



Review

Comparison and Synthesis of Leadership Theories in Human Resources: A Narrative Review

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Abstract: Leadership in human resources (HR) management has evolved from a focus on individual traits and situational behaviors (classical and contingency theories) to contemporary models that emphasize ethical influence and talent development. The purpose of this paper is to compare and synthesize the main leadership theories, from classical to contemporary ones. Methodology: The Snyder was used to carry out this work, which consists of four steps (designing the review, conducting the review, analyzing the information, and writing the review). The websites used for this work were ScienceDirect, Elsevier, Springer, and Google Scholar. The selection focused on scientific articles from recent years in the databases Scielo, Scopus, and Web of Science. Results: The results showed that modern HR leadership has shifted its focus from seeking the perfect leader to seeking the right leadership process. Effectiveness today is measured by the ability to synthesize combining ethics, inspiration, and technical adaptability as required by the maturity of the team and the volatility of the market. The HR leader must transcend the administrative function to become a strategic partner who uses leadership models such as transformational, ethical, service, and distributed leadership. Conclusions: Integrating these contemporary approaches is crucial for HR to influence strategic decisions and align human capital with business objectives.

Keywords: leadership; human resources; transformational leadership; transactional leadership; ethical leadership; service leadership; distributed leadership.

1. Introduction

This research study was conducted in response to the urgent need to address the theoretical fragmentation and proliferation of conceptual models that hinder the practical application of leadership in human resource management within today's organizations (Joullie et al., 2025; Yusuf et al., 2026). In a business environment marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA environments), professionals in the field face the challenge of selecting and implementing talent development strategies without a unified framework that integrates the various existing approaches (Blyznyuk & Blyznyuk, 2024; Esenyel, 2024).

Historically, leadership in human resources has evolved significantly, reflecting social, technological, and economic changes that directly influence

organizational dynamics (Porath, 2023; Santander-Salmon & Lara-Rivadeneira, 2023; Zerrad & Schechter, 2025). Today, leadership is a fundamental pillar for the success of any institution (Kessi et al., 2025; Sampson & Asonye, 2025), especially in the field of human resources, where talent management and influence over human capital are essential for achieving strategic objectives (Adeniyi et al., 2024; Bracho Parra & García Guiliany, 2013). This constantly evolving environment and growing workplace demands have spurred a prolific body of scientific research aimed at understanding and optimizing this phenomenon (García-Solarte, 2015).

Throughout the history of management and organizational psychology, various schools of thought have emerged that seek to explain what makes a leader effective. These have traditionally been grouped into trait, behavioral, and situational approaches, with classic models standing out (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969). However, the role of the human resources leader in senior management has evolved from a purely administrative function to that of a key strategic partner (Daraojimba et al., 2024; Restiana et al., 2025). Contemporary theories encompassing psychodynamic, neo-charismatic, relational, and adaptive approaches not only inform this transformation but are integrated as key pillars for aligning talent strategy with corporate objectives and generating a sustainable competitive advantage (Banda & Mwange, 2025; Blyznyuk & Blyznyuk, 2024; Dr.C.Meera et al., 2025). These current perspectives emphasize flexibility, collaboration, and the integration of multiple styles to respond to the changing demands of the digital and globalized era (Dinh et al., 2014; Watson, 2024).

1.1 Theoretical Comparison and Research Approach

This wide array of definitions and models underscores the intrinsic complexity of leadership (Nanjundeswaraswamy et al., 2024). In human resources practice, this diversity implies that there is no universal style that is optimal for all situations (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; Northouse, 2007), making it imperative for professionals in the field to go beyond merely describing isolated models. Understanding the similarities and differences among these approaches is crucial for the human resources field to formulate effective strategies for leadership development, performance management, and organizational culture, ensuring that the style implemented aligns with the team's specific needs (Kurametova et al., 2025; Lord et al., 2017).

To address this issue and offer a comprehensive solution, this study adopts a methodological research approach based on a narrative literature review and comparative bibliometric analysis. Through this approach, the scientific output of the last decade indexed in the Web of Science (**Figure 1**) is examined, with the aim of producing a structured synthesis of the main leadership theories, ranging from classical approaches to contemporary proposals such as transformational leadership (Alwali & Alwali, 2025; Bass & Avolio, 1993), ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005), service leadership (Avolio et al., 2009; Greenleaf, 2007), distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005), and transactional leadership (Burns, 1996; Carton, 2021; Meuser et al., 2016).

