogeneous constituent society (Voegtlin, 2016). The framework of RL itself implies a shared orientation (Pearce et al., 2014) in which a collaborative and relational approach to leading connects all constituents (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). The term constituents appeared in the RL literature to generally refer to those affected by the leadership system (Lynham & Chermack, 2006).

Responsible Leadership has also developed in part due to the emergence of stakeholder theories (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018). This popularity has been claimed to be gaining a positive reputation among stakeholders (Porter & Kramer, 2002). However, a growing number of

scholars refer to the increase in expectations and demands from societies and various stakeholders (e.g., Carroll, 1991, 2015; Clarkson, 1995; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman & Reed, 1983; Goodpaster, 1991; Harrison & Freeman, 1999; Wood, 1991; see also Kooskora, 2013; Kooskora & Kujala, 2009). Miska and Mendenhall (2018) observed, "the consideration of stakeholders both within and outside organizations makes RL distinct from other approaches which frequently tend to focus on followers residing solely inside the organization" (p. 118).

Most approaches to RL theory building focus on the shareholder-stakeholder dichotomy to define responsibility in a narrower, descriptive sense (Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Despite the interest in stakeholder and constituent frameworks in leadership studies, determinations of what constitutes a stakeholder are highly contested, with hundreds of definitions existing in the literature (Miles, 2012). A generalized model has been proposed to include internal stakeholders of employees, managers, and owners, and external stakeholders of suppliers, society, government, creditors, shareholders, and customers (Doh & Quigley, 2014; Doh et al., 2011; Voegtlin et al., 2012). Sorlie (2007) suggested that stakeholders become time-dependent and even include the planet.

Through a constituency orientation, RL development has become more responsive to follower perspectives, responding to many scholars' calls for more follower-oriented leadership theories (Fields, 2007). The relational nature of RL is rooted in relational engagement as a multi-level (micro, meso, and macro) experience, in which engagement among its components is critical for leadership success (Tan, 2023). Responsible Leadership emphasizes building relationships with all stakeholders who impact your organization, whether as individuals (micro), as members of organizations (meso), or as members of larger societal systems (macro), because these are the people who will help you build and maintain your power base (i.e., your leadership

position) (Bass & Bass, 1990). Responsible Leadership focuses on creating a sense of shared responsibility and accountability among all constituents and is therefore committed to developing relational connections that foster mutual trust and understanding among all parties involved (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Follower involvement is also significant, as followers can confer authority on their leaders, thereby influencing leaders' actions and determining their outcomes (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Consequently, it is vital to understand when followers perceive their leaders as leaders and how those perceptions will affect the overall leadership experience (Bligh et al., 2011).

5. Explore Leadership Framed Within Short- And Long-Term Perspectives. These perspectives point to enduring results (e.g., shareholder value has historically been short-term, while achieving stakeholder value is long-term) (Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Focusing on short-term practices without regard for long-term consequences has led to widespread economic consequences and perceptions of organizational leaders' irresponsibility (Marginson & McAulay, 2008). Hamel and Prahalad (1994) asserted that a lack of long-term perspectives is one of the most significant oversights that lead to organizational failure. Wang and Bansal (2012) noted that although long-term perspectives may not yield immediate returns, they will lead to organizational effectiveness in the long run.

Within the literature, responsibility is framed within short- or long-term perspectives. A long-term value perspective is identified as a unique dimension of RL, connected to broader consideration of constituents. It contrasts with a focus on shareholder value, which has historically been short-term (Waldman & Galvin, 2008). Considering this, leaders who cannot produce short-term results, such as operating margins and quarterly profits, may not be considered effective and legitimate (Hitt et al., 1998). This enduring consideration of the system

of leadership is a distinguishing characteristic of Lynham's RL/P model that bounds the system with temporal considerations (Lynham, 1998, 2000, 2004). In today's fast-paced environment, long-term perspectives can be challenging to come by and hold. Nevertheless, in this environment, understanding RL and cultivating it are even more valuable to organizations (MacTaggart, 2018).

6. Explore Leadership Through an Ethical Lens. An ethical lens is committed to the principles of do no harm and do good (Ciulla, 2006; Stahl & Sully de Luque, 2014), which are connected to notions of duty, morality, altruism, charity, and general values-orientation. Ethical qualification is implicitly built into the definition of RL (Voegtlin et al., 2012, p. 26). Much has been written and discussed about corporate governance, social responsibility, citizenship, accountability, sustainable business, and ethical and RL (e.g., Carroll, 1991; Ciulla, 2004b; Degeorge et al., 1999; Elkington & Rowland, 1999; Freeman, 1995; Maak & Pless, 2006b).

In their influential and most frequently cited work in RL literature (Marques et al., 2018), Maak and Pless asserted (2006a) that the attention to the growing incidences of leadership misconduct (e.g., Enron, WorldCom, Parmalat, VW, Ford, and others) and the subsequent importance of understanding how leadership can and should be responsible has given RL renewed importance in understanding how leadership can and should be responsible. As established leadership ethicist Joanne Ciulla (1995) stated, "We live in a world where leaders are often morally disappointing" (p. 3).

When it has become increasingly complex, if not impossible, to delineate systemic outcomes and individual responsibilities, ethics and morality have become front-page news; so far, leadership ethics, as the broadly defined field, has been neglected and underdeveloped in leadership studies (Ciulla, 2004b, 2006; Doh & Stumpf, 2005). A proposed rationale for the lack

of development is that ethics are locally derived and applied, or that they are a topic related to all considerations of leadership (Ciulla, 2006). Specifically, existing ethics measures in leadership (e.g., Brown et al., 2005) are subjective because they reflect inherent information-processing biases in how people perceive what is ethical, moral, or responsible. Given the diversity of constituents, identifying leadership can be complex and subjective.

7. Explore Leadership Related to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Linking leadership to CSR is a call for corporations to respond to the consequences of globalization (Doh & Stumpf, 2005; Carroll, 2015). This approach is generally fueled by the assumption that humanity must act more responsibly with the earth's resources and marginalized communities (Antunes & Franco, 2016). Building on ethical considerations, RL has been characterized by the imperative that corporations be regarded as socially responsible agents (Doh & Stumpf, 2005). A growing interest in and understanding of this force in RL development has driven a shift in how leadership should address the challenges of globalization (Voegtlin et al., 2012). Some scholars treat this area of RL as a distinct theoretical tributary within RL development (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018). However, given the breadth of the correlation between CSR and RL, this study recognizes CSR componentry as an essential topic for the development of RL theory. Building on the legitimacy of prior themes in this review, scholars such as Antunes (2016) pointed to a multi-dimensional understanding of RL that "is understood here by its proponents as an emerging concept at the overlap of studies" (p. 127) in ethical action, constituent-based systems of leadership, and corporate responsibility related to globalization.

Globalization has raised complex issues that make it impossible to identify individual actors as primarily responsible for outcomes, as many actors contribute to them (Maak & Pless, 2006b). This rise in the adverse effects of globalization, along with growing awareness,

corporate scandals, and the persistence of executive pay disparities, has led to an erosion of corporate trust and an image of irresponsibility (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). Given this complexity, adding the dimension of responsibility to the concept of leadership means that leaders can be held accountable, even when their impact extends beyond organizational boundaries, to a broader range of corporate stakeholders (Maak & Pless, 2006b). Waldman and Balven (2014) supported this conceptualization, arguing that RL lies at the intersection of two distinct fields: social responsibility and leadership.

8. Explore the CEO as a Central Figure in RL. As the highest-ranking executive in an organization, the CEO is ultimately accountable for the organization's actions and outcomes, from setting strategic direction to fostering ethical decision-making and modeling responsible behavior, and even the actions of their employees, regardless of a CEO's knowledge of the actions (Maak & Pless, 2006b). In addition to other top leadership roles, CEOs must address more complex, often conflicting stakeholder expectations while balancing financial performance with broader societal and environmental responsibilities (Voegtlin et al., 2012).

Senior executives and managers are extensions of the CEO's vision and decision-making framework. Therefore, CEOs influence the culture of accountability within their leadership teams (Maak et al., 2016). That is, executive leaders align with employees at all levels to embed RL principles throughout the organization through corporate cascading effects that ensure these principles reach every corner of the organization.

Although CEOs wield significant influence and authority, they are not the only important stakeholders shaping an organization's responsibilities. Other key players, including the Board of Directors, Shareholders, Customers, the Public, Suppliers, and Regulators, also hold CEOs accountable for RL (Pless et al., 2021a). This research examined how entry-level employees

perceived their CEO's RL, clarifying how leadership influence is perceived by employees at the greatest hierarchical distance and how corporate responsibility principles are viewed by employees with the least direct contact with decision-makers (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). This study, which focuses on CEOs and their role in RL, aligns with the existing literature on the distinctive role of top executives in establishing corporate social responsibility, ethical practices, and stakeholder engagement.

Summary of Why People Have Written About RL. These eight themes: (1) explore leadership through affective characteristics, traits, and behaviors; (2) explore other leadership theories in the context of RL; (3) explore leadership through a systems lens; (4) explore leadership through a constituency orientation; (5) explore leadership framed within short- and long-term perspectives; (6) explore leadership through an ethical lens (7) explore leadership related to corporate social responsibility (CSR); and (8) explore the CEO as a central figure in RL; arose as clear and distinct reasons why scholars explored RL in the literature. Though different, only some of these themes received equal attention in the literature, with a clear and significant focus on leaders' affective characteristics in RL. A tempting exercise in the review of different approaches may be to ask which of these explorations of RL is the most effective or contains the most fidelity, to which the literature may answer yes. RL, as described, is, in some way, all these themes simultaneously.

How People Have Written About RL

Beyond the question of why people have written about RL, two major themes in how they have written about RL emerged from the analysis of the collected literature.

1. RL as a set of affective leadership characteristics, actions, and images.
2. RL as an applied, socially-determined system of leadership.

The mainstream of RL development considers the theory a multilevel effect (Maak & Pless, 2008). Thus, RL inherently crosses multiple levels of organizational analysis by considering the individual, group, organization, stakeholders, and constituents (Christensen et al., 2014; Morgeson et al., 2013). Although some scholars, such as Waldman and Siegel (2008), argue that RL refers specifically to CEOs, most scholars support the plurality of leadership and decision-making at all levels of stakeholders, while differentiating CEOs by their unique positional authority within the leadership system.

Despite theoretical advances reported in the literature on RL, there has been a notable lack of emphasis on methods for studying it. Defining and operationalizing how RL translates into organizational outcomes has proven challenging (Doh & Quigley, 2014, p. 255). While Burrell (1988) believed that theory is fundamentally an idealist (p. 221), Lynham (2002) argued that useful theory should be descriptive/explanatory of how things really work, so it can lead to action. In applied fields, theories must provide methods that are both practical and insightful for solving real-world problems. Without providing methods to apply a theory to real-world problems, it has little value for applied disciplines (Swanson & Chermack, 2013).

The objective of this research was to examine how researchers have studied RL by critically evaluating the methodologies employed in recent studies. In doing so, this study provides an extensive review and critique of the methodologies used to study RL. Through the completion of this work, the authors seek to answer the following guiding research questions: (1) What methods have been used to study RL? (2) Which questions have these methods answered effectively? (3) Which questions have these methods not addressed adequately? (4) What methodological approach could fill the current gaps?

The review of methods illustrated RL's diverse and sometimes overlapping conceptualizations in the literature. The review highlights that the lack of consensus on conceptualizations affects research methods, with less emphasis on empirical confirmatory studies and grounded conceptual exploration. The lack of methods for analyzing RL may stem from the unfortunate reality that many scholars' efforts to advance conceptual theory often fall short of a holistic description of the selected domain (Swanson & Chermack, 2013).

RL Methods: Non-Empirical. Non-empirical research in the analysis refers to studies that describe RL without providing detailed methods or data, thereby laying a foundation for future empirical research. This analysis categorizes non-empirical research into five categories: contemplative work, conceptual literature reviews, anecdotal reports, theory-combining pieces, and model development.

Contemplative Research. Contemplative research draws on researchers' reflections to describe RL, thereby enabling interdisciplinary perspectives. For example, Mofuoa (2010) linked RL to Chief Mohlomi's leadership philosophy, while Wells (2009) discussed RL at the International Institute for Management Development Business School, offering unique perspectives. Contemplative research requires further empirical validation to refine and define these descriptions.

Conceptual Literature Review. These reviews synthesize existing literature to develop new insights or perspectives. An example is the categorization of RL literature by Miska and Mendenhall (2018) based on micro, macro, and crossed orientations, which, while informative, did not include a formal discussion of the methods used for literature collection or analysis. These reviews help track existing descriptions of RL and provide a snapshot of the field at

specific points in time. While valuable for tracking existing descriptions of RL, these reviews lack a detailed methodology.

Anecdotal Research. Anecdotal research uses personal stories and observations to illustrate RL, making it tangible and applicable. For example, Badaracco (2013) used anecdotes to describe various RL characteristics in *The Good Struggle*. Similarly, Doh and Quigley (2014) used corporate case studies to illustrate RL in practice.

Model Development. Conceptual models are a generalizable way to describe phenomena; conceptual model development is an intermediate stage of model development that can be used to develop descriptive concepts into formal theoretical concepts. For example, Maak and Pless's (2006b) roles model was developed to provide a foundation for developing RL models.

Theory Building. Theory development links non-empirical and empirical research. Although theory development is relatively rare in RL, Lynham's (1998, 2000, 2006) development of RL/P, which is based on Systems Thinking and the 3Es (Effectiveness, Ethics, Endurance), represents a comprehensive framework for relating RL to the operationalization of applied research on leadership systems.

Discussion of Non-Empirical Methods. Non-empirical research explores the boundaries of RL and provides a foundational understanding for future empirical research. While valuable, future research should explicitly outline methodological steps to ensure credibility in RL studies.

RL Methods: Empirical. Empirical research involves acquiring new knowledge through direct observation or experimentation, utilizing the senses to gather data. The primary data collection modes include visual or auditory observation and experimentation. This research can take a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approach. The extant literature employs these methods to various extents to study and inform RL.

Qualitative Approaches to Studying RL. Much of the research on RL relies on qualitative methods. Qualitative approaches provide insight into the richness and depth of complexity in RL and its many dimensions. The specific empirical techniques reported in this study include case studies, interpretive interviews, content analysis, and mixed-methods approaches, as reflected in other works as well.

Qualitative Case Studies. Case studies enable researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of RL within bounded systems, i.e., specific, well-defined units of analysis (Merriam, 2002). For example, Pless (2007) used a biographical-narrative case study to trace Roderick's development as a respected leader and to examine how she became one. Similarly, conducting research through the lens of a particular case offers the researcher the opportunity to explore the complexities of RL at both theoretical and practical levels.

Interpretive Interviews. Interpretive interviews provide researchers with access to the experiences and perceptions of people involved in RL as they are lived, from their own perspectives. The researcher thus examines how RL is known, practiced, and experienced across different organizational contexts. Gond et al. (2012) also conducted interpretive interviews to investigate the role of HR in enabling RL, thereby achieving deeper insight into organizational dynamics surrounding RL implementation. Thus, through interpretive interviews, subjective realities about responsible leaders can be obtained, detailing the intricacies of RL in practice.

Content Analysis. Traditionally, research in RL has employed quantitative methods and content analysis far less frequently than qualitative methods. However, content analysis can be a very useful lens through which research can explore the textual representation(s) of RL in corporate documents, reports, and other written records. Content analysis enables researchers to identify recurring themes and patterns associated with RL; hence, the discourses on RL. For

instance, Sroufe et al. (2015) analyze reflective essays from MBA students to develop an understanding of how RL can be used within formal education contexts. Thus, content analysis may serve as a methodological tool for researchers to identify implicit meanings and representations of RL,

Qualitative research methods play a vital role in developing deep insights into RL. Responsible Leadership is conceptualized as having the potential to impact leadership theory and its practical application. Therefore, through various qualitative approaches that enable observation of the complexities and subtleties of RL across diverse organizational settings, this academic work offers a strong foundation for developing better theories that provide greater detail on RL.

Quantitative Approaches to Studying RL. Quantitative inquiry in the RL literature primarily consists of correlational studies that explore relationships between variables without control (MacTaggart, 2018). Management scholars prioritize leadership studies that demonstrate quantitative rigor and repeatability to enhance the credibility and usefulness of leadership theories (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). These studies rely on the conceptualization and development of the RL construct, with clear, repeatable, and distinct definitions and dimensions. Miska and Mendenhall (2018) observed that only a limited number of instruments measure the various dimensions of RL and considered the instruments developed as rudimentary. Waldman (2011) noted that developing such instruments carries the risk of incorporating subjective notions that depend on authors' perspectives on RL, such as tacit definitions and assumptions.

Instruments to Measure RL. Based on the articles reviewed, nine distinct survey instruments were designed to measure RL, constructed according to different conceptualizations,

and operationalized across diverse contexts (See Table 1). This study lists these measures chronologically by publication date and assigns titles to each instrument to differentiate its focus.

Tyree's (1998) instrument measures individuals' perceptions of organizations' social responsibility efforts, emphasizing the leader's role in shaping CSR. Doh et al. (2011) designed a survey emphasizing RL as the cultivation of trustful relationships with stakeholders through stakeholder culture, HR practices, and managerial support. Voegtlin (2011) created the first Responsible Leadership Survey (discursive), which focuses on a leader's awareness of the impacts on all stakeholders. Saini (2015) developed the Value-Based Responsible Leadership Scale (for Indian business organizations), which has four subscales: Empathetic, Value-Oriented, Responsible, and Nurturing. Liu and Lin (2018) focused on Positive Psychology in developing their measures of RL and assessed how positively individuals interacted with one another. Voegtlin et al. (2011) defined RL as addressing employees' needs, organizational needs, and societal needs, and used behavioral complexity and stakeholder theories to develop a survey instrument. Agarwal and Bhal (2020) proposed a multi-dimensional approach to measure the ethical and strategic aspects of RL by utilizing four sub-scales (moral person, moral manager, multistakeholder consideration, and sustainable growth focus). Javed et al. (2020) developed a survey to measure RL based on different mindsets and differentiated the types of roles a leader may play (traditional economist, opportunity seeker, integrator, or idealist). According to Lips-Wiersma et al. (2020), RL is real, authentic, ethical, and shared. Luthans & Avolio (2003) defined the core construct of authenticity in transformational leadership theory as proposed by Bass (1985). Brown & Treviño (2006) developed a social learning theory model of ethical leadership, while Fletcher & Kaufer (2003) argue that sharing or distributing leadership more widely makes organizations practicing RL healthier spaces for both women and men. Muff et al.

(2020) developed an instrument to measure competencies related to RL, grounded in the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (U.N., 2015). The subscales include stakeholder relations, ethics and values, self-awareness, systems thinking, and change & innovation.

Table 1

Taxonomy of the Extant Instruments to Measure RL

Citation	Title	Instrument Focus	Items	Subscales	Perspective	(N)	Participant Role	Author's Location	Study Geography	Significant Outcomes
Tyree's (1999)	SRLS (Social Responsibility Leadership Scale)	Focused on measuring individuals' perceptions of their organizations' social responsibility efforts	103 items	Environmental sustainability, ethical practices, and community engagement	"I reflect…", "My energy…", "Being a member…"	675 participants	Self	North American	American	The 104-item instrument showed significant reliability and validity.
Doh et al. (2011)	RLS (RL Survey)	Focsed on the skill and art of cultivating and maintaining trustful relationships with an organization's internal and external stakeholders	13 items	Stakeholder culture, HR practices, and managerial support	"This organization…", "Our company…", and "My immediate manager…"	4,352 participants	Employees	North American	Asian	High levels of RL led to higher satisfaction with their organization (R = .76). Low levels of RL led to four times as much turnover as organizations with high levels of RL. Pride in organization proved to be a mediating factor for low- and mid-levels of RL.
Voegtlin (2011)	Discursive Responsible Leadership Survey (DRLS)	Focused on a leader's awareness and consideration of the consequences of their actions for all stakeholders	16 items	Stakeholder relationships, general elements of RL	"My direct supervisor…"	150 participants in final study	Employees	Swiss	European	The study significant relation between RL., ethical leadership (EL) and transformational leadership (TL): between RL and EL (R = 0.30), between RL and TL (R = 0.41). RL instrument showed a one-dimensional construct with high internal consistency, as well as discriminant, and predictive validity.
Saini (2015)	VBRLS (Value-Based Responsible Leadership)	Focused on the attributable values of RL and how those impact various organizational outcomes.	20 items	Empathetic, Value oriented, Responsible, Nurturing	"Conducts h/h personal life in an ethical manner…", "Takes interest in sharing, teaching, and coaching."	321 participants	Supervisors	India	Asian	The study demonstrated that the dimensions of value based responsible leadership has a significant impact on the workplace in the form of attitudinal outcomes as commitment, satisfaction and productivity.
Liu & Lin (2018)	PRLS (Positivity-Focused RL Survey)	Focused on value-centered leadership that emphasizes a leader's capacity to foster positivity through interpersonal interactions	16 items	Stakeholder relationships, general elements of RL	"I am concerned about employee emotion…", "...being responsible is highly important for my job."	252 participants in final study	Supervisors	Taiwanese	Asian	The study showed a sigifnicant relationship between RL and Organizational Identification (R = 0.34). The study goes into more in-depth variables related to uncertainty reduction theory and social categorization theory that indicate the RL has a mediating effect on retention and social categorization.
Voegtlin et al. (2019)	RLBS (RL Behavior Survey)	Focused and grounded in theories of behavioral complexity and stakeholder theory	97 items	Expert role, facilitator roles servant leader behaviors, citizen role	Mixed: "Would you like to work", "could you learn something from him?", "I am involved in community"	495 participants in final study	Employees	France	European	The study showed a number of supported outcomes in which RL has a significant impact on: leader effectiveness, employees' affective organizational commitment, Employees' community citizenship behavior, stakeholders perceive leader as attractive role model, and stakeholders perceive the company the leader works for as attractive.
Agarwal & Bhal (2020)	MDRLS (Multidimensional Measure of RL Survey)	Focused on leadership's ethical and strategic aspects	18 items	Moral person, moral manager, multistakeholder consideration, and sustainable growth focus	"My manager…", "this member will not hesitate to confront me…", "this follower would…"	178 participants in final study	Managers	India	Asian	RL are positively related to servant leadership and authentic leadership but empirically distinct. RL are positively connected with follower's citizenship behaviors toward stakeholders. RL are positively connected to follower's moral courage.
Javed et al. (2020)	RBRLS (Role-based RL Survey)	Focused on conceptualization of RL within varying mindsets, influencing how one perceives responsibility.	20 items	Traditional economist, opportunity seeker, integrator, and idealist	"I create short-term economic value for shareholders", "I do not focus on other stakeholders"	298 participants	Managers	Pakistani	Asian	The study demonstrated how the indirect effect of different orientations of RL have on the relationship between responsible governance. There were a number of findings that connected each of the orientations: traditional economist, opportunity seeker, integrator, and idealist with financial performance and and corporate reputation.
Lips-Wiersma et al. (2020)	IRLS (Inclusive Reponsible Leadership Survey)	Focused on conceptualizes RL as an inclusive term encompassing ethical and moral dimensions in leadership (Antunes & Franco, 2016)	4 items	Authentic (Luthans & Avolio, 2003), transformational (Bass, 1990), ethical (Brown & Trevino, 2006), and shared leadership (Fletcher & Kaufer, 2003)	Responsible leadership was measured with a unique four item construct of each leadership style and its definition 1 = never to 4 = always.	879 participants	Employees	New Zealand	Pacific Southwest	The structural model found that fairness, responsible leadership and worthy work are all significant and positively related to the majority of meaningfulness dimensions.
Muff et al. (2020)	CARL (Competency Assessment for RL)	Focused on sustainable change and aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.	45 items	Stakeholder relations, ethics and values,self-awareness, systems thinking,change and innovation	"I am able to initiate…", "Most of my friends I have…", I like working in diverse teams."	102 participants	Self	European	European	The study demonstrated factor confirmation of the various items and their subscales. It provides an opportunity for individuals to take an assessment to determine their personal responsible leadership competencies.

One remarkable observation in reviewing these tools is how differently each conceptualizes RL. The measurement constructs vary greatly in their content, number of items, focus, and design regarding participants and perspectives. This clearly works better for articulating what RL means in practice. Scholars have called for the development of more refined tools to capture the multidimensionality of RL (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). Further studies are needed to refine and mature these scales to understand their antecedents and consequences (Voegtlin, 2011; Voegtlin et al., 2012; Waldman & Balven, 2014). One reason for RL's

challenges might be its sub-summation within leadership, requiring new ways to understand followers' construction of their leaders' responsibility (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020; Dash, 2020).

Units of Analysis in RL Survey Instruments. The various survey instruments were constructed with different units of analysis. Some were designed for subordinates to provide feedback on their direct supervisors (n = 5), while others had a broader scope, encompassing all leaders within the organization (n = 2). One instrument focused on top management leaders, with middle managers as respondents. Additionally, survey instruments were designed as self-reports for leaders (n = 2). Response scales in these instruments varied, with the most common being a 5-point Likert scale. However, there were exceptions, including instruments with 7-point and 4-point Likert scales and a dichotomous response option. Notably, none of the survey instruments included a non-response option.

