



# Organisational leadership in South Africa: Explored through interactive qualitative analysis



## Authors:

Anton Grobler<sup>1</sup>   
Eben Enslin<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Graduate School for Business Leadership, University of South Africa, Midrand, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Anton Grobler,  
grobla@unisa.ac.za

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**Background:** Organisational leadership (OL) as a construct faces challenges in being universally defined, especially in South Africa, because of its contextual diverse nature (historically, politically, socially and culturally). This is amplified by the limited availability of contextual (South African) leadership research, and an overreliance on international and universal leadership models.

**Aim:** This study aimed to conceptualise OL from an emic perspective.

**Setting:** The study was based on the South African workforce.

**Method:** An exploratory qualitative design was employed. Interactive qualitative analysis (IQA), a systematic qualitative research methodology, was used. The inductive nature of IQA, combined with deductive analysis techniques (axial and theoretical coding), facilitated the identification of the elements of OL, as well as its inter-relational nature. Based on the participants' lived experiences, this is established from a pragmatist and social constructivism perspective.

**Results:** The outcome of the study is a system influence diagram (SID), indicating the relationship between the various elements of OL. The primary driver was the leader's *emotional awareness*, with the secondary drivers including *leadership style*, *characteristics*, *culture*, *communication* and *vision*. These drivers resulted in secondary outcomes of *leader support and team dynamics*, ultimately culminating in the primary outcome of *delivering strategy*.

**Conclusion:** Organisational leadership has relational, emotional and rational elements that should be navigated to reach the primary outcome, namely organisational success through strategy implementation.

**Contribution:** Conceptualising OL is valuable as it advances our understanding, highlights the social and cultural dynamics that influence leadership effectiveness, and offers a foundation for future research and leadership development.

**Keywords:** organisational leadership; management; leadership; interactive qualitative analysis; qualitative research; system influence diagram.

## Introduction

Effective organisational leadership (OL) is critical to achieving organisational objectives, yet understanding what constitutes effective leadership remains challenging because of its complex and context-specific nature (Grobler & Singh 2018), especially in the African context (read South Africa) (Banutu-Gomez et al. 2023). Enslin and Grobler (2025), in a systematic literature review on OL, found that although there is a plethora of research, there remains a lack of knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon in the South African context. The reason being that OL is mostly studied through the application of traditional, global and universal leadership theories and frameworks, developed primarily within the Western contexts. Kirabira, Winston and Wood (2023) suggest the need for a structured review of existing research of leadership in Africa, with Daft (2022) as well as Vilakati and Schurink (2021) calling for continuous, and more specifically, conceptual leadership research to provide clarity in terms of this complex and important matter. Rahmatika and Saragih (2023) emphasise the importance to study leadership through a contextual lens to ensure that unique cultural, societal, political and organisational nuances (found for instance in SA) are recognised.

The importance of OL cannot be overstated (Vilakati & Schurink 2021). Yukl and Gardner (2020) argue that leadership in general is a continuous social process and a highly valued organisational

asset, with OL (and the nature of it) being widely discussed for decades (Northouse 2021). Universal consensus was however not found (Iszatt-White & Saunders 2020), mainly as a result of its contextual nature (Grobler & Singh 2018). Most researchers however agree that OL entails influencing others to achieve shared goals (Daft 2022), although the 'how' is often determined by the context (Grobler & Singh 2018). This contextual dependence necessitates the need for new research (including methods) to capture leadership's evolving demands (Campos 2024; Enslin & Grobler 2025; Hesse 2018).

This study addresses this gap by exploring OL from a distinctly South African (emic) perspective, acknowledging and considering the local realities, including the diversity, social and cultural values, practices and behaviour. Because of the diverse nature of the South African leadership landscape, as well as the complexity it causes, it was decided to investigate OL through a social constructivist lens, as postulated by Bryman (2012) and supported by Campos (2024) who propagate more contemporary methods in studying leadership. In this study, the nature (definition) as well as the elements of OL were investigated by allowing participants to contribute to the process based on their lived experience, rather than imposing existing, global and universal leadership theories and models on them. Northouse (2021) refers to this as ethnocentrism, where one's own worldview is imposed on others outside your reference group.

