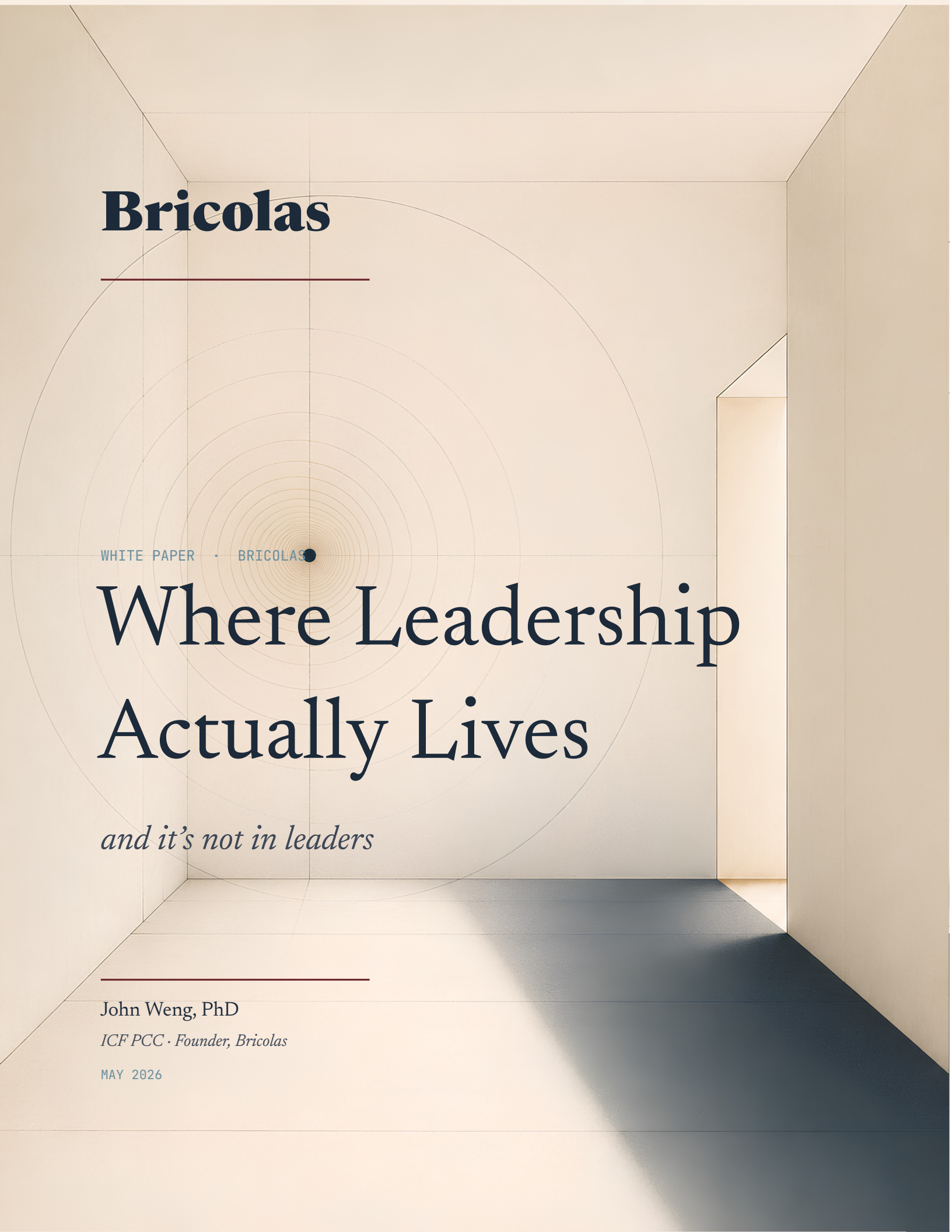




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Where Leadership Actually Lives

and it's not in leaders

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ICF PCC · Founder, Bricolas

MAY 2026

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About this paper

You're reading a stance paper. It articulates what Bricolas means by leadership and why getting that articulation right matters for what comes next.

Three kinds of readers in mind: practitioners building or buying leadership development, scholars adjacent to the question of what leadership is, and senior leaders who've been on the receiving end of leadership development and noticed it doesn't quite work.

What the paper claims: a defensible systems view of leadership grounded in seven decades of field history, the recent meta-analytic record, and three AI experiments probing what AI models do with the concept of leadership.