Many of the surveys reviewed are targeted at supervisors or managers, yet the articles fail to address the distinction between management and leadership, overlooking this fundamental conceptual divergence (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). This oversight is conspicuous in contemporary leadership studies, where leadership is often implicitly assumed to represent a positive form of management without thoroughly exploring how employees perceive themselves as followers, a prerequisite to leadership (Bass, 1985). There is an implicit assumption in the literature that has not been questioned: employees are automatically the followers of their supervisors (Schyns & Schilling, 2013). The unclear nature of this issue and what appears to be missing from its analysis suggest, as highlighted by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the usefulness of a phenomenologically oriented qualitative research approach to shed light on subtle dynamic aspects of leadership through an understanding accommodating complexity as well as highly contextual and subtle boundary notions.

Consequences

Implications of operationalization, predictive correlations, and consequences of RL vary across studies, depending on their conceptual assumptions. As this study demonstrates, there are many variables to consider in any analysis of RL, including definitions, instrumentation, methodology, context, and more. There is limited research on RL and its influence on employees' behavior (Haque et al., 2019; Miska & Mendenhall, 2018). Scholars have noted that dissonance in leadership styles, particularly irresponsible leadership, may negatively affect employees' organizational commitment (Haque et al., 2019; Mariappanadar, 2018; Sellgren et al., 2006). Moreover, responsible leaders create working conditions that enable organizations and their stakeholders to address corporate social responsibility challenges in mutually beneficial ways (Scherer et al., 2016). Voegtlin et al. (2020) also found that the citizenry dimension, associated with RL, contributes to leader effectiveness, employee engagement, and positive stakeholder evaluations. They also noted a positive effect of RL on employee engagement and found that perceived leaders who devote equal attention to primary and secondary stakeholders are perceived as more effective than those who focus solely on primary stakeholders.

Consequences at an Individual Level. Research has repeatedly found positive relationships between RL and a wide range of employee- and organizationally-based outcomes. Doh et al. (2011) have shown that RL is significantly related to employees' intentions to leave an organization, thereby reducing organizational instability. Studies show that RL positively affects employee job satisfaction and improves the overall workplace experience (Doh et al., 2011; Voegtlin, 2011). Employee commitment to an organization and motivation to align their efforts with the organization's mission are significantly affected by RL (Doh & Quigley, 2014; Voegtlin et al., 2012).

Additionally, RL practice is associated with reduced unethical behavior among employees, suggesting that RL fosters an ethical, responsible decision-making environment (Voegtlin, 2011). In addition to the attitudinal and ethical implications of RL described above, evidence indicates that RL enhances job performance. In an example of how RL positively affects employee productivity and contribution, Chen (2014) investigated this relationship in a Chinese context and found that RL has a direct effect on increasing employee motivation, subsequent productivity, and total contribution. The studies outlined above illustrate several dimensions of RL and its impact when present within an organization's culture, with positive consequences for organizational functioning.

Consequences at an Organizational Level. Responsible Leadership has been shown to positively influence critical aspects of organizational success. For instance, RL is vital in building and maintaining an organization's legitimacy, as it fosters trust and alignment with societal expectations and stakeholder needs (Voegtlin et al., 2012). Moreover, RL has a significant impact on organizational performance. Lee and Han (2024) demonstrated that RL directly enhances performance and achieves this indirectly by fostering social capital, a mediating factor. These findings highlight the broader organizational benefits of RL, reinforcing its value as a key driver of both legitimacy and performance.

Despite the interest in developing and understanding RL, scholars have argued that tools to measure its multidimensionality are lacking (Voegtlin, 2011; Voegtlin et al., 2012; Waldman & Balven, 2014). Agarwal and Bhal (2020) developed the multidimensional RL scale, though in its early stages, is a tool that can be used to grow in the understanding of RL and its antecedents and consequences. Further studies are needed to refine and mature these scales to understand their antecedents and consequences (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020).

The affective characteristic linked with RL has practical applications. Although some leadership styles may not emphasize RL-related traits, these traits can serve as benchmarks for evaluating performance. For instance, transparency and honesty are essential elements of RL that leaders must exhibit during decision-making. Kempster & Carroll (2016) pointed out:

> This limited form of theory development that generates normative ideal models of the responsible leader will, at best, provide useful if the limited stimulus to the practicing 'leader'; but, at worst, an idealized myth akin to becoming the 'romance' of responsible leadership. (p. 29)

The Challenge with an Affective Approach to RL Research

As Lynham (2000) notes, the context of leadership is sticky, which is why researchers will not arrive at a single normative model. According to Obolensky (2017), leadership is an adaptable quality that must evolve in response to contextual demands. Yet successful leaders often exhibit consistent characteristics or skill sets. However, when leadership theory is primarily based on a leader's affective traits and behaviors, existing conceptualizations conflate leader behaviors while neglecting "followers' evaluations of leaders' characteristics, values, traits, and followers' cognitions" (Banks et al., 2021, p. 1).

Traditional leadership skills still are important; however, in today's global, rapidly changing environment, a broader perspective is required. The many aspects of RL, the values, the decision making, and the behavior, make it so complex and therefore difficult to quantify and measure. As such, relational leaders have been identified as the hardest type of leader to develop, to assess, and to replicate (Waldman, 2011). There are significant pressures on businesses today from increased consumer demands, growing complexity, technological change, and increasingly stringent environmental regulations aimed at sustainability and at reducing consumption and resource use (Pless, 2023). Conventional forms of leadership will be insufficient for a company

to succeed in an environment with these factors at play (Uhl-Bien, 2021), underscoring the need for further research on RL models that can operate in this ever-changing business environment.

Moreover, Witt and Stahl (2016) found that the notion of responsibility diverged markedly among senior executives across three Asian and two Western societies, indicating that global and cultural paradigms further muddy the attributes related to RL. Where the scholars agree that the attributes required of responsible leaders are different than those required of conventional leaders (Dash, 2020), this distinction may be more of a fluidity (Pless & Maak, 2011) that requires leaders to respond to the needs of their constituents and is encased in localized and socially derived determinations of responsibility.

As Meindl et al. (2004) lamented, this limited form of theory development generates normative ideal models of the responsible leader that will, at best, provide useful information if the limited stimulus to the practicing 'leader', but, at worst, an idealized myth akin to becoming the 'romance' of responsible leadership (p. 29).

Levels of Analysis in RL Research

The mainstream of RL development considers the theory a multi-level effect (Maak & Pless, 2006b). Thus, RL inherently crosses multiple levels of organizational analysis by considering individuals, groups, organizations, and stakeholders (Christensen et al., 2014; Morgeson et al., 2013). Although some scholars, such as Waldman et al. (2020), argue that RL refers specifically to CEOs, most scholars support the concept of a plurality of leadership and decision-making across all stakeholder levels (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). Yet ambiguity about the level of analysis contributes to RL's broad, applied nature. Applied frameworks, such as the RL/P (Lynham & Chermack, 2006), offer a solution by contextualizing RL studies within a leadership system.

In mapping the degrees to which RL has been researched, Miska and Mendenhall (2018) outlined RL development as taking place across multiple levels of organizational analysis (see Table 2), including (1) micro level, with a focus on individuals and individual leaders; (2) meso level, with a focus on organizational context, groups, and corporate operations; (3) macro level, with a focus on institutions, culture, and society; and (4) cross-level, with a focus on various linkages and interactions among and between the different levels of analysis. This study adds the dimension of meta-analysis (5) to consider how RL relates to metatheory and how leadership theory refers to concepts of existentialism.

Table 2

Levels of Analysis in Responsible Leadership

LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	FOCUS OF EXTANT RL RESEARCH	OUTCOMES
Meta: Theory, Metaphysical	How RL relates to metatheory including how leadership theory relates to metaphysical theories, epistemology, existentialism, concepts of humanism	• Epistemological • Worldview
Macro: Institutions, culture, and society	Dynamics of changing institutional environments explaining the quest for RL in view of pressing global problems from conceptual perspectives. Empirical, comparative research on institutional and cultural influences on the conception and understanding of RL.	• Relations to External Stakeholders • Legitimacy • Trustful Stakeholder • Relations • Social Capital
Meso-level: Organizational context, groups, and corporate strategy	Linkages between RL and relevant organizational elements such as responsible management, HR, and corporate governance as well as leadership development. Effects of RL from traditional leadership perspectives on companies' CR performance.	• Shaping Organizational Culture and Performance • Ethical Culture • CSR Character • Social Entrepreneurship • Performance
Micro-level: Individuals and individual business leaders	Individuals' values, personal qualities, ethical motivations, characteristics, history, etc., mostly from a subjective, normative perspective. Individuals' different RL orientations and attendant qualities and competencies in view of different approaches to RL.	• Personal Interactions • Effect on Followers' • Attitudes and Cognitions (e.g., OCB, Motivation, Job Satisfaction)
Cross-level research:	Multi-level frameworks which model interactions among antecedents and/or outcomes across the micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis from different theoretical and conceptual perspectives.	• Theoretical Development

Note. Adapted from Miska and Mendenhall (2018, p. 120).

Mixed Methods Approaches

The mixed-methods approach to research integrates qualitative and quantitative methods. In a single research design that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative elements,

researchers can triangulate data to identify, verify, and analyze retailing at a detailed level, understanding its complex nature. For example, Maritz et al. (2010) combined an initial set of in-depth interviews with a quantitative survey to determine the effect of retailing on stock price movements. Coldwell et al. (2012) used a very similar methodology to investigate links between corporate reputation, retailing, and stock prices, applying qualitative case studies and quantitative time-series correlation analyses to develop an enhanced understanding of the complex relationship among the three areas. Mixed methods provide a way to understand relationships at nuanced levels, including mechanisms that explain cause-and-effect relationships driven by contextual factors.

Methodologies to Analyze RL

A basic assumption in RL approaches is that leadership occurs within a performance system, which operates through joint, coordinated action (Holton & Lynham, 2000; Northouse, 2021; Brache & Rummler, 1995; Swanson, 1999; Swanson & Arnold, 1996). Leadership can be seen as both enacted and assessed within the performance system framework used to develop an understanding of leadership, comprising a systems view of interrelated inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback components. Some scholars have called for this larger performance system context in examining leadership (Holton & Lynham, 2000; Russ-Eft & Preskill, 2005), thereby emphasizing the interface between acts of leading and organizational context.

Lynham (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004) was the first to develop a methodology specifically suited to the study of RL in the Responsible Leadership for Performance (RL/P) framework. Leadership is viewed as an interacting system of elements within this framework (Lynham & Chermack, 2006). Leadership practice reciprocates with constituents toward their purposes and goals within a bounded environment, where social construction takes place on leadership and its

ethics, and where constituents' effectiveness rules the system. The endurance-in-the-leadership-system notion integrates societal norm considerations without making any normative judgment about the ethical systems that it connects, which require willing followership (Lynham, 2004). MacTaggart (2018) applied research uses RL/P, but more applied, contextual research should use it, since it remains one of the primary methodologies suited specifically to studying RL.

Additional methodologies more broadly designed for leadership studies include frameworks such as the leadership-as-practice developed by Raelin (2016, 2020). Rooted in cultural-historical activity theory and critical realism, this methodology examines leadership practices within organizational contexts, such as RL/P, emphasizing the nuances of everyday actions, interactions, and relationships (Takoeva, 2021).

Discussion on Methodologies. There are inconsistencies in how RL is operationalized, confirmed, applied, or refined. According to Pless and Maak (2011), the construct of RL is considered fluid, and "the tentative answer to the question 'What is responsible leadership?' must be 'It depends'" (p. 5). Waldman and Galvin (2008) reflect a similar variability, writing that "responsible leadership is not the same concept in the minds of all" (p. 328). Swanson and Chermack (2013) noted that this is standard practice in much of the popular management and business sciences, which often do not move beyond conceptualization.

One reason RL may seem more expansive than definitive is its subsumption within the phenomenon of leadership. Some scholars argue that RL is inherent to all leadership (Kempster & Carroll, 2016). Rather than spending more time seeking to differentiate constructs, scholars argue that studies should explore new ways to understand followers' constructions of their leaders' responsibilities in specific contexts (Dash, 2020).

Through this systematic review of the methods, clear divergences emerge in the conceptualization of RL and in the instruments and methods used by researchers to study it. A call for future research should explore new ways of thinking about organizations and methodologies that strengthen theory rather than offer reconceptualizations or new definitions. This type of activity would enrich RL development by offering multiple investigative perspectives and tools (Lynham, 2002). Rather than focusing on differentiation and academic theory-claim-staking, RL studies may benefit from more pressing questions, such as "How does RL work in applied settings?" There is a growing need to explore new approaches that address today's organizational complexity, contextually bound leadership systems, and unethical corporate behavior (Hackett & Wang, 2012).

Utilizing novel qualitative methods grounded in context and applied in nature can benefit RL research. Qualitative research is valued for understanding human behavior, meaning, and purpose in activities, particularly in contextualizing collected information (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Such approaches prioritize understanding situations from participants' perspectives rather than from researchers', thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the findings. In the qualitative paradigm, data are collected by directly participating in the natural social environment, thereby enabling a better understanding and description of real situations. As Coutinho (2020) suggested, the social world's complexity necessitates an interpretative approach that recognizes the unlikelihood of developing "natural science" type laws that can be used to predict and control. Lincoln and Lynham (2011, p. 18) concur with this view regarding the complexity of contexts, such as larger organizational systems, where interpretive approaches provide greater trustworthiness than other methodologies, particularly through narrative explanations and inquiry.

The application of interpretive methods to RL research would be beneficial, as they enable researchers to study and understand leadership practices and behaviors within their respective contexts. Additionally, qualitative methods allow researchers to capture the perspective(s) of participants, which would be valuable in research related to larger organizations and real-world applications, thereby providing the practicality necessary to support the use of RL and increasing its applicability.

RL as a Core Leadership Concept. One reason scholars have struggled to develop an instrument that identifies the dimensions of RL is that the concept inherently involves responsibility within leadership itself. By its nature, leadership is a set-apart role defined primarily by responsibility.

Ciulla (2006) notes that how humans treat each other in various relationships constitutes ethics. Thus, as leadership is about human relationships, ethics should be a core element in the leadership process. Ciulla's corpus points to a view of leadership in which ethics are "the heart of leadership," and nearly every definition of leadership mentions ethics. In common parlance, leadership is a 'good' (Ciulla, 2004b). When people call for leadership or deplore its lack, they see it not as a spur to human progress but as a moral and ethical entity, a necessary gauge of action. Leadership, in short, becomes an activity and an academic enterprise (Jackson & Parry, 2018).

As a core concept, RL presents responsibility as of utmost importance across both theoretical and practitioner contexts of leadership determination. Without the ability to ascribe and describe what a system of leadership is responsible for, it would be impossible to adjudicate whether it has met those responsibilities in the eyes of its stakeholders. Waldman and Gavin

(2008) state it like this: "(Responsibility) is at the heart of what effective leadership is all about. In a nutshell, not to be responsible is not to be effective as a leader" (p. 327).

This view of leadership may mean that all leadership effectiveness can be understood through the lens of responsibility. The literature should clarify whether leadership can exist without responsibility. As a core concept, responsibility is less a stylistic modifier of leadership and more a component of leadership itself.

Other scholars have similarly likened this facet of leadership. By contrast, Avolio and Gardner proposed that authentic leadership is a core concept across all forms of positive leadership (2005). Similarly, Kempster et al. (2011) argue that leadership should be seen as equivocal to purpose. As a core construct, this facet posits that leadership is a responsibility — with responsibility inseparable from leadership.

Marques and Gomes (2020) argue to this end, stating:

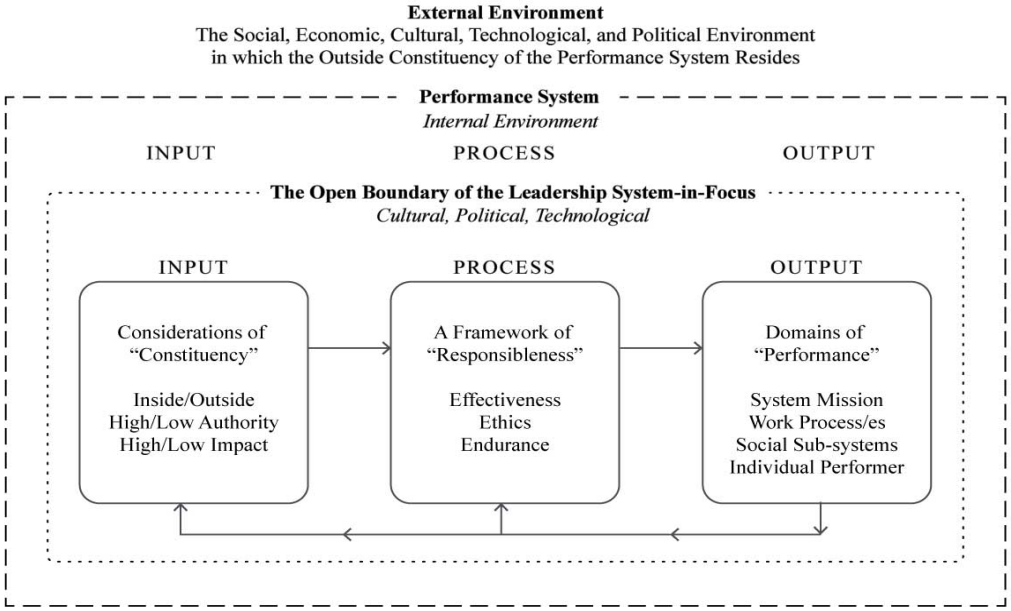
> It does not — or rather, it should not — suffice anymore to explore virtuous leadership merely (Havard, 2007) or servant leadership (Washington, Sutton & Sauser, 2014), for example, one needs to pay attention to the fundamental outcomes of leadership, which is, after all, the decisive tenet of responsible leadership. (p. 2)

Limitations to RL as a Core Concept. With an agreed-upon definition of leadership, specifically as it relates to its process and how its outcomes should be considered, it becomes challenging to make normative claims about its conception. Suppose part of the research is understanding the human condition and making it accessible to increase human flourishing. In that case, the search for affective and generalizable characterization remains in service to that goal. In other words, this facet of leadership does not offer researchers or practitioners unique characteristics to differentiate leadership. Additionally, responsibility, as a dimension rather than an attributable behavior, may render the attempt to construct a theory of RL moot, as it would be a reconceptualization of a general model of leadership.

RL as An Applied, Socially-Determined System of Leadership. Recent research and subsequent commentaries on leadership give voice to an orientation away from the essentialist qualities of an individual and toward relational, contextual, and processual leadership perspectives (Miska et al., 2014). Before the development by management schools, White-Newman (1993) designed a model framework for viewing leadership through three Es: the practices of being Effective, Ethical, and Enduring. This model was further developed by Lynham (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004) to develop a theory of RL for performance (RL/P). Lynham (2000) identified that these three determining domains of effectiveness, ethics, and endurance "interact in a systemic way to form the inputs, process, and outputs of the leadership system-in-focus" (p. 130), as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Responsible Leadership for Performance (RL/P) Framework



Note. Figure originally published in Lynham, 1998

Lynham's RL/P theory "offers a uniquely robust theoretical perspective on the construct, which includes dynamic processes as well as multiple domains of contextual performance that

are important to [leadership praxis]" (MacTaggart & Lynham, 2018, p. 4-5). With an applied view of RL as a unique, context-specific phenomenon, it becomes hard to generalize how to apply RL principles, as the determinations are grounded in the specific RL/P study rather than in general RL principles.

Based on Lynham (1998), this understanding of facet differs from other facets of leadership, in which greater emphasis is placed on who decides what constitutes responsibility; applied RL is contextually grounded within a leadership system. This approach to RL moves away from normative thinking, in which responsibility is broadly defined, toward a localized construction of responsibility that is both real and perceived within a constrained leadership system. While much of the literature seeks to normalize and stabilize a construction of RL, scholars have also urged greater consideration of the localized context in which leadership occurs (Waldman & Balven, 2014, p. 231).

This view of RL allows for each organization "to identify those capabilities which, given their context and challenges, will most likely make for RL (because) it allows (organizations) to identify the practices and capabilities (they) need to have and develop for (their) leadership to be considered effective, ethical and enduring from multiple stakeholder perspectives" (Lynham, 1998, p. 217).

Unknowns and Implications

Given the historical foundations and general literature review, the theoretical definition of RL differs significantly (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). This differentiation may result from the various ways people define and approach theory building (Swanson & Chermack, 2013), which encompasses a multitude of definitions. Dubin (1976) provided a basic description that "a theory

tries to make sense out of the observable world by ordering the relationships among elements that constitute the theorist's focus of attention in the real world" (p. 26).

The RL literature on praxis is the least abundant among all research types (Frangieh et al., 2017). Most theoretical work in RL has focused on conceptualizing RL and its boundaries, with very few extant measures or methodologies for analysis. Theory development and its failure to launch beyond conceptualization are common in existing theory building (Swanson & Chermack, 2013). Beyond established definitions, theory building in RL has developed along distinct streams.

Research Opportunity

Most of the RL literature reviewed focused on the affective characteristics of individual leaders, even when referring to leaders in general. This tendency in how scholars write about RL echoes the origins of leadership studies in Meindl et al.'s (1985) search for the holy grail of leadership. As a result, some researchers argue that our traditional view of leadership has been skewed by leader-centric models that focus solely on what leaders do to followers (Brown & Hosking, 1986; Meindl et al., 1985; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992).

Understanding RL through Follower Perspectives

Additionally, the discrepancy in interest in leadership versus followership is stark. Weick (2007) noted from a Google search that he found 57 items relating to the word 'leader' for each one regarding a 'follower.' New insights into leadership processes can be gained by focusing squarely on processes connected to followers and their contexts, independently of what leaders currently do (Meindl, 2004b, p. 1347). Despite the call for a more thorough investigation of followers' perceptions (Fields, 2007), very few studies have aimed to understand how followers construct their views of leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). Further research in RL should begin

to build or deconstruct the experience and relationships between followership and leadership (Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007).

Waldman and Balven (2014) identify theoretical gaps and highlight five areas requiring further research: processes and outcomes; stakeholder priorities; training and development; globalization and macro-level forces; and measurement and assessment. In this study and integrative literature review, special attention is given to opportunities for future research on stakeholder priorities, with an emphasis on follower perspectives. Although RL's core construct is shaped by followers' perceptions, which leaders are responsible for, most of the reviewed articles gave little consideration to followers' perspectives. This gap in understanding RL through a follower-centered perspective of leadership is not only an area requiring future research but also a problem of construct congruity, as it hinges on determining followers' perceptions of responsibility.

Though the literature's focus has yet to fully embrace followers' perspectives, RL offers an opportunity to depart from leader-centric approaches toward more follower-inclusive and social constructionist approaches to leadership. Meindl spoke to this opportunity, reflecting that "the romance of leadership is about the thoughts of followers: how leaders are constructed and represented in their thought systems" (Meindl, 1995, p. 330).

This need for more research and understanding of how followers interact within leadership systems echoes a broader call from leadership scholars to move away from a narrow focus on the leader as an individual and to be more inclusive of followers' perceptions and roles in the leadership equation. An important distinction is that the research involves followers rather than the entire constituency, because leadership is inextricably defined and phenomenologically catalyzed by followership in the co-creation of leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Leadership

does not exist without followers (Lynham, 2004). Yet leadership literature continually neglects followers' perspectives (Meindl, 1995). Followers are often portrayed as passive and ineffectual agents in leadership processes (De Luque et al., 2008). This lack of follower-centric research is central to building a more comprehensive understanding of how RL works within organizations. Another substantial area of opportunity within RL theory and development lies in leadership development, particularly in preparing leaders to navigate crises and volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments, where adaptability, ethical decision-making, and stakeholder engagement are critical (Harrison, 2024).

Closing

These two overarching themes of how people have written about RL from both an affective model and a generalizable and strategic framework for praxis provide a strong foundation for the continued development of RL. This convergence aligns with Day and Antonakis's (2013) emphasis on a future direction for leadership theory: collapsing and complementing conceptualizations by drawing on prior knowledge of leader behaviors. This approach also echoes the recent work of Agarwal and Bhal (2020), who propose unifying the ethical and strategic dimensions around which RL literature has been coalescing. Although progress has been made in the multidimensionality of RL, inconsistencies abound in attempts to codify normative approaches, and contributions toward praxis leave RL intangible for organizations.

Lynham's work on the theory of RL/P remains the only operable theory that integrates both affective domains of determination and a generalizable model of practice (MacTaggart, 2018). A reconsideration of RL/P development reveals the need for further theoretical support for RL, including new operationalizations. More studies are needed that incorporate praxis. In

the ongoing broader trend toward including more follower perspectives in the study of leadership, new articles should narrow their focus to how followers construct their assessments of responsibility within their leadership systems, using RL/P as a method of inquiry. Appropriately, as RL has been widely accepted as a socially determined phenomenon, more should be understood regarding how followers contribute. These studies should explicitly consider national culture and identity, organizational level, personal beliefs, their impact on the ethical framework, and interactions with leadership systems and their leaders. In contrast to many other leadership studies, RL is arguably the most follower-determined.