This study countered the notion of ethnocentrism, and universalism, by using the interactive qualitative analysis (IQA) methodology. The IQA is based on the facilitated and systematic collection of data, with the qualitative data analysed through participation and consensus. This technique entails group members, closely associated with the leadership phenomenon, sharing their experiences and views on OL, articulating relationships, thus contributing to the conceptualisation process. The result of the process is a system influence diagram (SID) that depicts the construct, its elements (affinities), and their relationships.

This study differs from many other leadership studies, which are often conducted on a philosophical level or through quantitative approaches (using existing models and measurements) (over 40%, according to Enslin & Grobler 2025), and thus failing to capture leadership's complex, contextual and relational nature. Methodologically, the IQA stands out among qualitative methods because of its participatory, structured approach (Northcutt & McCoy 2004). This participatory approach ensures a more comprehensive exploration of OL, and more specifically, the elements it consists of, and the interrelationship between these elements, with the latter often being missed by studies using more traditional methodologies.

The objectives of this study were to: (1) identify the elements contributing to effective OL and (2) to determine the causal

relationship between the elements, in terms of key drivers, pivots and outcomes.

The overall purpose of this study is to stimulate new ideas about OL in the South African context. The study proposes a novel and empirically justified framework to enhance leadership practices and organisational productivity, and offers recommendations at practical, organisational and academic levels.

## Literature review

### Conceptualising organisational leadership

Leadership in general is defined as the attempt by an individual (the leader, with his or her preferred behaviour) to reach a common goal (outcome or result) through exerting influence (process) (Northouse 2021). Leadership, including OL, is however a more complex and an evolving and relational construct. It is shaped by social, cultural and situational influences, and its intricate nature (Daft 2022; Iszatt-White & Saunders 2020; Northouse 2021; Punnett 2017; Yukl 2013; Yukl & Gardner 2020) is characterised by ongoing conversation, social interaction and emergent processes (Van de Mierop, Clifton & Verhelst 2020). Organisational leadership is shaped on the individual level (both by the leader as well as the followers), influenced by both their personal and collective assumptions, values and culture (Punnett 2017). It thus seems that OL has components or elements on three levels, namely the leader (and follower), the process level (social and managerial processes) and the outcome level, all related to specific context (Northouse 2021). This is consistent with general leadership theory, but the finer nuances of what the elements on the three levels are, and the relationship they have with each other, are not clear.

This uncertainty, especially from a contextual perspective aligns with the assumption of Iszatt-White and Saunders (2020) as well as Daft (2022) that despite extensive definitions of the construct, there is no universally accepted conceptualisation of OL. Kok and Van den Heuvel (2019), Reed, Klutts and Mattingly (2019) as well as Yukl and Gardner (2020) complicate the matter further by emphasising the importance of context and context-specific studies. This is because leadership is sensitive to different organisational, cultural, and situational contexts, a view supported by Banutu-Gomez et al. (2023) from an African perspective.

### The need for contextualisation: Emic and etic perspectives

According to the seminal authors Pike (1967) and Berry (1969), researchers should make a critical distinction in cross-cultural research between emic and etic perspectives. They define etic perspectives as a search to define a universal construct, and in the case of OL often defined from a Western perspective. In contrast, emic perspectives focus on culture-specific nuances and nature of the construct. The emic perspective studies a phenomenon from a contextual

perspective, which contrasts with the ethnocentric and universal perspective typical of etic studies.