What the paper does NOT claim: empirical validation in the controlled-study sense, exhaustive coverage of the field's traditions, or a crowned theory of leadership. The field still hasn't pulled it all together. That question stays open; this paper offers one honest answer inside it, not the last word.

How to read this

If you read one paragraph: the executive summary opens with what leadership is.

If you want the argument: §1 → §2 → §3 → §4 → §6 in order.

If you want what this changes for your practice: §5.

If you want the evidence behind it: the resources page at bricolas.com/resources/.

Executive summary

Leadership isn't a person. It's what happens in the room when someone makes a move and the group picks it up – or doesn't.

Leadership lives in the in-between: someone makes a move, and the group does something with it. That whole live exchange is the thing we call leadership. What's moving inside it is authorization, the right to do what right now, and how that right gets claimed, conferred, refused, or contested between us. A leader is someone doing that work in the moment. Anyone can. Nobody does it all the time.

The field has spent seventy years looking somewhere else: inside the leader, for the trait, behavior, or style that makes someone effective. Eight to twelve dominant theories (transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, ethical, charismatic) each refined the same individual-property model. Then a 2025 meta-analysis in the *Journal of Management Studies* (Eva et al.) examined twelve of them and found they don't actually measure different things. What every one of those instruments is really picking up is how followers feel about their leader, not what the leader does. The labels and the evidence came apart, because the labels were pointing at the wrong place. Call it a category error: leadership treated as something a person *has*, when the thing itself happens *between* people.

A second family of theories has been working at a level that measurement fight never reached: critical leadership studies, distributed leadership, relational-process work, the group-relations tradition. These don't treat leadership as a property of an actor; they treat it as relational, processual, systemic. The systems view in this paper sits in that family. Three thought experiments I ran with AI (probing how AI models define leadership, what the scholarship yields when you force it together, and what a reconstructed deliberation of leadership's own theorists produces) all point the same way the literature already did: no single, unified theory of leadership emerges. The field's plurality isn't a stage it will grow out of. It's structural.

For practitioners, the consequence is direct: leadership development is system intervention, not individual repair. One question discriminates across all of it: *is authorization live in this room?* A standalone brief on leadership architecture is forthcoming.

Why this paper

Leadership lives in a place the field has spent seventy years not looking. This paper says where, why, and what to do about it.

Most of the leaders I work with have been “developed”: coaching engagements, leadership programs, 360 reviews, competency models. Many of them are skilled. Many of them are also stuck. I can’t tell you the number of times leaders tell me about going back to their organizations after a learning experience equipped with new learning and goals but find themselves unable or unsuccessful in implementing them and end up blaming themselves. What they describe doesn’t quite map to the leadership that the developers are trying to build.

That gap has a category error at its root. The field kept asking what kind of person the leader is; the answers kept coming back describing a relationship. The full history of how the field got here, and the measurement record that exposes it, is §3.

I’m writing this paper now because the work I’ve been doing on leadership development requires it. I’ve been rethinking what leadership development is: what it actually requires, what gets in its way, what changes when we treat it as system intervention rather than individual development. Before I can do that work in public, I need to be clear about what I mean when I say leadership. This paper is that clarity.

The Bricolas stance picks up what the empirical signal has been showing all along: when leadership is rigorously measured, it is relational (Eva et al., 2025). The theoretical framing hasn’t caught up. This paper

offers a systems view of leadership that extends the relational signal, the one the field’s lone relationship-first measure (LMX) caught between a leader and a single follower, out across the whole system: held by the container, visible in where authorization moves.

The paper unfolds in five moves. §2 articulates the systems view. §3 walks the seven-decade history of looking inside leaders and what the measurements actually picked up. §4 walks three thought experiments I ran with AI as diagnostic probes alongside the literature. §5 names what the systems view changes for practitioners: for L&D programs, coaching, workshop design, assessment, and the systems leaders operate inside. §6 leaves the integrative arc open as the field’s outstanding question.

The systems view of leadership

The field has been looking inside leaders. This section says where to look instead.

Leadership lives in the in-between: between someone making a move and the group doing something with it. The whole live thing is what we call leadership. What's actually moving in there is authorization – who has the right to do what right now, and how that gets claimed, conferred, refused, or contested between us. A leader is someone doing that work in the moment. Anyone can. Nobody does it all the time.

This is a shift in where to look. The field has spent seventy years looking for leadership inside leaders, in their traits, behaviors, styles, charisma. The systems view says we've been looking in the wrong place. Leadership doesn't just live in the leader, rather it's in the space between the people, like a relationship doesn't live in one person but rather between two.

