

SELF-LEADERSHIP AS A FOUNDATION FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract. The conventional approaches to developing leaders have majorly focused on interpersonal influence and external organisational management competences. Nevertheless, these methods tend to ignore the inner basis upon which the ultimate effectiveness of leaders is determined. This theoretical treatise critically places self-leadership as a formative but often overlooked component in the formation of authentic and sustainable community and organisational leaders. Using the self-leadership theory, Social Cognitive Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the paper will discuss the ability of self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and personal accountability to create not only the competence in the individual but also a wider effect of ethical and social consequences. Despite the prevalence of positive correlations in Western research, a critical interpretation would indicate that such practices are understudied and thus unsuitable to the context of developing countries like Malaysia whereby cultural and structural aspects often interfere with the process of individual self-leadership translation to collective results. The paper suggests a new conceptual framework which synthesises these factors and explains crucial implications to leadership training programmes. The improvement of self-leadership is likely to improve organisational performance and lead to responsible and sustainable development of communities, if cultural and empirical gaps are mitigated.

Keywords: *self-leadership, leadership development, community leadership, organizational leadership, human development, leadership competencies*

Introduction

Leadership is one of the main resources of the success of any organisation, both in community and in organisational settings (Northouse, 2021; Yukl, 2013). Leadership has been studied widely in the past, with numerous researchers examining different aspects of leadership such as leader traits (Judge et al., 2002; Stogdill, 1974), leadership styles (Bass and Riggio, 2006; Burns, 1978), and what makes a leader effective. Nevertheless, external leadership approaches (such as transformational or transactional) have been the most extensively researched, without adequately recognising that the success of leadership is ultimately reliant on the internal strength of the leader (Goldsby et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2011). Neck et al. (2019) and Neck and Houghton (2006) remark that the current literature tends to presume that leaders have already developed a well-formed sense of self, which is not always the case, since many leaders fail because of a lack of self-regulation and intrinsic motivation. In Malaysia, declining interest in STEM among students and persistent challenges in youth leadership development illustrate the pressing need to cultivate strong self-led leaders within the country (Jamaluddin et al., 2025). Moreover, in many organisational studies, leadership has been

shown to have a strong impact on employee engagement and organisational commitment (Mazzetti and Schaufeli, 2022), as well as on followers' job attitudes, motivation, and proactive behaviour (Steinmann et al., 2018). However, the current body of research on self-leadership has largely ignored the consideration of external leadership and positioned self-leadership as the antecedent of both community and organisational leadership, especially in collectivistic, non-Western countries like Malaysia (Jamaluddin et al., 2025; Goldsby et al., 2021; Neck and Houghton, 2006). This has created a huge gap in the literature, as the models of self-leadership are still largely based on Western cultural and ethical values and do not pay attention to the cultural and ethical aspects that influence leadership development in the Malaysian context. Through incorporating key theories and recent empirical evidence, this paper highlights self-leadership as the underlying foundation without which community and organisational leadership initiatives risk producing only superficial, short-lived results.

Literature review

Self-leadership concept

There are several theories that underlie self-leadership, which complement each other and create a strong theoretical foundation. Manz (1986) coined the term self-leadership as a continuation of self-management and as a process of self-influence that helps individuals attain self-direction and intrinsic motivation to perform better. This theory is grounded in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which focuses on the reciprocal interplay of individual thought, behaviour, and the environment through self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement. In addition, Self-Determination Theory, proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), describes how self-leadership satisfies three fundamental psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby creating sustainable intrinsic motivation. Self-regulation theory and self-control theory further support both perspectives, since they underpin the three fundamental strategies of self-leadership: behaviour-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought pattern strategies (Neck et al., 2019; Neck and Houghton, 2006). The four-decade review of self-leadership literature conducted by Goldsby et al. (2021) supports the notion that self-leadership is an essential requirement for the emergence of effective external leadership, since the process of self-influence can only be fully clarified through the combination of these theories. Importantly, these theories also have limitations. The majority of the foundational studies was conducted in Western settings and gave little consideration to the collective cultural factors that are common in Asia (Goldsby et al., 2021; Furtner et al., 2013). In cultures such as Malaysia, where group harmony is a priority, the unreflective application of an individualistic model of self-leadership can be incompatible with cultural expectations (Jamaluddin et al., 2025). This suggests that although self-leadership is highly relevant, it must be critically contextualised rather than adopted wholesale from Western models.