Organisational leadership studies continue to be dominated by the application of etic methodologies (Enslin & Grobler 2025), despite growing recognition that OL in Africa reflects unique historical, cultural and socioeconomic realities (Acquaah & Yasai-Ardekani 2008; Nkomo 2011; Meylahn & Musiyambiri 2017; Iszatt-White & Saunders 2020). The South African leadership context, marked by high cultural diversity and historic inequality, requires approaches that authentically represent indigenous leadership values (Du Preez & Van Zyl 2015; Grobler & Singh 2018). Without culturally specific models, leadership research risks reinforcing Western and European biases (related to ethnocentrism) rather than reflecting local realities. Blom and Alvesson (2015), Lu (2012) as well as Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) argue that leadership research must go beyond simplistic universal influence models by studying it within specific contexts to uncover deeper social meanings.

While the universal theories and paradigms aid the interpretation and understanding of the leadership-related phenomena, their position in research evolution implies that a single, pure leadership paradigm is unlikely. Without a universally agreed-upon paradigm and definition of OL, there is an opportunity to reevaluate the construct within specific cultural and organisational contexts. Leadership behaviours are strongly influenced by context; thus, constructs developed in Western markets often show reduced validity and reliability when applied in South African organisations (Grobler & Singh 2018; Nemashakwe, Zinyemba & Gumbe 2023). Empirical research confirms that globally defined leadership constructs often underrepresent African relational norms and community values (Nemashakwe et al. 2023; Saeed, Ali & Rashid 2023). This view is supported through recent South African studies recognising the urgent need to conceptualise OL from a contextual (Frantz, Lawack & Rhoda 2020), thus an emic perspective.

The context specific and sensitive conceptualisation of OL is needed not only on academic level, but it should also provide leadership direction in terms of unique challenges, including cultural diversity, historical inequalities and economic transformation (Mbandlwa & Fagbadebo 2020). Building an emic OL model requires identifying leadership behaviours that resonate within South African organisational contexts, taking into consideration these contextual challenges. The development of organisational leaders, based on contextual information (generated by context-specific research) also contributes to broader organisational effectiveness and social cohesion (Groenewald & Ashfield 2008; Saeed et al. 2023).

This study responds to this need by applying IQA to explore emic OL behaviours drawn directly from leaders lived experiences (Northcutt & McCoy 2004), bridging the gap between theory and practice.

## Methods

### Research paradigms and their relevance to leadership research

This study adopts a pragmatist perspective (paradigm) to explore OL as a socially constructed, dynamic phenomenon, acknowledging multiple contextual realities. Guided by IQA and an emic approach, it empowers participants to co-construct meaning, rather than relying solely on existing, non-context specific models. It allows participants – organisational leaders with expert knowledge and experience – to generate, interpret and analyse data, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the findings. Interactive qualitative analysis' ontology emphasises the interplay between knowledge and power, and its epistemology is grounded in social constructionism, using both deductive and inductive reasoning.

Through focus groups and mind maps, participants defined and explored relationships among identified OL elements (also referred to as affinities), resulting in a participant-driven theoretical framework that authentically reflects South African organisational realities, independent from universal and ethnocentric ideas and conceptualisations. Interactive qualitative analysis as the method used in this study generated affinity diagrams by means of open and axial coding, focusing on social systems and shared meaning that enabled the definition and composition of OL. The process offered a robust, phenomenologically informed representation of OL as understood within specific social contexts, namely South African organisations.

### The interactive qualitative analysis process

This study applied Northcutt and McCoy's (2004) seven structured steps to explore OL in South Africa:

- **Identifying constituents:** Using purposive and snowball sampling, 14 experienced South African organisational leaders were selected to participate in a full-day virtual focus group on Microsoft Teams. The participants had at least 3 years' experience in OL roles (at various levels). This sample comprised of 57% males and 43% females, and included 11 industries. The mean age of the participants was 49-years-old, with a range of 35-65-years-old. The population's educational qualifications were diverse, with 14% having completed Grade 12, 21% holding diplomas, 21% possessing undergraduate degrees, 36% holding Master's degrees and 7% with Doctorate degrees.
- **Focus group introductions:** Participants introduced themselves and shared personal leadership stories to build rapport and set the stage for in-depth discussion.
- **Fundamental brainstorming:** Through a guided visualisation and use of Teams' chat, participants reflected on and shared views about effective leadership behaviours.
- **Clarification of meaning:** Participants collaboratively deepened their understanding of shared ideas, adapting in-person IQA procedures for the virtual environment.