Chapter 3 – Methodology & Methods

Reflecting on the years since launching the journal *Organization Science*, Daft and Lewin (2008) conceded that their original mission had not been realized. Daft and Lewin reemphasized the need not to prioritize rigorous empirical research methods but, instead, "new theories and ways of thinking about organizations, coupled with a plausible methodology that grounds the theory" (p. 182). This call for a methodology that grounds theory is still lacking in the vast majority of RL development as most scholars neglect applied methodologies in favor of the quest for the holy grail of leadership — romanced by an idealized adventure to return with the elixir of leadership (see also, the works of Handy, 2007; Meindl et al., 1985; Meindl 1995, 2004a; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007). RL research should focus on grounding theory with a plausible methodology that provides insights organizations may use in praxis.

This chapter outlines the methodology for this study on how entry-level employees form perceptions of their CEO's RL. The research problem highlights the urgent need to examine RL across all levels of organizational hierarchy. An explicit justification for a constructivist approach is provided, linking methodological choices to the core argument and contextualizing the inquiry. Subsequently, the chapter describes the specific research methods applied within this framework.

Along these lines, the chapter describes Narrative Inquiry (NI), as defined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), as a qualitative approach that focuses on the narratives and stories people use to make sense of their experiences. It details participant selection, data collection methods, and thematic analysis. This single-organization study analyzes RL among respondents reporting

to a single CEO within a bounded system, conceptualizing leadership distance. Next, we examine in greater detail why constructivist inquiry is compatible with these choices.

Constructivist inquiry is consistent with the aim reported herein and applies the quality criteria proposed herein. Supporting the direction of the discussion toward exploring a complex and socially embedded phenomenon, this methodological approach aligns with the philosophical underpinnings of Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly's NI, which is grounded in a phenomenological tradition. Human beings are always at the core of meaning construction through narratives (Bruner 1990), emphasizing restorying (Ollerenshaw & Creswell 2002) and co-construction between researcher and participant. Criteria for quality in constructivist inquiry are **outlined, including what constitutes an ethical story, as well as** the narrative account provided by the researcher (Josselson 2007). With the paradigm and methodology outlined, the next section restates the research problem.

Research Problem Restated

Therefore, the problem that drove this research is:

> *Despite the growing size of organizations and the widening distance between executives and employees, most leadership research focuses on leader behaviors rather than on how employees receive and interpret leadership influence.*

Proposed Research Design

The study examines how employees perceive and construct RL within a large corporate organization, employing methodologies that focus on employees' experiences and narratives. These methods analyze both employee agency and organizational structures as they appear in RL accounts. The chapter uses NI to showcase how personal and organizational stories shape RL perceptions (Czarniawska 2007; 2008).

Understanding RL through NI

Understanding leadership through a narrative followership lens could help unearth complexity (Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2009). As noted, RL is often conceptualized as comprising multiple subjectively defined dimensions (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). Leveraging socially constructed inquiry may help make sense of complex experiences (Meindl et al., 1985). This complexity is exemplified in stories, such as Spiderman's ubiquitous lesson from Uncle Ben: "With great power comes great responsibility" (Lee & Ditko, 1962). Narrative Inquiry is a powerful method for studying RL because it allows researchers to explore the complexities of leadership in context, focusing on the stories and narratives that individuals use to make sense of their experiences. The questions regarding employees' experiences of RL align closely with their daily lived experiences, bringing meaning and depth to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Question. This study is focused on exploring this primary research question: *How do entry-level employees in a large organization construct their perceptions of Responsible Leadership (RL) in relation to their Chief Executive Officer (CEO)?*

This question is further explored through the following sub-questions:

1. How do entry-level employees perceive and describe their CEO's effectiveness in leading the organization?
2. How do entry-level employees interpret and describe the ethicality of the CEO's decisions and leadership?
3. How do entry-level employees view the long-term impact (enduring qualities) of the CEO's leadership?
4. How does leadership distance shape the way entry-level employees experience RL within the organization?

5. How do organizational narratives, leadership messaging, and indirect interactions influence employees' perceptions of RL?
6. How does the use of NI to examine how entry-level employees construct their perceptions of RL provide insights into the RL/P theory proposed by Lynham (1998, 2000, 2002, 2004), particularly in relation to leadership distance, communication, and organizational influence?

Breaking down the main question clarifies the approach while aligning it with NI (Moustakas, 1994). The following section explains the key elements embedded in the question, including "how," "employees," "perceive," "describe," "experience," "RL," and "large organizations." Each represents a core component of the inquiry, and understanding these elements is essential to the research design.

"How" invites freedom and curiosity about RL during the research process.

"Employees" names the group, often seen as followers in organizations, whose views are the focus here (i.e., "I am an employee and I follow this company"). Their views frame this study.

"Perceive" highlights the subjective and potentially plural understandings of RL held by respondents, guided by individual and contextual factors.

"Describe" asks participants to give detailed accounts of what they mean by, and how they show, the three E's: effectiveness, ethicality, and endurance, when they talk about RL. These three dimensions are used in this study to define RL as effective, ethical, and enduring.

"Experience" refers to the goal of this study: to gather participants' stories about how they perceive, explain, and make sense of RL in their daily work within one organization.

"RL" in this study refers to Responsible Leadership and is defined as a leadership approach that is effective, ethical, and enduring. The study examines RL in large organizations to characterize its nature and the challenges associated with leader distance.

In summary, NI is appropriate for this research because it collects and interprets employees' lived stories to provide a holistic understanding of RL. This methodological fit grounds the study in its aim — to uncover how employees perceive RL in large organizations — while strengthening RL/P theory and yielding relevant insights for leadership systems. The following sections discuss the inquiry paradigm and approach in greater detail.

Inquiry Paradigm: Constructivist Paradigm

This study employs the constructivist paradigm described by Guba and Lincoln (1985, 2013), which views knowledge as constructed and is well-suited to exploring leadership through stories. Reality is considered personal and contextual (Crotty, 1998), shaped by human interaction, and there is no single reality but multiple social understandings. In this study, RL emerges from employees' experiences within organizational culture and systems (Voegtlin, 2016) and is influenced by broader social and power structures (Fairhurst & Grant, 2010). Participant stories best reveal the relational and systemic aspects of leadership. Here, knowledge results from researcher-subject interaction and subjective interpretation (Schwandt, 1994), so NI supports meaning-making with participants. The researcher is not neutral but collaborates in creating knowledge, identifies ethical, effective, and enduring RL components with employees, and acknowledges that these traits are socially shaped — not inherent. Meaning-building occurs naturally in human interaction (Weick, 1995).

Ontology. Reality, from a constructivist point of view, is relative and contextual: it depends on individuals and is created by them in interaction with the world (Guba 1990; Lincoln

& Guba 2013). There are not many socially constructed realities; understanding cannot be stretched to mean multiplicity within a single objective reality. RL, for purposes of this study, will be assumed to be dynamic, based on employees' lived experiences, as shaped by organizational culture and systems that institutionalize certain behaviors as responsible or otherwise (Voegtlin 2016). The paper draws on constructions similar to RL from broader societal discourses and power dynamics, following Fairhurst & Grant's constructionist approach, whereby stories open avenues into participants' narratives needed to access constructed realities.

Epistemology. In **c**onstructivist epistemology, knowledge is understood as constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants and thus is subjective and interpretive (Schwandt, 1994). The NI applied in this study aims to construct meaning with participants and underscores a dialogic process of knowledge construction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This completely dispels the notion of an objective observer standing outside the research process, placing the researcher within knowledge construction as another participant. The study reveals what employees think about RL's ethics, effectiveness, and sustainability by allowing their voices to convey their experiences, dimensions that are not inherent qualities but arise from social interaction and interpretation, since RL is understood as socially constructed (Weick, 1995).

Methodology. Constructivist research methodology is how researchers get and build their knowledge base — or how they do research to gain useful insights (Lincoln et al., 2011). The constructivist view holds that knowledge is socially constructed and subjective; therefore, the methodology should focus on interpretation and meaning-making. This study used hermeneutic and dialectic methods to shape and compare people's ideas of leadership through

language (Lincoln et al., 2011). Both methods fit qualitative inquiry, which explores life through detailed, relevant stories (Angen, 2000).

Axiology. The constructivist perspective views the research inquiry as an inherently value-based, subjectively laden activity that recognizes researchers' ethical obligation to honor and accurately represent participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Rather than seeing values as "biases" to be removed from the research process, values are recognized as fundamental components that shape all aspects of the research process, including the nature of the questions being explored, the application of forms used for data collection and analysis, and the way in which the data collected will be interpreted. Transparency and reflexivity throughout all aspects of the research process, so that ethical considerations guide and inform the research at each stage: data collection, data analysis, and data interpretation. In addition, reflexivity addresses "the researcher's awareness of the assumptions taken as given to later stages in the research process," and how these assumptions can affect subsequent stages (Finlay 2002). Furthermore, it emphasizes the power relationship between the researcher and the participant, making knowledge sharing a more equitable process.

Teleology. The teleological aim of this study is to develop an intensive, nuanced, and contextual understanding of RL through followers' experiences. Ethical, effective, and enduring aspects of leadership as perceived and construed by the led shall significantly inform theoretical discourse and practical application in organizational development. The study goes beyond providing a rational or prescriptive model for RL to address the complexity that corporate experience reveals in contradictions within large enterprises. Hopefully, it leads to initiatives toward more inclusive and participatory leadership development that foster greater ownership and responsibility among all members of an organization.

Methods: Narrative Inquiry

Narrative Inquiry is a relational, temporal, and situational account of human experience, emphasizing both the lived and the told experiences through stories. Narrative Inquiry was first labeled as such by Connelly and Clandinin (1990), drawing on Dewey's theory that experience develops through connections and continuity with the reflective construction of identities and knowledge. However, NI considers the personal narratives people build within larger social or organizational contexts. Researchers work with participants to develop narrative accounts from which the relational aspects of lived experiences can be explored (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). NI creates vignettes for each story, organized along a meta-narrative path, each containing major aspects common to all shared stories. The stories can be told through images, create a fictive story/play that shows the main 'gist' of the narratives, or even single out the main 'themes' found within the narratives (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). There are seven commonly applied steps in NI (See Figure 5).

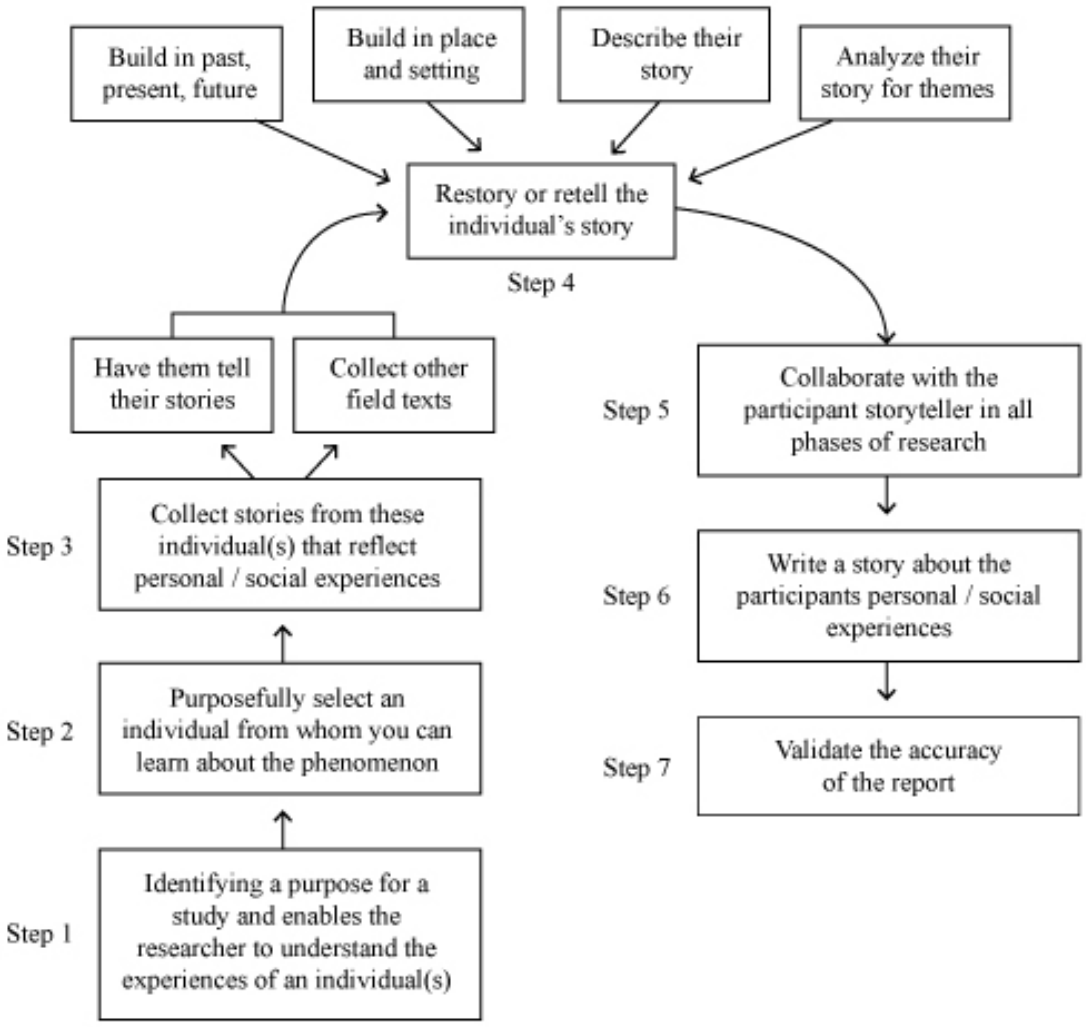
Narrative Component: Plot

A critical component of narrative structure is 'plot'. Plot is the organization of how people interpret experiences, past and present. Through plot, temporal unity can be maintained (Athens 1994; Ezzy 1998). Most participants express perceptions of leadership through internalized soliloquies, in which their continuous internal dialogues, either with themselves or with some imagined other, concern how they assess responsibility for and effectiveness in leadership. Narrative analysis also considers who gets to tell the story and who does not, thereby identifying which organizational characters confer meaning on leadership while others remain in the background. Gergen and Gergen (1984) have referred to them as a supporting cast in an

individual's story about being a leader, but what this clearly shows is that social/organizational systems co-construct conceptions of leaders.

Figure 5

Common Steps in the NI Process



NI as Empowering Folk Research

Narrative Inquiry is sometimes labeled "folk research" because it resembles the everyday ways people make sense of experiences and share knowledge across disciplines such as history, anthropology, psychology, and medicine (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). It has also been argued that narrative forms a counter-discourse to elitist academic discourses and allows marginalized groups to construct knowledge (Canagarajah, 1996). This NI study takes narrative both as data collected from stories told about leadership perceptions at different distances within an organization and as a process by which those perceptions are socially constructed through mediation; narratives facilitate participants' explanations not only of what happened but also of why they think it happened (Savin-Baden, 2007).

NI as Three-Dimensional

The analysis will be conducted based on the three-dimensional NI space (temporality, sociality, and place) suggested by Connelly & Clandinin (2006), which provides a rationale for exploring stories considering past, present, and future dimensions; personal and social aspects; as well as different places within physical and institutional contexts where experiences happen. This view is consistent with the argument that RL is complex adaptive, while allowing examination of how leader-follower relations develop within large-scale organizational systems, thereby bringing into focus relational ethics and shared meaning in the leadership process (Schwind et al., 2014).

For purposes of this research, NI was well-suited to explore the relational dynamics between RL and large organizations. Narratives provide accounts or descriptions of personal experience; thus, they permit a deeper understanding of followers' perceptions of RL, which is

inherently relational and shaped by organizational complexities. Lindsay and Schwind (2016) emphasized that NI goes beyond simple 'storytelling' since meaning has to be construed reflectively across stories told from different dimensions, in terms of temporality, sociality, and spatiality. It provides fine-grained insight into how RL is perceived at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Theoretical Framework: Connecting RL/P with NI

The constructivist paradigm and the NI method underscore the relational, co-constructed nature of leadership, aligning with the methodological framework of Responsible Leadership for Performance (RL/P). Rather than imposing a theoretical structure that predetermines the meaning of leadership, this study applies RL/P as an organizing lens to explore how entry-level employees construct their perceptions of RL in relation to their CEO. Large organizations are experienced at a distance — primarily through mediation by organizational messaging, indirect interactions, and cultural norms (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). The RL/P framework provides both vocabulary as well as conceptual grounding from which followers' perception towards leaders can be examined, since narratives could be processed within the bounded system of leadership so as to understand how followers determine that leader action should be considered across the vectors of whether they are perceived to be effective, ethical, and enduring (White-Newman, 1993; Lynham, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004).

The RL/P framework was not used as a prescriptive model in this research. Rather, it was used as a structuring tool that directs the research focus and the organization of the inquiry without imposing a predefined construct on participants' experiences. The 3E's of RL (White-Newman, 1993) provided a structure that van Manen (2014) described as "bridling" — a gentle restraint and direction of the inquiry; yet it allowed for the emergence of new participant-driven

narratives. Thus, leadership will be understood not as a behavioral model centered on the leader, but rather as an interactional process shaped by both employees' lived experiences and organizational structure. Using RL/P as a conceptual framework for NI, this research links theoretical insights with empirical explorations to ensure that RL is used both at the theoretical level and as a phenomenon interpreted and co-created by organizational members.

Site Selection

The use of videoconferencing in this research project aligned with the constructivist paradigm and met the research study's requirements. Videoconferencing offered many benefits for conducting interviews, improving methodological quality, and accommodating participants' contemporary work environments and requirements (Dilthey, 1976).

First, videoconferencing ensures participants' full anonymity because employees can join from private locations, and no one needs to know they are at work while speaking with a researcher. This additional layer of privacy fosters openness, as experiences can be shared without fear of workplace repercussions. The literature on virtual interviews finds that the comfort levels participants attain in these settings lead to more detailed disclosures than would have been provided in face-to-face settings (Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Thunberg and Arnell, 2022).

Second, since videoconferencing involves no travel, it was logistically convenient. It could easily fit into the schedules of both participants and researchers. In large organizations where employees work from different locations, this convenience becomes more apparent. Long-distance participation is enhanced by videoconferencing and proves more economical than face-to-face methods in the future (Sullivan 2012).

This also mirrors the current work environment, as most employees are accustomed to interacting virtually. With remote and hybrid work increasingly relying on videoconferencing for

professional communication, it is appropriate that real workplace stories be captured through the same medium. The use of videoconferencing made the interview setting appear regular within participants' organizations, rather than artificial or detached from organizational reality (Archibald et al., 2019).

The study leveraged videoconferencing, which was methodically incorporated into the research design to ensure participant confidentiality, make the sessions accessible, and ensure they were relevant to today's workplace. In this manner, videoconferencing also aligned with current workforce trends while creating a secure environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their real-life experiences of RL.

Participant Selection

A participant from an organization with more than 1,000 employees was selected to provide a rich, authentic RL experience in large organizations. Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) emphasized the importance of allowing participants to have meaningful, intense experiences with the phenomenon under study, and of participants' willingness to co-construct knowledge with the researcher through stories. Patton (2015) also proposed that an intensity-sampling strategy could be used to select participants who could provide detailed, vivid accounts of RL.

Participants met the criteria for entry-level employees: having been with an organization for less than five years, in non-managerial positions, and with minimal direct access to executive leadership (NACE, 2024; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). This ensures that this group is the farthest removed from the CEO and that their perspective on RL is important at the highest hierarchical levels. The study sought participants willing to discuss and share their lived experience of RL. This willingness to participate in the research process also supports the

collaborative nature of NI, in which meanings are co-constructed between the participant and the researcher through dialogue (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2019; Lindsay & Schwind, 2016). In summary, participants were willing to commit to the research process, which involves several interviews and follow-up discussions, along with member checking, to enhance the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participant recruitment was conducted through multiple strategies over 5.5 months, from March 23 to September 9, 2025. Participants were to be entry-level Microsoft employees who would express their perceptions of RL from a considerable hierarchical distance. Different outreach approaches were used to identify potential participants and bring them into the study, with varying degrees of success.

The initial recruitment method was a mass email campaign using Apollo, a lead-generation platform that identifies and verifies Microsoft employees using publicly available professional information. More than 500 cold emails were sent in daily batches of about 50. This approach received zero responses. The recruiter then experimented with the premium LinkedIn "Sales Navigator" tool, permitting InMail outreach. On this platform, he could send up to 100 InMails to prospective participants but got only a couple of informal responses and no confirmed interviews.

The revised method for making connections was to send connection invitations via LinkedIn. Using Sales Navigator, the researcher searched for lead contacts that met all required characteristics and sent over 500 connection invitations with no "notes" (LinkedIn's term for a short message with a connection request) or additional message. Once a contact accepted or confirmed a request to connect, a prewritten follow-up message was automatically sent to them. This follow-up message provided a brief introduction to the researcher's dissertation and noted

that the researcher had a $40 Visa gift card available for their time and willingness to participate in a one-hour (confidential) Zoom interview and a short pre-interview survey. More than 500 connection invitations were sent, and approximately 70 led to conversations with potential participants; nine potential participants were successfully contacted and interviewed, but only eight were included in the study.

Originally, the criteria included only participants who had been working at Microsoft for more than one year. However, due to difficulties encountered in the recruitment process, this criterion was slightly relaxed. A few respondents with approximately 1 year or less of experience closely aligned their experiences with the objectives of this study and provided thoughtful reflections on leadership and organizational aspects; hence, their perspectives added richness to the data. This flexibility is guided by constructivist philosophy that underpins contextual relevance (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

After the potential participant expressed interest, the researcher sent a message containing the consent form, as approved by the IRB, and additional context about the study. Calendly, an online calendar linked to the researcher's availability, was used to schedule appointments with participants. Each participant received an automatically generated Zoom videoconference link. Electronic signatures were collected on consent forms, and email confirmations documented participant consent.

The recruitment process was one of the more challenging aspects of this study. As an external researcher with no organizational sponsor, success and progress depended on persistence and on clearly articulating the request for research participation, eventually gaining access to an entry-level employee at a Fortune 100 firm. The key channel utilized included publicly available social media tools; worked within weekly quotas for LinkedIn connections;

and adjusted the language of the outreach message to match that of potential participants, in both tone and style. Referrals were attempted through first-degree connections and Microsoft-affiliated groups on LinkedIn, but these proved unproductive. The final, proven-effective approach involved sending a connection request, followed by personalized outreach messages.

The recruitment process involved no specific screening of departments, demographics, roles, or other factors beyond the basic eligibility requirements for participation. Thus, as Patton (2015) noted, the researcher's bias in selecting participants was greatly minimized. The researchers identified potential participants by reviewing their profiles and public information. Visibility bias may affect who accepts a connection request, but the fact that these individuals had professional profiles with senior titles and photos of themselves speaking may have created an impression of credibility or value, leading them to accept the request. This resulted in participants being randomly assigned within the organization.

Nine individuals opted to participate in the interview process: seven software engineers, a designer, and a program manager. Although the sample consisted mostly of young adults, it represented diversity across functional areas and levels of organizational experience. One of the interview participants' results was excluded because she did not meet the comparable criteria for entry-level status, despite having direct reports and serving as a manager, although her tenure at Microsoft and title met the criteria. The dataset is representative of Microsoft's entry-level demographics across all functions, as no demographic filters were applied during recruitment. The dataset ranged from strong support for the CEO's leadership to cautious concern, showing significant variation in participants' viewpoints.

Themes organizing the research participants' stories were identified and categorized. New information or themes stopped emerging after a particular level of data, which could be

considered sufficient for data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). All participants had different stories to tell, but most shared common elements in their narratives about losing leadership, catching up with technology, being understood, going through corporate restructuring, and supposed accountability.

Each participant received a $40 electronic Visa gift card as compensation for their participation at the conclusion of their interview (including the aforementioned participant, who was interviewed but not entry-level). Three participants agreed to review the study's findings and provide feedback to the researcher, which was used in a thematic analysis to ensure accuracy and relevance to the participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, several other individuals expressed interest in participating but ultimately neither scheduled an interview nor responded after the researcher sent a follow-up message; no participants formally withdrew from the study.

This recruitment story captures both the authentic challenges of conducting a narrative study and the creative ways in which a researcher can adapt the recruitment process to foster an ethical, participant-centered approach. The researcher's flexibility in developing and implementing a recruitment plan that prioritized an ethical environment while maintaining a focus on participant voice resulted in a study that is both methodologically sound and richly detailed, drawing on narrative data.

Bounding the Participant in a System of Leadership

To clearly define and study broad concepts (e.g., "leadership," "followership"), establishing clear parameters (i.e., boundaries) for the investigation is critical to increasing both its depth and focus. This study outlines a design to investigate entry-level employees and their CEOs within a single organization.

Focus on Entry-Level Employees. This is in line with the conception of followership as a situational, context- dependent phenomenon, mediated through organizational structures and cultures (Loyola & Aiswarya, 2023). Entry-level employees are defined as those at the earliest stage of their careers, occupying positions with minimal influence over leadership decisions and being directly supervised by mid-level managers (Gentry et al., 2021). They have the greatest hierarchical distance from the CEO. Accordingly, the low-level employees in the given organizations can serve as an effective population for studying their views on leadership.