This analytical framework will allow us to identify theoretical convergences and divergences, demonstrating how modern leadership integrates elements from previous approaches to consolidate a holistic, adaptable, and transferable model for the strategic management of human capital (Benmira & Agboola, 2021; García-Solarte, 2015).

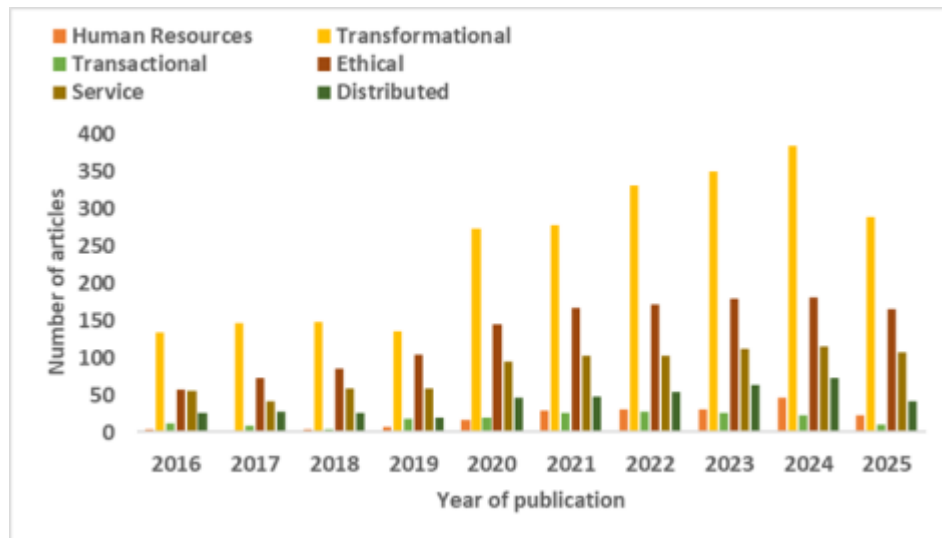


Figure 1. Articles published in the last 10 years on leadership styles. The search was conducted in the Web of Science in English, using the title in the first field, title in the second field and publication year in the third field as parameters.

Keywords: leadership, human resources, transformational, transactional, ethical, service, distributed.

2. Materials and methods

The development of this narrative review and bibliometric analysis followed the methodological framework proposed by Snyder (2019), which provides a structured process consisting of four consecutive stages: review design, search execution, data analysis, and manuscript drafting (**Table 1**). To ensure the transparency, rigor, and replicability of the study, the collection and selection of the document corpus were managed using a bibliographic search strategy detailed below.

Table 1. Synthesis of the Evolution and Theories of Leadership in HR (Snyder Methodology)

Nº	Stage of the Method	Analytical Component	Description of Key Finding
1	Review Design	Objective and Scope	Compare and synthesize leadership theories (from classical to contemporary) and their integration into the strategic role of HR director.
		Data Sources	ScienceDirect, Elsevier, Springer, Google Scholar, Scielo, Scopus and Web of Science.
2	Conducting the review	Search Criteria	Period 2016-2025. Keywords: Leadership, Human Resources, Transformational, Transactional, Ethical, Service, Distributed.
		Selection Process	Filtered by relevance, scientific quality, and ability to report data on talent management and strategic objectives.
3	Information Analysis	Theoretical Categorization	Classical: Traits and behavior (ideal style). Contingency: Leader-situation adjustment (Fiedler). Contemporary: Transformational, Ethical, Service y Distributed.
		Recent Trends (Co-occurrence)	Evolution from Job satisfaction (2016) towards Green Leadership (Sustainability) and creativity/ innovation (2022-2025).
4	Drafting of the Review	Summary of the HR Role	The HR leader evolves from administrator to strategic partner and 'organizational architect'.
		Strategic Conclusion	Need for Adaptive/ Holistic Leadership that combines vision (Transformational) with morality and Agility (Distributed).

2.1 Strategy and Literature Search Process

Primary sources were collected through an exhaustive digital search of high-impact scientific platforms. The parameters that defined the search were:

Databases consulted: We consulted the indexes and indexed databases in Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and SciELO. In addition, we explored specialized publishing platforms such as ScienceDirect, Elsevier, and Springer, along with advanced searches on the academic search engine Google Scholar (Manterola et al., 2023).

Time period covered: A specific time window was defined, spanning the years 2016 through 2025. This range ensures that the sources analyzed reflect the evolution and relevance of leadership theories in today's dynamic organizational environments (VUCA environments).