- Affinity analysis (inductive and axial coding): Ideas were grouped into related themes (affinities) using inductive and axial coding. Adaptations included visual tools such as colour coding and screen sharing.
- Theoretical coding: Participants used Affinity Relationship Tables (ART) and breakout discussions to establish cause-effect relationships among affinities.
- System rationalisation: Interrelationship diagrams (IRD) and SID were generated using the Pareto Protocol, visually mapping OL dynamics.

Overall, this rigorous, participant-driven process enabled a nuanced, emic understanding of leadership, grounded in shared social experience and enhanced by collaborative data analysis.

## Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the School of Business Leadership Research Ethics Review Committee (GSBL CRERC), and ethics consent was received on 23 November 2020. The ethics approval number is 2020\_SBL\_AC\_014\_FA.

## Results

The study aimed to identify characteristics indicative of OL in South Africa and develop an SID to illustrate the elements (affinities), and specifically the relationship between them.

This study identified eight IQA affinities, namely, leadership culture, engaging communication, support, delivering strategy, emotional awareness of leader, team dynamics, vision, and leadership style and characteristics, as listed in Table 1.

**TABLE 1:** Interactive qualitative analysis affinities.

Number	Affinity	Description
1	Leadership culture	Provide a blueprint for winning together, trusting each other, having high ethical standards and recognising subordinates.
2	Engaging communication	Providing constant, motivating and transparent messages while simultaneously sharing relevant knowledge and mentoring.
3	Support	Creating a safe space through understanding and connectivity where subordinates are engaged and are willing to take risks.
4	Delivering strategy	Focusing on the achievement of consistent results sustainably through appropriate reward and recognition.
5	Emotional awareness of leader	Managing and understanding the intra (own) and inner (others) states to positively influence subordinates towards achieving organisational goals.
6	Team dynamics	Using the collective energy and diversity of the team members effectively in achieving organisational objectives.
7	Vision	The ability to plan and imagine an ideal future state translated it into an actionable and workable plan.
8	Leadership style and characteristics	Achieving extraordinary results and achievements from a diverse group of people through courage, humility, innovation and integrity, guided by aligned values.

Source: Enslin, E., 2023, 'The conceptualisation, development and validation of a South African organisational leadership scale', DBL thesis, Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa

**TABLE 2:** Combined interview theoretical code frequency table.

Affinity pair relationship	Frequency
1 → 2	4
1 ← 2	0
1 → 3	3
1 ← 3	1
1 → 4	4
1 ← 4	0
1 → 5	0
1 ← 5	4
1 → 6	4
1 ← 6	0
1 → 7	3
1 ← 7	1
1 → 8	0
1 ← 8	4
2 → 3	2
2 ← 3	2
2 → 4	4
2 ← 4	0
2 → 5	1
2 ← 5	3
2 → 6	4
2 ← 6	0
2 → 7	2
2 ← 7	2
2 → 8	0
2 ← 8	4
3 → 4	3
3 ← 4	1
3 → 5	0
3 ← 5	4
3 → 6	3
3 ← 6	1
3 → 7	1
3 ← 7	3
3 → 8	0
3 ← 8	4
4 → 5	0
4 ← 5	4
4 → 6	0
4 ← 6	4
4 → 7	0
4 ← 7	4
4 → 8	0
4 ← 8	4
5 → 6	4
5 ← 6	0
5 → 7	3
5 ← 7	0
5 → 8	3
5 ← 8	1
6 → 7	1
6 ← 7	2
6 → 8	1
6 ← 8	3
7 → 8	2
7 ← 8	2

Source: Adapted Enslin, E., 2023, 'The conceptualisation, development and validation of a South African organisational leadership scale', DBL thesis, Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa

Note: Where: 1: Leadership culture, 2: Engaging communication, 3: Support, 4: Delivering strategy, 5: Emotional awareness of leader, 6: Team dynamics, 7: Vision, 8: Leadership style and characteristics.