Relationship between self-leadership and community and organisational leadership

Self-leadership is a key component in the development of efficient community and organisational leadership (Goldsby et al., 2021). According to Goleman (1995), self-leadership builds the foundational leadership skills of emotional intelligence, ethical awareness and accountability, and empirical research broadly supports the view that highly self-led individuals exhibit stronger emotional control and more consistent

ethical decision-making (Furtner et al., 2013). Self-awareness and self-regulation enable leaders to develop the genuine trust and influence that underpin transformational and servant leadership (Furtner and Baldegger, 2016; Furtner et al., 2013). Nevertheless, the relationship between self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy and ethical leadership is not as linear as commonly assumed, even though Goleman (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory proposes that these factors are interconnected; organisational and cultural context often mediates the effect of self-leadership on external leadership performance. This body of work has also been criticised as being highly dependent on Western assumptions in which individual emotional expression is valued, in contrast to Asian cultures where such expression is often discouraged in order to preserve social harmony (Hofstede, 2011). Within the collectivistic and hierarchical Malaysian environment, an overly individualistic conception of self-leadership can therefore be incompatible with prevailing social values. At the organisational level, self-leadership is positively associated with innovation, employee commitment, empowerment, and team performance (Goldsby et al., 2021; Neck et al., 2019); however, these benefits are realised only when leadership maturity and well-formulated organisational support structures are present (Eisenberger et al., 1986). This indicates that self-leadership is a situational issue of fit rather than a universally applicable prescription.

At the community level, self-leadership has the potential to develop innovative, proactive, and responsible youth leaders. In the Malaysian context, however, research highlights that unless self-leadership is integrated with local values such as *gotong-royong* (mutual cooperation), *musyawarah* (collective deliberation) and a shared communal spirit, it risks becoming individualistic and ineffective in producing meaningful social impact (Jamaluddin et al., 2025). Existing theoretical perspectives on self-leadership have similarly been criticised for paying insufficient attention to social power relations, which can transform self-regulation into a further burden for marginalised groups if applied without cultural sensitivity (Jamaluddin et al., 2025). This implies that Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) can be excessively optimistic in its assumption that self-influence produces positive outcomes without adequate ethical safeguards. The correlation between self-leadership and community and organisational leadership should therefore be critically addressed: self-leadership can be a strong driver of positive change, but unless it is ethically anchored and adapted, for example through a culturally sensitive reading of Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985) that gives due weight to collective aspects, it may produce leaders who are technically competent yet morally, socially, and inclusively deficient. In a plural society such as Malaysia, self-leadership may even have unintended negative effects unless its cultural dimensions are properly managed (Jamaluddin et al., 2025; Goldsby et al., 2021).

Materials and Methods

This paper is conceptual and theory building in nature, following the convention of conceptual papers in the literature of leadership and organisational behaviour (Goldsby et al., 2021). The framework proposed in this paper has been built on a structured narrative review and a critical synthesis of the literature in the fields of self-leadership, leadership and organisational behaviour. The relevant literature was retrieved by searching the combination of keywords of “self-leadership”, “self-regulation”, “self-determination theory”, “social cognitive theory”, “transformational leadership”,

“community leadership”, “organisational leadership”, and “Malaysia” on Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. Only those articles that were peer-reviewed appeared in journals and books (both foundational theories, such as Manz (1986) and Bandura (1986) and empirical and conceptual studies published within the past 15 years that explored the relationship between self-leadership and external leadership styles, employee outcomes, or non-Western and Malaysian organisations) were included in the search.

There are three inclusion criteria were used to screen the sources: (i) the self-leadership theory or its component constructs (self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and personal accountability) were directly addressed; (ii) there was explicit linkage to the community, organisational, or cross-cultural leadership outcomes; and (iii) there was methodological and/or theoretical rigour, as evidenced by the use of peer-reviewed outlets for publication. The final synthesis did not include any sources that could not be independently confirmed against publisher or indexing records. The literature that was selected was thematically analysed and synthesized by the conceptual framework building method, which involves identifying common theoretical elements and their connections within the analysis of the selected literature. The theoretical foundation was selected after the literature was reviewed, as three specific theories were found and were recurring and central: Self-Leadership Theory (Manz, 1986), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985). These theories were then connected with the most recent knowledge on cultural and ethical moderators of self-leadership (Jamaluddin et al., 2025; Hofstede, 2011), and the conceptual framework as presented in Figure 1 was constructed. It is a conceptual paper that does not involve primary data collection, human participants or any statistical analysis but rather review and synthesis of the literature and conceptual and comparative reasoning applied to that literature.