Understanding RL must therefore take place from that perspective. On the one hand, there is an expectation that CEOs will behave responsibly at the highest level of accountability (Maak & Pless, 2006b); on the other hand, CEOs' influence on entry-level employees' attitudes can be highly indirect. The indirectness of CEOs' effects on entry-level employees stems from the fact that these influences are usually transmitted through organizational systems or broad messages/communications (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Thus, the sample, on the one hand, provides insight into how the lowest-level employees perceive RL, and, on the other hand, allows us to understand how RL is co-created across different levels within an organization.

Focus on a single Organization and its CEO. The literature provides a rationale for the CEO-centric approach to leadership, as CEOs are responsible for setting the organizational culture and ethical tone (Petrick & Quinn, 2001). Evidence shows that corporate integrity accountability frameworks are primarily developed by the CEO within organizations. Therefore, having a single organization with a single CEO in this study will capture a single, consistent leadership narrative, thereby enhancing the internal validity of the findings. Perspectives of entry-level employees on their immediate supervisors provide a good foundation for

contextualizing specific insights into broader leadership dynamics, but more importantly, ensure that those insights remain firmly anchored in a particular organizational context.

Participant System of Leadership. According to Lynham (2000), leadership is a systemic process in which responsibility is constructed and operationalized through interactions among followers, leaders, and the organizational context, which serves as a bounding system for leadership for its constituents. Employees entering an organization are participants in the proposed study's leadership system as the individuals who perceive, interpret, and subsequently assign responsibility to their leader, the CEO, in one organizational setting. The employee's understanding of what is considered a responsible, effective act of a leader is an outcome of the leadership system resulting from narrative influences on action, which provides a basis for how much of a leadership experience may occur when there is an extreme hierarchy gap using the NI approach (Lynham, 2000, 2002; White-Newman, 1993).

Description of Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling with an emphasis on diversity across organizational roles, cultural backgrounds, and professional backgrounds. Informed consent was signed after IRB approval through anonymization by pseudonyms and removal of identifiable organizational information, in line with NI's ethical guidelines that emphasize participant safety and ethics (Clandinin, 2022; Lindsay & Schwind, 2016).

Most of the proposed participants hold various positions based in different locations. Their views may or may not pertain to a particular department or group within the organization. Such a background enabled a comprehensive discussion of RL, highlighting its relational and systemic aspects. NI principles state that an account must be constructed from multiple perspectives, consistent with Clandinin & Connelly (2000) and Huber et al. (2013).

Saturation of Participants

Saturation in NI is not solely about a specific number of participants, but about ensuring their stories provide depth, richness, and a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Clandinin, 2022). A detailed, iterative collection of data from eight participants' stories ensure that each narrative insight into RL is unique, thereby achieving saturation for this study. The final interviews did not yield any new themes, indicating that the data have attained sufficient richness and comprehensiveness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Patton's (2015) statement that "in-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information-rich" (p. 244) clearly expresses and supports the viability of this approach. As further emphasized by Schwind et al. (2016), NI is more concerned with the richness of participants' stories than with their number. Across all participants' stories, the study highlighted RL's effectiveness, ethics, and sustainability within specific large-scale organizational contexts.

The iterative cycles of data collection and analysis enable rich exploration of RL, reflecting its nature as something between relations and co-construction within an organizational system. Therefore, different stories provide a multifaceted understanding of RL, offering useful insight into how it is perceived and enacted within complex leadership contexts.

Organization Selection

The choice of an appropriate organization for this study largely determined the relevance of the findings on RL and leadership distance. Several sampling strategies are proposed at the employment and research design stages. All these strategies have been identified in the literature, including:

Purposeful Sampling. Purposeful sampling is the type of sampling in which an organization is selected that best fits the objectives of research and provides rich content and relevant data for the study (Patton, 2015). In this case, criterion sampling, a subtype of purposive sampling, can be used to select an organization that meets specific, predefined criteria, such as large size (1,000+ employees), a structured leadership hierarchy, and a public commitment to RL (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Organizational Context. The study takes place at a single organization and provides an isolated environment in which the ways subjects narrate responsible leadership can be studied. Although the study is based on a sample of employees at one company, it is a narrative inquiry, not a case study. A narrative inquiry is concerned with how people make sense of their experiences and create meaning through stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); thus, the organization serves as the background or context in which participants' narratives unfold, rather than as the primary focus of the study.

While a focus on a single organization as a system resembles a single-case study approach (Yin, 2018), it differs in that a case study's primary unit of analysis is participant narratives rather than the organization (i.e., case). To reiterate this point, in this study, Microsoft, or "the organization," serves as the contextual boundary rather than the methodological framework.

The choice of Microsoft as an organizational context for this study was based on Microsoft's publicly recognized reputation for ethical leadership, its commitment to sustainability, and its stakeholder-oriented governance (Microsoft, n.d.). In the study of leadership, organizations recognized externally for being responsibly or ethically led create a

unique opportunity to understand how followers view and construct leadership actions (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Beyond aligning with many values often considered representative of RL in research and literature, Microsoft is a large global corporation positioned at the forefront of the technological and societal changes taking place today. With a market capitalization of over $2 trillion, Microsoft is one of the most influential corporations in the world and has considerable influence in several areas, including social media and professional networking (LinkedIn), gaming and digital entertainment (Xbox and Activision Blizzard), enterprise productivity (Microsoft 365), and AI (e.g., Copilot, OpenAI). As such, these business activities position Microsoft across a number of industries at the forefront of the technological, communications, and digital infrastructure that will shape society in the years ahead.

As such, Microsoft is at the center of much of today's debate regarding the ethics of innovation, corporate responsibility, trust, and technological change. Therefore, Microsoft provides a particularly important context to investigate how followers view and construct perceptions of responsible leadership as technological development accelerates and expectations for corporate accountability increase. Therefore, the organizational environment provides a rich context for examining how employees perceive leadership decisions regarding innovation, governance, and societal impacts within a complex, rapidly changing institutional environment.

Organizational Structure and Leadership Distance. Since this proposed study is on leadership distance, an appropriate organization is one that ensures the CEO's leadership effect on entry-level employees' experiences passes through several hierarchical levels- a multinational or multi-site firm (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Firms with such structural complexity introduce

additional layers between employees and top executives, thereby increasing accountability for leadership communication (Georgakakis et al., 2023).

Industry Considerations. The research can target industries with a top-down leadership hierarchy, such as finance, consumer retail brands, healthcare, manufacturing, or technology, where decisions by executive-level leaders have far-reaching implications for employees and stakeholders (Hannah et al., 2009). Leadership structures in these industries are often formalized, with highly publicized executive decision-making, making them ideal for examining RL in practice (Mironko et al., 2022).

Practical Constraints. Apart from theoretical considerations, it should be guided by ease of access, data availability, and organizations' willingness or openness to participate in the study. An organization that has previously participated in leadership research and one that has made a public commitment to transparency is likely to be interested in this study (Bryman, 2016).

These selection strategies aim to find an organization with a suitable, rich context for the study. A well-organized study will provide contextual richness in exploring RL, leadership distance, and employees' perceptions of executive leaders' approval by the IRB.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study adopted a Narrative Inquiry (NI) methodology, grounded in a constructivist ontology and epistemology, to understand participants' experiences with RL. In line with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) proposal and subsequent work, data collection and analysis were designed to elicit and construct rich, highly contextualized stories that reveal the relational and systemic dimensions of RL.

Data Collection

Narrative Inquiry is defined as the collection of personal stories that help understand experiences and the meanings participants attach to them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The researcher used a structured descriptive survey and semi-structured, open-ended interviews as primary data-collection methods. This provided respondents with an avenue to freely narrate their stories, thereby fostering true co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and respondents (Clandinin, 2022). The interview was guided by a protocol that prompted reflection on RL through the RL/P framework, including the 3E dimensions of effective, ethical, and enduring leadership (White-Newman, 1993; Lynham, 2000).

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

To facilitate rich storytelling, the following open-ended questions were used:

1. Tell me a story about your first impression of your CEO. How did you form this impression, and what factors contributed to it?
2. In this short survey, you answered whether you perceive your CEO to be responsible or irresponsible. Tell me a story that represents how you've made this determination.
3. How have you come to these determinations? What information, experiences, or interactions have shaped your perspective?
4. How has your own background, personal values, or life experiences influenced what you see as responsible or irresponsible leadership? Can you share a story from your life that relates to how you perceive your CEO's responsible leadership?
5. Has your immediate supervisor influenced your experience with your CEO? Share a story of how you experience your immediate supervisor experiencing your CEO?

6. Have your colleagues or workplace discussions influenced your perception of the CEO's leadership? Have you heard stories from coworkers that shaped your views?
7. What specific experiences stand out in shaping your perception of your CEO's leadership? How have these experiences reinforced or challenged your views?
8. Can you tell me a story of a time when you observed or experienced your CEO acting in a way that made your organization more effective?
9. Can you tell me a story of a time when you observed or experienced your CEO making a decision or taking an action that had a clear ethical component?
10. Can you tell me a story of a time when you observed or experienced your CEO acting in a way that demonstrated enduring, long-term thinking rather than prioritizing short-term gains?
11. If you were to construct and share a metaphor of your experience, what would it be and why?

This flexible structure enabled the interviews to dynamically adapt and emphasize participants' lived experiences while aligning with the study's focus, as highlighted by Clandinin & Connelly (2000). The interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to maintain confidentiality. Bracketing questions around the three Es of RL — Effective, Ethical, and Enduring leadership — will guide participants' reflections toward the study's purpose while maintaining focus on its intended aims, as suggested by Clandinin (2022).

The Structured Survey for the Research Design

A short, structured survey established baseline perceptions of RL before the participants engaged in deep, reflective storytelling. The researcher administered this at the beginning of each interview session. This survey provides quick, countable data on how participants normatively

perceive their CEOs' leadership, which was analyzed comparatively across qualitative themes to ensure that emergent narratives are well situated within broader RL/P domains. This survey is intended to provide descriptive and contextual information rather than serve as a statistically significant quantitative instrument or a rigorously designed mixed-methods component.

The survey comprised five closed-ended questions. Key dimensions of RL, as framed by the RL/P system (Lynham, 2000), were identified and operationalized in these questions. Each question was rated on a Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), thereby allowing for varying responses.

1. Have you had direct, in-person interaction with your CEO? (Yes/No)
2. I perceive my CEO to be generally responsible. (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)
3. I perceive my CEO to be effective in their leadership. (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)
4. I perceive my CEO to be ethical in decision-making and corporate governance. (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)
5. I perceive my CEO to prioritize enduring, long-term thinking over short-term gains. (1=Strongly Disagree, 5=Strongly Agree)

A structured survey used prior to an interview has multiple uses in enhancing the reliability and validity of the research methodology. First, as a guide for the conversation, the survey provides a predetermined launch point for further exploring participants' perceptions of leadership. In addition, the survey helps establish baselines for participants' perceptions of leaders' responsibilities, ethics, and effectiveness within the RL/P framework, creating a common frame of reference for analyzing these perceptions. Finally, the survey enables comparisons of qualitative narratives to identify patterns or inconsistencies in how distance from

the leader influences participants' perceptions of RL/P. As a result, the structured survey complements the open-ended qualitative narratives by providing descriptive quantitative information about participants' perceptions of leadership, while the narrative interviews provide deeper insight into how employees construct leadership through the stories they tell (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

All responses remained completely anonymous and confidential. Larger themes will be determined based on aggregated data. The structured survey instrument triangulated the NI method, thereby providing a richer qualitative understanding of the participants' perceptions of leadership across extreme hierarchical distances.

Data Analysis

The study analyzed the NI data through an iterative, interpretive lens to identify patterns and themes within the stories (Clandinin, 2022). The researcher applied the analysis outlined by Lindsay and Schwind (2016), as well as being informed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), and followed four analytic steps:

1. **Restorying:** The researcher organized participants' stories through contextualizing specific events in relation to both the organization and relational settings (Clandinin, 2022).
2. **Thematic Analysis:** The researcher analyzed the stories to identify recurring motifs and themes describing participants' relational and systemic aspects of RL.
3. **Contextual Interpretation:** The researcher interpreted each story within the context of its occurrence, as part of the organizational, cultural, and relational setting(s) in which it was situated, acknowledging the social constructiveness of leadership (Riessman, 2008).

4. **Co-Construction:** Member checking was conducted with participants to ensure that the research findings accurately reflect their experiences and interpretations (Clandinin, 2022).

Thematic narrative analysis was undertaken within a three-dimensional framework of inquiry as developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000): (1) interaction, defined as personal and social aspects or dimensions of leadership experience; (2) continuity, concerned with changing perceptions regarding leadership across time; and (3) situation dealing with organizational and cultural settings or contexts that influence such perceptions.

Themes were developed to generalize patterns on how entry-level employees construct meanings of RL at the highest leadership distance. Table 3 displays how NI has been applied in this study.

Table 3

Narrative Inquiry Components

NI Component	Description	Application in Study
Field Texts	Data sources including interview transcripts, reflective journals, and contextual notes.	Interview transcripts and researcher field notes formed the primary data corpus.
Interim Texts	Preliminary interpretations and themes developed from the field texts.	Developed thematic summaries and shared with participants for validation.
Research Texts	Final synthesized narratives that present findings and interpretations.	Constructed individual and shared narratives reflecting RL's relational dynamics.

Three-Dimensional Inquiry Space	Analysis across interaction (personal/social), continuity (past/present/future), and place (context).	Explored how RL experiences intersected with organizational roles and environments.
Member Checking	Participant validation of findings and interpretations.	Participants reviewed their narratives and thematic interpretations for accuracy.

Trustworthiness, Reflexivity, and Quality Criteria

This study employs the criteria of credibility, transferability, reliability, and verifiability proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985) to assess the credibility of leadership narratives. To guard against researcher bias and to meet the credibility criteria for this research, the study incorporated techniques common in qualitative narrative research.

First, reflexivity is embedded throughout this study. Reflexivity encourages the researcher to reflect on former presumptions and to incorporate the participant's voice into their thinking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Secondly, the study invited member checking, inviting participants to reflect on how they felt their account had been represented throughout the analysis. This ensured that participants had an opportunity to gauge whether the study's reliability and credibility were reflected in our interpretation of their responses. Two participants provided reviews of the work, helping validate the account's trustworthiness, credibility, and verifiability. These reviews are provided without edit or addition in the appendix.

Third, the study details coding decisions, includes analysis memos in the appendix, and provides a detailed account of the topical development process itself in Atlas.ti. This transparency and the inclusion of appendices serve as an "audit trail" that allows the reader to

follow the researchers' thought process as they connect this to their interpretation of the participants' stories.

Finally, the study employed an iterative analysis to strengthen the study by examining additional data at each stage to develop and refine themes describing how participants constructed their leadership cognition.

As stated, the researchers employed the tenets of narrative research and the constructivist paradigm to provide a detailed, rich description of these life experiences. Unlike many qualitative studies, in which an outside reviewer is invited to accept or challenge the analysts' interpretation of the data, narrative research is typically not evaluated in this manner. Narrative research values (and reflects) the co-construction of meaning among researchers and participants. Tactics such as reflexivity, transparency, and participant validation are valued more than the evaluation of the analysts' decisions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008).

Thus, from both the perspectives of ensuring the reliability of the results and the credibility of the study, member review of narrative interpretations was emphasized.

Quality Criteria in NI

The study was guided by core constructivist criteria for quality research, including fairness, ontological authenticity, and catalytic authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 2013) as shown in Table 4. Constructivist and NI approaches consider the quality of research beyond positivistic measures of reliability and validity; they use standards of authenticity and impartiality in the interpretive process. Since the NI method explores how people develop meaning through lived experience and storytelling, the research process itself provides an opportunity for participants to reflect upon and develop meaning of their experiences as part of the study.

Fairness was demonstrated by drawing participant samples from various organizational roles, thereby providing multiple viewpoints on responsible leadership that could be represented and analyzed in the research.

The degree to which the research process promotes participants' awareness of their own interpretations and experiences is referred to as ontological authenticity. Participants explored how their perceptions of RL developed within their organizational contexts through semi-structured narrative interviews, which prompted them to articulate their experiences more fully.

Table 4

Quality Criteria in Constructivist Research

Quality Criterion	Description	Application
Fairness	Inclusion and representation of diverse participant perspectives.	Recruited participants with varied organizational roles and validated narratives.
Ontological Authenticity	Enhanced awareness of participants' own constructions of RL.	Semi-structured interviews facilitated deep reflection and self-awareness.
Catalytic Authenticity	Stimulating action or change through the research process.	Highlighted actionable insights on RL for organizational leadership practices.

Note. Table from Lincoln & Guba, 2013

Catalytic authenticity is the degree to which the research process promotes reflection that can lead to future action or change. This study generated knowledge that provides insight into employees' interpretations of leadership behaviors across hierarchical levels and that guides and shapes communication among leaders and employees, organizational development, and/or leadership practices within complex organizations. Therefore, the quality criteria for authenticity are consistent with the constructivist paradigm and support the narrative inquiry methodology used in this research.

Conclusion of Data Collection and Analysis

This chapter describes the data collection and analysis methods employed to investigate participants' experiences of RL with NI. By obtaining detailed accounts from participants, the study demonstrated both the relational and systemic dimensions of RL in an organizational context. The next chapter presents findings as themes identified within participants' narratives, enhancing understanding of the RL content knowledge/practice themes that can be developed.

Researcher Positionality and Rationale for Study

This section intentionally shifts to a first-person perspective to embody the personal nature of my research positionality and bias as a research instrument in this study. A key driver of my passion for this study is my professional experience as an executive and my direct engagement with senior leaders to craft their internal messaging. At the time of this writing, I serve as the Chief Strategy Officer for a mid-sized company of approximately 200 employees. My organization operates as a third-party corporate event management, production, and creative agency, so much of my work centers on helping executives communicate effectively within their organizations. This has given me direct experience working closely with CEOs and senior officers of large organizations, including multiple Fortune 500 companies.

Work in executive creative direction, speechwriting, video and presentation production, including speaker coaching, has given me a front-row seat to the challenges leaders face when communicating with their followers. Because most corporate events are composed primarily of employees and internal stakeholders, this underscores the importance of focusing on this internal constituency in my research. The communications literature overwhelmingly supports the common-sense notion that leadership communication is key to shaping culture, engagement, and strategic alignment inside organizations (Men, 2014). Unless we develop a far more nuanced

understanding of how employees receive leadership communications, such communications will risk falling flat, failing to drive change, and even causing disengagement (Tourish, 2013).

Beyond simple academic curiosity, this research responds to a higher calling: the growing disengagement of workers from work and from leaders. According to Gallup's State of the Global Workplace report, most employees worldwide are not engaged at work; many report a lack of connection with leadership, a lack of purpose, and limited opportunities for fulfillment (Gallup 2023). How much commitment and engagement can be inspired by slightly moving even one influential leader toward a better understanding of his or her employees? The entry-level employee likely represents an organization's largest leadership distance gap relative to the CEO and is among the two most culturally significant roles: one through decisions made and strategy articulated; the other through day-to-day execution based on sense-making within peers (Schein 2010).

Ultimately, the NI method for identifying meaning-making through storytelling at an individual level aligns with the study's methodology and my role as a storyteller and strategic communication professional. I assist executive teams in developing their own leadership stories through speeches, corporate messaging, and internal communications to inspire and engage employees. Therefore, the practicality and academic understanding of how leadership is constructed and articulated, communicated throughout an organization, and eventually internalized (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), fits in well with my desire to understand what new hires perceive about RL at the highest point of articulation and ultimately create organizational connection toward people to facilitate RL.

Chapter 4 – Findings

This Chapter outlines the study's results and examines how new employees at a large, global company construct their perceptions of Responsible Leadership (RL) relative to their Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The central research question guiding this chapter is:

How do entry-level employees in a large organization construct their perceptions of Responsible Leadership (RL) in relation to their Chief Executive Officer (CEO)?

The findings show that employees do not perceive RL through direct experience or relational closeness to leaders. Instead, they construct RL through signals sent by leadership (i.e., decisions on strategy, downsizing, and other forms of communication), filtered through hierarchical distance and proxy managers, viewed through lenses of cultural and moral identity, categorized across multiple domains of responsibility, and rebuilt through trust.

In keeping with the principles of Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), this Chapter begins with each participant's account to capture their lived perceptions. It then proceeds to cross-case thematic synthesis to identify common patterns of meaning-making in the collected data. Ultimately, these patterns coalesce into the Responsible Leadership for Performance (RL/P) model (Lynham, 1998, 2000), which views RL as a mediated, identity-filtered, and recursively constructed organizational phenomenon.

Chapter Structure

The first section provides a brief description of the participants to give an impression of the organization and its demographics. In the second section, there are descriptions of how each participant formed and changed their perceptions of the CEO. In the third section, a cross-case thematic analysis is presented to identify common themes in the interpretation of leadership

signals over hierarchical distances. The fourth and final section analyzes the adjustment of trust and responsibility following layoffs and other narrative disruptions, such as international controversy.

The chapter builds on itself to develop a processual understanding of how RL is constructed and experienced in large organizations; that is, RL is not generated solely by leaders, but also by followers.

Participant Overview

Table 5 summarizes the eight participants included in this study. Each pseudonym represents a Microsoft employee interviewed for this research. Participants varied in tenure, functional role, and employment status (full-time and contractor), and all were positioned at significant hierarchical distance from the CEO. None reported direct, regular interaction with the CEO, and most described experiencing leadership influence indirectly through organizational communication, managerial interpretation, or media exposure.

Table 5

Participant Interviews and Information

#	Pseudonym	Role	Tenure	Location	Int. Date	Int. Length
#1	Paul	Software Engineer	1 year	Seattle	9/7/25	1:02
#2	Shu	Software Engineer	2 years	Seattle	9/15/25	1:03
#3	Francisco	Software Engineer	2 years	Seattle	9/16/25	1:09
#4	Lainey	Program Manager	6 months	Seattle	9/17/25	1:05
#5	Micah	Software Engineer	1 year	Seattle	9/18/25	1:01
#6	Darby	Software Engineer	1 year	Seattle	9/19/25	1:03
#7	Ahmed	Software Engineer	1 year, 4 months	Seattle	9/20/25	1:05
#8	Siva	Software Engineer	1 month	Seattle	9/21/25	0:58

The diversity of roles and backgrounds provided a broad interpretive range, enabling examination of how RL is constructed through different identity positions within the same organizational system. This variation is critically significant, as it reveals patterned divergence in how responsibility is weighted and interpreted. This structural distance between participants and the CEO proved central to understanding how leadership signals were interpreted and categorized.

Narrative Accounts

The chapter opens with accounts of each individual's narrative, thereby preserving their lived experiences of RL across varying hierarchical levels. Each account does not exist independently of the others; instead, they function as a means of providing interpretive access to how RL is created through mediated messages, the development of personal identity, and the role of organizational context.

The pathways through which each participant developed their perception of the CEO were unique to each participant. However, there were some similarities across participants' pathways: they relied on interpretations of artifacts, organizational decisions, and frames applied by peers or managers rather than on direct interaction to develop their perceptions of the CEO.

Hence, the use of narrative accounts provides the base for a cross-case synthesis. Through this initial analysis of lived experience, the chapter remains true to NI while it prepares for a process-based thematic integration.

Participant #1: Paul's Restory: Constructing RL from a Distance

Paul is a new software engineer in Microsoft's graphics division. Paul constructs his perception of Satya Nadella through mediated exposure, peer narratives, and observable organizational outcomes.

Forming First Impressions. Paul's first real impression of Satya came from a University seminar video before his interview. In it, Satya discussed his son's diagnosis. Paul interpreted Satya's vulnerability as authentic, forming an early aspirational impression of RL. This experience helped Paul prepare for his final interview. It increased his interest in Microsoft.

Relational Constructions through Peer Stories. Paul shares a story about Redmond senior engineers talking about working under Satya: "Satya would never tell them to do anything wrong or work late hours. There is a positive vibe in corporate culture that flows from top to bottom." He forms his image of Satya as ethical through these stories and cultural elements. In the unavailability of direct interaction, these stories act as interpretive anchors through which Paul infers ethical leadership.

Assessing Responsibility and Ethics. Paul rates Satya a four out of five as an effective leader, highlighting Satya's achievements in open source, cloud, and AI. However, Paul identifies two key concerns: the impact of mass layoffs (over 20,000 employees) and disparities between executive and employee pay, especially since Satya earned $40 million in 2021 while most employees did not receive raises. Tensions shape how Paul considers RL with respect to strategic competence and distributive fairness.

Enduring Thinking and Future-Oriented Perspective. For Paul, the clear rise in Azure's dominance and the prescience of Microsoft's AI investments are evidence of long-term strategic competence. He states, "Good leadership means sharing a long-term vision, even when

hard decisions like layoffs are not fully addressed." He admits, "If it works out, it may be worth it... But I am currently very far away from that." This conditional framing reveals an early form of recursive trust calibration.

Leadership's Multimodal Influence. Paul mostly gets information from public media, such as news, podcasts, and talks. Paul's perceptions are shaped as much by peer conversations as by formal executive communication. He explained he worries about being laid off, "so that's where I get most of my information."

Personal Values and Ethical Calibration. Paul says he learned values such as empathy, doing his best, and sacrifice from his upbringing. These influence his perception of Satya's positive changes at Microsoft. He observes efforts to promote employee psychological health, philanthropy, and work-life balance, yet judges Satya by his own standards. This fuels his concern about pay and layoffs. Paul emphasizes that when a leader makes a decision that affects people, especially when it leads to increased profit, the leader is responsible for those affected. He uses the concepts of sacrifice and equity to illustrate how personal moral structures shape one's assessment of the importance of responsibility.