These affinities were not placed in any relational position, and to do that, a composite ART was generated, using IRD by applying the Pareto Protocol. This statistical method identifies the most significant relationships for inclusion in the IRD by precisely counting the frequency of each relationship and arranging them in descending order, as shown in Table 2.

The Pareto principle was used to determine the appropriate level of affinity relationships in the system, identifying the most critical relationships that explained the greatest variation. These relationships were then examined to identify any conflicts (Enslin 2023).

Non-conflicting relationships were recorded in an IRD matrix, which captured all evident relationships in the system, as shown in Table 3. This double-entry matrix logs each IRD twice. The IRD analysis helped identify driver, pivot and outcome variables, which were displayed in a SID. Relationships with a positive delta were classified as drivers or causes, while those with a negative delta were considered outcomes (Enslin 2023). Table 3 illustrates how participants' lived experiences of OL were systematically structured into drivers and outcomes, providing a conceptual backbone for the conceptualisation of OL, derived from this study. The IRD, reported in Table 3, is determined by counting the number of up arrows (↑) or Outs; counting the number of left arrows (←) or Ins; subtracting the number of Ins from the Outs to determine the ( $\Delta$ ) Deltas.

The sorted IRD (in descending order of  $\Delta$ ) is reported in Table 4.

**TABLE 3:** Interrelationship diagram.

Affinity number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	OUT	IN	$\Delta$
1	-	↑	↑	↑	←	↑	↑	←	5	2	3
2	←	-	↑	↑	←	↑	↑	←	4	3	1
3	←	←	-	↑	←	↑	←	←	2	5	-3
4	←	←	←	-	←	←	←	←	0	7	-7
5	↑	↑	↑	↑	-	↑	↑	↑	7	0	7
6	←	←	←	↑	←	-	←	←	1	6	-5
7	←	←	↑	↑	←	↑	-	↑	4	3	1
8	↑	↑	↑	↑	←	↑	←	-	5	2	3

Source: Adapted from Enslin, E., 2023, 'The conceptualisation, development and validation of a South African organisational leadership scale', DBL thesis, Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa

Note: (↑) = Outs; (←) = Ins; ( $\Delta$ ) = Deltas  $\Delta$ .

Where: 1: Leadership culture, 2: Engaging communication, 3: Support, 4: Delivering strategy, 5: Emotional awareness of leader, 6: Team dynamics, 7: Vision, 8: Leadership style and characteristics.

**TABLE 4:** Tabular interrelationship diagram.

Affinity number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	OUT	IN	$\Delta$
5	↑	↑	↑	↑	-	↑	↑	↑	7	0	7
8	↑	↑	↑	↑	←	↑	←	-	5	2	3
1	-	↑	↑	↑	←	↑	↑	←	5	2	3
2	←	-	↑	↑	←	↑	↑	←	4	3	1
7	←	←	↑	↑	←	↑	-	↑	4	3	1
3	←	←	-	↑	←	↑	←	←	2	5	-3
6	←	←	←	↑	←	-	←	←	1	6	-5
4	←	←	←	-	←	←	←	←	0	7	-7

Source: Adapted from Enslin, E., 2023, 'The conceptualisation, development and validation of a South African organisational leadership scale', DBL thesis, Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa

Note: (↑) = Outs; (←) = Ins; ( $\Delta$ ) = Deltas  $\Delta$ .

Where: 1: Leadership culture, 2: Engaging communication, 3: Support, 4: delivering Strategy, 5: Emotional awareness of Leader, 6: Team dynamics, 7: Vision, 8: Leadership style and characteristics.

As shown in Table 4, the affinity with the greatest positive delta ( $\Delta$ ), resulting from multiple outputs (OUTs) and no inputs (INs), was identified as the primary driver, namely *emotional awareness of leader*. This fundamental driver influences other affinities but is not influenced by them. The secondary drivers serve as proximal causes in the system, with more OUTs than INs. They were *leadership style and characteristics, leadership culture, engaging communication and Vision*.