Results and Discussion

The development of conceptual framework

Self-leadership rests on several theories which complement each other and create a sound theoretical foundation. Self-leadership theory, proposed by Manz (1986) as a continuation of self-management, is described as a process of self-influence whereby individuals can attain self-direction and intrinsic motivation to perform better. The theory is based on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which focuses on the reciprocal interaction between individual thought, behaviour, and the environment through such mechanisms as self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement. Moreover, Self-Determination Theory, proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), states that self-leadership satisfies three fundamental psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thus producing sustainable intrinsic motivation. The frameworks of self-regulation theory and self-control theory support both theories and form the basis of the three main strategies of self-leadership: behaviour-focused strategies, natural reward strategies, and constructive thought pattern strategies (Neck et al., 2019; Neck and Houghton, 2006). The four-decade survey of self-leadership literature by Goldsby et al. (2021) confirms that integrating these theories not only provides a clear explanation of how self-influence occurs, but also establishes self-leadership as a core requirement in the process of forming effective external leadership.

Based on the critical synthesis of the three main theories, namely Self-Leadership Theory (Neck et al., 2019; Manz, 1986), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), and Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), this conceptual paper establishes a new conceptual framework, filling existing gaps in the theoretical literature. The model conceptualises self-leadership as an independent variable that determines individual leadership competence, which in turn shapes community and organisational leadership outcomes, with ethical governance and cultural considerations acting as moderators. This approach is a critical step in overcoming the shortcomings of traditional Western paradigms, which are generally linear and do not fully account for the context of collectivistic cultures and ethical considerations (Goldsby et al., 2021; Furtner and Baldegger, 2016). The elaboration of this conceptual framework, illustrated in *Figure 1*, consists of two key stages. In the first stage, the Self-Leadership Component comprises four fundamental elements: self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and personal responsibility. These elements are grounded in Self-Leadership Theory (Neck et al., 2019; Manz, 1986) and are directly shaped by Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985). In the second stage, the mediating variable, Individual Leadership Competence, comprising emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making ability, accountability and authentic behaviour, is produced by these components. Finally, Leadership Outcomes, namely innovative and sustainable organisational leadership, inclusive of community leadership, social impact, and sustainable development, result from this individual competence. Ethical governance and cultural factors moderate the relationship between the mediating and dependent variables, shaping the strength and direction of the model's ultimate effects. This framework makes an important theoretical contribution by explicitly incorporating the three foundational theories together with ethical and cultural considerations as moderators, factors that are frequently omitted from traditional Western models (Goldsby et al., 2021). It also aligns with the Meta-Performance Model of Goldsby et al. (2021), which highlights self-leadership as a mechanism for the continued reinforcement of leadership training programmes. Furthermore, the proposed framework is more contextual and holistic than the existing models, and its propositions can be empirically tested in Malaysia through longitudinal studies, which would strengthen both its publication prospects and its practical relevance.