Keywords and descriptors: The searches were conducted in both Spanish and English, using standardized terms in the search fields for title, abstract, and keywords. The key descriptors used were: Leadership, Human Resources, Transformational, Transactional, Ethical, Service, and Distributed (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Burns, 1996; Efianda & Iswahyuni, 2021; Stogdill, 1948). These terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND / OR) according to the requirements of each platform.

2.2 Selection Criteria: Inclusion and Exclusion

To ensure the validity of the content and maintain strict quality control over the units of analysis, a selective filter was applied based on the following general criteria:

Inclusion Criteria

Original empirical research articles and current systematic or narrative literature reviews.

Publications written exclusively in English or Spanish.

Studies that present an explicit and integrated approach to human resource management, strategic talent management, and their direct relationship to the leadership styles analyzed.

Exclusion Criteria

Editorials, letters to the editor, opinion pieces, book reviews, or full-text articles from books that have not undergone a rigorous peer-review process.

Duplicate documents across the various databases consulted.

Studies that address leadership in a generic or isolated manner, without a demonstrable link to human capital management or organizational strategic objectives.

2.3 Analysis Tools and Reliability

To strengthen the methodology, the literature selection process was divided into four phases: Identification: A total of 1245 studies were identified across the main databases examined (WoS, Scopus, SciELO, and supplementary databases). Screening: Following the automatic and manual exclusion of duplicate studies (512), the titles and abstracts of 733 articles from indexed journals were evaluated against the initial thematic criteria; of these, 533 studies were discarded because they did not directly and explicitly relate leadership to the strategic functions of human resource management or because they constituted gray literature. Eligibility: Next, 200 full-text scientific articles were reviewed, and 95 manuscripts were excluded from this group. Inclusion: Finally, 105 studies were included in the final qualitative and bibliometric synthesis, see **Figure 2**.

Once the articles were selected, the bibliographic data were exported for processing using network analysis tools. Specialized bibliometric software, VOSviewer (<https://www.vosviewer.com/>), was used to perform keyword co-occurrence analyses, which allowed for the statistical identification of

conceptual connectivity maps, thematic clusters, and the chronological evolution of the literature. Following Snyder's (2019) guidelines, the reliability of the research was based on the internal consistency of the coding process and on the double critical review conducted by the researchers during the data analysis stage.

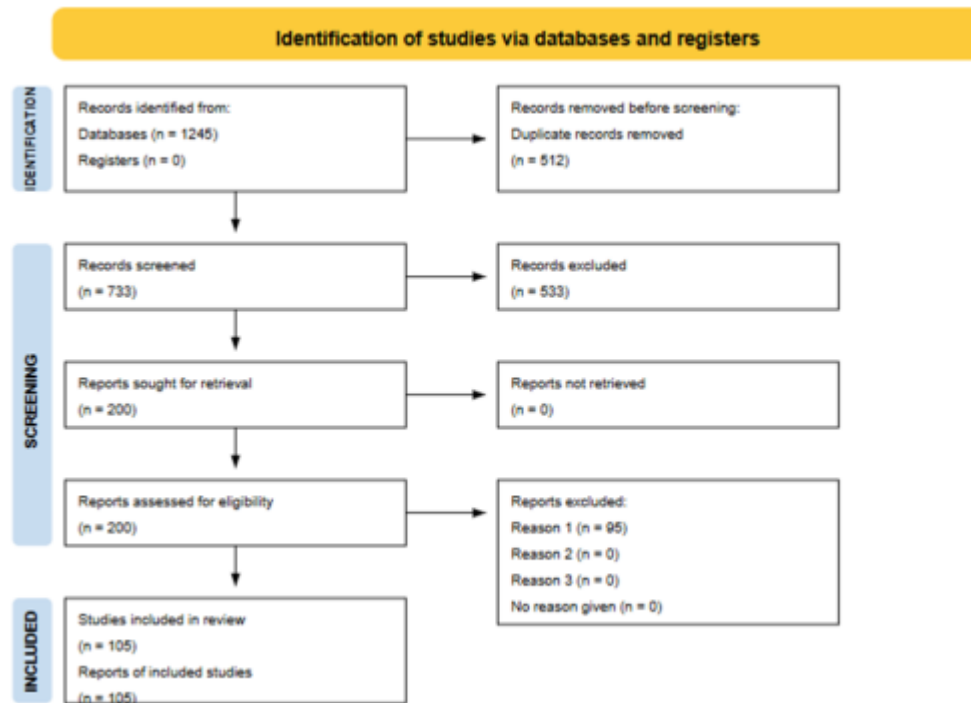


Figure 2. Stages of the literature selection process. PRISMA flowchart. Sepúlveda-Irribarra, C. (2025) (<https://cristiansepulvedai.com/prisma/>). cristiansepulvedai.com.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Comparison and Synthesis of Leadership Theories