In contrast, the secondary outcomes showed more INs than OUTs, with the primary result, *delivering strategy*, having the most significant impact inside the system because it was influenced by other affinities but did not influence them. The secondary outcomes were *support* and *team dynamics*. The secondary outcomes serve as proximal results or outcomes in the system, with more INs than OUTs.

It is worth noting that the affinities identified (OL elements) in this study presents itself on the three levels mentioned before, namely the leader, the process and the results. The affinities are intuitively grouped accordingly. The tentative SID, with one primary driver, six secondary drivers and one primary outcome, is reported in Table 5.

The IRDs derived from this data influenced the creation of the system for the virtual focus group. In order to create the final SID, assignments were organised horizontally according to their preliminary SID sequence. The drivers were placed on the left side, and the results were placed on the right side. Arrows were added to indicate the direction of relationships

between each affinity, as specified in the composite ART. Redundant links, which are connections between two affinities that can be made through an intermediary, were eliminated.

Based on the SID data, OL elements clearly displayed a primary driver and outcome, with no pivots noted in this study. The primary driver was identified as the leader's emotional awareness, while the primary outcome was delivering on strategy. Figure 1 offers a clear visual of the focus group's final IQA SID, illustrating the system's dynamics and highlighting points where interventions could alter outcomes (Enslin 2023). The outcome of this procedure led to a simplified SID, which was initially shown as a provisional arrangement in Table 5.

The IQA session findings describe OL in the South African context as exhibiting strong self-awareness and awareness of others, upholding ethical standards and fostering a winning mindset in subordinates. These leaders cultivate trusted relationships with their teams, demonstrating courage, humility, creativity and integrity, all rooted in shared values. They communicate transparently and engagingly to create a safe environment that encourages risk-taking. By employing effective incentive and recognition strategies, they achieve exceptional results from diverse teams (Enslin 2023).

**TABLE 5:** Tentative system influence diagram.

Tentative SID assignments	Type driver or outcome	Intuitive grouping
Emotional awareness	Primary driver	The leader
Leadership style and characteristics	Secondary driver	
Leadership culture	Secondary driver	Process
Engaging communication	Secondary driver	
Vision	Secondary driver	
Support	Secondary outcome	
Team dynamics	Secondary outcome	
Delivering strategy	Primary outcome	Results

Source: Adapted from Enslin, E., 2023, 'The conceptualisation, development and validation of a South African organisational leadership scale', DBL thesis, Graduate School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa

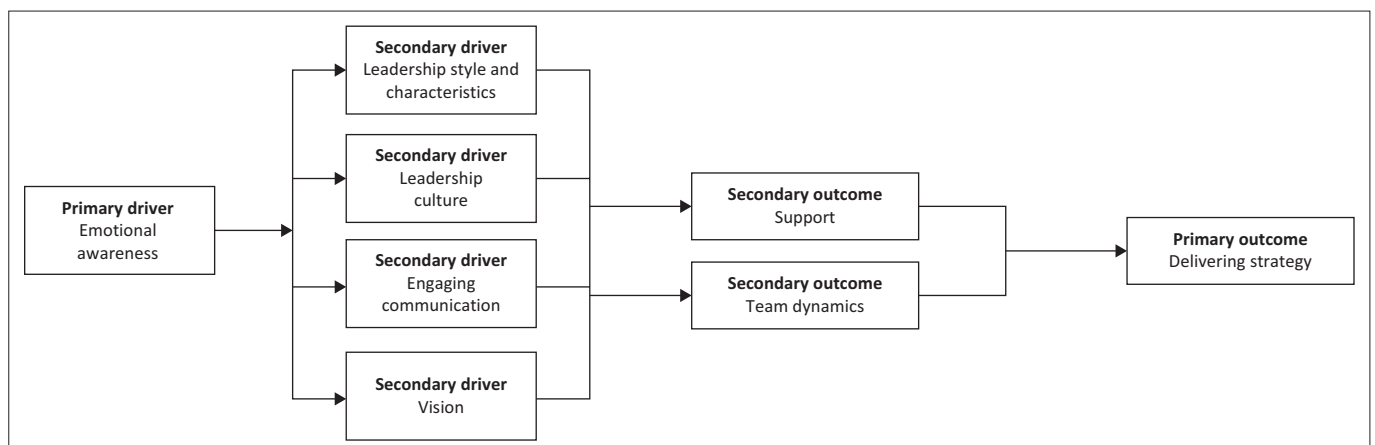
SID, system influence diagram.