Summary of Paul's Restory. Paul's narrative shows how RL is built at several layers of remove from direct experience: mediated messaging, peer folklore, personal morality, and conditional trust. Paul validates Satya's strategic competence and recalibrates his trust in response to layoffs and perceived inequities. His narrative illustrates the coexistence of market admiration with a morally ambivalent stance, in which responsibility is not judged monolithically but is weighed across domains.

Participant #2: Shu's Restory: Evaluating RL through Distance and Discipline

Leadership for Shu is primarily a function of communication, results, and organizational discipline. He was raised in Shanghai with upright values of honesty and responsibility, which are regarded as integral to effective leadership, so he tends to view Satya primarily through observable signals rather than by developing a personal relationship with him.

Forming First Impressions. Shu's first substantive impression of Satya came through a company-wide email explaining the layoffs. Although the language in the layoff emails seemed to have been generated from templates, Shu was impressed by a paragraph about the instability of achieving success in the era of AI. The way the author spoke about the subject sounded "authentic" and "human," Shu mentioned, "a chatbot does not write it." The contrast between templated language and a distinctly human paragraph led Shu to view Satya as deliberate and thoughtful.

Relational Constructions. Shu forms most of his picture of Satya through what his manager shares. He cannot recall a single instance in which his team discussed Satya directly. Instead, his impressions accumulated indirectly. For example, he pointed to Satya's persistent green checkmark in Microsoft Teams — even late on Saturday nights — as a small but telling signal of accessibility and responsibility. Shu also cited Blind, an internal, anonymous social media site where employees voice worries about culture and rising pressure.

Assessing Responsibility and Ethics. Shu rated Satya four out of five for responsibility; however, he rated Satya three out of five for both ethics and long-term thinking. Shu views rising stock performance, acquisitions such as GitHub and Blizzard, and AI integration as clear strategic positives. However, Nadella's lack of public comments about the protests related to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict influenced Shu's ethical views of Satya. Shu argued that Nadella

should have been more visible as a global leader at such times and that Satya's silence was an opportunity missed to provide moral leadership. Shu also expressed concern that Microsoft was becoming a second version of Amazon, denoting a cultural drift toward performance pressure.

Enduring, Long-Term Vision. Regarding RL's dimension of enduring, long-term thinking, Shu expressed a favorable outlook on Microsoft's future-oriented direction. Much of that optimism, he said, came from the tactical move to bake OpenAI's Copilot into the Office suite. At the same time, he backed Microsoft's direction while warning that long-term category leadership will require building proprietary innovation and development capabilities, rather than leaning so heavily on another company's model (OpenAI).

Sources of Influence on Leadership Perception. Shu perceives Satya's leadership in structural terms, both through the organization's digital signals — company email and Teams status updates — and through the "culture of care" at Microsoft, which he believes is more evident in Satya's interactions with managers than in what he directly observes. When he meets his manager for casual conversations while walking around campus, he feels that his manager shows him respect, empathy, and supports his interests and development. However, he does not believe Satya would have similar empathy toward upper management.

Personalized Ethical Calibration. Shu also has a personalized view of what constitutes a good leader and an ethical leader. As a person from Shanghai, he emphasized that he learned to value accountability, teamwork, and visible responsibility; thus, he views a good leader as an employee communicator and decision facilitator. That is why he criticizes Satya as extremely competent strategically; however, Satya is not sufficiently transparent or open with employees.

Summary of Shu's Restory. Shu provides an account that illustrates how RL can be structured through observation, digital cues, and cultural expectations or assumptions about

discipline and visibility. He agrees with Satya's strategic judgment but has some doubts about Satya's ethical transparency. Unlike Paul, who appears to interpret leadership primarily through peer narratives, Shu appears to judge leadership more by systemic cues.

Participant #3: Francisco's Restory: Constructing RL through Mixed Messages and Cascades

Francisco constructs RL through culture, messaging, and organizational storytelling instead of through direct interaction. Francisco has never met or spoken with Satya Nadella. His understanding of RL is formed by onboarding messages, managerial examples, and symbolic representation.

First Exposure and Cultural Effect. Francisco first heard of Satya Nadella as a teenager. While he has never met Nadella directly, the idea of a leading technologist and global figure has shaped his understanding of Microsoft and its leaders. Francisco is Canadian by nationality, but because he is the son of Venezuelan immigrants, his everyday experience is shaped by second-generation customs of transnational migration and concepts of economic mobility. Francisco's parents moved from Venezuela to Canada in search of greater stability and opportunity. This profoundly shaped how Francisco understood work, the nature of success, and how to take responsibility for leadership. His understanding of big global companies as pathways to economic mobility and professional legitimacy may stem from this formative experience. When he was in college and taking on more internships, he began to pay closer attention to Microsoft and its leaders, and he noticed a shift in ttribuhow the company communicated its culture, direction, and values, which he associated to Satya Nadella's leadership.

Francisco's Early Impressions Through Onboarding. Francisco recently completed onboarding at his company, which has given him a clear perspective on the impact of internal communications on organizational culture and leadership. Francisco specifically recalls a virtual

training session for new employees, during which several senior executives discussed Microsoft's values, purpose, and commitment to inclusion. "It wasn't inspirational," he states with some reservation. Francisco characterized the session as overly repetitive and scripted, and as focused on branding rather than providing practical information. "I thought it was advertising," he states, describing that the message delivered through these organized sessions lacked both substance and emotional authenticity.

Leadership Influence via Managerial Translation. Francisco has developed perceptions of RL based on his managers and skip-level leaders rather than on direct interactions. Within Francisco's team, he experiences collaboration and flexibility, which he relates back to Satya's cultural change. When Francisco's managers reference "growth mindset" and "psychological safety", those values seem more legitimate than corporate messaging alone would.

Responsibility, Ethics, and Contradictions. Francisco was somewhat skeptical of the logic behind layoffs ("hiring aggressively only to lay people off a few months later") and of the fast-paced, frequent changes in strategy with little or no explanation. One of Francisco's colleagues said, "We had a plan…but then Satya's team totally changed the roadmap." Francisco was somewhat skeptical of RL but not entirely disillusioned with it. Francisco believes that investing in AI is very important, but he argues that the company is operating recklessly rather than simply reacting to hype cycles. "I believe that everyone is currently just chasing after AI."

Cultural Expectations and Leadership Accountability. Francisco is aware of many of the current controversies surrounding Microsoft's ethical responsibilities, particularly its relationships with other companies and governments. Francisco does not feel like he has much of a stake in the political aspects of these controversies, but he feels strongly that leaders need to be

honest. “If you’re going to talk about your values, show them.” Francisco evaluates RL through cultural values such as humility and hard work. Francisco respects Satya’s background but remains guarded. “You can’t get to where you are today without giving something up,” Francisco thought. For Francisco, RL will ultimately be evaluated by whether the decisions made were consistent, not by how the company’s executives look.

Summary of Francisco’s Restory. Francisco evaluates RL through symbolic aspirations (i.e., corporate messaging), the managerial translations of those aspirations (i.e., what is communicated and how), and the actual decision-making process within the organization. Francisco respects Satya’s background and managerial abilities but is skeptical of scripted communication and major strategic changes. Francisco’s evaluation of RL is then an example of an even-handed view of both cultural reverence and organizational skepticism. For Francisco, RL requires that the corporation’s stated values and lived culture align, and that the corporation’s decision-making process supports that alignment.

Participant #4: Lainey’s Restory: Constructing RL through Emotion, Empathy, and Ethics

Lainey evaluates RL on tone, emotional intelligence, and moral consistency. The way she thinks about RL is characterized by acute sensitivity to tone, intentions, and the moral consistency between leaders’ actions and their words. Although she has never met CEO Satya Nadella, Lainey has a clear image of him that she has cognitively painted through internal communications, leadership visibility, peer reactions to leadership, and how leadership decisions mirror or do not reflect her personal values.

First Encounters with Leadership Narratives. She interprets RL as concerned with emotional intelligence, tenor, intentions, and a values-based moral alignment. Although she has never interacted with Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, her views of him have been formed by

messages from Microsoft leaders, his clarity about his actions, her colleagues' responses to those actions, and whether his decisions agree with her own values. Her evaluation combines admiration for Satya's cultural influence with concern about whether words and actions regularly align.

Perception through Culture and Affective Tone. Lainey pays close attention to tone. Microsoft's corporate culture, she describes as "generous" and "warm". For her, most of that tone is set by Satya Nadella. Her colleagues have referenced "the old Microsoft" before Satya's time at the helm, stories brimming with strong ambition and toxic relationships. They also credited Satya with shifting the culture toward a more human-centered, team-oriented approach. For Lainey, RL was judged less by slogans and more by the informal, emotional signs of how people treat each other within teams, and by the culture those teams create. She believes Satya's tone influences how teams treat one another.

Moral Dissonance and Ethical Questions. Lainey neither rejected nor fully accepted the corporate messages. She expressed strong discontent with Microsoft's mass layoff and the "lack of clarity" about the company's decision-making regarding employees' job security, thereby exposing a gap between corporate social responsibility rhetoric and her experience of a "cold" business move. Lainey argued that "care" must be demonstrated not only in leaders' language but also in their actions; when employees sense care, trust can begin to rebuild. These contradictions led Lainey to question whether RL can be sustained at scale.

Sympathy and Embodied Leadership. Although she criticized Satya for many things, Lainey had some positive reactions to moments that revealed his emotional vulnerability and involvement. A salient example of this occurred when Satya delivered a leadership message to her. In the message, he shared his son's personal story, which led her to see Satya as more than

just the company's leader. For Lainey, authenticity is conveyed through affect rather than slogans. She evaluates integrity through tone, eye contact in video messages, and team morale

Managerial Influence and Cultural Consistency. Lainey experiences Satya's leadership indirectly through her manager. Lainey believes that her boss has created an environment of psychological safety, team-based care, and accessible lines of communication, all of which are aspects of Satya's leadership. However, Lainey's experience with her team reinforces her view that the CEO is leading the company's culture in a very positive way; she still wonders whether this is true across the entire company or simply reflects her "being fortunate" of working for a great team.

Responsibility and Enduring Thinking. Lainey largely views Satya's long-term commitment to responsibility and planning as well-suited to him, given the investment returns she observes at Microsoft in AI, accessibility, and sustainability. One area of concern regarding Microsoft is whether it allows its AI to move too fast, with hype compromising the ethics of its products and services.

Personal Values and Ethical Alignment. Growing up in a family where both emotional discernment and sympathy were valued, Lainey measures leaders' relational integrity (i.e., whether they do what they say). Lainey feels betrayed when the message about caring is not aligned with decisions about layoffs, pay cuts, or social injustices. Responsible Leadership requires relational congruence, not merely rhetoric.

Summary of Lainey's Restory. Lainey constructs RL through affective tone, cultural experience, and moral alignment. She credits Satya with building a warmer organizational culture but questions whether that tone consistently translates into action during disruptions. Her

evaluation indicates a preference for moral and relational responsibility, with trust contingent on emotional and ethical coherence.

Participant #5: Micah's Restory: Constructing RL through Pragmatism and Observation

Micah assesses RL through a combination of pragmatism (what is being done) and observation (results), rather than through emotional or cultural identity. As such, he defines RL in terms of system dependability and long-range organizational direction. In addition to having no clearly defined opinion of Satya Nadella, Micah assesses Satya rationally based on the long-term, consistent impacts he has seen during his tenure at Microsoft.

Early Perceptions and Limited Exposure. Micah had no opinion of Satya before joining Microsoft. His onboarding experience was perceived as competent but emotionally neutral. Micah described his initial onboarding as "competent" but "cold". He stated that he "saw him in a video," and it was simply "background noise."

Indirect Impressions and Corporate Distance. As previously mentioned, Micah's perceptions of hierarchy are formed through observing how work is done and who makes decisions. Micah evaluates leadership through second- and third-order effects — budget shifts, reorganizations, and changes in priority. As such, Satya remains distant and symbolically present in Micah's day-to-day life.

Responsibility and Results Orientation. Micah rated Satya moderately on responsibility, ethics, and long-term thinking. Micah attributed Microsoft's AI and Cloud transformation to Satya's strategic vision, yet also noted that many large-scale changes occur abruptly and/or in an opaque manner. As such, Micah does not evaluate RL based upon single deeds or occurrences, but rather on the long-term consistency of Satya's actions. Additionally,

Micah wondered whether Microsoft's sustainability efforts stemmed from Satya's vision or from corporate momentum. "I'm not sure if I would attribute those things to the CEO," Micah replied.

Organizational Transmission and Cascade. When discussing the continuity of his experience across several levels of management at Microsoft, Micah expressed more confidence in his immediate management (his manager and "skip" manager) than in the upper echelons of his organization. The hierarchy within his organization had clear priorities, real expectations, and a tradition of mutual respect. When asked how much Satya shaped this culture, Micah saw limited direct impact.

Ethics and Planned Neutrality. Micah takes a careful approach regarding ethical controversies. In fact, he is aware of the protests and the worldwide reaction to his actions, yet he will not form an opinion until he believes there is sufficient evidence to support it. According to Micah, RL consists of principle-based decision-making that excludes performative moralizing. He argues that leaders should not feign concern for public opinion to secure favorable publicity; instead, they should emulate his role model, former New York Governor Mario Cuomo, who was willing to make decisions based on principle rather than political expediency.

Personal Values and Evaluation Criteria. Micah's values include hard work, responsibility, and realism. He values steady, unflamboyant leaders. He bases his evaluation of a leader on whether their stated priorities align with their actions over time, whether they follow through on their commitments.

Summary of Micah's Restory. Micah develops his version of RL based on the systems he observes, rather than on the symbolism of his manner. To Micah, Satya is strategic; he is also remote from him, and Micah assesses Satya's ability to lead as continuous strategic thinking and operational consistency. Micah places greater weight on a manager's performance and

commitment to stability than on the strength of his emotional connection to the manager. Ultimately, Micah defines his version of RL as dependability in sustained behavior rather than as a matter of the manager's rhetoric.

Participant #6: Darby's Restory: Constructing RL through Integrity, Vision, and Resonance

Darby constructs RL through integrity, vision, and symbolic alignment. Although he has never met Satya Nadella, he interprets leadership through stories, cultural support, and personal value resonance.

Initial Impressions Rooted in Story and Symbol. Darby's first memorable impression of Satya Nadella long preceded her joining Microsoft. Darby recalls listening to a podcast in which Satya discussed his son's disability and how it shaped his empathy. The story profoundly affected Darby: it was not only Satya's vulnerability but also his portrayal of leadership through love, humanity, and care. That story remained with him and later shaped his aspiration to work at Microsoft.

Reinforcement Through Organizational Culture. At Microsoft, he found those values in his team's culture. "My manager and my teammates all reinforce psychological safety and trust. I think Satya leads by example from the top, but my manager additionally reinforces it a lot." This everyday experience strengthened his earlier impression.

Leadership Visibility and Communication. Darby describes Satya's communication as calm and grounded. The first was when he saw him speak in calm, firm tones at specific town hall meetings or in leadership videos. Darby communicated it in clear English: "He doesn't seem like he's trying to impress anyone." For Darby, leadership is most visible in tone, posture, and restraint.

Evaluating Responsibility and Ethical Congruence. Darby rated Satya highly across responsibility, effectiveness, ethics, and long-term thinking. “Look at how they are leading on AI safety, sustainability, and making technology accessible to people with disabilities as well as without,” he said in cues of responsible foresight. He cited the Secure Future Initiative as evidence of accountability in practice. “This is [Microsoft] taking accountability for potential harms associated with its tech,” he added. Darby acknowledges that layoffs and pay inequities complicate the ethical terrain. For him, it never has been about getting everything right; RL should be actualized via honesty and learning- continuous bridging of intention with action.

Personal Values and Leadership Alignment. Darby believes Satya models authenticity, justice, and contribution. Darby argues that these values are apparent not only in Satya’s strategic management at Microsoft but also in his articulation of “purpose,” “care,” and “accountability.”

Symbolic Resonance and Identity Construction. Darby’s positive identity with Satya’s leadership method is grounded in symbolic resonance (the extent to which an individual identifies with an organizational culture). Darby evaluates Satya’s leadership by how well it reflects him as a person and, hence, by how loyal he is to the company. “Satya represents what leadership can be when driven from within, and not by egos.”

Summary of Darby’s Restory. Darby constructs his RL through symbolic alignment (he shares Satya’s beliefs), cultural support (Microsoft’s culture supports him), and perceived integrity (he believes Satya has acted in employees’ best interests). Darby perceives Satya as setting a tone of accountability, evidenced by investments in AI safety and security. While Darby acknowledges tensions around layoffs and compensation, his overall assessment is extremely positive. To Darby, RL is demonstrated by consistent behavior between the leaders’ character, communication, and strategy.

Participant #7: Ahmed's Restory: Constructing RL through Culture, Ethical Anticipation, and Broad-Spectrum Dynamics

Ahmed evaluates RL with respect to moral courage, transparency, and global accountability. Having grown up in a conflict zone, he interprets leadership decisions through a prism formed by injustice, silence, and power.

Forming First Impressions Through Culture and Change. Ahmed's first impression of Satya Nadella came from friends and colleagues who had worked at Microsoft before he joined; people who spoke about the cultural change that came with his appointment as CEO, from internal competition and a culture of fear to collaboration, empowerment, and innovation. A more open, people-focused culture drew Ahmed to the organization. Ahmed was drawn to Microsoft because of what he perceived as Satya's cultural shift, from internal competition to collaboration and empowerment.

Evaluating Tactical Insight and Long-Term Thinking. Ahmed views Satya as an effective, modern leader who has positioned Microsoft for success in AI and the cloud, and commends him for bold decisions, including adopting open-source software, pivoting to a cloud-first strategy, and investing in Copilot and other AI tools. He further admires Satya's product background and technical fluency, which ensure that the strategy is well grounded at the conceptual level of technology. For Ahmed, these moves signal long-term strategic competence.

Leadership Visibility and Affective Signals. Ahmed has never met Satya in person, but he has seen Satya's town halls and employee keynote presentations. "At some point, speaking about something very close to his heart, a quantum chip, there's a long research timeline on this topic, [he was] like a kid talking about something he loves. That is the body language that comes

out. So much energy visible emotionally, this helped humanize him as CEO and made me believe more in trusting his authenticity," said Ahmed.

On the contrary, he remembers and gives an example of one that was just so promotional, particularly around Copilot and Satya's town hall, where "he wasn't even passionate; it seemed like more of a sales pitch." A later Copilot-focused town hall seemed promotional. "It used to feel like they cared about us; now it feels like they care about someone else."

Ethical Disappointment and Silence in Crisis. To Ahmed, there was no other event than "the moment", which weighed much more heavily than most other events. "That was the moment," he said, "Microsoft's response to Israel-Gaza", and for this Kashmiri who was tuned into global injustice and international issues, "it affected me". Reports suggesting that Microsoft technology was being used in the Israel-Gaza conflict disturbed Ahmed. He characterized Microsoft's response as "late" and "ambiguous". "I wanted transparency. I wanted empathy. I wanted moral clarity," he said. According to Ahmed, the episode represented a failure of ethical leadership. He recognized the rationality behind the business decision, however, he asserted that while there may be costs to taking a moral position (e.g., losing business) that does not diminish the need for leaders to take moral risks to protect "children who are dying." The incident and its effect on Ahmed led him to examine the depth of commitment of Microsoft's stated values, and how far those values would have to be challenged in light of this lack of action.

Cultural and Religious Values as Evaluation Lenses. Ahmed assesses leadership through his self-identity as a practicing Muslim, raised in a community-based environment that emphasizes justice and accountability. "Leadership is about speaking the truth even when it gets difficult to do so," he said, "sticking to your beliefs regardless of political cost or financial benefit."

Ambivalence and Personal Complicity. Ahmed stated that he felt "guilty" about staying at Microsoft. He appreciates the career opportunities available through working for the company; however, he feels conflicted about what appears to be the corporation's lack of moral silence. The story of Ahmed illustrates the tension between achieving institutional success and sustaining personal ethics.

Summary of Ahmed's Restory. Ahmed develops an RL through a globalized moral lens formed by his lived experiences in conflict. While he supports Satya's strategic outlook and cultural reform efforts at Microsoft, he believes the corporation failed to demonstrate moral courage amid a geopolitical crisis. In evaluating the corporation, he stresses the organization's moral obligation to act ethically. Furthermore, Ahmed illustrates how RL can be recalibrated when an organization's institutional performance conflicts with individual obligations to pursue justice.

Participant #8: Siva's Restory: Constructing RL through Skepticism, Culture, and Contradiction

Siva evaluates Microsoft's approach to RL by assessing how closely its processes align with her cultural values, while using her skepticism to objectively evaluate its statements.

First Impressions and Cultural Connection. During her teenage years, Satya Nadella became Microsoft's CEO. Because she and Satya share a common language (Telugu) and nationality (Indian), she saw how her family and close friends reacted to his success with a sense of symbolic pride that someone "like us" now led a major technology corporation. Through her college studies, internships, and other opportunities, she learned more about what seemed to be changing culturally at Microsoft under Satya's leadership, though she did not learn this directly.

Onboarding and Performative Culture. The message to Siva was consistent with Microsoft's principles and devotion to inclusion, though she felt it was too polished and lacked sufficient practical application. "It was like a commercial," she stated.

Influence via Managerial Intermediation. Many of Siva's perceptions of Satya Nadella were not firsthand; they were conveyed to her by her managers and skip-level supervisors. Through these conversations, she learned more about Microsoft's strategic direction, particularly the rapid pace at which it is pursuing AI. Siva has seen the business rationale for Microsoft's rapid transition to AI but believes the speed at which Microsoft shifts from one priority to the next calls into question Microsoft's sustained viability. "We had a whole road map," she recalls being told, "but we just dropped everything for AI." This pattern raises doubts in Siva's mind about Microsoft's ability to maintain sustained stability.

Ethical Skepticism plus Narrative Strain. Siva has reservations about Satya's ethical approach to Microsoft, based upon a longer history of corporate compromise rather than a singular event. Based upon her father's observation as well as his own experience as a techie, Siva does not believe that you can reach the top of a large company like Microsoft without making some compromises on your values. Additionally, Siva believes Satya's recent actions — such as laying off tens of thousands of employees and abandoning legacy product teams that helped Microsoft through difficult times are examples of a disconnect between the values Microsoft espouses and the way it acts. Siva will always remember Satya's comments at the Grace Hopper conference, telling women to "trust the system" when asking for job promotions or raises, rather than advocating for themselves. To Siva, this example illustrated that organizations could espouse progressive values while still holding to outdated assumptions.

Ambivalence and Big Picture Thinking. Siva is undecided about Microsoft's pursuit of AI; she believes they are innovators and enjoys tools such as Copilot, but is uncertain whether she wants to follow them down that path. She believes Microsoft's priorities are nonlinear, rapidly moving from one financial justification to the next. Siva fears that Microsoft's rapid expansion of AI may marginalize legacy teams and products that allowed the company to survive.

Personal Values and Growth Orientation. Siva values independence, lifelong learning, and honest self-support; all values her parents, who immigrated to the United States, taught her. Siva likes Microsoft's hackathons and learning programs, but is unsure whether the company applies these values consistently across the organization.

Constructing RL through Tension. Siva is constructing RL through contradictions and complexity. Siva respects Satya's technological expertise and the symbolic value of having a representative at the helm of a global technology company but is skeptical of the alignment between Satya's words and actions.

Summary of Siva's Restory. Siva is developing RL through cultural proximity, organizational skepticism, and a review of Microsoft's performance. While Siva respects Satya's symbolic representation and technological abilities, she questions the reliability and transparency of Microsoft's tactical moves. Siva's evaluation demonstrates that she is cautiously participating rather than rejecting Microsoft, and that she prioritizes consistency and courage of action over inspiration alone.

Multiplicity of Narratives: A Polyphonic Construction of RL

The evidence of greatest value across all cases wasn't simply how much participants' evaluations differed from one another, but the simultaneous occurrence of many, often

conflicting, accounts of the same person, Satya Nadella. There was no singular story of Satya Nadella or what RL means. Instead, participants developed multiple accounts of Satya as an innovative strategist, cultural reformer, disciplined executive, moral actor, and, at times, as a silent bystander. These accounts did not coalesce into a single definitive account of Satya's leadership or what he represents. They existed in tandem.

This concept of multiple, sometimes contradictory, accounts of the same leader is well illustrated by Bakhtin's (1981) theory of polyphony — a mode in which multiple voices can coexist within a single narrative, none of them the sole voice of truth. Participants were not presented with a single "story" of leadership. Instead, they created and negotiated competing interpretations shaped by their identities, proximity to Satya, institutional positions, and expectations regarding their own morality.

For example, Darby and Ahmed both complimented Satya for having the ability to clearly communicate business strategy and for developing a long-term perspective. However, Ahmed viewed Satya's failure to respond to a major geopolitical event as a failure of moral obligation, whereas Darby focused on Satya's character and his conformity to his overall strategy. Siva showed pride in Satya's ethnicity while simultaneously questioning Satya's moral consistency. Lainey valued the language of care and psychological safety that Satya used, yet questioned whether he would use it when faced with the systemic pressures that affect all employees. These differences were not subtle. They represented two distinct approaches to evaluating and ranking the domains of responsibility.