Leadership theories can be classified into three main stages: classical, contingency and contemporary (Arenas et al., 2017; Shelley & Locke, 1991; Stogdill, 1948; Stogdill, 1974), each offering a unique perspective on how effective influence is exercised. The comparison and synthesis of leadership theories in HR stand out for a transition from traditional approaches (trait and behavior) to contemporary alternative models (**Table 2**). Classical theories (traditional of trait/ behavior) (Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Fleishman & Harris, 1962; Lewin et al., 1939; Likert, 1967; McGregor, 1960) focus on the leader and seek ideal styles to maximize influence, being considered functionalist and pragmatic for organizational management (Majid, 2025). In contrast, alternative or contemporary theories dismiss the superiority of the leader and emphasize the environment, the subjective world, and complex social processes (Cernas Ortiz & S.P., 2023; Codina Jiménez, 2017; Hatipoğlu & Akduman, 2025; Villar-Vargas & Araya-Castillo, 2019). Contemporary leadership focuses on the ability to inspire and transform followers (transformational leadership) (Bass & Riggio, 2005; Bass, 1985; Bass, 1990; Bass & Stogdill, 1990; Burns, 1996), unlike classical theories that focus on innate or predefined behaviors. The phenomenon of leadership is today seen as fluid, versatile, and dynamic, interrelating personal characteristics with the objective factors of the environment and the situation (El Habchi Mahir & Padilla Castillo, 2020). In the face of this volatile world (VUCA), a different kind of leadership (such as adaptive leadership) is required to complement classic technical leadership, since not all answers are predefined in advance (Guamán Chisica, 2024), see **Table 3**.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Leadership Styles in HR (Snyder Methodology)

Nº	Leadership Model	Principal Focus	Application in Human Resources
5	Transformational	Inspiration and change.	Alignment with strategic objectives, innovation, and career plans.
6	Transactional	Exchange and rewards	Management of expectations and achievement of operational objectives through incentives.
7	Ethical and Service-oriented	Integrity and well-being	Construction of organizational culture, talent retention, and fairness in processes.
8	Distributed	Delegation and autonomy	Promotion of organizational Agility and empowerment in VUCA environments.

Table 3. Comparison of Classical and Behavioral Theories

Nº	Theory	Principal Focus	Application in HR
9	Trait Theory	Innate attributes of the leader (intelligence, charisma, determination).	Identification of leadership potential and selection of executives. Limited for development.
10	Behavior Theory	Observable leadership styles: task oriented vs. people oriented	Design of training programs to develop effective and flexible leadership styles (coaching).

Contingency theory, such as Fiedler's model, posits that there is no universally effective style, but rather that success is achieved by aligning the leader's styles (task-oriented or relationship-oriented) with the level of situational control (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967).

The Transactional-Transformational Leadership Model (TLM) has been consolidated, suggesting that leaders can apply both styles according to circumstances to achieve greater effectiveness (Escobar et al., 2023; Hermosilla et al., 2016; Rozo Mogollón & Abaunza de González, 2010). In practice, contingency complements transactionality, since the choice of incentive type (contingent reward) or the management of expectations in transactional leadership must be adapted to environmental variables and follower maturity (Bass, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1993; Koontz et al., 2022).

Contemporary leadership styles complement each other, but they differ in their main focus and outcomes: Service Leadership and Ethical Leadership tend to show a stronger relationship with job performance and employee well-being compared to transformational leadership, as they prioritize needs and morality (Greenleaf, 2007; Greenleaf & Spears, 2002; Khan et al., 2022; Tribhuvan et al., 2025).

Transformational Leadership is highly effective in inspiring vision, driving innovation, creativity, and strategic change, demonstrating a positive and significant correlation with organizational commitment and climate (Burns, 1996; Hatipoğlu & Akduman, 2025; Hermosilla et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2018). Distributed or shared leadership focuses on delegating responsibilities and promoting participation and autonomy, positively impacting the team's performance and attitude, although its effectiveness is situational. (Bennett et al., 2003; Manz & Sims, 1993; Solano Bocanegra, 2024).