Leadership is not the move.

Leadership is the meeting between the move and the system's response.

Three things operate at once.

The container. What holds the work. The frame, the boundary, the room itself. When the container is sound, moves can be made and received workably. When it's absent or broken, the same moves go traumatic, scapegoated, defensive. Think of the cabin in a falling plane: the cabin doesn't fly the plane, but if it ruptures, nothing else matters.

The process. The live work of authorization between people: claiming, conferring, refusing, contesting, re-routing the right to do work. This is what a practitioner watches when reading a room.



*Authorization is not
authority. Authority is held;
authorization moves.*

Imagine a meeting where someone offers a direction. The room either works with it, ignores it, or pushes back. Each of those is a move of authorization.

The outcome. What the system holds afterward, as a result of the acts it took up: a history, not a state. The Center for Creative Leadership's vocabulary of direction, alignment, and commitment (Drath et al., 2008) names this layer and is inherited here as available language. But those words freeze into a snapshot

what is actually a trace of the moves that produced it. Leadership doesn't live in the outcome; it leaves its mark there.

What the stance commits to

- Leadership is a relational condition, not a property of an actor
- Authorization is the medium – the right to do the work, in motion
- Containment is the condition – what holds the work workable
- Three layers operate at once: what holds, what flows, what's left behind
- The meeting-point is the unit – leadership lives where move meets response

What the stance doesn't commit to

The systems view isn't a relabel of the field's other moves at the same layer:

- Not pure discourse (not just talk and identity work)
- Not pure distribution (not just sharing the leadership load across more people)
- Not pure process (not just an unfolding over time)
- Not leader-property (not what the leader has or does)
- Not the outcome alone (not just what gets produced downstream)

Three layers operate at once. None is optional.

Container = what's possible. Process = what's moving. Outcome = what stuck.

Container

The setup that makes the work possible.

A senior team meets to set next year's priorities. Container holds when the room is real: who's in it, what's actually on the table, whether the CEO is open to being moved. Container fails when the offsite is theater.

WHERE IS THE WORK HELD?

Process

The live work between people in the room.

A VP challenges the CEO's favored initiative. Peers back the challenge, redirect it, or back away. The question isn't whether the VP was brave. It's whether the room can authorize honest disagreement.

WHAT IS ACTUALLY MOVING?

Outcome

What the system actually ran with.

A week later. Real strategic commitment, or polite agreement and private resistance. The trace tells you whether anything moved in the system.

WHAT CHANGED IN THE ROOM?

Inside leaders: a short history of looking in the wrong place

For seventy years, the field has been looking for leadership inside leaders. The signal that survives the field's own scrutiny says leadership lives somewhere else.

The field's history reads as a sequence (see Fig 3.1): each era named, each era succeeded by the next. Great-man theory in the early 20th century. Trait theory, after Jenkins (1947) and Stogdill (1948) undermined it. Behavioral approaches in the 1950s and 60s. Contingency theory in the 70s.

Transformational leadership in the 80s. Authentic leadership, servant leadership, ethical leadership in the 2000s. Each new framework came with a new measurement instrument. Each instrument asked followers to rate their leader against the framework's items.