These patterns of evaluation are similar to those proposed by Boje (2001), who argues that leadership isn't a singular, monologic narrative transmitted downward but instead a fragmented, distributed storytelling process. Boje (2019, 2025) further develops this idea using

his “Tamara” metaphor, suggesting that the meanings of leadership emerge in multiple “narrative rooms,” and therefore have validity depending upon the individual’s standpoint. What makes sense in one “room” may seem nonsensical in another.

Similarly, Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011) argue that the meanings associated with leadership are constructed through relational and dialogic processes. The findings above support this assertion. Responsible Leadership was not simply enacted by Satya. It was negotiated by Darby and Ahmed, based on Darby’s status as a Microsoft employee, Siva’s identity as an Indian American, Lainey’s objective of promoting care-based leadership practices, the moral obligations of each participant, and their perceptions of their relative power.

It is important to note that the multiple perspectives in this research did not represent arbitrary or chaotic interpretations. Instead, the various patterns illustrated by participants such as Darby and Ahmed were channeled through each participant’s identity and weighted according to specific domains of responsibility. Therefore, the existence of polyphony reinforces one of the basic tenets of Narrative Inquiry: stories are located, partial, and context-dependent (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Therefore, the polyphonic nature of the various viewpoints and interpretations of Satya Nadella underscores that RL should not be viewed as a singular, unchanging attribute or a static evaluative category. Instead, it exists as a variable that can be revised in response to new information, challenges, and changing expectations.

Narrative Plot Structure Across Participant Accounts

Narrative Inquiry, in addition to thematic content analysis, stresses the role of narrative “plot” as how events over time become connected into meaningful sequential patterns (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While the individual restories included above preserve the lived nature of the

participants' accounts, they also show an emergent structured sequence of events that are revealed as an arc across the initial impression, a catalyzing signal, the disruption event(s), and the adjustment of trust after the disruption event(s).

To make these time-related structures analytically visible, Table 6 provides a high-level overview of the narrative plot structure across all cases. In no way is this table intended to replace individual narrative accounts, nor to reduce them to their thematic content; instead, it is designed to highlight the structural flow and development of each participant's account. In every case, the participants begin with an initial orientation toward the CEO, experience leadership signals that influence the early assessment of the CEO's leadership, experience at least one or more disruption events that complicate interpretation, apply those events through their identity-based lenses, and ultimately establish a current trust position that is ongoing and open to revision.

Table 6

Narrative Plot Structure Across Participant Accounts

Participant	Initial Orientation	Catalytic Signal	Disruption Moment	Identity-Based Filter	Trust Outcome
#1 Paul	Inspired by empathy story	AI/cloud success	Layoffs & pay gap	Fairness & sacrifice	Conditional optimism
#2 Shu	Disciplined competence	Layoff email tone	Geopolitical silence	Transparency & visibility	Moderate but guarded
#3 Francisco	Cultural pride	Onboarding messaging	Strategic volatility	Humility & consistency	Skeptical alignment
#4 Lainey	Warm culture	Care-based rhetoric	Layoffs vs care	Emotional congruence	Fragile trust
#5 Micah	Neutral	Strategic results	Structural shifts	Pragmatic stability	Suspended judgment
#6 Darby	Symbolic admiration	AI safety vision	Layoffs tension	Integrity & character	Strong but reflective
#7 Ahmed	Cultural reform hope	Innovation boldness	Israel-Gaza silence	Moral courage & justice	Moral rupture
#8 Siva	Ethnic pride	Strategic ambition	AI acceleration volatility	Skepticism & consistency	Cautious participation

By presenting the plot structures of each case in a comparative manner, the analysis stresses the importance of temporality and illustrates that Responsible Leadership is not constructed on individual assessments but through the progression of a continuing story. Additionally, the explicit attention to plot provides a strong basis for continuing to use the

Narrative Inquiry methodology and for moving from individual case analyses to cross-case thematic analysis.

Cross-Case Thematic Synthesis

The following themes of how participants constructed RL were identified through a comparative examination of commonalities across the narratives of all eight participants. Because NI cautions against collapsing complex lived experience into categorical descriptions, the thematic summaries presented below aim to reflect participants' views of RL through their own cultural lenses. The themes, structured in Table 7, are intended to be neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive; rather, they illustrate some of the primary ways in which participants have conceptualized RL. These themes were not idealistic or conceptual constructs; rather, they reflected how participants used lived interpretive frameworks to make sense of executive decision-making from substantial distances.

Table 7

Cross-Case Thematic Patterns in the Construction of RL

Theme	Description
1. Leadership Signals	Strategic decisions (AI, layoffs, acquisitions), public communication, and organizational actions serve as primary stimuli through which leadership is interpreted.
2. Mediation Through Distance	Perceptions are formed indirectly through managerial translation, peer narratives, media coverage, and leadership artifacts rather than direct relational contact.
3. Identity Filtering	Cultural background, moral frameworks, career stage, and personal values shape how leadership signals are interpreted.
4. Responsibility Domain Weighting	Followers implicitly categorize leadership across market, organizational, and moral domains, assigning differential importance to each.
5. Narrative Disruption Events	Layoffs, geopolitical silence, AI pivots, and compensation tensions function as inflection points that destabilize or reinforce prior perceptions.
6. Conditional and Recursive Trust	Trust is provisional and recalibrated over time; prior events shape interpretation of future leadership signals.

These, though not purely linear or chronological, can be thought of as processual. Signals are mediated through distance, filtered through layers of identity and values, weighted across

domains of responsibility, disrupted by consequential events (narrative disruptions), and through that process, individuals construct conditional trust that is recalibrated as the process continues and repeats. These themes are presented in Table 8 along with sample excerpts from various perception-laden participants' cases.

Table 8

Cross-Case Thematic Representative Excerpts

Process Stage	Illustrative Participants	Representative Excerpts
1. Leadership Signals	Micah, Ahmed, Francisco	*"He embraced the initial wave of cloud computing…" (Micah); "There was no transparency…" (Ahmed)*
2. Mediation Through Distance	Paul, Siva, Shu, Francisco	*"I watched a video… he transfers his learnings…" (Paul); "Through my direct supervisor's interpretation…" (Siva); "My manager feels like he's on our team…" (Francisco)*
3. Identity Filtering	Ahmed, Siva, Lainey	*"I wanted transparency. I wanted empathy." (Ahmed); "Seeing someone like us…" (Siva)*
4. Responsibility Domain Weighting	Micah, Darby, Lainey	*"Microsoft says publicly… matches what we do internally." (Darby); "Largely right before a holiday weekend felt really messed up." (Lainey)*
5. Narrative Disruption	Ahmed, Paul, Francisco	*"The moment…" (Ahmed); "The layoffs might be worth it in the long term…" (Paul)*
6. Conditional and Recursive Trust	Siva, Shu, Paul	*"Everyone's AI-focused…" (Siva); "I feel he is reliable." (Shu)*

Theme 1: Leadership Signals

As indicated by participants' responses across the eight case studies, the first signals to emerge regarding RL in relation to Satya Nadella were based on observable and calculated leadership indicators. Rather than assessing Satya Nadella on the basis of relational familiarity or access, the participants evaluated him on the basis of his deliberate, structural, and symbolic decisions, as well as the visible changes within the organization. These observable signals were the primary stimulus through which the participants inferred Satya Nadella's intentions.

Strategic signals emerged as the most consistently cited among all participants. All of the participants mentioned that Satya Nadella's decision to move toward cloud computing was indicative of his deliberate planning for Microsoft, the OpenAI partnership, the embedding of

Copilot into Microsoft products, Microsoft's increased focus on security, and Microsoft's acquisition of companies such as GitHub and Blizzard represented to them evidence of Satya Nadella's leadership.

Some participants viewed this as evidence of Satya Nadella's innovative capacity to adapt to emerging technologies. Micah stated that the early positioning of the cloud was fundamental to establishing Microsoft's long-term credibility. Darby referred to the investment in OpenAI as bold and future-oriented. Ahmed viewed the transition to AI as a sign of Satya Nadella's willingness to change course amid the accelerating speed of technological development. While some participants ultimately articulated moral concerns regarding the company's strategic direction, many affirmed that the company demonstrated competence in this area.

While structural signals (i.e., layoffs and reorganization) elicited less consistent interpretations, they still prompted differing interpretations. Paul noted that the scale and disparities in executive compensation associated with the layoffs complicated his assessment of Satya Nadella's effectiveness. Francisco noted that he had reservations about the suddenness of layoffs and changes in hiring and product roadmap. Lainey reacted very negatively to the timing and tenor of the layoffs. For participants, layoffs and reorganization were not merely measures to optimize the company's operations; rather, they were seen as signals of the company's values, priorities, and principles for allocating resources.

Participants also interpreted symbolic communications as signals. Participants repeatedly referenced Satya Nadella's use of town halls, emails, keynote addresses, onboarding sessions, and public interviews as examples of how he communicated with employees and other stakeholders. Darby reacted favorably to what he viewed as Satya Nadella's tranquil manner and

modest tone. Lainey paid great attention to affect (e.g., eye contact, cadence) and whether Satya Nadella's words about "care" were supported by lived experience. Shu identified the distinction between templated corporate messages and moments where he experienced "humanness." Ahmed contrasted the emotional impact of certain moments with the nature of promotional presentations. Although none of the participants interviewed had direct access to the CEO, these communications artifacts served as a common point of reference.

Silence itself also served as a signal in this study. When the controversy surrounding international events prompted many participants to question Satya Nadella's response, the lack of response was interpreted as a signal. For example, both Ahmed and Shu did not view the lack of response to the Israel-Gaza conflict as neutral; rather, they interpreted it as a form of positioning. Other participants (e.g., Micah), although resistant to making immediate moral judgments, acknowledged that inaction communicates.

Together, these cases demonstrate that leadership signals are not received passively by followers. Rather, they provide the raw materials that followers use to form their perceptions of RL. Consequently, strategic decisions (e.g., cloud computing, OpenAI, Copilot, security, acquisitions), compensation decisions, layoffs, town hall meetings, digital artifacts, and executive silence serve as data points within an ongoing, dynamic interpretive process.

Theme 2: Mediation Through Distance

Although leadership signals provided the context for evaluation, participants did not have consistent and direct exposure to them. The participants' perceptions of RL were influenced by layers of mediation — organizational, relational, and symbolic. There were no reports of regular, immediate communication with the CEO by any of the participants. Rather, leadership was perceived through managerial translation, peer talk, social media, and organizational artifacts.

The organization's ranking created a consistent level of distance among all participants. Shu said, "I think Satya is too high up to be able to interact with me." Lainey described the CEO as "an enigma." Ahmed mentioned that he was curious as to how decisions are made in "those big companies." While some participants observed leadership through town halls or conferences, they viewed them as staged rather than relational. Therefore, while leadership was visible, it was inaccessible to the participants.

Local managers acted as intermediaries. Francisco developed his opinions based on how his manager communicated the idea of "a growth mindset" and "psychological safety." Siva relied on input from skip-level leaders to form most of her opinions regarding strategic revisions at the company. Micah stated that he was more confident in his local manager than in the executive leadership, though he attributed certain aspects of his team's culture to top-level leadership. For many participants, their local manager either supported or conflicted with the messages from the top of the organization. Thus, leadership was interpreted rather than transmitted.

Participants drew on internal digital artifacts and other media outlets to derive meaning from the leadership messages. Shu stated that the constant display of Satya's green status indicator was a subtle message of presence to him. Lainey examined the vocal inflection and eye contact in videos. Darby remembered the town hall meetings as being very genuine and unforced. These digital artifacts were not neutral. They were seen as evidence of whether the leadership messages were authentic or merely for show.

Peer conversation also had a part in creating meaning. Paul stated that he learned about morale and layoffs mainly through casual lunchtime conversations. Ahmed heard the narrative

about cultural changes at Microsoft from coworkers who had worked there before he arrived. Informal conversations were typically given greater credibility than formal conversations.

The leadership's signals were not altered; they were merely structured. The distance between leadership and employees provided enough room for interpretation of the signals. The signals were conveyed through people's behaviors and the digital environment in which they operated, prior to being evaluated for responsibility. Accordingly, under these conditions, leadership at scale was not relational but was constructed through distributed sense-making. The mediated process explains why different signals produced different evaluations. The next theme will explore how identity frameworks also influenced those evaluations.

Theme 3: Identity Filtering

After leadership signals were mediated, meaning was further interpreted through each participant's personal identity, which influenced how they weighed those signals. A person's cultural background, religious beliefs, life experiences, career goals, and past experiences all influence how they define and evaluate responsibility. Thus, although participants interpret the same events, they employ different lenses for occupational and moral purposes.

Ahmed views leadership as a combination of moral courage and global accountability. In a conflict zone, he has viewed executives' silence on international affairs as a failure of responsibility. When Ahmed states, "I wanted transparency. I wanted empathy. I wanted moral clarity," it is clear that his ethical evaluation of events is grounded in his real-time experience rather than on abstract notions. For Ahmed, strategic competence (the ability to lead effectively) is subordinate to moral expectations (what is right).

Siva uses cultural proximity and cynicism as filters to evaluate Satya Nadella's leadership. Although Siva has both regional and linguistic ties to Nadella, she refused to let the

symbolic representation of the two supersede critical thinking. Initially, Siva's ethnic pride elicited admiration; however, the subsequent volatility and perceived value compromise in Nadella's decision-making process cast doubt on Siva's judgment. Siva's evaluation illustrates how common identity can create higher, rather than lower, expectations for performance.

Paul filters leadership through a prism of fairness and sacrifice developed in his childhood. Paul's concerns regarding executive compensation during layoffs are not based solely on economic considerations but also on a moral calculus of fairness. To Paul, RL requires distributive fairness combined with planned competence. Layoffs are not necessarily grounds for dismissing a leader; the optics of layoffs, including the number of people laid off, are important to Paul.

In evaluating leadership, Lainey examines relational integrity and affective tone. As someone raised in a family that emphasizes emotional intelligence and care, she evaluates leaders by whether their words align with their felt experience. For Lainey, authenticity in leadership is conveyed through tone rather than slogans. When the rhetoric of caring fails to match a leader's structural decisions, Lainey will experience moral dissonance.

In contrast to the other participants, Micah filters leadership through a prism of pragmatism alongside system coherence. Micah values steadiness, execution, and long-term consistency over symbolic actions. Micah's ethical evaluation of Satya Nadella's leadership was not immediately diminished by controversy surrounding ethical conduct; Micah chose to withhold a conclusion in the absence of sufficient evidence. Micah's values prioritize business continuity over the emotional impact of a leader's decisions.

Satya Nadella's articulation of intent and sympathy resonated strongly with Darby's ideals for leadership and strengthened Darby's trust in Nadella. For Darby, responsibility is

aligning a leader's character with the strategic plan. Shu views responsibility in terms of discipline, visibility, and institutional stability. Shu interprets the presence and responsiveness of a leader as the most important indicators of responsibility. Shu believes that silence is not a failure; it is merely a lost opportunity.

Francisco views the cultural undertones of Satya Nadella's leadership through an equal mixture of appreciation for humility and distrust of messages. He appreciates humility and consistency and questions the rationale behind sudden strategic turns in direction and scripted communication.

The examples provided demonstrate that filtering by identity not only shapes perception but also structures it. Participants weighted strategic competence, cultural tone, and moral clarity differently depending on their identity commitments. Differences were not due to conflicting information; they resulted from differing value hierarchies.

Accordingly, the leadership signals are entered into identity-based interpretive frameworks, rather than into a neutral evaluative space. The same event — AI acceleration, layoffs, and international silence — can be viewed as visionary, pragmatic, disturbing, or morally reprehensible, depending on the lens used.

This filtering mechanism provides insight into why RL was not evaluated monolithically by all participants. It sets the stage for the final theme: the domain weighting of responsibility.

Theme 4: Responsibility Domain Weighting

When considering the participants' stories, it was evident that they subconsciously grouped RL into various categories throughout multiple areas. While none of the participants explicitly used these categories, their evaluations of their experiences always fell into three dimensions of responsibility: Market (strategic), Organizational (culture), and Moral (ethics).

When participants' perceptions diverged, it did not stem solely from disagreements about the factual events at the company, but rather from how they weighed each of the aforementioned domains.

Market responsibility refers to the ability to compete successfully in a given marketplace, to develop innovative products, and to serve as responsible stewards of the organization's financial resources. The majority of participants agreed that Microsoft's decision to transition to cloud computing and AI reflected its executives' forward-looking vision. Micah felt that early cloud investments helped solidify Microsoft's competitive advantage. Darby referred to Microsoft's partnership with OpenAI as "bold" and "progressive." Paul felt that Microsoft had a "strong foothold" in AI and would benefit in the long term. Many of the participants who shared concerns regarding ethics also recognized the competence in marketing.

As defined by the participants, organizational responsibility relates to the organization's culture, empowerment, and internal solidarity. Most participants noted a discrepancy between what the executives said about creating a psychologically safe environment, growing through learning from failure, and being inclusive, and their experiences of the team they worked in. Lainey stated that she judged RL based on how care was manifested within the team. Francisco determined whether he believed the corporation's messages were authentic or just scripted. Shu determined if the executives were physically present and responsive to him as examples of discipline and accountability. Team norms and manager behavior were both identified by many participants as organizational responsibilities that affected their overall experience with executive leadership.

Moral responsibility is associated with ethical clarity, transparency, and a willingness to take principled risks. It is here that the greatest divergence of views occurred among the

participants. Ahmed placed the greatest weight on moral responsibility and argued that the executive's silence during the geopolitical controversy constituted a failure of leadership. Shu was disappointed that there were few opportunities for the executives to express a visible moral position. Lainey felt that the layoffs and lack of transparency were inconsistent with the corporation's stated values. On the other hand, Micah felt that one should not draw conclusions regarding moral principles unless one could clearly see evidence. Darby emphasized intention and accountability instead of perfection.

It is important to note that the participants did not reject any domains; they weighted them differently. Some individuals weigh the market responsibility of the executive against the principled consequences of their actions. Some view the executive's moral responsibility as potentially undermining otherwise positive evaluations of their managerial competence. Organizational responsibility is often invoked as a stabilizing or moderating influence, reinforcing or increasing trust based on the degree of congruence between the corporation's rhetoric and employees' lived experience.

The weights participants assigned to each domain provide insight into why the same leadership signal produces different judgments among respondents. What Darby perceives as visionary competence, Siva views as volatility. For Micah, what Micah sees as strategically rational is, for Paul, unfair. What is viewed as prudent by some is viewed as a moral failure by others. In this regard, participants differ in the importance they assign to the dimensions, thereby delivering a structural explanation for the different interpretations of events across accounts and laying the basis for comprehending how disruptions might recalibrate trust.

Theme 5: Narrative Disruption

While leadership provided baseline evaluations based on established assessments and domain weights, there were also events that could be characterized as "narrative disruptions." These narrative disruptions (moments) disrupted previous judgment processes and led to reevaluation. Narrative disruptions did not always result in a complete loss of confidence or trust; rather, they revealed tensions between domains and prompted each participant to modify their prior domain weights.

Participants cited layoffs as the most frequently mentioned example of narrative disruption. The participants described the layoffs in both moral and calculated terms. Paul emphasized the number of employees laid off ("over 20,000 people gone") and compared it with executive compensation, creating tension between profitability and distributive justice. Lainey stated that she felt the timing and character of the lay-offs were inconsistent with a company that claimed to care for its employees. Francisco questioned the speed with which the company's strategy shifted before the reduction in the employee base. Micah, who generally approaches corporate leadership pragmatically, stated that he experienced internal pressure and doubt regarding the layoffs.

The reason lay-offs differed from other signals was the level of interpretive weight placed upon them, not just their size. For some participants, the lay-offs illustrated inconsistencies between what leadership said and what leadership actually did. For other participants, the layoffs were illustrations of the difficulties involved in making difficult decisions to compete successfully in a highly competitive economic environment. The same structural event activated different levels of responsibility depending on the previously weighted responsibility domains.

The transition to using AI quickly became a second disruption for many participants. For Darby and Ahmed, the decision to invest heavily in AI confirmed their perception of Microsoft's leadership as clear and progressive. For Siva and Francisco, the rapid shift away from the previously defined roadmap raised concerns about stability and opportunism. The use of AI symbolized vision and volatility. Participants' interpretations of AI depended on whether they prioritized tactical agility or strategic consistency.

Controversy surrounding international affairs was the most morally charged type of narrative disruption. Ahmed stated that Microsoft's response to allegations related to the Israel-Gaza conflict marked the moment that changed his perception of leadership. To Ahmed, the muteness demonstrated a lack of moral responsibility. Shu shared similar views and believed that the lack of any apparent leadership statements during the controversy created an opportunity for leadership to articulate the ethical principles that should guide their actions. Micah, however, refused to draw any firm conclusions and illustrates that disruption may lead to a reopening of evaluation, but it will not always result in a complete collapse of moral expectations.

In all the examples of narrative disruption, disruption served as a test of the strength of prior judgments. Participants re-evaluated their prior impressions of the organization and reweighted their domains of responsibility. Trust in the organization was re-established or adjusted based on the results of these evaluations. Prior admiration based on tactical competency was re-assessed in light of expected ethical behavior. Prior cultural warmth was reassessed in light of the structural actions taken. Prior symbolic alignment was re-evaluated relative to executive risk-taking or silence. In this sense, RL was not evaluated linearly. Rather, it was evaluated alongside moments of stress to demonstrate the extent to which prior judgments were solid or weak.

Theme 6: Conditional Trust Under Leadership Distance

Participants' trust in RL was almost never unconditional; it was conditional, contingent on revisions informed by their assessments of prior signals, identity-based commitments, and disruptions. Participants presented their evaluations of RL as a formative process, in which their assessments would continue to change in response to new information, experiences, and disruptions.

Many participants developed expressions to illustrate the formative, provisional nature of their evaluations. Paul stated, "I am really far away from that right now... If it all works out, it might be worth it." Francisco encapsulated his own attitude toward Satya as follows, "It's kinda like, I get it... But it definitely has you just thinking." Lainey stated she had evaluated Satya's performance as "neither super positive, nor super negative," representing a lack of resolve or ambiguity. Shu provided an overall positive rating of Satya's performance but indicated his trust in Satya varied depending on the level of ethical clarity he perceived. Darby, who generally provided a very positive evaluation of Satya, also recognized tension associated with layoffs and perceived Satya's compensation practices.

The conditional nature of trust indicates that evaluations of RL represented a developing, evolving narrative of credibility (rather than static judgments). The level of trust remained stable as long as the participant perceived alignment among Satya's strategic competence, cultural consistency, and moral clarity. However, trust was unstable when the participant perceived misalignment among these three areas of interest.

Trust was not a binary variable, as some participants simultaneously trusted and doubted Satya. Satya's strategic competence can exist alongside the participant's moral disappointment in Satya's actions/decisions. The participant could experience cultural warmth from Satya, but

wariness about Satya's ability to communicate candidly. These layered evaluations imply that trust is influenced by domain weighting and that its formation is disrupted by prior narrative interpretations.

As new data emerged, the participants' previous interpretation(s) of Satya's behavior influenced their understanding of Satya's behavior. Prior signal(s) and interpretations influenced the participant's interpretation of new signals. When a prior interpretation of Satya's behavior aligned with the participant's expectations, the disruption was more likely to be tolerated. Conversely, if the participant had repeatedly received disconfirmations of their prior interpretations of Satya's behavior, subsequent disruptions would be interpreted as further evidence supporting their initial suspicions. Consequently, trust operated recursively.

This recursive process ultimately concluded the interpretive process. Signals of leadership behavior entered the system and were passed through distance. The signals were then passed through the participant's identity. As such, the signals were weighted according to the participant's perception of the relative importance of each responsibility domain (e.g., strategic competence, culture, etc.). The signals were then tested for their ability to disrupt the participant's current understanding of Satya's behavior. Finally, the trust assessment, based on testing the signals against disruption, informed the participant's interpretation of future signals regarding Satya's behavior. In this way, RL is viewed not as awarded or granted once, but as continually negotiated, reassessed, and reconstructed over time. This recursive process establishes the basis for the combined RL/P model presented next.

Table 9 presents a cross-case comparison of how participants allocated responsibility across several domains. While most participants evaluated market responsibility positively,

moral responsibility generated the greatest divergence. Such divergences appear to be strongly mediated by cultural background, ethical frameworks, and the distance between leadership.