The evidence suggests that exemplary and inspiring leadership, a central trait of transformational and ethical leadership, significantly improves performance and generates greater commitment within teams. (Cavazos & Toscano Moctezuma, 2023; Stogdill, 1948; Stogdill, 1974). Current findings highlight the need to combine elements of these styles for comprehensive management adapting the

approach (such as service for morale and transformational for change) according to the organization's needs (Gronn, 2002; Ruiz et al., 2025; Spears, 1996), See **Table 4**. In summary, the current world (volatile or VUCA) requires more than a single style. The trend is toward adaptive and comprehensive leadership, which combines elements: for example, using servant leadership to strengthen morale and transformational leadership to drive change. The key to success lies in the leader's ability to be versatile and adjust their approach according to the maturity of their team and the demands of the environment.

Table 4. Comparison of Contingency and Transactional Theories

Nº	Theory	Principal Focus	Application in HR
11	Contingency Theory	The effectiveness of the leader depends on the match between the style and the situation (leader-member relations, task structure, position power).	Succession planning and assignment of leaders to situations where their natural styles in most effective.
12	Transactional Leadership	Exchange between leader and follower (reward for performance or punishment for noncompliance). It focuses on task completion and maintaining the status quo.	Performance management (objectives, incentives, correction of deviations). It is the basis of the reward system.

4. Discussion

4.1 Integration into the Strategic Role of the HR Leader

The human resources leader in senior management (HR Director) must be more than a personnel manager; they must be an organizational architect and a strategist in the search for and retention of talent. The integration of contemporary leadership theories is essential to executing this role effectively and strategically (Akash, 2025; Calderón Hernández et al., 2010; Menezes et al., 2025; Purnama et al., 2025; Rahmat et al., 2025; Ruchitra & Thamilselvan, 2025; Saraih & Kassim, 2025; Ulrich et al., 2009), see **Table 5**.

Table 5. Comparison of Contemporary Theories

Nº	Theory	Principal Focus	Strategic Integration in HR
13	Transformational Leadership	Inspiration, intellectual motivation, individualized consideration, and vision. It elevates the interests and morale of followers.	Promotion of a culture of innovation and organizational change. It fosters commitment and loyalty to the company's vision.
14	Service Leadership	The leader exists to serve others first (employees, community), and authority arises from the trust and development of followers.	It promotes well-being, ethics, and employee empowerment. It aligns HR policies with corporate social responsibility (CSR).
15	Ethical Leadership	Appropriate normative conduct, promotion of ethical behavior through personal and interpersonal actions (being a role model).	Establishment of a culture of compliance and values. Integration of Ethics into codes of conduct, training, and performance evaluations.
16	Distributed Leadership	Leadership does not reside in a single person but is distributed among multiple individuals or teams according to experience and context.	Structuring high-performance teams, promoting self-organization and decentralized decision-making. It is key for organizational agility.

4.2 Transformational Leadership and Talent Strategy

The HR leader uses transformational leadership to align staff with the objectives of senior management. Transformational leadership, initially formulated by Burns (1996) and popularized by Bass (1985), focuses on inspiring and motivating employees to go beyond their personal interests for the good of the organization, fostering innovation and personal growth (Abdul-Azeez et al.,

2024; Crefton, 2019; Hidayah, 2025; Kang et al., 2023; Northouse, 2007; Quiros, 2020).

Inspirational vision: Communicate the HR strategy (digital transformation, culture, expansion) not as a bureaucratic plan, but as an opportunity for growth and higher purpose for employees (Arendt, 2018; Cheong et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2018).

Potential development: Utilizes intellectual motivation and individualized consideration to design training programs, mentoring, and career plans that not only meet the company's needs but also develop the maximum potential of each employee (Bass, 1990; Bass & Avolio, 1993). This directly impacts retention and intellectual capital.

4.3 Ethical and Service Leadership: Building the Culture

The HR leader is the primary guardian of culture and values. Service-oriented and ethical approaches are their tools to ensure sustainability and trust (Singh et al., 2020; Younis & Hussain, 2023). Ethical leadership is defined as the demonstration of proper and normative conduct, both personal and interpersonal, and the promotion of such conduct to subordinates through communication and reinforcement (Brown et al., 2005; Treviño et al., 2000).

Ethical Leadership: In senior management, the HR leader must be a model of integrity and transparency. This translates to fair policies, equitable decision-making processes (compensation, promotions), and the establishment of effective reporting mechanisms. By modeling ethics (Brown et al., 2005), they reduce the risk of non-compliance and strengthen corporate reputation (Brown et al., 2005; de Hoogh & den Hartog, 2009; Treviño et al., 2000; Walumbwa et al., 2008).