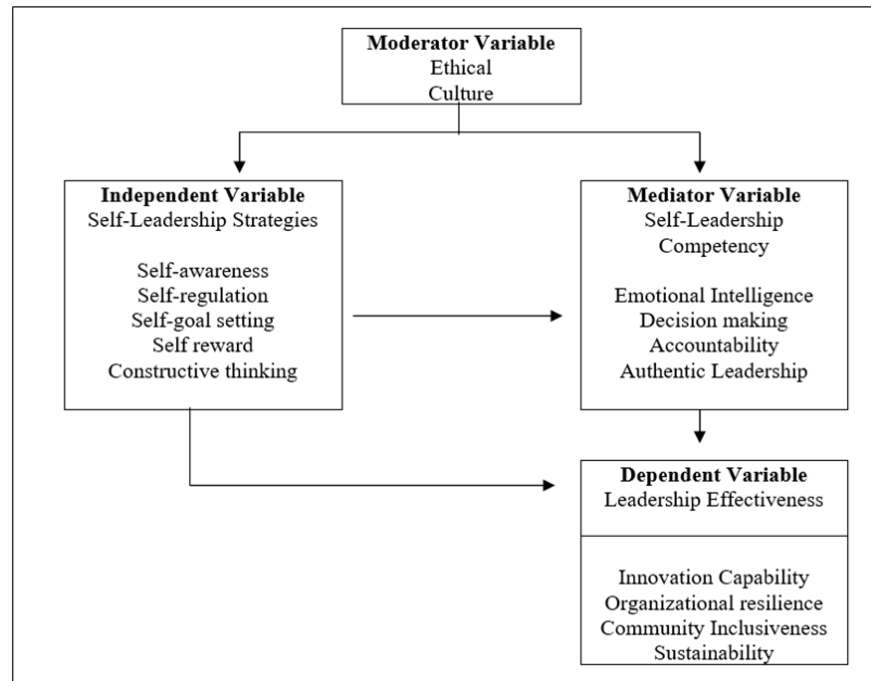


Figure 1. Self-leadership as a foundation for community and organizational leadership framework.

Theoretical and practical implications

There are a number of implications of this conceptual framework, both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, it extends the self-leadership literature by explicitly accounting for cultural and ethical considerations as moderators, not as a side issue, which broadens the gap that exists in models that primarily draw from samples from the West (Goldsby et al., 2021). Additionally, Neck and Houghton (2006) agreed that the framework also addresses the sequencing that has been described in earlier reviews: that is, external leadership behaviours are the downstream outcomes of an individual's capacity to influence his or her own actions as an internal leader. The framework recommends that leadership development programs in Malaysian public universities, government bodies and civic education programs should not be exclusively based on external leadership skills like communication or strategic planning for practice. Instead, these programmes should be built around developing the basic self-leadership skills, self-awareness, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and personal accountability, and then added with the skills of external leaders. According to Jamaluddin et al. (2025), this framework can be utilised by practitioners in developing the leadership development training programme, and by community development practitioners in developing the youth leadership training programme in which the local collectivist values, such as the gotong-royong and musyawarah, are explicitly incorporated and are not imported without adaptation as models of self-leadership.

Limitations and future research recommendation

This research is a conceptual research which has a few limitations. First, the framework has not yet been implemented in practice and its propositions are drawn from a critical synthesis of existing theory and literature, not primary data, and thus need to be tested through quantitative or mixed methods research. Second, literature

cited in the review is largely from the English language and literature that is indexed in the key academic databases, which may not fully represent the locally published literature on self-leadership and community development in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Third, the cultural moderators of the framework are discussed in a relatively general manner and further research is needed in the development of self-leadership in the context of specific cultural variation within the plural society of Malaysia. The proposed framework should therefore further be tested in future studies in Malaysian public sector and community leadership settings in order to confirm the mediating role of individual leadership competence and the moderating role of ethical governance and culture, by employing structural equation modelling with samples of participants in these contexts. The framework could be further strengthened by comparative studies among different Malaysian states or ethnic communities, as well as by longitudinal studies that examine leadership development over time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this concept paper argues quite forcefully that self-leadership is really the underlying basis of authentic community and organizational leadership. By presenting a working model and integrating leading theories with up-to-date information, the research enriches organisational behaviour and human development disciplines by drawing attention to context-derived and ethical loopholes. A firm stand on self-leadership unarguably plays a leading role in shaping leadership efficacy, which in turn is aided by external factors like culture and ethics. At the end of the day, it is a critical strengthening of one's inner self that makes it possible for individuals to give rise to leaders who are not only capable but also conscientious and sustainable. Such a framework indicates that leader's development programmes need a radical change. For example, it is known that self-leadership (self-goal setting and especially positive self-talk) is the root of other leadership skills and thus the best predictor of leadership performance over a long period; generally, these aspects are not touched upon during training (Goldsby et al., 2021; Neck et al., 2019; Furtner et al., 2013; Manz, 1986). At the same time, in the case of Malaysia, it is important that student and youth programmes be designed with reference to the local culture to avoid situations when there is a loss of meaning during the translation process (Jamaluddin et al., 2025; Hofstede, 2011). This framework could, for example, lead to the emergence of local leaders who are socially responsible in the Johan community; in the absence of government official support the overall results will be limited. Management may look to the model as a source for leadership candidate evaluation but should keep in mind that it could be misused (Northouse, 2021; Judge et al., 2002). In any case, supporting self-leadership is an effective method but, at the same time, it necessitates a discerning viewpoint to recognize the cultural and moral restrictions.

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Conflict of interest

The author declared that they have no conflicts of interest.

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