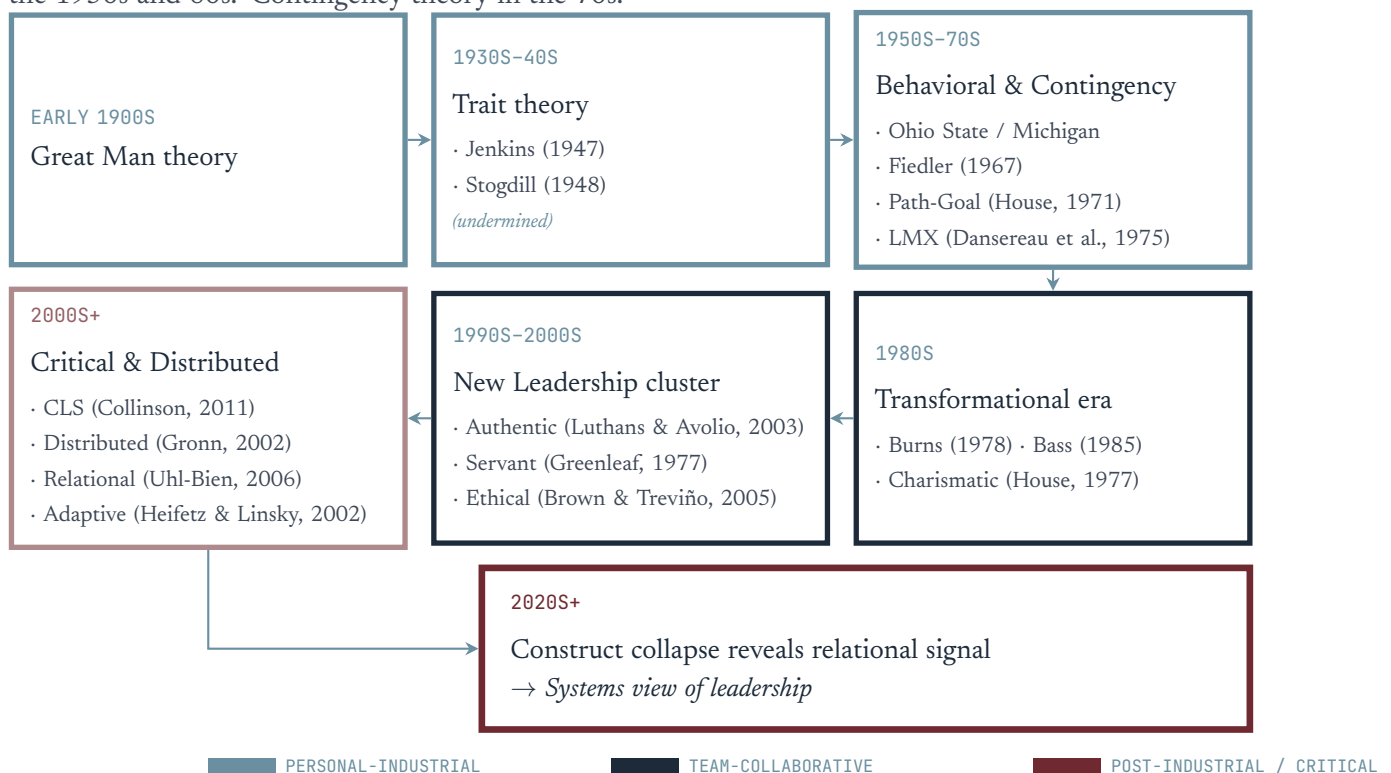


Fig 3.1 • Leadership theory eras – 1900s through 2020s+. Era schema adapted from Grint (2011) and Northouse (2019); macro-era categorization adapted from Dugan (2017); 2020s+ era added by author.

The field's main way of collecting data has been the survey (Bryman, 2011). Lowe and Gardner (2000) found 64% of articles in *Leadership Quarterly's* first decade used questionnaires. Followers rated their leaders against a list of items; the follower's rating was treated as a measure of how the leader behaves.

In 2025, a meta-analysis in the *Journal of Management Studies* (Eva et al.) examined twelve dominant leadership measures across seven samples, 4,000+ respondents, five countries. The finding: the twelve measures overlap so heavily they can't be told apart. They aren't measuring different things. The shared signal, the thing every leadership instrument is actually picking up, is how followers feel about their leader. Basically the same thing as one piece of LMX, a relational measure first built in 1975.

LMX (Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975) was one of the few mainstream-measured theories to take a relational view from the start. Instead of asking followers to rate their leader against a checklist (follower perception dressed up as leader behavior), LMX asked about the relationship itself. The question shifted from *what kind of leader is this* to *how good is the relationship between this leader and this person*. Eva's finding fifty years later, that mainstream measures all collapse onto a relational signal, is the empirical echo of what LMX was already pointing at.

The labels and the evidence came apart. For seven decades, the field has been measuring a relational signal with leader-property labels: looking inside leaders for a phenomenon that lives between them. That is the category error the empirical record has been showing.

Eva's finding doesn't apply to every theory of leadership. It applies to a specific family: the ones that built measurement instruments and ran them across thousands of respondents. Mainstream-measured theories: transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, ethical, charismatic. A different family operates at a level the measurement controversy never reaches: critical leadership studies, distributed leadership, relational-process work, and the group-relations and Tavistock tradition, which reads leadership at the level of the group rather than the person. These theories don't define leadership as a property of an actor. They define it as relational, processual, or systemic. The systems view this paper offers sits in this second family.

The mainstream family is not without a reply. Judge and Piccolo's (2004) meta-analysis found transformational-leadership measures predicting follower satisfaction and performance with an overall validity of .44, about as strong as anything the field has produced. Whatever the instruments are picking up, it forecasts real outcomes. The systems view takes that seriously and asks what is doing the predicting: the leader's properties, or the state of the relationship the instrument is actually touching.