Service Leadership: It implies that the HR leader prioritizes the needs of the employees and their development. Strategically, this is manifested in wellness policies, work-life balance, and employee's engagement. By serving employees, greater engagement is achieved, which is a key driver for productivity and organizational resilience (Al-Sada et al., 2017; Greenleaf, 2007; Greenleaf, 1991; Greenleaf & Spears, 2002; Gronn, 2002; Spears, 1996).

4.4 Distributed Leadership and Organizational Agility

In VUCA business environments (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous), responsiveness and innovation are vital. Distributed leadership becomes a strategic necessity. Distributed leadership is a conceptual and analytical approach that proposes that leadership action does not reside in a single hierarchical figure, but is distributed among individuals with diverse skills throughout the organization, activated according to tasks and context (Bennett et al., 2003; Gronn, 2002; Manz & Sims, 1993; Portalanza, 2013; Spillane, 2005; West, 2012). The HR leader promotes flat and flexible organizational structure, delegating authority for operational and talent decision-making to middle management and teams. This involves empowering employees to assume leadership roles according to their expertise in a given context (Spillane, 2005). The role of HR is to train the entire organization in leadership skills and create the infrastructure that supports decentralized decision making (**Figure 3**).

4.5 Practical Implications for HR Professionals

The theoretical overview presented here is not only of academic value but also translates into direct strategic guidelines for professionals in people management. Below are some examples of how these principles can be applied to the critical pillars of the discipline:

Talent Management and Retention: Human resources directors must shift from a purely transactional approach based solely on individual

financial compensation toward a combined transactional-transformational model. Implementing an inspiring vision and taking individual needs into account when designing career plans and employee value propositions (EVPs) increases emotional engagement and reduces turnover of critical intellectual capital (e.g., Microsoft transformed its transactional system of rigid incentives into a growth mindset approach).

Employee Development: Instead of designing generic, one-way training programs based on classical behavioral theory, development departments should structure coaching and mentoring programs grounded in servant leadership and intellectual stimulation. This enables middle management to operate within adaptive dynamics, directly enhancing employees' self-efficacy in VUCA environments (e.g., Google uses its internal Google to Google program, where the employees themselves train their peers using a service leadership and intellectual stimulation approach).

Organizational culture: HR professionals must position themselves as architects of internal culture by actively promoting ethical leadership. This involves integrating explicit ethical considerations and normative behaviors into codes of conduct, senior management performance evaluations, and transparency channels. Furthermore, in light of emerging trends identified in current literature, it has become imperative to co-design a culture oriented toward corporate sustainability by fostering green transformational leadership practices (e.g., Patagonia maintains a strong culture aligned with green transformational leadership and ethics) (Boon et al., 2017; Chen & Chang, 2013; Widana et al., 2025).

Organizational agility through distributed leadership: To avoid bureaucratic bottlenecks, human resources must provide the training infrastructure that enables decentralized decision-making. Promoting a culture of trust and autonomy where leadership emerges organically based on employees' competencies when facing a specific challenge is essential for team adaptability (e.g., Spotify organizes its engineers and developers into autonomous teams called Squads) (Aduwo et al., 2025).

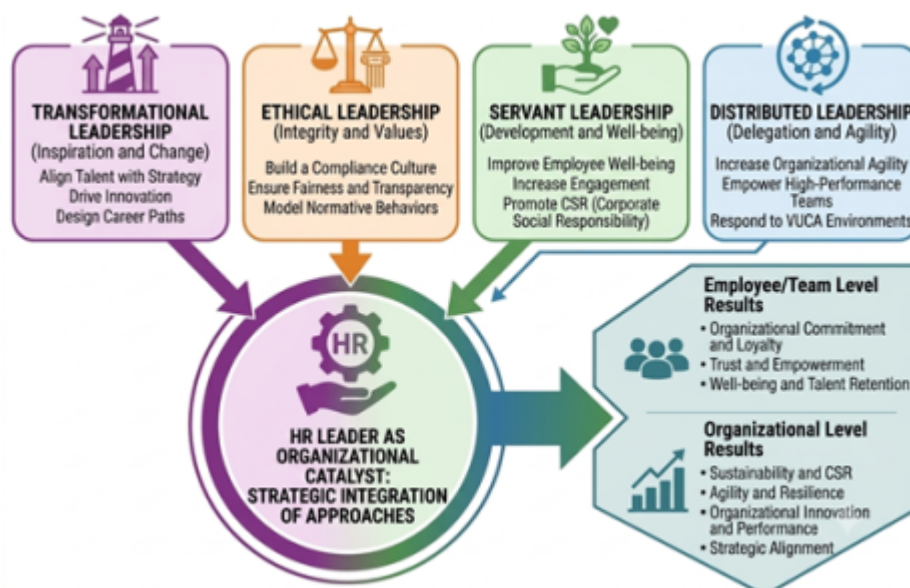


Figure 3. Conceptual framework for the integration of leadership styles in the strategic management of HR.