## Summary of major trends

The findings of the IQA phase established the key trends that characterise effective OL in the South African context through the SID. The SID, as a visual representation of cause-and-effect relationships, offers systemic insight into how leadership behaviours interact to influence organisational success.

The primary driver identified was *emotional awareness of the leader*. This driver was considered the most influential factor within the system, affecting multiple other elements without itself being influenced. The intuitive placement of this element was on the level of the leader (as postulated by Northouse 2021). This highlights the essential role that emotional intelligence plays in OL, particularly in multicultural environments such as South Africa. Empirical research indicates a strong relationship between leadership effectiveness and emotional intelligence levels (Du Toit et al. 2017). This validates the study's emphasis on emotional awareness as the critical driver of leadership success.

The study also identified four secondary drivers, namely (1) *leadership style and characteristics*, (2) *leadership culture*, (3) *engaging communication*, and (4) *vision*. These affinities acted as proximate causes that significantly influenced the system, contributing to the creation of an organisational environment conducive to effective OL. *Leadership style and characteristics* emphasised traits such as courage, humility, innovation and integrity, and could be placed intuitively on the leader level (according to Northouse 2021). The following three elements could be placed on the process level, which include firstly, *leadership culture* that was defined as creating a DNA of winning together, trust, high ethical standards and recognition. Secondly, *engaging communication* focused on motivating, transparent dialogue, and thirdly *vision* that involves imagining an ideal future and translating it into actionable plans. According to Sanda (2017), effective OL enables subordinates to execute strategies and attain success by offering direction and strategic alignment. This aligns with the study's findings, which show that these constructs underpin a leader's ability to inspire, guide and manage



**FIGURE 1:** System influence diagram.

diverse teams. These findings also reinforce the need for South African leaders to implement leadership strategies that are multifaceted, human-centric and future-oriented.

Two secondary outcomes were identified, namely (1) *support* and (2) *team dynamics*. These affinities were more influenced by the other factors than influencing others. *Support* was characterised by leaders creating safe, engaging spaces, while *team dynamics* referred to harnessing the collective energy and diversity of the group to achieve organisational goals. Thus, emotionally intelligent leadership practices directly enhance psychological safety, collaboration and group performance. According to Grobler and Singh (2018), although a secondary outcome it is intuitively placed in the category of process, and forms an essential part of OL in the South African context.

The primary outcome was *delivering strategy*. This outcome was the culmination of all the OL elements (affinities), indicating that the ultimate aim of effective OL is the consistent and sustainable achievement of organisational results. To sustain these outcomes, leaders must also implement effective rewards, recognition systems and adaptive strategies suited to diverse team dynamics.

The results of this study broaden our understanding of OL in South African organisations and emphasise the vital role that emotional awareness plays in improving leadership efficacy. Leaders who effectively manage their own emotions and respond to the emotional needs of their teams are more likely to foster trust, resilience and high performance. In South Africa's multicultural context, leaders must possess emotional awareness to effectively negotiate diverse cultural backgrounds and emotional landscapes in order to foster team cohesion. This competency is critical for strengthening both personal leadership effectiveness and organisational outcomes.