Table 9

Cross-case Comparison of Participant Determination Domain Weighting

Participant	**Market Responsibility** *Strategic, Financial, AI*	**Organizational Responsibility** *Culture, Empowerment, Collaboration*	**Moral Responsibility** *Ethics / Transparency / Geopolitical*	**Perceived Leadership Distance**	**Overall RL Orientation**	**Dominant Interpretive Lens**
Paul	Strongly Positive – AI pivot, stock growth, OpenAI partnership seen as visionary	Moderately Positive – Culture shift from Ballmer appreciated	Mixed – Layoffs and performance shifts cause concern	High (media + lunch conversations)	Generally Positive with Caveats	Market-Strategic
Francisco	Positive but cautious – Acknowledges growth but questions some strategic shifts	Mixed – Remote policy shift created skepticism	Neutral – No strong ethical stance but confused by communication opacity	Very High ("Hologram" perception)	Moderately Positive	Organizational Stability
Lainey	Moderately Positive – Strategic competence assumed from company performance	Positive – Work-life balance and inclusivity emphasized	Skeptical – Gaza protests and sustainability contradictions raise doubt	High (symbolic exposure only)	Mixed	Cultural-Ethical
Micah	Strongly Positive – AI, security prioritization, infrastructure investments admired	Positive – Alignment through org and leadership clarity	Strongly Positive – Trust in ethical intent	Moderate (engaged via media + org communication)	Strongly Positive	Visionary-Technocratic
Darby	Strongly Positive – AI leadership, security-first pivot seen as decisive	Positive – Empowerment and transparency valued	Moderately Positive – No major ethical concerns expressed	Moderate (engages via town halls + posts)	Strongly Positive	Strategic-Professional
Ahmed	Positive – Acknowledges AI positioning and strategic foresight	Positive – Feels empowered, collaborative culture appreciated	Negative to Ambivalent – Gaza conflict and silence viewed as moral failure	Moderate (town halls + media)	Ethically Ambivalent	Moral-Communitarian
Siva	Skeptical – AI focus perceived as trend-following	Mixed – Hack weeks and learning culture appreciated but onboarding performative	Neutral to Slightly Skeptical – No strong ethical stance but questions long-term thinking	High (manager-mediated)	Moderately Skeptical	Cynical-Performance
Shu	Positive – Stock growth and AI integration seen as responsible	Neutral – Culture not primary evaluative factor	Neutral – Layoffs templated, empathy lacking	Very High (distance acknowledged)	Moderately Positive	Pragmatic

Emergence of the RL Follower Interpretive Process RL/P Model

The cross-case findings shown above suggest that RL, as experienced by entry-level employees at hierarchical distance, operates through an interpretive stage that is not explicitly specified in Lynham's (1998, 2000, 2004) Responsible Leadership for Performance (RL/P) framework. While RL/P conceptualizes leadership as an open performance system linking constituency considerations, responsibleness (effective, ethical, enduring), and organizational

performance domains, the present study shows that these dimensions are not directly encountered by followers. Rather, they are accessed through interpretive processing.

Figure 6 integrates this perception-mediated stage within the first RL/P architecture. The model preserves the structure of RL/P — including the external environment, the performance system boundary, the input-process-output flow, and the framework of responsibleness — while making explicit the interpretive mechanism by which RL is constructed under conditions of hierarchical distance.

Within the input stage, constituency considerations give rise to leader signals. These signals include strategic decisions (e.g., AI investments, cloud positioning), structural actions (e.g., layoffs, reorganization), symbolic communication (e.g., town halls, emails), and responses — or silence — during moments of international controversy. Participants in this study did not encounter the CEO as an interpersonal leader; instead, they encountered the leader's influence mainly through such signals. One of the most important contributions of this research is the recognition of a follower interpretive processing level within the RL/P process domain. The level includes three interconnected mechanisms: (1) mediation and identity filtering, (2) responsibility and domain weighting, and (3) recursive trust calibration.

Mediation and Identity Filtering. Follower interpretation of the leader's signal occurred through the translation of managerial actions into language, peer dialogues, media accounts of the company, and digital artifacts. These signals were also mediated through followers' personally developed identity frameworks, formed by their culture, religion, upbringing, and current career stage.

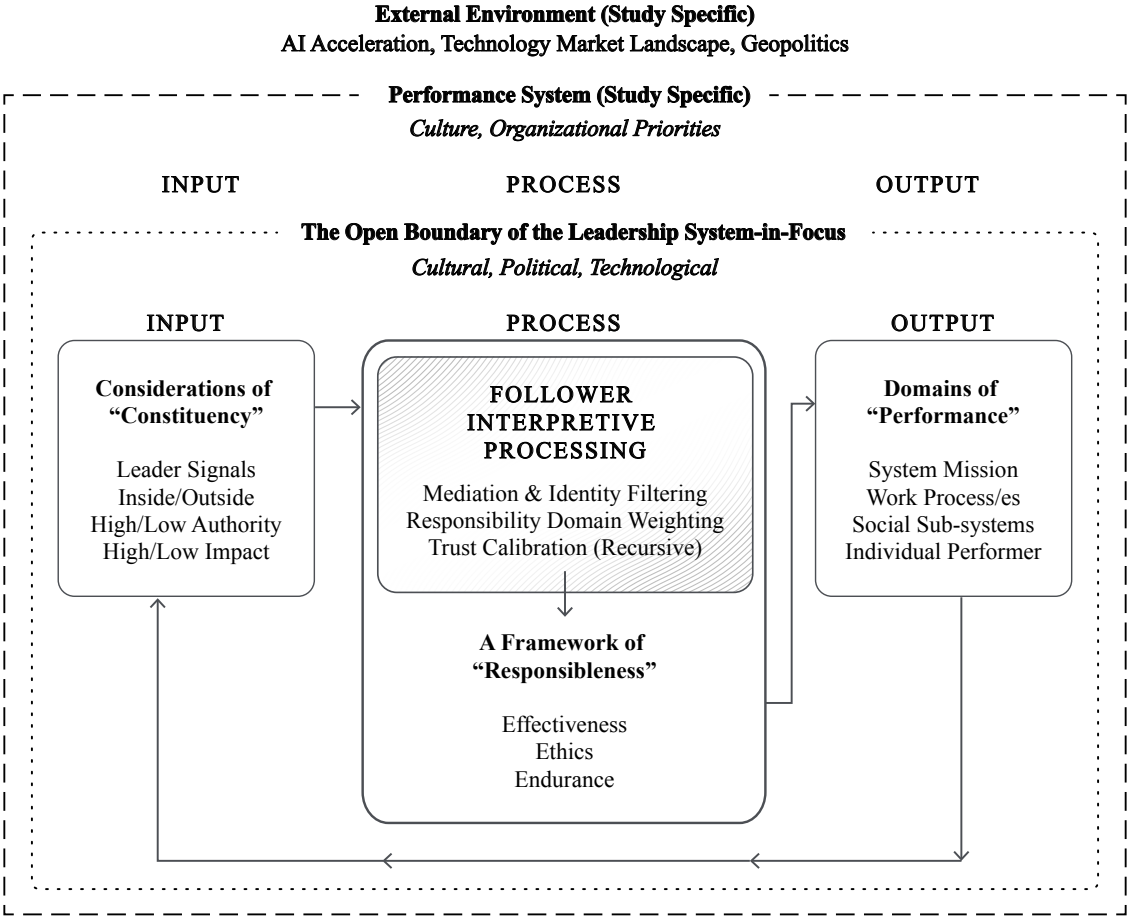
Responsibility Domain Weighting. Followers implicitly categorized the leader's responsibilities into three different types (market, organizational, and moral). Disagreement

regarding perceptions of the leader wasn't only because of differing views of what was observed, but also to differing ways followers assigned weights to each type of responsibility.

Recursive Trust Calibration. Trust was not a constant. It was recalibrated at some point during the relationship in response to narrative interruptions (e.g., layoffs, managerial shifts, or perceived silence on ethical issues). The interpretation of earlier signals influenced how later signals would be interpreted, thereby creating a recursive dynamic within the relationship.

Figure 6

Emergence of the Follower Interpretive Layer in the RL/P Model



It is through the interpretive layer that followers determine whether signals sent by leaders are viewed as effective, ethical, and enduring action. In essence, the qualities of

effectiveness, ethics, and endurance are not properties of leaders; they are attributes assigned to leaders by followers through meaning-making processes.

In addition, the model preserves the RL/P output dimension of RL/P —the domains of performance for the system (mission, work processes, social subsystems, and individual performance). However, the results show that the legitimacy of performance is determined by the stability of trust and perceived alignment within the interpretive layer. When alignment between the leader's messaging and followers' experience is strong, trust stabilizes, and followers perceive the performance domains as cohesive. However, when narrative disruptions create dissonance in the message received by the follower, trust becomes conditional and subject to recalibration.

Importantly, the feedback loop within RL/P remains intact. Organizational outcomes — such as profitability, organizational climate, or crisis response — feed back into future interpretations of leadership signals. In this way, RL is not judged once but continually reconstructed over time.

This integrated model (see Figure 6) broadens Lynham's RL/P framework by explicating the interpretive mechanism through which RL/P operates in contemporary multinational organizations characterized by scale, complexity, and hierarchical distance. By inserting follower interpretive processing into the system architecture, this study clarifies how RL is constructed, contested, and renegotiated within large organizational contexts.

The next chapter examines the conceptual implications of this extended RL/P model and articulates the analytic propositions that follow from these outcomes.

Integrative Summary of Findings

Throughout this chapter, the experiences of entry-level employees in a multinational organization under a CEO's leadership have been examined in relation to participants' perceptions of RL. These perceptions of RL were constructed through mediated signals, identity-based filtering, and recursive interpretation, rather than through direct experiences due to relational proximity.

A patterned process was seen across the eight participants' narratives regarding the construction of their perceptions of RL. The process initiated with the receipt of the CEO's leadership signals, such as strategic decisions, layoffs, communication artifacts, or reactions to international events; from there, the participant interpreted the executive's intent through these signals. The signals themselves did not occur independently; they arose through managerial translation, peer discussions, media coverage of the organization, and other organizational artifacts. Finally, participants filtered these mediated signals through personal cultural models, moral expectations, and professional objectives.

Perceptions of RL were further structured by responsibility-domain weighting. Participants implicitly categorized leadership across market responsibility (strategic competence and financial stewardship), organizational responsibility (cultural integrity and empowerment), and moral responsibility (ethical clarity plus stakeholder justice). Disagreement in the weighting of domains, rather than about any actual events that could be observed, was at the root of divergence in evaluation.

Inflection points, layoffs as a narrative disruption, and other accelerated AI strategy shifts, along with perceived silence during geopolitical controversy, led most to pause and reassess rather than immediately dismiss. Very few had absolute trust; most people's trust was

conditional and revised with time or experience. Earlier signals affected later interpretation, thereby producing a recursive pattern in the construction of leadership credibility.

The integrated RL/P model introduced in this chapter makes explicit the interpretive mechanism through which Lynham's framework functions under conditions of hierarchical distance. By situating follower interpretive processing within the performance system architecture, this research shows that effectiveness, ethics, and endurance are not merely enacted by leadership but also perceived and negotiated by followers within complex organizational contexts.

Responsible Leadership, as constructed by participants in this study, is accordingly not a static attribute. It is a socially situated and temporally dynamic process formed by signals, mediation, identity, disruption, and the calibration of trust. The next chapter builds on these outcomes by articulating the conceptual implications of the integrated RL/P model and formalizing the analytic propositions derived from the data.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

This chapter synthesizes the study's findings to explain how entry-level employees construct perceptions of RL within a large multinational organization. The key argument is that RL is not a fixed trait or merely a function of positional power, but a multidimensional, progressive narrative that is indirectly and mediately experienced by employees. Their statements and experiences, documented in this chapter through direct quotations and noted patterns, show how such perception comes into being. Empirical findings show that leadership meaning is constructed through mediated signals rather than direct interaction. In evaluating Satya Nadella's choices and ethics, participants also considered their relationship with him in terms of cultural identity, moral expectations, emotions, and peers' interpretations. This finding supports the arguments of Maak & Pless (2006) and Voegtlin (2011) that RL must be understood as a socially embedded process.

Beyond present frameworks, this study expanded RL/P (Lynham, 1998) and narrative subjectivity by focusing on the follower's voice. Rather than questioning whether followers' beliefs about a leader's legitimacy were based solely on performance and prominence, the research examined how legitimacy is constructed, focusing on whether the leader reflects their principles and upholds their words with actions. This contributes to RL theory and the literature by emphasizing the centrality of complexity in leadership experience and perception.

Theoretical Propositions Emerging from this Applied RL/P Model

The results of the research showed that RL is not perceived as a strictly defined behavioral construct or function that an executive intends to apply at any level, but rather as a percep-

tion-mediated social construction shaped by distance, identity, and interpretative meaning-making. On the contrary, the data showed very little cross-participant reference to CEOs' traits and behaviors, which were interpreted in context within descriptions of particular situations/events. Based on a cross-case thematic analysis grounded in the NI approach, this study develops four analytic propositions that extend RL theory by strengthening the RL for Performance (RL/P) framework (Lynham, 1998, 2004).

These are not statistical hypotheses but analytic generalizations that emerge from dense contextual accounts of participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Riessman, 2008). They express a processual understanding of RL amidst conditions of extreme hierarchical distance.

Proposition 1: RL is Constructed Mainly through Mediated Signals Under Conditions of Hierarchical Distance

In large organizations with RL at the upper echelons and extreme hierarchical distances, perceptions of RL are shaped more by mediated signals than by direct relational interaction. There was no interpersonal relationship between the participants and the CEO. Participants perceived the CEO through organizational artifacts (emails, town halls, keynotes), strategic decisions (AI investments, layoffs), and indirect narratives from managers and peers. This finding supports the leadership-at-a-distance literature, which argues that in the absence of relational proximity, symbolic cues and performance indicators supply means for followers to infer leader attributes. (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Shamir, 1995)

However, this study advances this stream of literature by showing that RL judgment is not merely a trait attribution, but an evaluative construction grounded in the coherence of signals. Symbolic artifacts of leadership communication provide anchors in place of trust-building through relationships.

This is consistent with Raelin's (2016, 2020) leadership-as-practice perspective, which shifts the focus from leader-centric characteristics to the relational and discursive processes through which leadership is enacted and understood. Under conditions of hierarchical distance, RL becomes a semiotic phenomenon — constructed through the interpretation of signals within a performance system.

Proposition 2: Followers Filter Leadership Signals through Identity-Based Interpretive Lenses

Participants did not apply any kind of universal standard in their evaluation of RL. What counted as "responsible" was determined by their cultural upbringing, religious commitments, position within a particular generation, and organizational experiences they brought to their employment. Perceptions of RL are formed by identity-based lenses informed by cultural background, moral philosophy, and experience.

This finding tallies with social identity theory in leadership research, which claims that leader legitimacy is granted when leaders are perceived as representing the group's values and prototypes (Hogg, 2001; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). However, in this study, identity did not simply shape favoritism toward leaders; it shaped the criteria by which responsibility itself was defined.

Human participants from collectivist contexts, as they described them, spoke about humanitarian openness and moral courage. Other participants emphasized innovation, long-term vision, and market competence. The findings support Maak and Pless's (2006) argument about the essentially relational nature of RL toward stakeholders, while also indicating that stakeholder evaluation criteria are themselves identity-based.

An identity-filtering mechanism can also be explained by sensemaking theory, which posits that ambiguous cues about organizations are interpreted through preexisting cognitive frames, in this case, culturally constructed frames about what it means to be a responsible leader

(Särner et al., 2024; Malik, 2025). Therefore, RL is not perceived uniformly but construed through culturally embedded interpretive schemas.

Proposition 3: RL Is Categorized Among Distinct Responsibility Domains, and Divergence Emerges through Differential Domain Weighting

Followers weigh and evaluate RL across three domains: (a) market responsibility or strategic effectiveness, (b) organization responsibility or stewardship of the culture, and (c) moral responsibility in ethical clarity. Therefore, divergence arises because perceptions differ in the extent to which each domain is considered.

This finding advances within the triadic conceptualization of RL/P, effectiveness, ethics, and endurance (Lynham, 1998; Saini, 2015). While RL/P conceptualizes these dimensions as integrated elements within systems of responsible performance, this study found that followers selectively emphasize particular dimensions according to their personal weighting schemas.

Participants who prioritized market responsibility interpreted AI investments and cloud expansion as responsible foresight. To the morally responsible, it was an ethical failing that leaders remained silent amid international controversy. Empowerment and culture sat in the middle ground, organizationally responsible.

This domain differentiation parallels Scherer and Palazzo's (2007) political conception of corporate responsibility, which situates corporations as moral actors within global governance structures. However, this study shows that followers do not simply evaluate corporate political behavior; they selectively prioritize moral domains relative to strategic and organizational domains.

Proposition 4: Trust in RL Is Conditional and Recursive

Trust in RL is conditional, negotiated, and constructed recursively from prior interpretive events. None of the participants described trust as absolute; instead, all highlighted a process of negotiation. Layoffs, narrative inflections such as restructuring toward AI acceleration programs, and international silence recalibrated trust in the organization. In this regard, they seem to provide "epiphanies," momentary events that change interpretive frameworks (Denzin 1989).

Responsible leadership recursive theory development is inspired by temporal sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and narrative construction of identity (Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Trust is conceptualized as a process and not simply an outcome or state. Earlier leadership signals shape how later actions are interpreted, producing cumulative effects on trust over time. Demonstratively, popular conditional statements within participants' time, such as "time will tell", "if it works out, then maybe it's worth it," were reflected in the negotiation of RL through actual performative outcomes and in their consistency/inconsistency with morality.

In this regard, the study complements Quigley et al. (2005), who relate RL to competent governance, by showing that tactical outcomes alone are insufficient for perceiving legitimate governance, yet that perceived alignment among messaging, identity expectations, and moral positioning is also important.

Integrating the Propositions Within the RL/P Model

Taken together, the four propositions above support a process-based understanding of RL in large organizational systems. The RL/P framework can be reframed and developed through this study as follows:

1. External forces generate signal opportunities for leadership.

2. There is mediation by hierarchical distance, managerial proxies, and communication artifacts.
3. Followers receive the signals through identity-based interpretive lenses.
4. Leadership actions are classified across responsibility domains.
5. Trust is conditionally allocated and recursively recalibrated over time.

Responsible Leadership is not solely a trait of the leader or even a behavioral pattern. It becomes an emergent, co-constructed narrative process occurring within complex organizational systems. The paper contributes to RL scholarship by repositioning the follower not as a passive judge of the leader's virtue, but as an engaged constructor of responsibility within mediated environments, and by adding a recursive dimension of temporality to extend RL/P. Responsible Leadership is continually renegotiated as followers reassess effectiveness, ethics, and enduring action over time.

Implications for RL Theory

This study advances RL scholarship by introducing perception-mediated processing as a primary mechanism underlying RL under conditions of hierarchical distance. The connection between the RL/P model and its conceptual foundations is explicitly made in this section.

Extending Lynham's RL/P Framework Through Perception Processing

RL/P, as conceptualized by Lynham in several works from 1998 through 2006 and with Chermack (2006), is fundamentally a systems-oriented model that integrates effectiveness, ethics, and enduring practice within the context of organizational performance (Lynham, 2000). What makes RL/P somewhat unique among other RL frameworks is its focus on the interdependence between acts of leadership responsibility and systemic consequences in an adaptively emerging environment.

This study progresses RL/P by adding an interpretive processing stage between leadership signals and performance outcomes. While RL/P conceptualizes RL as enacted within a performance system, we found in the present study that followers do not experience its enactment directly but rather through mediated signals, to which they apply identity-based filters and categorize by responsibility domain.

By inserting an additional perception-processing step between RL/P, the present research reforms responsibility input from a leader-centered, unilateral deposit into a follower-interpreted, co-creative outcome export. In large multinationals, leadership effectiveness, ethics, and endurance are not manifested; they are interpreted. This article develops and extends RL/P by integrating constructivist perception dynamics inside its systems-based architecture.

Advancing Leadership-at-a-Distance Theory through Moral Weighting

For a long time, the leadership-at-a-distance scholarship has argued that, in contexts lacking relational proximity, followers rely on symbolic cues, performance signals, and mediated communication to judge leaders (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Shamir, 1995). Even though most of this literature provides an account in terms of charisma or symbolic leadership and attribution processes instead of moral evaluation,

This study develops leadership-at-a-distance theory by showing that the moral weighting serves as an important interpretive mechanism. Participants do not simply judge the CEO symbolically, either in terms of competence or outcomes, but selectively emphasize moral responsibility, organizational stewardship, or market competence, depending on their personal value frameworks. In doing so, this work shows that leading from a distance is not morally neutral. Under the conditions of hierarchical distance, ethical silence, geopolitical positioning, and layoff

communication, all carry interpretive weight equal to that of strategic prediction. In the absence of relational proximity, moral evaluation becomes amplified.

This suggests an extension. In large organizations, symbolic leadership must be understood not only as impression management but also as moral signaling, subject to identity-based scrutiny and to conditionally negotiated and mediated trust.

Deepening RL Theory through Responsibility Domain Differentiation

Responsible Leadership theory has traditionally conceptualized responsibility as an integrated construct combining ethical awareness, stakeholder inclusion, and sustainable performance (Maak & Pless, 2006; Waldman & Galvin, 2008). RL/P further articulates this integration through effectiveness, ethics, and endurance. The findings of this study deepen the conceptual basis by demonstrating that followers implicitly categorize RL across three separate domains:

1. **Market Responsibility** (strategic competence and financial stewardship)
2. **Organizational Responsibility** (culture, empowerment, relational stewardship)
3. **Moral Responsibility** (ethical clarity, CSR, along with stakeholder justice)

Critically, divergence in leadership evaluation did not stem from a dispute over leaders' actual behaviors but from differences in how participants weighed these domains. Such domain differentiation makes explicit that RL is not only multidimensional but also multi-domain weighted. Different followers attach varying degrees of importance to the accomplishment of the intended task, cultural stewardship, and moral clarity, depending on their identity frames and lived experiences. RL theory is further specified by this insight through the introduction of differential domain prioritization as a mechanism explaining perceptual divergence.

Integrating Sensemaking and Identity into RL Evaluation

Sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014) were introduced in Chapter 2 as relevant interpretive lenses. This is the first empirical study to integrate these schemes into a framework for evaluating RL. Leadership actions were not passively received by the participants yet were actively interpreted by them. AI pivots, layoffs, and international controversies were construed through cultural backgrounds, moral philosophies, religious commitments, generational positions, and prior organizational experiences.

This strongly suggests that RL is an identity-based perception. Leaders are seen as legitimate not only when they deliver on performance, but also when their behavior aligns with followers' moral prototypes and their identity commitments. By inserting an identity-based filter into RL/P, RL is situated within the broader interpretive processes of leadership. Responsible Leadership is a negotiated construction formed at the intersection between leader signaling and follower identity and interpretation.

This study resolves the conceptual tension identified in Chapter 2 by embedding perception processing into the RL/P framework, by the following:

1. Perception as compiled competence within the system of performances extending RL/P.
2. It supports the theory of leadership at a distance through related moral principles.
3. The distinction between domains specifies the RL theory.
4. Sensemaking and identity construction are both core mechanisms integrated into RL assessment.

The RL/P framework is extended by incorporating perception processing within performance systems. Leadership-at-a-distance theory is advanced by incorporating moral weighting

into leaders' motives. Responsible Leadership theory is deepened through domain differentiation. Sensemaking and identity are integrated as core mechanisms in evaluating RL.

Altogether, these conceptual returns complete the loop left open in Chapter 2. Extends RL/P by embedding perception processing within performance systems. Advances leadership-at-a-distance theory through incorporating moral weighting. Deepens RL theory through domain differentiation. Integrates sensemaking and identity as core mechanisms in RL evaluation.

Implications for Praxis

In large organizations, RL must account for how signals are interpreted, not merely how decisions are made. Since mediated signals construct RL, identity filtering, and recursive trust calibration, the pragmatic consequence must include how leadership is interpreted, not simply how it is enacted. Five main executive leaders and organization development-oriented consequences are yielded by the RL/P model.

First: Designing Leadership Signals with Interpretive Awareness

Leadership signals are not neutral transmissions. They are interpreted through identity-based filters and domain-weighted responsibility. Thus, executives should understand that: (1) strategic statements will be judged through concurrent market, organizational, and moral perspectives; (2) silence becomes a signal in morally contested contexts; and (3) tone, both content-wise and affective authenticity, carries credibility. For example, participants explained that enthusiasm inside quantum communications was considered authentic, whereas the same feeling in AI communications would be interpreted as promotional. This means that followers apply affective signaling alongside narrative coherence to build leadership legitimacy.

Practical implication. Leaders must be aware that their communication will be interpreted at different levels. Executive messages should consider how cultural, moral, or generational filters may shape their interpretation. In practicing RL, signaling coherence matters.

Second: Identifying the Manager as an Interpretive Mediator

A consistent finding in this study was the role of managerial proxies in forming perceptions of executive leadership. Participants regularly constructed their evaluation of the CEO through how immediate supervisors framed and operationalized executive priorities. This brings two major implications: (1) RL does not travel directly from the CEO to the employee; (2) middle management functions as a narrative translator. If executive messaging emphasizes empowerment while local managers underscore urgency, perceptions of responsibility break down. Trust is stabilized by the alignment between top-level messaging and its implementation at the middle-management layer.

Practical implication. Organizations must develop training programs for managers that clearly define the interpretive role they play in operationalizing executive strategies. Most organizations do not realize that their managers are responsible for creating a cultural experience aligned with the organization's strategic intent. Responsibility remains with leadership and is distributed simultaneously and distinctly.