4.6 Critical Synthesis of Integrated Leadership Models in Human Resources Management.

The critical synthesis of integrated leadership models in human resources

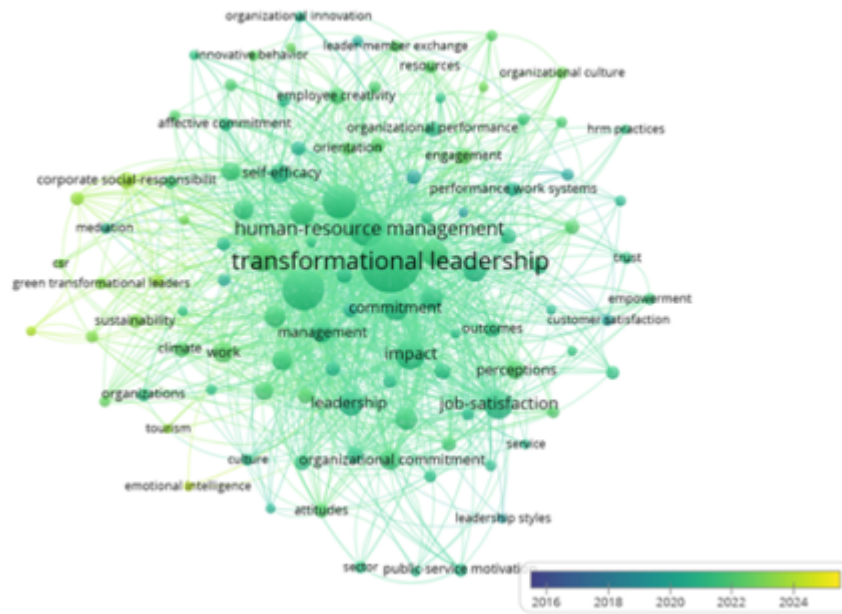
management emerged in response to a transformation in the nature of work and corporate structures. The evolution of work and today's organizations demands moving beyond outdated hierarchical and linear models, which are now insufficient. In today's environment, it is necessary to adopt an integrated leadership approach that incorporates the best of different approaches. On the one hand, it harnesses the power of transformational leadership to foster innovative perspectives and motivate teams. On the other hand, it relies on ethical and servant leadership to safeguard people's emotional well-being and psychological safety. Added to this is distributed leadership, which eliminates vertical bureaucracy and decentralizes decision-making. This enables employees to solve problems quickly and autonomously, right where each challenge arises. For the human resources department, this integration is a key tool in strategic talent management. It enables the department to design flexible work systems capable of adapting quickly to market changes. At the same time, it helps build a strong culture that keeps the team united and committed over the long term. In short, it balances operational agility with cultural cohesion to retain the most valuable talent.

5. Co-occurrence Analysis

The co-occurrence analysis reveals a deep and multifaceted connection between leadership styles and human resources (HR) management, especially in organizational contexts that seek transformation, service, ethics, and power distribution. The use of co-occurrence graphs allows us to identify gaps in understanding or areas that require more thorough research on this topic. The number of nodes, along with their central or peripheral arrangement, enables the visualization of connections between concepts. In **Figure 4(a)**, the scientific articles analyzed are shown in co-occurrence with each other. In **Figure 4(b)**, existing studies related to leadership, human resources, transformational, transactional, ethical, service, and distributed aspects can be identified in chronological order, from the oldest to the most recent (2016-2024), which are distinguished in five cluster groups:



(a)



(b)

Figure 4. Co-occurrence analysis: (a) network and cluster visualization; a pie chart created using VosViewer (<https://www.vosviewer.com/>) depicting research trends in the field of Human Resource Management and Leadership; (b) temporal overlap visualization using VosViewer (HYPERLINK "<https://www.vosviewer.com/>" <https://www.vosviewer.com/>). Keywords: leadership, human resources, transformational, transactional, ethical, service, distributed.

5.1 Pilares Centrales

The size of the circles (nodes) indicates the frequency with which that term appears in the research, See **Table 6**.

Table 6. Interpretation of Groups (Clusters) by Colors (The colors group topics that usually appear together in the same research studies).