Eva is one method's finding. I ran three thought experiments with AI that probe the same question from different angles. None of them produced a unified theory of leadership either.

Three probes, one observation

Three thought experiments. Three different ways of asking the same question. Each one yielded the same observation.

These are probes, not proofs. Each one tests what AI does with the concept of leadership under different conditions: the everyday default the models reach for, the scholarly literature, and the General Theory of Leadership Project (GTOL) deliberation reconstructed. The findings are about what AI yields when you ask it about leadership, not empirical claims about leadership itself. Diagnostic, not evidential. A fun set of experiments that happen to point the same way the literature record does.

PROBE 1 – the everyday default. AI models are trained on human language at scale. Asking them to define leadership is itself a probe: what does that

training reveal as our everyday assumption about leadership? I asked four AI models (Claude, ChatGPT, Grok, Perplexity) to define leadership across five different user contexts. Twenty outputs. Four distinct defaults emerged (see Fig 4.1): Heifetz-style mobilization, judgment-under-uncertainty, heroic-individual leadership, operational-pragmatic. None of them defaults to leadership-living-in-the-group, or to authorization as the thing that matters. The default is leader-centered across all four. They agree on what leadership isn't: authority, charisma, management, consensus. But ruling those out doesn't move them off the leader. The leader is still the answer; they've just narrowed which kind.

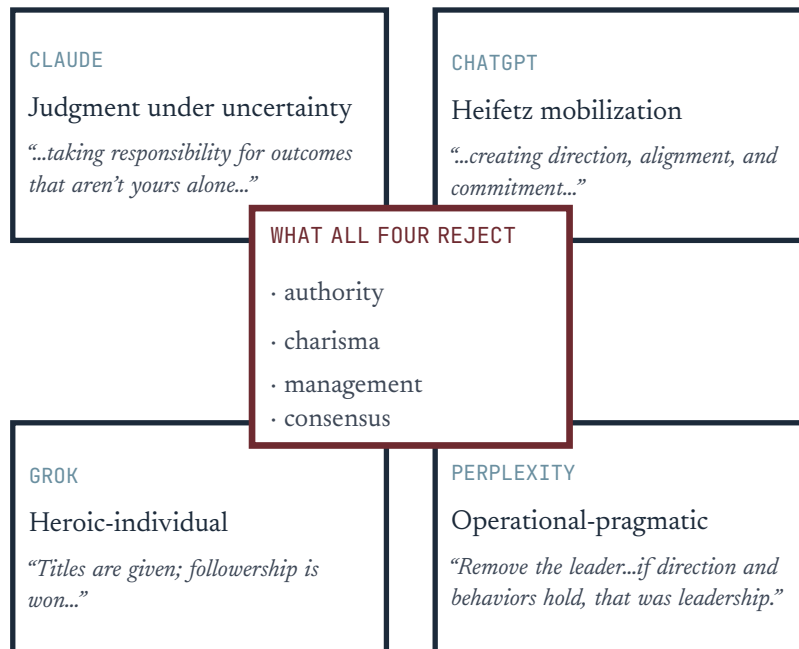


Fig 4.1 • Modal AI defaults on the concept of leadership. Four model families' modal scholarly defaults + shared convergent floor (what each rejects). Verbatim lifts from sample outputs (probe 1 of §4).

PROBE 2 – the literature corpus. I forced AI to engage the leadership scholarship systematically (see Fig 4.2): twenty-five distinct bodies across roughly two hundred and forty-five distinct works, from mainstream taxonomy (transformational, servant, authentic, ethical) through critical leadership studies, gender and identity work, distributed and relational-process traditions, decoloniality, and the philosophy beneath them. The question: can the field’s actual scholarship, when scoped comprehensively, yield a

unified theory? Three iterations to saturation. The answer that emerged was no. The corpus produces multiple framings with no master frame. Each tradition speaks its own language (what Wittgenstein called different language-games), and they don’t translate cleanly across. The field’s plurality looks less like unfinished business and more like the appropriate response to a phenomenon whose nature resists single-frame capture.¹