In addition to emotional intelligence, the study highlights the importance of leadership style, culture, communication and vision as critical components of an overall leadership strategy. These elements influence leadership effectiveness and should be incorporated into leadership strategies to create a multidimensional framework. The results indicate that influential leaders have the ability to enhance collaboration and mutual support among team members, hence fostering a positive organisational culture and a productive work environment. These insights provide a substantial framework for the development of leadership training initiatives, practical leadership tools and targeted interventions that can elevate leadership effectiveness in South African organisations.

Linking these findings back to the research aim, the study successfully conceptualises OL by identifying the interdependent drivers and outcomes, through systemic relationships, as mapped by the SID. The study advances a more authentic, culturally resonant understanding of OL in South Africa by conceptualising OL as an interconnected

system rather than a set of isolated constructs, and importantly, studies it from a contextual, emic perspective.

## Conclusion

Africa is a unique continent (Nkomo 2011), and effective leadership is essential for the continent's organisations to thrive (Ncube 2010). The distinct cultural, historical and social factors present in African contexts call for leadership models that are both globally aware and locally grounded. Empirical investigation is necessary to fully understand the nature of OL in Africa (Vilakati & Schurink 2021).

It is important for leaders, organisational practitioners' and leadership development specialists to note that, in order to succeed as an organisational leader in SA, they must understand their own emotions and those of others before conveying the vision through their unique leadership style. When done effectively, this inspires the team to embrace the vision and execute the strategy successfully (Enslin 2023). This interconnected sequence highlights the systemic nature of effective leadership in organisational contexts. This is especially relevant to the South African context where thoughtful and critical introspection is required to harness diversity and draw on its strengths (Enslin 2023). The increasing complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty within organisational environments necessitate a rethinking of traditional leadership philosophies and strategies. Leaders must embrace both rational and emotional elements to navigate these evolving dynamics successfully.

Effective OL is crucial for positioning South Africa as a respected and influential contributor on the global stage (Enslin 2023). By fostering emotionally intelligent, culturally attuned, visionary leaders, South African organisations can drive sustainable development and achieve greater influence within the global economy. This research contributes a culturally grounded leadership framework, empowering South African organisations to cultivate leaders who can effectively navigate complexity, drive transformation and position the country as a dynamic force in the global arena.

Based on the findings and recommendations of this study, several areas for future research are apparent. Future studies should continue to investigate and validate new emic leadership constructs, considering the cultural nuances that impact leadership behaviours. Organisational leadership measurements or scales can be developed based on these results, which will assist researchers that adopt a more positivistic stance to leadership research. Comparative studies between emic and etic constructs would offer valuable insights into their respective effectiveness across different cultural settings. Such research could significantly enhance our understanding of culturally relevant leadership frameworks, and the universality of leadership.

In addition, it is recommended that IQA be further explored as a research methodology in OL studies. This study demonstrated the effectiveness of IQA as a systematic and rigorous qualitative research method capable of uncovering complex leadership dynamics. Future investigations could assess the applicability and robustness of IQA across various industries and cultural contexts, contributing to methodological advancements in leadership research.

Future research could also explore the leadership behaviours identified in this study and assess how they positively impact organisational performance and employee behaviour within organisational environments. This would strengthen the understanding of the unique leadership dynamics present in South African organisations and support the development of more culturally sensitive and effective leadership development strategies. Lastly, further research into leadership training and succession planning is recommended. Creating a leadership pipeline, grounded in emotional awareness and cultural adaptability, could significantly enhance organisational resilience and effectiveness. Evaluating the impact of leadership development programmes that emphasise these factors would contribute to building a sustainable leadership culture in South Africa.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

## Authors' contributions

A.G. and E.E. worked on this research article as part of A.G.'s structured leadership research programme and E.E.'s Doctorate Business Leadership thesis. A.G. was responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, investigation,

writing of the original draft, project administration, review and editing, and supervision. E.E. contributed to methodology, formal analysis, investigation, writing of the original draft, and project administration.

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## Data availability

The data are available from the corresponding author, A.G., under conditions set out in the research ethics approval.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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