Nº	Color	Principal Theme	Key Concepts
17	Green	Performance and Innovation	Employee creativity, innovative behavior, organizational performance, and affective commitment. Transformational leadership, self-efficacy, organizational orientation.
18	Red	Sustainability and Ethics	Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), sustainability, emotional intelligence, and organizational culture. Human resources management, corporate social responsibility, mediation, culture.
19	Yellow	Empowerment and Confidence	Trust, employee empowerment, and customer satisfaction. Commitment, impact, job satisfaction, results.
20	Blue	Attitudinal Results	Organizational commitment, job satisfaction, motivation in public service, and attitudes. Perception, service, organizational commitment, attitudes.
21	Purple	Culture and Practices	Organizational culture, HRM practices, and engagement. Engagement, organizational culture.

Transformational Leadership: It is the largest and most central node. This indicates that it remains the most studied leadership paradigm, acting as the bridge that connects almost all other topics.

Human-Resource Management: The second strongest pillar. Current research seeks to understand how management practices interact with leadership to improve performance.

5.2 Current Trends

Based on the layout of the map and the visible terms, these are the strongest lines of research of the past five years:

Green and Sustainable Leadership: The emergence of terms such as Green Transformational Leadership and Sustainability in the red cluster shows a shift towards how leaders can promote ecological behaviors in companies.

The Link between Leadership and Creativity: The green cluster shows a strong connection between transformational leadership and employee creativity (Gumusluoglu & Ilsev, 2009). The focus is no longer solely on efficiency, but on constant innovation.

Mediation and Psychological Mechanisms: The closeness of Self-efficacy and Mediating suggests that current research not only asks, 'Does leadership work?' but also 'How does it work?' through employee psychology.

The lines (links) between the circles show which topics are cited together. The high density of lines in the center indicates a highly consolidated field of study, where transformational leadership is the driving force that propels both employee well-being (Satisfaction/Engagement) and business outcomes (Innovation/Performance).

Central Core: The predominant concept is transformational leadership, which acts as the main node connected to almost all the other terms. This indicates that it is the central topic of the analyzed research.

Analysis Dimensions: Three major areas of influence are observed:

HR Management: with nodes such as HR management, HRM practices, and performance work systems (Guest, 2017).

Psychological/ Work Results: Terms such as job-satisfaction, commitment, engagement and self-efficacy (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Thematical Evolution (Color): The chronological scale (2016-2024) shows that interest has shifted from classic management topics to modern concepts such as green transformational leadership and sustainability (in yellow/light green, indicating that they are recent trends), see **Table 7**.

Table 7. Thematical evolution of the chronological scale

Nº	Category	Key Concepts
22	Central Variable	Transformational leadership
23	Human Resources Management	HRM practices, Performance work systems
24	Psychological Mediation	Job-satisfaction, Commitment, Trust
25	Innovation Results	Employee creativity, Innovative behavior
26	Emerging Trends	Green transformational leadership, Sustainability
27	Social Responsibility	CSR, Mediation

The chart shows a transition in research: while between 2016 and 2018 the focus was on job satisfaction and engagement, from 2022 onwards literature has strongly shifted towards sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012), integrating leadership with environmental awareness.

6. Conclusion

Human Resources leadership at the senior management level requires a comprehensive vision that synthesizes the lessons of classical theories with the

imperatives of contemporary models. Mere transaction management is no longer sufficient. The HR leader must adopt transformational leadership to inspire change, ethical and service-oriented leadership to build a culture of trust and development, and distributed leadership to ensure organizational agility and resilience. The HR leader's ability to integrate these approaches into talent management policies and processes is what positions them as a true strategic partner, driving the company's value through its human capital and ensuring that effective leadership is not an isolated event, but a distributed and sustainable capability throughout the organization.

7. Perspectives

To validate the integrity of these theories into the strategic role of the HR leader, future research should focus on:

Impact Measurement: Develop metrics that correlate the implementation of ethical, service-oriented, and distributed leadership practices (led by HR) with tangible organizational outcomes such as the innovation rate profitability, reduction in key talent turnover, and employees' perception of organizational fairness.

Digital Leadership: Research how the HR leader must adapt contemporary styles to lead and motivate hybrid and remote workforces, integrating technology and HR analytics into leadership models.

Inclusive Leadership: Exploring the intersection between transformations/ service leadership, diversity and inclusion management, analyzing how the HR leader can use these approaches to dismantle unconscious biases and foster a truly equitable environment in senior management.

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