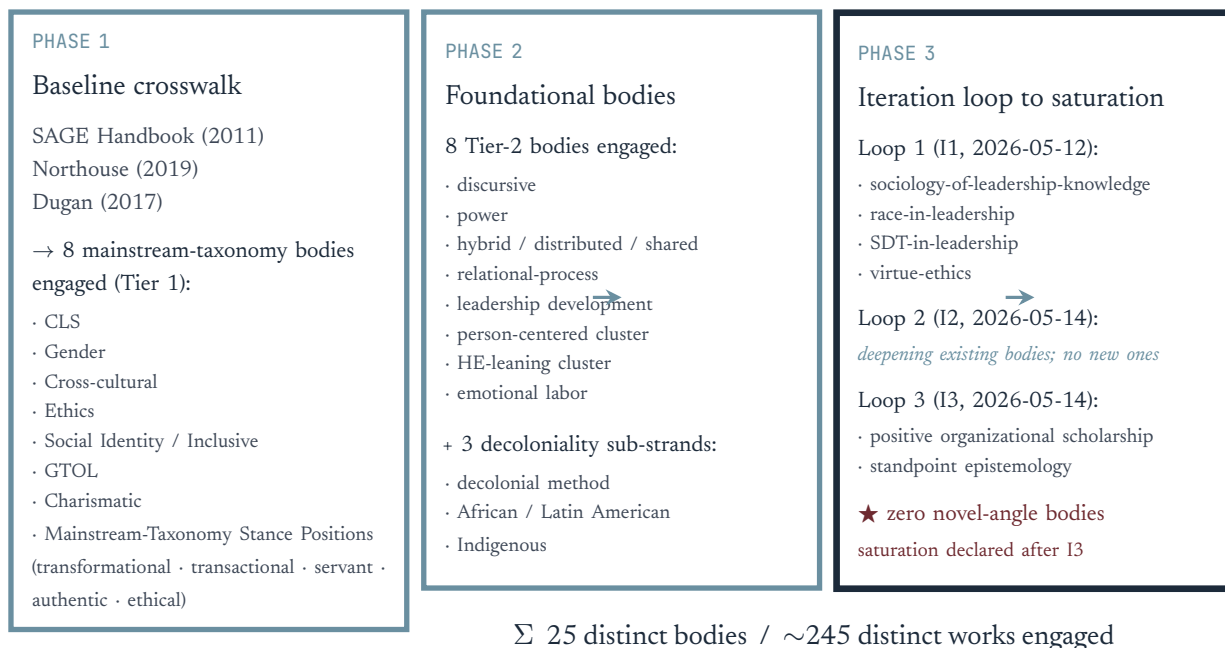


Fig 4.2 · Literature corpus was engaged across three phases. Phase 1 baseline crosswalk (SAGE Handbook, 2011; Northouse, 2019; Dugan, 2017) engaged 8 mainstream-taxonomy bodies. Phase 2 engaged 8 foundational bodies plus 3 decoloniality sub-strands. Phase 3 iterated three times: Loop 1 surfaced 4 bodies; Loop 2 deepened existing bodies without surfacing new ones; Loop 3 surfaced 2 bodies and produced zero novel-angle adjacencies – saturation declared.

PROBE 3 – the counterfactual deliberation. The actual GTOL project ran from 2001 to 2007 and didn’t produce a unified theory – it shipped a multi-narrative volume. The thought experiment: under deliberative pressure, would the same room reach the same end, or were the historical findings a fluke? I reconstructed the project with AI personas of twenty-three actual GTOL scholars, across eight

or more deliberative rounds (see Fig 4.3), and ran the deliberation five times, to separate what was stable from what was noise. Every run ended where the real GTOL ended: no unified theory. That refusal to collapse the field into one frame held across all five. What didn’t hold was the shape: the most careful runs each built a genuinely different structure for holding the plurality, no two alike. The reproducible finding isn’t any one architecture. It’s the refusal

itself: run the room again and it declines to unify, every time; only the form of its refusal changes.²