Third: Preparing for Moral Inflection Points

Layoffs and international controversies served as narrative-disruption events in participants' accounts. These events recalibrated trust and reshaped perceptions of leadership responsibility. Importantly, participants did not universally reject difficult decisions. Rather, their evaluation hinged on: (1) transparency is paramount, (2) a felt sense of authentic empathy, (3) moral acknowledgment, and (4) congruence with espoused values. This suggests that difficult tactical

moves are not inherently perception-damaging; inconsistency between values and response is. The significance of the weighting of these moral inflection moments cannot be stressed enough. Leaders (and their organizations) must get these right or seek prompt remediation when they do not. The data made this exceedingly clear. If executives get anything out of this study, it should be that moral moments matter greatly.

Practical implication. Executives should anticipate moral inflection points and prepare for interpretive consequences. Proactive transparency, recognition of tensions, and explicit articulation of trade-offs may mitigate erosion of trust. Responsible Leadership requires visible moral reasoning during disruption.

Fourth: Accounting for Domain-Weighted Responsibility

This study demonstrated that followers weigh responsibility domains differently. Some prioritize market performance, others cultural stewardship, and others moral clarity. This difference implies that (1) no single leadership action satisfies all evaluative criteria simultaneously; (2) perception management is not reducible to financial success alone; and (3) cultural investment does not substitute moral clarity in contested contexts.

Practical implication. Leaders should assess stakeholder weighting patterns within their organizations. Structured internal dialogue among executive team members may help surface how employees prioritize domains of responsibility. Responsible Leadership demands plural accountability.

Fifth: Treating Trust as Recursive Rather Than Static

Trust is defined as the condition and period during which it develops. Most participants spoke about ‘waiting to see’, ‘time will tell’, and holding apparently contradictory evaluations simultaneously. This implies that (1) trust is always fundamentally different in the aftermath of

extreme events; (2) leadership signaling is interpreted relative to previous signaling; and (3) ethical ambiguity accumulates over time.

Practical implication. Consider trust as a perpetual yet exhaustible resource within the organization between executive teams and all its stakeholders. If there is repeated dissonance between the message and lived experience, skepticism sets in faster. RL can never be assumed; it must be continuously re-earned.

Additional Implications for Organizational Development Practice

This should therefore provide the foundation for the responsible development of interpretive leadership and training, rather than continuing to focus on individual leader traits, for organizational development (OD) professionals. Organizational Development interventions need to facilitate an understanding of how leadership signals percolate through various layers within the organization and estimate points at which friction occurs between top management intention and local enactment across multiple cultures, as a dialogue about responsibility expectations that executive communications strategies reflectively develop cross-cultural moral scenario planning integrated into strategic management processes (Bushe & Marshak, 2009, 2014). Responsible leadership is interpreted rather than simply performed in large-scale organizations. Organizational systems, and OD practitioners that fail to accommodate interpretive complexity risk moral fragmentation and the stabilization of moral norms.

Summary and Discussion for Praxis

The practical results of this study do not mean that RL is impossible under hierarchical distance. They show that RL must be understood as a mediated, identity-sensitive, and recursively assessed process. Senior executive leaders who acknowledge the interpretive architecture

of their organizations, anticipate domain weighting, are ready for moral inflection, and inculcate signal coherence are more likely to sustain RL legitimacy inside complicated environments.

Limitations

This study had several limitations that warrant discussion. First, this study took place in a single organizational context to examine how employees develop perceptions of RL, but it cautions against haphazardly generalizing these outcomes to other company contexts. We chose Microsoft as a case study partly because it is a global enterprise, a multinational with a responsibility constituency, a disruptor due to its technology-driven business model, and has publicly pledged to RL, but perceptions of leadership will always differ across industries, organizations, and leadership teams.

Second, this study used a relatively small qualitative sample (n = 8) from employees' perspectives, which is sufficient for an NI but limits the generalizability of the findings to employees who did not participate in the study or to employees of other organizations. Narrative Inquiry seeks a rich, thorough understanding of the topic being studied, rather than a statistically representative sample. The results of this study should be viewed as contextually situated interpretations of leadership experiences.

Third, while the hierarchical separation between the participants and the CEO represents a distinct opportunity to understand how leadership narratives are created within a large organization, the participants' interpretations of their experiences were probably affected by indirect experiences (such as organizational communications, media coverage, and managerial interpretations) instead of direct contact with the CEO. As such, this study is not intended as an accurate depiction of Satya Nadella, but instead a reflection of the lived experiences of his followers. In addition, the researcher's background in working with executives and

organizational leadership likely shaped his interpretation of the data, despite efforts to minimize bias through self-reflection, member checking, and transparent analysis. Additionally, member-checking feedback was received from two of the eight participants, providing limited support for the study's findings.

Fourth, the field of study was rapidly changing (particularly in relation to AI). As the study was conducted during a period of shifting priorities and leadership approaches, perceptions may reflect a point-in-time view of a moving target of nuance and change. While the constraints described above do not diminish the significance of the findings, they demonstrate the interpretive and temporally bound nature of NI and provide avenues for subsequent research to examine similar questions across multiple organizational domains, industries, leadership environments, and time.

Future Research

These outcomes, in tandem with the stated limitations, open several paths for future research at the intersection of RL, hierarchical distance, and the construction of follower perceptions. While this dissertation advances a process-based understanding of RL throughout conditions of scale and mediation, further empirical and theoretical work is needed to improve and test these understandings across contexts.

Testing Responsibility Domain Weighting Across Contexts

The study found three domains of responsibility: market, organization, and moral, by which followers categorize leadership. Divergence did not arise from any disagreement about leadership behavior per se, but rather from different weightings given to these domains. Future research can fruitfully examine whether domain-weighting patterns systematically vary across cultural settings, industry sectors, organizational sizes, generational cohorts, and functional roles.

Quantitative research designs could operationalize the domain and test whether moral priorities are more volatile with respect to trust than to market tolerance for disruption in structural prioritization. Cross-national comparative studies would be especially useful for determining whether responsibility weighting aligns with broader cultural norms. Such a study would enhance the generalizability of the multidimensional weighting system proposed herein.

The current results clearly demonstrate that hierarchical distance substantially shapes RL construction. However, this study particularly centered on entry-level employees within a large multinational corporation. Upcoming research will need to compare hierarchical distance as a moderating variable among middle managers, senior leaders, and/or executives, as only entry-level employees are currently being studied.

Cross-level studies can determine whether perception-mediated effects reach a minimum level or whether processing through identity remains important at levels where access is more relational. Another avenue for comparing big and small organizations, in which the latter have greater relational proximity, could help determine whether the mediated perception of leaders by followers is a phenomenon restricted to large systems.

Examining Hierarchical Distance as a Moderating Variable

The present data show that hierarchical distance substantially shapes RL construction. However, the study focused specifically on entry-level employees within a large multinational corporation. Future research needs to examine hierarchical distance as a moderating variable by comparing entry-level employees, middle managers, senior leaders, and/or executives.

Such cross-level studies would help determine whether perception mediation decreases with proximity, or whether identity filtering remains central even among those with greater rela-

tional access. Additionally, research comparing smaller organizations — where relational proximity is greater — with enterprise-scale corporations may clarify whether mediated perception is unique to large systems or a more universal leadership phenomenon.

Longitudinal Studies of Recursive Trust Calibration

Trust emerged in this study as conditional and recursive rather than static. Participants adjusted their understanding of RL in the wake of narrative disruptions, such as layoff stories or political controversy stories, which offered an alternate perspective on leaders' responsibility. Subsequent studies might longitudinally track the trajectories of trust before and after major organizational events, the time required for trust to erode or recover, and the effects of repeated disruptions on long-term legitimacy. Such research would provide observational confirmation of the recursive trust proposition and contribute to a more temporally dynamic understanding of RL.

Integrating RL with Political Corporate Responsibility

The findings show that employees increasingly evaluate corporate leadership through political and moral lenses, particularly when corporations operate as global actors. Future research ought to investigate the intersection of RL and political corporate responsibility (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007), especially examining: (1) internal employee reactions to corporate political positioning; (2) the relationship between moral silence and perceived legitimacy; and (3) the role of internal activism in forming leadership perception.

Practical implications. As multinational organizations continue operations in politically contested spaces, the manner in which internal stakeholders interpret corporate political action will become increasingly critical to underscore.

Expanding NI into Leadership-as-Practice

In conclusion, this research responds to the call of leadership-as-practice scholars (Raelin, 2016, 2020) by providing an example of how leadership can be constructed through narrative and sensemaking construction. Future qualitative research may include comparative narrative inquiries across organizations, examinations of how identity narratives change over time, or studies of the impact of online communication platforms on symbolic leadership. More NI could show whether RL becomes infused — or fractured — within developing organizational storylines.

Summary of Future Research

This study has offered an account of RL as a perception-mediated process, determined by hierarchical distance and identity filtering together with recursively calibrated trust. The dynamics identified here beg further cross-contextual, cross-level, and longitudinal inquiry. Responsible Leadership must move beyond trait-based positivity to interpretive and systemic scholarship if future research is to engage fruitfully with the complexity of contemporary multinational organizations.

Final Reflection

Most people know this intuitively and rarely state it explicitly: Leadership is messy, complicated, hard to define — without first exploring the lived experience of those it supports. With RL, meaning does not exist for the leader alone; rather, it is mutually constructed through the telling of stories, shaped by an individual's values, and evaluated in light of identity, culture, and moral judgment. It recedes and flows. Its composition is not static or linear. It is fragile because it can be drastically altered by a single event.

At its core, this dissertation centers on the follower's viewpoint and shows that employees do not form perceptions of a high-profile CEO through proximity or access. They form them through distance — through mediated signals, interpreted decisions, and the meaning they make from what they can see and feel. Instead, employee perceptions of a high-profile CEO are shaped by "mediated" experiences, including what is communicated to them, what they observe around them, how decisions affect them, and whether the CEO appears to operate in accordance with employees' beliefs about what is correct. In this way, RL is framed as a form of "narrative work" that followers use to assess, support, or reject, depending on the impact of the decisions made.

Ultimately, leadership is not simply what leaders claim to be. Leadership is not a neat behavioral construct created by scholars. Leadership is what followers experience. Leadership is not only about the actions leaders take, but moreover about how those actions are interpreted by others. Leadership is not defined exclusively by policy but also by what people remember about the past and carry into the future. If leadership is to be seen as responsible, it must be felt and reaffirmed as responsible by those who follow in its wake.

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Appendix

Appendix A – IRB Approved Informed Consent Form

Appendix B – IRB Approved Interview Protocol

Appendix C – Codebook

Appendix D – Sample Analytic Memos

Appendix E – Member Checking Notes

Appendix A – IRB Approved Informed Consent Form – Page 1

Colorado State University

Consent to Participate in Research

Project Title	**How Entry-Level Employees Construct Their Perceptions of Responsible Leadership in a Large Organization: A Narrative Inquiry Into Leadership Distance, Follower Experience, and CEO Influence**
Principal Investigator	**Thomas Chermack**
Co-Investigator	**Timothy Woodring**
Protocol #	**IRB: #6721**

Purpose, Procedure, and Duration:
We are researchers from Colorado State University (CSU), Department of Education, inviting you to participate in a questionnaire and interviews. We want to learn more about the purpose of this study, which is to explore how entry-level employees at Microsoft perceive Responsible Leadership (RL) concerning your CEO, Satya Nadella. This research aims to understand how employees significantly form opinions about leadership effectiveness, ethics, and long-term decision-making when they do not interact directly with senior executives.

By participating in this study, you will help provide valuable insights into how leadership is experienced at different levels of an organization. Your participation will contribute to research that may help companies improve leadership communication, engagement, and workplace culture.

Your responses will remain completely anonymous, and participation is entirely voluntary.

If you agree to participate in our study, you will be asked to complete a short survey and participate in a semi-structured interview via videoconference, where you will share your experiences and perceptions of leadership at Microsoft. The survey will take about 5 minutes, and the interview will take approximately 55 minutes to complete — both will be conducted during the 60-minute video conference. We expect seven people to respond.

You must meet the following requirements to participate in this research study:

1. Be a current employee or full-time contractor at Microsoft.
2. Hold an entry-level, non-managerial position (no direct reports or formal leadership responsibilities).
3. Have no direct, regular interaction with the CEO, Satya Nadella.
4. Be at least 18 years of age.
5. Be fluent in English, as the study will be conducted in English.
6. Have access to a private space and a stable internet connection for a virtual interview.

Risks:
Some of our questions may make you feel uncomfortable or upset, but you can skip any question you don't want to answer. You can also stop the survey at any time.

We will make every effort to safeguard your data. However, we cannot guarantee the security of data obtained via the Internet.

Benefits:
You may not benefit personally from being in this study, but your answers could help us understand more about how entry-level employees perceive Responsible Leadership (RL) in large organizations, particularly in relation to

Appendix A – IRB Approved Informed Consent Form – Page 2

their CEO. This research may contribute to improving leadership communication, employee engagement, and workplace culture in corporate environments.

Compensation:
You will be paid $40 for participating in our study. Compensation will be provided as a Visa gift card upon completion of the interview. To receive the full reward, you must complete both the pre-interview survey (10–15 minutes) and the full semi-structured interview (60 minutes). If you choose to withdraw before completing the interview, compensation may not be provided.

Alternatively, you may choose to have the $40 donated to a charitable organization of your choice, aligning with the values of Responsible Leadership (RL) and ethical research practices.

Privacy and Future Use:
Your responses to the research questionnaire and interviews are anonymous. That means we won't know which responses are yours. We won't collect names, internet addresses, email addresses, or other identifiable information.

We may or may not use your responses or share them with other researchers in future research.

Complaints or Concerns:
If you have questions about the study, please contact the researcher using the contact information provided above.

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at CSU_IRB@colostate.edu

Thank you for taking the time to consider our study. You do not have to participate in our study, but we hope you will.

Please reply to the email that this consent form was attached with one of the two responses below to indicate you read this information and you wish to take the survey:

1. I agree to be in this study
2. I don't want to be in this study

Appendix B – IRB Approved Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Narrative Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Narrative Interview (55 minutes)

1. **Purpose:** Captures participant experiences and leadership perceptions through open-ended storytelling.
2. **Format:** Conducted via videoconference to ensure anonymity and minimize workplace pressures (Archibald et al., 2019). These videos will be audio-recorded for transcription to allow the investigator to be present in the interviewing process. The data process will be covered in more detail in section 18.0 Data Management and Confidentiality.
3. **Process:** Participants will share personal experiences of leadership influence, with probing questions to explore meaning construction, ethical considerations, and long-term leadership perceptions.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me a story about your first impression of your CEO. How did you form this impression, and what factors contributed to it?
2. In this short survey, you answered whether you perceive your CEO to be responsible or irresponsible. Tell me a story that represents how you've made this determination.
3. How have you come to these determinations? What information, experiences, or interactions have shaped your perspective?
4. How has your own background, personal values, or life experiences influenced what you see as responsible or irresponsible leadership? Can you share a story from your life that relates to how you perceive your CEO's responsible leadership?
5. Has your immediate supervisor influenced your experience with your CEO? Share a story of how you experience your immediate supervisor experiencing your CEO?
6. Have your colleagues or workplace discussions influenced your perception of the CEO's leadership? Have you heard stories from coworkers that shaped your views?
7. What specific experiences stand out in shaping your perception of your CEO's leadership? How have these experiences reinforced or challenged your views?
8. Can you tell me a story of a time when you observed or experienced your CEO acting in a way that made your organization more effective?
9. Can you tell me a story of a time when you observed or experienced your CEO making a decision or taking an action that had a clear ethical component?
10. Can you tell me a story of a time when you observed or experienced your CEO acting in a way that demonstrated enduring, long-term thinking rather than prioritizing short-term gains?

If you were to construct and share a metaphor of your experience, what would it be and why?

Appendix C – Codebook: (# of Occurrences), Description, Inclusion/Exclusion

Code	#	Description	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
CEO_Perception_Source_Internal_Stories	12	Perceptions of the CEO formed through internal organizational narratives such as colleague stories, supervisor framing, or informal workplace discourse.	Include references to stories shared by managers, coworkers, or organizational folklore about the CEO.	Exclude direct media-based perceptions or personal speculative inference without internal reference.
CEO_Perception_Source_Media	22	Perceptions of the CEO constructed through external media sources including news, podcasts, keynote clips, and social media.	Include mentions of news articles, Twitter/X, Instagram, podcasts, YouTube, or headlines shaping perception.	Exclude internal team discussions or direct organizational communications.
CEO_Perception_Source_Personal_Inference	43	Evaluations of the CEO derived from indirect reasoning, symbolic interpretation, or extrapolation from outcomes.	Include statements such as 'I assume,' 'it seems like,' or inference from stock growth or strategic moves.	Exclude direct quotations of CEO communication or peer-shared narratives.
Effective_As_Financial_Performance	4	Leadership effectiveness evaluated through financial indicators such as stock price, profitability, and shareholder value.	Include references to stock growth, record profits, revenue performance.	Exclude cultural or moral evaluations unrelated to financial outcomes.
Effective_As_Strategic_Competence	15	References to CEO's ability to position the organization competitively through strategic foresight and innovation.	Include AI pivot, cloud strategy, security-first initiatives, acquisitions.	Exclude ethical or empathy-based assessments.
Enduring_Long_Term_Orientation	16	Evaluation of leadership based on prioritization of enduring long-term value over short-term gains.	Include explicit references to 'long-term thinking,' sustainability of strategy, endurance.	Exclude short-term tactical praise without future orientation context.
Ethical_Framework_Empathy	18	Mentions of empathy, care, or concern for affected stakeholders as a standard of responsible leadership.	Include references to care for employees, humanitarian concern, emotional tone.	Exclude purely strategic rationale without emotional component.
Ethical_Framework_Environmental_Concern	7	References to environmental sustainability or ecological responsibility as leadership evaluation criteria.	Include sustainability, carbon footprint, climate responsibility comments.	Exclude general ethical discussions unrelated to environment.
Ethical_Framework_Humility	4	Evaluations of leadership based on modesty, lack of flashiness, or grounded demeanor.	Include references to humility, low-key lifestyle, avoiding spotlight.	Exclude competence or financial evaluations.
Ethical_Framework_Integrity	6	Judgments related to honesty, transparency, and alignment between stated values and enacted behavior.	Include comments about authenticity, truth-telling, consistency.	Exclude empathy or sacrifice unless tied directly to moral consistency.
Ethical_Framework_Sacrifice	5	Expectations that responsible leaders should incur personal or organizational cost in defense of ethical principles.	Include statements about standing up even if losing money or reputation.	Exclude generic moral disappointment without sacrifice framing.
Ethical_Trust_Conditional	18	Expressions of trust that are provisional and dependent on continued alignment.	Include statements such as 'time will tell' or 'I trust him for now.'	Exclude strong positive trust without conditions.
Ethical_Trust_Erosion	18	Instances where leadership actions or silence diminish trust.	Include moral disappointment, skepticism, reduced confidence.	Exclude neutral ambivalence without erosion language.
Narrative_Disruption_Artificial_Intelligence	3	AI initiatives functioning as turning points in leadership perception.	Include Copilot, OpenAI, AI pivot, quantum references.	Exclude general tech praise not tied to perception shift.
Narrative_Disruption_Geopolitics	4	Global political events introducing moral evaluation into leadership perception.	Include Israel-Gaza, government contracts, protests.	Exclude purely financial or operational impacts.
Narrative_Disruption_Layoffs	14	Layoffs described as emotionally or morally disruptive events shaping perception.	Include mass layoffs, holiday timing, empathy critiques.	Exclude neutral HR procedural comments.
Narrative_Disruption_Remote_Work_Policy	1	Remote or return-to-office policies interpreted as signals of leadership priorities.	Include RTO mandates, flexibility policy discussion.	Exclude unrelated cultural commentary.
Sensemaking_Comparison	7	Leadership perceptions shaped through comparison with other companies or CEOs.	Include references to Amazon, Bezos, Musk, etc.	Exclude standalone evaluations without comparison.
Sensemaking_Peers	8	Leadership interpretations formed through peer conversations.	Include lunch conversations, team discussions shaping perception.	Exclude media-based formation.
Sensemaking_Senior_Leaders	12	Perceptions of CEO mediated through interpretations by senior managers.	Include manager explanations of strategy or tone translation.	Exclude peer-only discussions.

Appendix D – Analytical Memos — Researcher Memo After First Coding Pass

Trust and Responsibility: Paul's Approach

1. How Paul begins to build trust

Paul starts to trust the CEO from a distance, even before any direct contact. His first real impression of Satya Nadella comes from a recorded lecture shown in class, in which Satya shares his personal story, particularly about being a parent to an autistic son, and connects it to empathy and leadership. This story becomes the main reason Paul feels trust. Other signs, such as Microsoft's strong financial position, Azure's market leadership, early moves in AI, and major partnerships and acquisitions, also help build trust. For Paul, these are signs that Satya is "doing something right," even if he cannot see all the details. At this point, Paul's trust is more about stories, success, and vision than personal experience.

2. What messes up that trust?

Paul's trust is shaken when he sees decisions that affect people, like large layoffs. It feels wrong to him when long-serving senior leaders, who have a lot of experience, are let go. This seems to go against the idea of caring leadership. Paul finds it hard to see these actions as anything other than sudden, impersonal job cuts. Hearing about layoff notices given while employees were on vacation, more formal performance plans, and a return to ranking employees also makes him question things. While these events don't make Paul lose faith in Satya's skills as a leader, they do make him worry about the human cost and the ethics behind these choices.

3. Why trust doesn't just fall apart

Paul's trust does not depend on an all-or-nothing judgment and therefore is not totally destroyed by these upheavals. He continues to differentiate between what he calls long-term strategic outcomes and short-term human consequences, thus allowing both esteem and anxiety in the same space. Paul leaves room for the possibility that current decisions- particularly layoffs and organizational restructuring- may have justification in the long term even if they conflict with his values in the present. Trust also endures through continued external validation: strong earnings, market leadership, and Satya's perception as having a "seat at the table" with global decision-makers. Paul's sensemaking is strongly shaped by senior colleagues who contrast Satya favorably with previous leadership, reinforcing the view that current leadership, while imperfect, represents an improvement over the past.

4. Evaluating Moral Responsibility

Paul's view of responsibility is grounded in a moral concept that emphasizes empathy, sacrifice, and equity. These values came to him through his family and later personal life experiences. He wants leaders to make personal sacrifices when the organization faces tough times. He gets very uncomfortable with supposed asymmetries between executive compensation and layoffs at all levels below management. Additional dimensions to his evaluation arise from environmental concerns about AI, as Paul sees an ethical trade-off in the rapidly growing energy consumption of data centers that few have addressed. For Paul, responsibility does not pay off only financially or even innovatively; it also asks whether leaders are willing, first, to absorb costs and protect people where possible, and to acknowledge the ethical consequences of their decisions.

Appendix E – Analytical Memos — Researcher Memo After Second Coding Reflection

Paul: Trust Changes When Leadership Seems Distant

Paul's experience shows that trust in leadership depends on the distance between the leader and the follower. He does not interact with leaders directly or through close contacts. Instead, he learns about them through stories, company results, and feedback from people who are closer to leadership. Paul's view begins with Satya Nadella's personal "origin story," especially the story of Nadella's son, which helps establish Nadella's moral credibility early on. Microsoft's healthy financial performance, Azure's growth, and the company's early steps in AI all reinforce Paul's positive view of Microsoft's leadership. For Paul, having a vision is the same as being competent in leading.

Paul links 'responsibility' to strong strategic skills. He believes a responsible leader makes decisions that keep the organization sustainable and competitive. For Paul, financial success and market leadership demonstrate that a leader acts ethically. He thinks responsible leaders must balance long-term company health with short-term impacts on people. Paul accepts tough choices, such as layoffs, when they are needed for the company's future. He also appreciates empathy, sacrifice, and equity. Paul pays close attention to whether leaders share in the sacrifices they ask employees to make, since he comes from a background where leaders regularly led by example and put others first.

Paul's story leaves several tensions unresolved. The biggest gap is between caring, people-focused leadership and the reality of layoffs, stricter company culture, and

the disconnect between executive pay and employee security. Paul finds it hard to match the empathy he first felt for Nadella with the company's actions, which seem distant from those values. He also worries about AI's impact on the environment, seeing both risks and benefits in innovation. Paul does not fully trust or distrust leadership; instead, his trust is on hold. For him, responsibility is not a final judgment but something that must be reviewed as future results show whether the current harm was justified. This continuing tension is central to Paul's story and shows that, for employees far from leadership, responsibility is always an open moral question.

Note: Memos like these were written with each coding pass, including cross-case analysis. For the sake of brevity, only two have been included as the reflective process simply informed the substance of Chapters 4 and 5; they would be redundant and excessive to include them all in the Appendix.

Appendix E – Member Checking Notes

From [Paul]. Hi Tim, It's good to hear from you and hope you're doing good, as well. The dissertation is insightful, especially the perspectives of other new employees, and additionally, I confirm that the Paul portion of your dissertation is accurate. I'm glad I could contribute to your research, and I wish you the best of luck in finishing the dissertation and getting the PhD! Best, [Paul]

From [Shu]. Hi Tim, Thanks for sending this over! It's such great work, and I'm glad that I was able to contribute to the process. I have read through the participant narratives, and everything looks accurate to me except for one minor correction: Page 110, Shu also cited '*Blade'*, an internal, anonymous social media site where employees voice worries about culture and rising pressure. The platform is called *Blind* (https://www.teamblind.com/). Best, [Shu]

Note. This edit has now been made, so the program name is now 'Blind'.