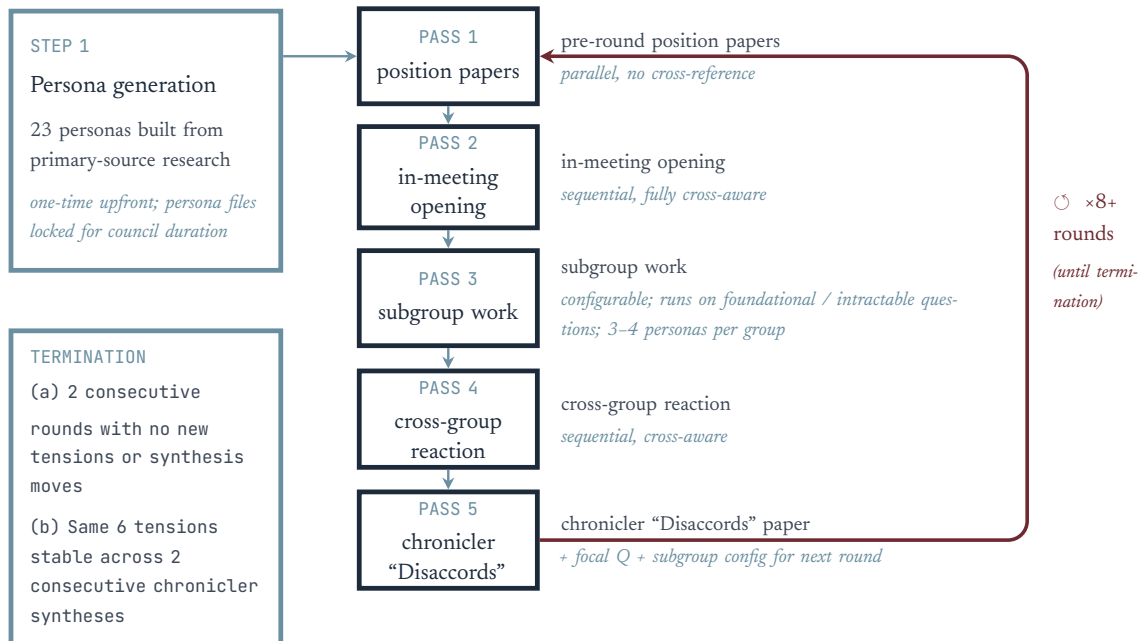


Fig 4.3 • Wren Council Phase 1 mechanic. Persona generation (Step 1, one-time) feeds Round 1, which iterates the 5-pass deliberation structure for ≥ 8 rounds until termination criteria fire. Pass structure adapted from the actual GTOL gathering rhythm: pre-meeting paper exchange $\rightarrow$ in-person discussion $\rightarrow$ optional subgroup work $\rightarrow$ cross-group reaction $\rightarrow$ chronicler synthesis.

The probes don't show the same thing, and it matters not to blur them. The everyday-default probe shows where the training corpus puts leadership: inside the leader, even after ruling out authority and charisma. The literature probe shows the scholarship declining to unify when forced to sit together. The deliberation probe shows that refusal holding under pressure, five runs in five different shapes. Only the last two bear on unification at all, and none of the three locates leadership anywhere on its own. The one observation they share is the wall they all hit: asked about leadership from any angle I could construct, AI never arrives at a single frame. Neither has the field. The plural state is not awaiting resolution. It is structural.

works cited, lit-review methodology, and saturation criteria available on the Bricolas resources page: bricolas.com/resources/

² *Full council mechanic, 23-persona roster with primary-source attribution per persona, the per-run deliverables across the five-run stability test, and round transcripts available on the Bricolas resources page: bricolas.com/resources/*

¹ *Full list of the 25 bodies engaged, the ~245 distinct*

What this changes in practice

If leadership lives in the meeting between move and response, the work of developing it changes. So does the work of measuring it, coaching it, and designing for it.

When I work with L&D teams buying our programs, the first conversation we have is about the system the leaders operate in, not about the leaders themselves. The systems view has practical consequences across the practices that try to build leadership in organizations.

Leadership development programs. Most leadership development asks the wrong question. It asks how to upskill individual leaders. The systems view asks how to develop the conditions in which authorization can happen: the container holding the team, the live exchanges in the room, the structure of the system around them. The unit of development is rarely the individual; it is the conditions that let one person do leadership the group can take up.

Coaching. Coaching the individual without engaging the system around them is incomplete. The leader's intentions are real. So are their self-narratives. Whether leadership actually happened shows up in the meetings they actually run: whether their moves get picked up, refused, contested, or re-routed by the people they work with. A coach attending only to the leader misses where leadership lives.

Workshop design. Workshops that simulate leadership through role-play and skill-practice underestimate what they're trying to develop. The systems view suggests workshop design built around real meetings (actual authorization, in actual groups,

with actual stakes) and watches what happens there. Practice in artificial conditions tells you about practitioners under artificial conditions. Practice in live conditions tells you about leadership.

Assessment and 360s. Eva and the meta-analytic record tell us mainstream leadership instruments measure follower affect more than leader behavior. Used with that limitation named, they remain useful: for tracking follower perception, for surfacing relationship-quality patterns, for naming where a leader is liked or disliked. Used as ground truth about who is a leader, they mislead.

The outcome is not where leadership lives. It is where leadership leaves its trace.

Team and system design. If the container is what makes leadership possible, organizational structures that hold or break the container matter. Reporting lines, decision rights, meeting design, who is in the room and who isn't. These are conditions for leadership, not background. Designing the system around a leader is doing leadership development at a different altitude. I call this leadership architecture.

The five practices run on one underlying read: whether authorization is live in the room, the meeting, the engagement. When it is, leadership is happening. When it isn't, what's there is something else.

A standalone brief on leadership architecture is forthcoming. It takes the systems view as given and works out what leadership development actually requires when the conditions matter more than the individual. The architecture brief carries the practical implications out to specific moves for L&D leaders, OD practitioners, and the buyers who fund the work.

NOTE · WHAT'S NEXT

Leadership development is system intervention, even when the contract reads executive coaching.

What's left open

The systems view is one defensible answer to a question the field has refused to settle. The integrative arc remains open.

The field has not produced a unified theory of leadership in seventy years of looking. Three AI probes aren't definitive evidence but offer another angle on what the literature already showed: the plurality is built in. This paper offers a systems view as one honest answer inside that plurality. It is not the crowned frame. There isn't one.

What I owe the reader, and what Burns owed the GTOL room: the integrative arc remains an outstanding question, not a resolved one. The systems view does honest work: at the meeting-point of move and response, in the live work of authorization, in the conditions that hold the work. It does not rule out what other framings see. There is also a specific way this stance could be wrong. If follower sentiment turns out to do the causal work, driving what teams do more than any live movement of authorization, the instruments were measuring the right thing all along and this claim shrinks accordingly. More stances will come. Some will converge with this one. Some won't. The convergence, or its absence, will itself be a finding about leadership.

Use the systems view if it helps you see what other framings miss. Watch the meeting. Watch the authorization moving in it. Notice when the container is sound and when it isn't. Notice when authorization is live and when it isn't. The discriminator stays simple: is what's happening in the room leadership, or is it something else?

The discriminating question is not “who is the leader?” – but “is authorization live in this room?”

Methodology

This is a theoretical-framework contribution. The systems view of leadership offered here draws on three sources: seven decades of leadership scholarship (engaged across 25 distinct bodies via a structured literature review pass with three iterations to saturation); the empirical record on leadership measurement (centrally Eva et al., 2025); and three AI-orchestrated thought experiments probing how AI handles the concept of leadership under different conditions.

The three AI probes are diagnostic rather than evidential. They explore what AI yields when asked to define leadership unprompted (Probe 1), when forced to synthesize across the field's literature (Probe 2), and when reconstructed as a deliberative protocol of named historical scholars (Probe 3). The findings are about what AI does with leadership as a concept, not empirical claims about leadership itself.

Full methodology, the 25 bodies engaged with anchor citations, the council mechanic with 23-persona roster, and all 8 round transcripts available on the Bricolas resources page: bricolas.com/resources/.

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- The works above are the load-bearing inline references in this paper. The full body of sources – approximately 245 distinct works engaged across 25 bodies of leadership scholarship, plus the 23-persona GTOL council roster – is available at bricolas.com/resources/.*

About the author

PRACTICE

John Weng, PhD is the founder and principal of Bricolas, a leadership development practice in San Diego, California focused on executive coaching, team development, and supervision for senior leaders, partners, and founders. He also serves as a leadership coach and consultant at the University of Cambridge Judge Business School, supporting participants of the General Management Programme and the Advanced Leadership Programme.

CREDENTIALS

PhD in Leadership Studies, University of San Diego (2024). Professional Certified Coach (PCC) and ICF Advanced Certificate in Team Coaching (ACTC) through the International Coaching Federation. Post-graduate Certificate of Advanced Study in Coaching Supervision. The practice draws on group-relations methodology, adaptive-leadership tradition, developmental scholarship, and coaching-supervision practice.

SCHOLARSHIP

Dissertation: *Development of the Group Dynamics Awareness Questionnaire (GDAQ): A Mixed Methods Study* – developing and testing an instrument for measuring habits of attention practitioners use when reading groups. Published work appears in *New Directions for Student Leadership* and the *Journal of Leadership Education*, with empirical and theoretical contributions on case-in-point pedagogy, intentional emergence in leadership development, and learner-centered design. Recent work appears in the Emerald edited volume *Moving the Needle* (2025).

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